As I hike, the colours are elemental – copper-coloured trails under a cobalt-blue sky and row upon row of emerald-green tea stretching to the horizon. A kaleidoscope of rural life: women in brightly coloured saris bend over the tea bushes deftly plucking the palest leaves. Schoolgirls dressed in immaculate white uniforms giggle as they pass; in the fields, wooden ploughs are still pulled by oxen.

In 1867, Scotsman James Taylor planted the first tea estate in the island nation of Sri Lanka, then Ceylon. A few years later another Scotsman, the Glasgow-born entrepreneur Sir Thomas Lipton, met with Taylor, and bought five estates for tea production, selling it direct to the British public with the slogan, ‘from the tea garden to the teapot’.

Merrill J Fernando was born in 1930, to a rural middle-class family in the southwest of Sri Lanka. ‘When I was at school, the tea industry was the backbone of Sri Lanka’s economy, providing employment to almost a million people directly and indirectly,’ he says. ‘However, it was almost entirely in the hands of foreign multinational companies. And while many Sri Lankans were employed in the plantations, those in key positions, such as tea tasters and blenders, were foreigners.’

In the 1950s, Fernando was among the first six Sri Lankans selected to become a tea taster and was sent to the mecca of tea trading, Mincing Lane in the City of London. There he saw first-hand that Ceylon tea was being shipped in bulk to Europe for a nominal sum where it was packed and branded. This meant that the producer received a fraction of the profits, and the
The launch of the MJF Charitable Foundation in 2003.

As his company grew, so did Fernando's philanthropic projects. Beginning modestly in the 1960s, helping out the families of his small staff with housing loans, school fees and vocational training, the MJF charity has helped over 346 scholarship recipients in the country's northern and eastern estates, and seen them graduate from professionally designed culinary programmes after working with some of the country's top chefs.

By 2003, the MJF charity had helped over 346 Sri Lankan tea workers.

More than a traditional charity, the Foundation represents an alternative economic model. As Malik Fernando told me: ‘Lots of companies write cheques but don’t put in the time. We wanted to approach it differently and take full responsibility for our projects. This isn’t just an add-on to our business; it’s central to it.’

The same ethos has been applied to Resplendent Ceylon. When Sri Lanka emerged from nearly four decades of conflict, it had neglected infrastructure projects, stunted economic development and untapped tourism potential. Now the hope is to avoid unstructured development and integrate sustainability into national tourism policies.

The MJF charity has helped over 346 Sri Lankan tea workers.

It opened Cape Weligama on a headland jutting out over the Indian Ocean on the south coast in 2014, with LEED gold certification standards, including solar power and wastewater recycling, and engaging with local fishermen to encourage sustainable fishing. Later this year, Wild Coast Tented Lodge will open in the buffer zone around Yala, the crown jewel of Sri Lanka's national parks, home to a high concentration of leopards, elephants and reclusive sloth bears.

But this charitable outreach has now begun to extend beyond just the tea workers, covering a range of social issues in more than 150 projects across Sri Lanka. For example, the MJF Kids Programme supports children from poor communities with after-school education and life-skills training, while the Small Entrepreneur Programme (SEP) provides equipment and funds to launch vocational-based businesses or improve existing businesses, with the recipients often becoming role models in their communities.

The MJF charity has helped over 346 Sri Lankan tea workers.

The Empowering the North of Sri Lanka programme, meanwhile, supports an area that has suffered both socially and economically due to the 25-year civil war that ended in 2009. A special branch of SEP has focused on war widows and to date, 577 women have been supported in the country’s northern and eastern provinces. SEP also helps to integrate former prison offenders back into society and the workplace, and has seen reoffending rates plummet from around 50 per cent to as low as three per cent.

SHARE THE WEALTH

But the tea workers are still very much at the heart of the Foundation's work and the very latest initiative has taken 15 disadvantaged young people from the tea estates, and seen them graduate from professionally designed culinary programmes after working with some of the country’s top chefs.

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At the same time, Dilmah Conservation is opening a Climate Change and Biodiversity Station, complete with accommodation for five researchers working on a leopard-focused programme in Yala, with the aim of providing scientific feedback to aid policy makers.

Fernando's environmental efforts haven't gone unnoticed. In May 2015, he became the first Sri Lankan Oslo Business for Peace Award Honouree, nominated by the Award Committee of Nobel Laureates in Peace and Economics who recognize business owners who promote socially responsible and ethical business practices in an outstanding way, and garnered the FIRST Award for Responsible Capitalism in 2016.

As Fernando says: ‘We come into this world with nothing and we leave with nothing. The wealth some of us acquire is owed to the efforts and cooperation of many others around us. Let us therefore share that wealth, while we are still around, and make our world a happier place for others too.’
When to go
Sri Lanka is a year-round destination with consistently high temperatures – although hill country is always a few degrees cooler – and two distinct monsoon seasons. January to March is the country’s busiest season, when the hill country and the west and south coast beaches are at their driest and sunniest. April is the hottest month. From May to June, monsoon affects the south and west region, including Colombo and Galle, with short, sharp showers. From July to September is inter-monsoon season, with the odd shower but usually warm and dry. October to November sees a severe monsoon on the north and east coasts, which can also affect the rest of the country. December is usually hot and dry when the monsoon ends.

Getting there
Sri Lanka Airlines (www.srilankan.com) fly direct to Colombo from around £500 per person, including taxes. Flight time is approximately 11 hours. The author travelled with The Ultimate Travel Company (www.theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk).

More information
Resplendent Ceylon: www.resplendentceylon.com
Sri Lanka Tourist Board: www.srilanka.travel