Travel.

CEYLON AS A MILITARY STATION.

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To the traveller the word Ceylon calls up memories of a glorious break in the monotony of a long sea voyage, of a palm-fringed shore washed by the bluest of blue seas, of red roads winding beneath the shade of beautiful green forest trees among which here and there a blaze of scarlet marks the position of a flamboyant tree in flower, of cool-looking bungalows set well back in flower-filled gardens, and of a warm, languorous atmosphere, inspiring a feeling of indolent content, which makes anything approaching bustle appear an act of vandalism. Such is Ceylon to the traveller; and it is only natural that when he leaves the island after a visit of a few days he takes with him only a superficial idea of its advantages and disadvantages as a place of residence, and is apt to give misleading advice.

As four of our officers are stationed in Ceylon it may be helpful to set down the impressions one has formed after serving the greater part of a three-year tour there. It is somewhat difficult to write with an unbiased pen, as feelings on the desirability or otherwise of Ceylon as a station are apt to run high. Some officers profess to like it immensely, while others, the majority I think, dislike it fervently. Let the facts speak, and let the reader decide in which class he would place himself.

Garrison.—The garrison consists of a regiment of Indian infantry, a company each of Royal Garrison Artillery, Royal Engineers and Royal Army Medical Corps, Army Service Corps, and Army Ordnance Department details, the whole British garrison numbering only 320 of all ranks.

The four officers R.A.M.C. are distributed as follows: One lieutenant-colonel, who is senior medical officer and officer commanding R.A.M.C.; one major, who does duty with the troops in Colombo and generally goes up to camp with them at Diyatalawa, and who is also the sanitary officer; and two other officers, who have the rank of major, captain, or lieutenant. These two take it in turn to be in charge of the convalescent depot at Nuwara Eliya, and so spend half their tour in the hill station. The only stations now occupied by British troops are Colombo, Nuwara...
Eliya, and Diyatalawa, while there is a company of Indian troops at Kandy.

Colombo is the chief place of interest, as all the troops are stationed there except during two or three months of each year, when they take it in turn to go to Nuwara Eliya and Diyatalawa for musketry and field training. Colombo is a very large and pretentious town covering an area about eight miles long by two miles broad. Distances are great. From the officers' quarters in the fort to the tennis clubs and the district in which most of their friends live is a distance of from two to three miles, and the golf club is over four miles away. The method of locomotion is therefore an important question. Horses are very dear, and a sound horse is not easy to find in Ceylon. Traps are also dear and are seldom seen, as nearly everyone runs a car or a motor-bicycle. Rickshaws are too slow for these days of hurry and rush.

Houses and Quarters.—The R.A.M.C. are fortunate in having quarters allotted sufficient for all. The quarters are well situated and get the full benefit of the sea breeze, but their internal arrangements are inconvenient and ill-designed. Poor as they are, however, the Corps is counted lucky to have them, as the married officer, who is allotted one room in Bachelor Row, is in a sorry plight. Bungalows cost anything from Rs. 200 a month upwards, and are hard to get at any price, and the only alternative is to live in one of the hotels at prohibitive rates, or to go into a boarding-house where everything from the food to the society is of a second-rate order.

Society.—Colombo being a very large commercial town, and the garrison being so small, it is not surprising that the latter takes a very unimportant position in the society of the place. The unostentatious friendliness which makes Indian life so pleasant is conspicuous by its absence in Ceylon, where large dinner parties and balls are the only method of entertaining. The individual officer with his limited income and inconvenient quarters can do little by way of a return, and collectively it has never been found possible to do more than give an “At Home” at the races once a year. Those who care for dancing can get as much of it as they want, as, besides private and subscription dances at intervals, there is a dance every Saturday and sometimes also on Thursday at the Galle Face Hotel, and one a week at the G. O. Hotel. These dances are open to all comers and are largely frequented by Colombo society. There are two clubs at which tennis, croquet, bowls, and bridge can be indulged in. The Garden Club is,
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excellence, the tennis club. It possesses twenty-two good courts, and everyone keen on tennis joins it. Prince’s Club has only three courts, and on week-days is almost deserted. On Sundays and race days, however, it is the fashionable resort. A band plays there every Sunday evening, and all the world and his wife go in their best clothes and gossip with their friends. Other games played in Colombo are cricket, rugger, soccer, hockey, and golf. The golf links are fairly good. There are eighteen holes presenting a certain amount of variety, and the greens are well kept, and made of good turf.

Climate.—The climate of Colombo is by no means unendurable. Perhaps the greatest drawback is that there is little variation in the temperature all the year round. There is no bracing cold weather to look forward to. The maximum shade temperature usually is between 80° and 90° F., while the minimum seldom, if ever, falls below 70° F. The mean temperature varies only between 79° and 82.5° F. There is very little variation either diurnal or annual, and one’s feelings depend rather on the humidity of the air, and the presence or absence of wind, than on the actual temperature. The humidity is always high, and often is little short of saturation, a condition which gives rise to far more discomfort than a higher temperature which is at the same time drier. While there is plenty of wind one remains fairly comfortable, but during the windless months the damp heat is decidedly oppressive.

Colombo gets two monsoons. The south-west begins in May and continues until September. During this time the air is fairly cool and frequent showers keep the dust laid and make everything fresh and green. In October, the north-east monsoon is ushered in with heavy rain, which may continue off and on until the end of the year. At this time it is usual to get heavy rain every afternoon, which spoils all games, and gives the new arrivals by the troopship a bad impression of the country. January, February, and March are usually fine. The north-east wind blows strongly at first, raising clouds of dust, which, as well as being unpleasant, is the cause of sore throats and other ailments. March, April, and May, until the monsoon breaks, are hot unpleasant months. During these months everyone who can make any excuse to go to the hills hurries out of Colombo, and numerous are the “inspections” of Kandy and Nuwara Eliya.

Nuwara Eliya is the sanatorium and hill station of Ceylon. Situated in beautiful surroundings at a height of 6,200 feet, it is reached in about ten hours’ travelling by rail from Colombo.
During some months of the year it possesses a climate equal to the English climate on its best behaviour, but during the monsoons it experiences a good deal of wet, misty, unpleasant weather.

Nuwara Eliya is much patronized by Colombo residents, many of whom have bungalows there. For officers there is a furnished quarter, which is allotted in turn to applicants, preference being given to junior married officers and those on duty. Besides this there are quarters for the general, the deputy assistant adjutant-general, and the medical officer. For the accommodation of others there are several hotels, the Hill Club, and a few boarding-houses. The hotels are very expensive, like everything else in Nuwara Eliya, and the cost of bungalows is absolutely prohibitive. Therefore one of the attractions of Ceylon—a hill station within a night’s journey from Colombo, where one can spend a few days’ short leave when oppressed by the climate—is found to be an impracticability, at least for a married man. The cost of travelling and of hotels is too high for most of us to indulge in such trips, and from experience I have no hesitation in saying that when two months’ leave is obtained one can have a much better time and, at the same time, a less expensive holiday by crossing over to India, and spending one’s leave at Ootacamund or Coonoor.

Diyatalawa is a hutted camp to which the troops are sent annually for musketry and field training. It is situated on open downs at a height of 4,500 feet, and enjoys a mild climate. The heat in the day-time is tempered by cool breezes, while at night it is often quite chilly. Though a pleasant change from the enervating atmosphere of Colombo, it is not a place that one would voluntarily spend much time in. The accommodation is bad. The medical officer is provided with an old and dilapidated tin hut consisting of three tiny rooms, into which he has somehow to squeeze his family and belongings. The surroundings are dull, and there is little to do there.

Trincomalee used to be one of the best stations in the East. It is a lovely place, and every sort of sport can be had within a few miles, but to the great sorrow of everyone it has been abandoned. Kandy, too, a pretty and pleasant place where troops used to be stationed, is now occupied only by a company of the Indian infantry.

Expenses.—Everything in Ceylon is expensive. Wages are much higher than in India, and the servants are not so good. A really good cook is a treasure which is seldom found. The Cingalese are cleaner and more intelligent than the Tamils, but are lazy, conceited, and quick-tempered. The Tamils, except for a
small class known as Trinco Tamils, are immigrants hailing from South India. They are exceedingly stupid, and are not always clean, but a well-trained boy makes a good servant. The best servant is the Trinco Tamil, and one is fortunate to get a good "boy" of this class. Servants' wages for a family generally amount to £9 or £10 a month.

Food is dear and inferior in quality. Beef and mutton, chicken and eggs are all imported from India. The beef is old cart-bull and the mutton is goat. No sheep are slaughtered in Colombo, a fact of which most of the residents are unaware. Fowls and eggs gain so much in value by the sea voyage that Indian eggs cost a shilling a dozen, and immature chickens anything from a shilling upwards. Fruit and vegetables are lacking in variety, and are scarce and expensive. Oranges, pine-apples, and papaw are usually the only fruits obtainable, though sometimes as a rare treat mangosteens can be procured at a price. Fortunately the Ceylon Cold Storage Company keep a well-stocked larder, from which, when things get too bad, the harassed housewife orders beef, mutton, game, poultry, ham, etc. Such items, though largely swelling the monthly bills, make life endurable.

Clothes.—Only the lightest of clothes are required in Colombo. Cotton or linen suits are worn through the week, while on Sunday a thin suit of blue forms the conventional calling outfit. Only the thinnest of cotton underclothes can be worn, and believers in wool next to the skin had better stay at home unless they are prepared to suffer the tortures of prickly heat.

Plenty of flannel tennis trousers should be brought out, and an unlined Irish tweed coat is useful for wear after games. In fact, tennis flannels and a tweed coat are the almost universal wear in the afternoons. Warm clothes are necessary in Nuwara Eliya, where it gets very cold after sunset. It is well to bring out all the clothes and boots required for three years, or else to make arrangements to have things sent out as required. Almost everything can be bought in Colombo shops, but the prices are 50 per cent higher than at home.

A burberry or some other form of waterproof coat, made without rubber, is indispensable, as rain is "hard and frequent." Sola topees are worn until 4 p.m., and squash hats are the favourite wear afterwards. Straw hats are reserved for Sundays and race days. There should be as little silk as possible in coat linings or elsewhere, as silk invariably perishes in a few months of the Colombo climate. It is necessary to bring out one's tunic and mess kit, as they are
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worn up-country, and even in Colombo full dress uniform is compulsory at the levée and reception at Government House on the King's birthday. It is well to have an old tunic for this occasion, as it is the ruination of a new one.

Health.—Colombo is not unhealthy. Malaria does not exist in the fort where the troops are quartered; the few cases that occur there have acquired the infection elsewhere. Enteric fever is very rare. Only one case has occurred among the troops in two years.

The only diseases at all common are dysentery and "seven days' fever." The latter is fairly common at times, and somewhat resembles dengue, but is a much milder disease, and differs in other respects. On the other hand, although specific diseases are rare, the debilitating effects of the climate tell on everyone; and a tired, listless manner, with a total lack of energy in business or pleasure, are common evidences of a prolonged residence in the country. In this respect Ceylon is far worse than India, owing to there being no semblance of cold weather to look forward to as a break in the monotony of warm muggy days.

Conclusion.—Enough has been said to point out the more important of the advantages and disadvantages of a tour in Ceylon. To sum up briefly—Ceylon is not a bad station for bachelors. The climate is not unendurable, quarters are fairly good, and there are enough for all. Games and amusements can be had in plenty, and big game shooting can be obtained by a keen sportsman, though some trouble and expense is necessary to get anything worth having. Best of all, Ceylon is a three-year station.

For a married man matters are somewhat different. Quarters are inconvenient, servants troublesome, food indifferent and expensive. The climate is trying to women and children. Children over five should not be brought out, and younger children are apt to grow thin and weedy. The expense of living swamps the extra allowances—good though they appear—which are drawn in Ceylon, and leaves little of one's pay for other purposes.

One is bound to judge Ceylon by an Indian standard, and I have never met anyone knowing both countries who did not prefer India. One misses the easy friendliness and good-fellowship, the unconventionality and inexpensiveness of life in India, and one is apt to think that the smallness of the island makes for pettiness just as the largeness of India makes for broad-mindedness.

But Ceylon has its points, and those who do not know India more readily appreciate them. But to those who are coming to Ceylon expecting to find it a second and better edition of India, I would offer Mr. Punch's advice—don't!