



# T'ing

To re-ignite the passions of town & country folk

FEATURES EDITOR: (011) 242 9216 Fax: (011) 234 3694  
E-mail: features.dailynews@lakehouse.lk

Meet the amazing women of the Tea Country Trails

Sri Lanka's Tea Trails are the green prescription to a healthier lifestyle

## WALKING THE WALK IN SRI LANKA'S TEA COUNTRY TRAILS

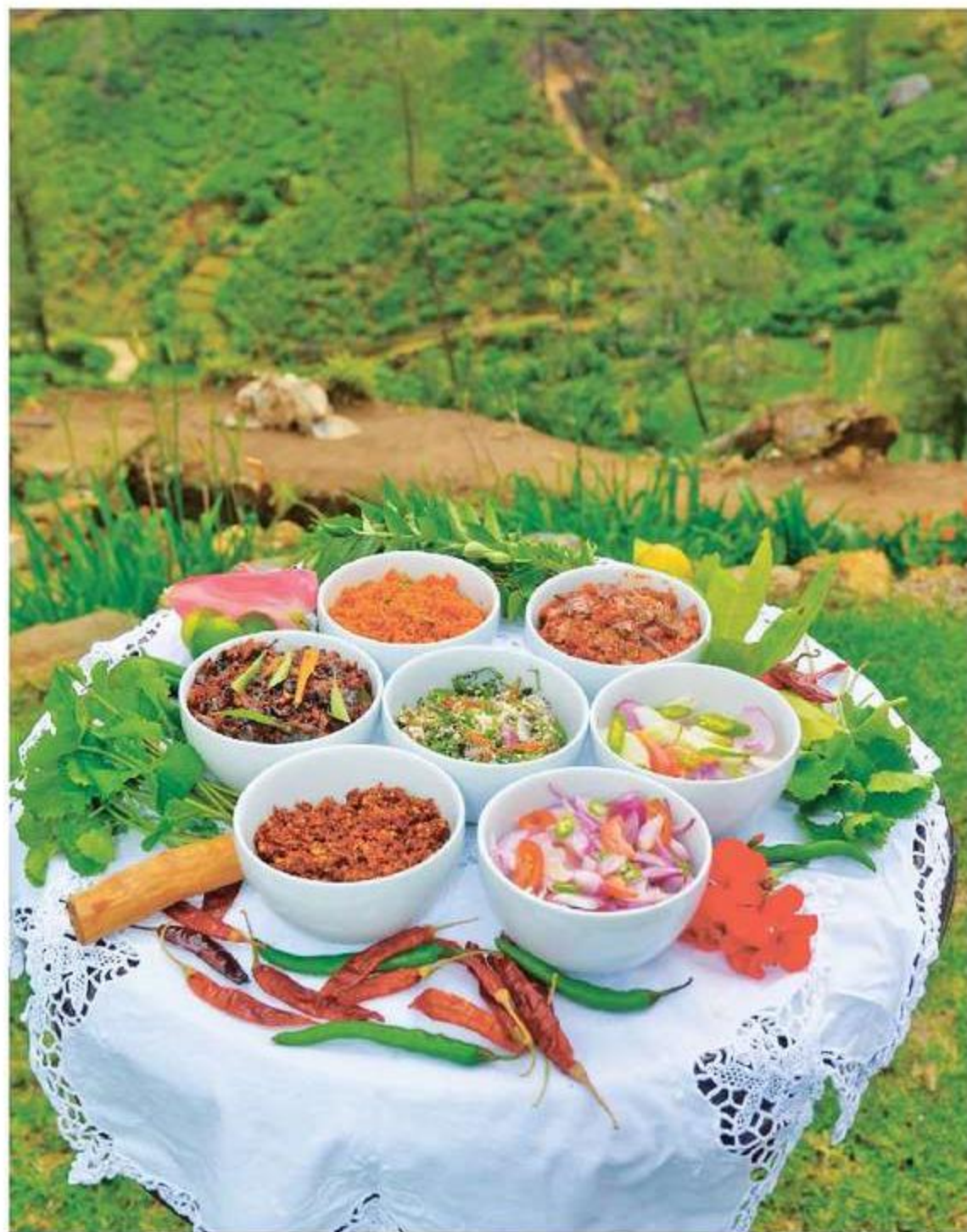
JULIET COOMBE

**I** talk to Miguel Cunat, one of the world's most visionary sustainable tourism experts, about the trail blazing 25 day hike he has created across the tea country and the enormous heritage values they represent to the world.

"The mystical high is very real on Sri Lanka's Tea Country Trail. Ancient trees, enchanted forests, little shrines, Adam's peak, the smell of incense, views of misty mountains, ravines, deep river gorges, eagles, monkeys... Every day must start with giving thanks and asking permission and safe passage through the mountains of this ancient land, and to help heal some of the wounds inflicted upon it by men," says Miguel Cunat, when I speak of other mystical travel highs such as Kandy's Temple of the Tooth, a remote shrine on a dangerous bit of road, a carved Tamil Temple or a simple colonial Catholic Church with breathtaking views.

Though fashioned along similar lines as the deeply spiritual Spanish Camino Trails, the Sri Lankan Tea Country trail offerings will go one stage further as, although walking a pilgrim's trail all by itself can be a major tonic for the body and spirit, he wants to also engage walkers with local communities to enjoy experiences with them in the afternoons after walking from 7am to 1pm. Such experiences might include tea tasting, painting, or making jams, pineapple wine and even have a go at tea bush furniture making.

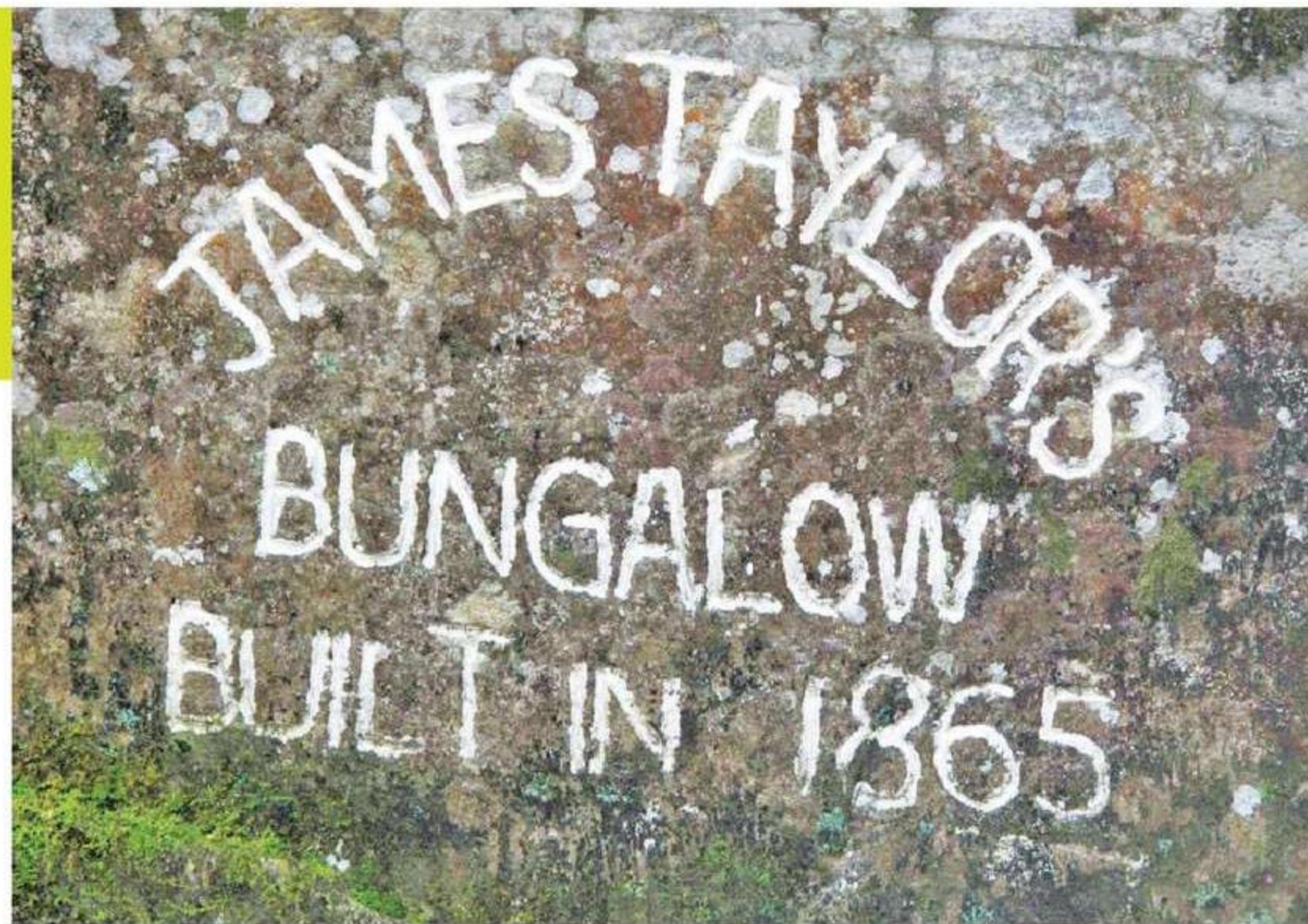
"After many years trying to help travellers connect with Sri Lanka in new and interesting ways I realised it was time to take an about turn, go into reverse and demonstrate that Sri Lanka is the priority, that we should focus on preserving and taking care of what



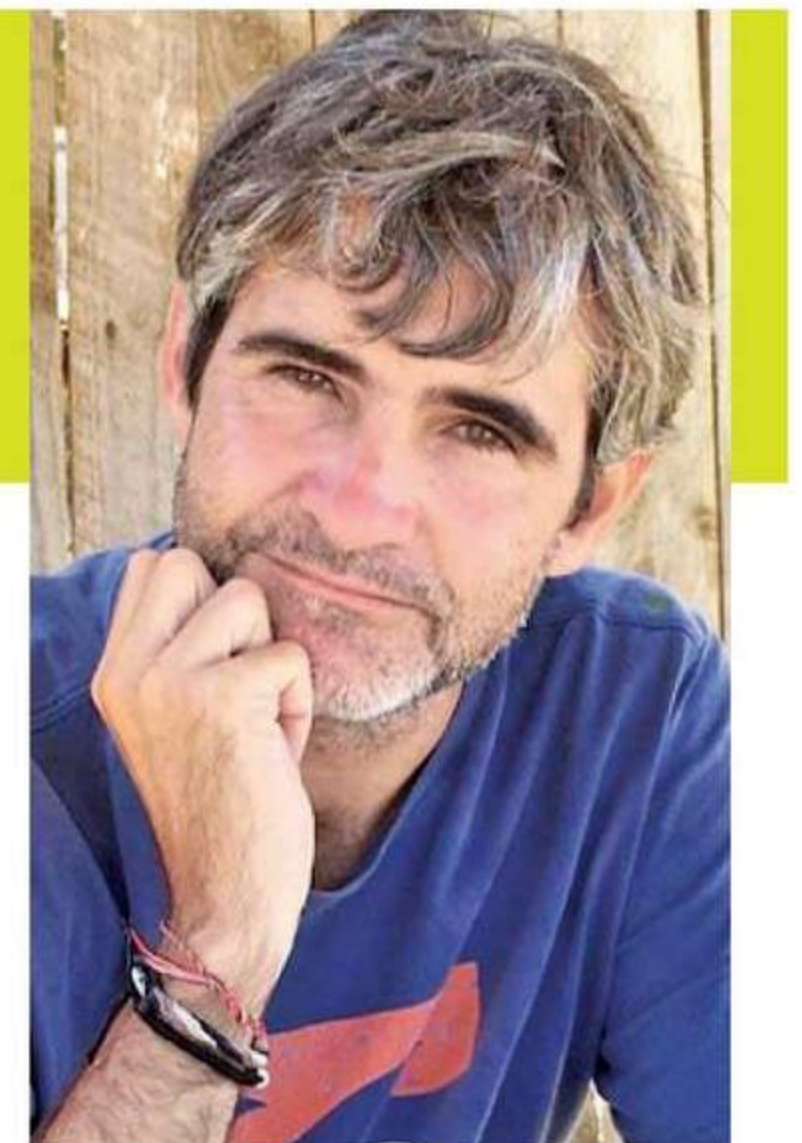
The tea country is famous for its superb rice and curry banquets

we have that is special and unique: the country's history, culture and natural beauty." Nearly thirty years of conflict, the Tsunamis and political interference have put Sri Lanka on the back foot, but it is now time to demand attention for the people who have kept this country in such great shape and perpetuated age old and timeless traditions that really take care of the land and communities of people.

Ultimately the 25 days of trails will change the tea country, but Miguel is confident it will all be for the better as sharing heritage often helps protect it for future



Pioneers of tea are sign posted all over the 25 day trail



Miguel, pioneer of Sri Lanka's Tea Country Trails

generations, "They will drive the conservation agenda – to raise the level of consciousness amongst people, that we need to protect the tea country, both the natural spaces and also the cultural heritage. They will also benefit the people of the tea country by creating opportunities for them, by engaging with them directly; the simple act of buying a tambili, coconut along the way from a local vendor has tremendous value. The third way is to see Sri Lanka's Tea Country trail capture the imagination of people – so it is recognised as one of the great walks of the world."

The various trails can be both guided and self-guided. All the trail GPRS coordinates are published and 'open source'. However Miguel strongly recommends travelling with a guide, as they can enrich you with the history and cultural heritage of local areas, as well as interpret for you and the locals. "We're working with some of Sri Lanka's best mountain guides." Explains Miguel with great excitement after yet another exciting trip mapping the hills with a group that just can't stop talking about the experience.

As for the walkers, who will they be? Well, anyone who likes to walk and learn really, and, unlike with most other pilgrimage trails, whole families will be welcome, too; children between say 9 and 12 can walk



Take your families and learn first-hand about the trail's traditions

about 7km - 10km comfortably, before you might hear those inevitable classic words "are were there yet?" Furthermore, you can do anything from a day's trek up to 25 days, depending on your availability, and there are travel styles to suit all budgets, from camping to staying in homesteads or villas?

Don't worry too much about eating out or buying from the village kadé as one way or another you'll get an excellent meal and "There's nothing like a good rice and curry after a 4-5 hour hike in the mountains," enthuses Miguel. Food tastes much better after healthy exertion in the mountains.

Miguel has, of course, travelled the mountains extensively to put these trail offerings together and now lives by the mantra, "every day is the best day". Every day surely does have something special to offer, lots of serendipitous moments, amazing scenery, wildlife, medicinal trees and colourful flowers. His eyes sparkle as he talks of a particular favourite, "The mountain passes are magnificent and majestic. There's something about crossing over from one valley to the next having made the effort to hike all the way to the top. The contrasts in landscape make some of my favourite moments of the trail." As for particular favourite sections of the trail, he says, "Stage 2 – from Galaha to Loleconda is very much about the story of James Taylor. Reaching the ruins of his bungalow on the same footpaths used by the early planters and plantation workers is very special. All the views of Adam's peak over four days as you approach

the Maskeliya Valley are stunning. The two days crossing the Horton Plains national park are momentous; it feels so remote and isolated at higher elevations. Saddling the ridge that separates the villages of the UVA province to the north, and Uda Wallawwe National Park to the south in the far distance is quite fantastic."

Ever the positive one, he has a good attitude to the recent global health restraints, "The pandemic has given us a different perspective and made us realise that we shouldn't take life for granted, that we need to be more present and conscious, and there are few better ways to achieve this than by walking, which is the most instinctive and primal form of movement. It takes very little effort to walk. Putting one foot in front of the other is something we do almost unconsciously all the time. We evolved to be able to walk 10-15km every day, and the rest is history. Walking from village to village is something humans have been doing for millennia. No one is re-inventing the wheel here. When you choose to walk you're choosing to be your true naked self."

So, go on put on those walking boots and discover these amazing hikes through gorgeous countryside, meeting a huge diversity of people, travellers and locals, in some of the most peaceful and beautiful surroundings the world has to offer. For more information go to Sri Lankan Tea Country Trails Facebook page and tell Miguel and his pioneering team your views on this holistic approach to travel.



Walking Sri Lanka's heritage Tea Trails is epic and like being in your own National Geographic programme