

Highland History

Colonial Hill Stations

The idea of building bungalows and hotels in the highlands are a uniquely European colonial fascination. The very first ‘imperial belvedere’ built by the British colonialists dates back to the late 18th century sanatorium in Penang Hill. This was on the island of Penang, located at the northwest of peninsula Malaysia. This practice was most elaborately carried to fruition in British India and Dutch Java.

Reasons for the building of hill-stations, another name for these highland constructions, was to allow colonial officers to escape the tropical heat. Thus the very first bungalows built were also meant to be rest-houses and sanatoriums for recuperating officers. The Cameron Highlands is the largest of all the hill stations that the British ever built in Malaysia.

Cameron’s Highlands

The name Cameron Highlands is derived from the name of British government surveyor, the late William Cameron who explored the highlands due east of Batu Gajah, Perak in 1885. Although many believe that it was he who discovered this 12 square mile plateau, it was most certainly possible that he never even saw the region (Aiken 45).

However by 1885, Sir Hugh Low, British Resident of Perak, suggested that the region should be opened up and used as a “health-and-pleasure resort”. The first bridle path some 55 kilometres long was finally extended from Tapah to well within the Highlands in 1904.

It was Sir George Maxwell who, in 1925, headed an expedition to the Highlands and reported on the climate, topography, health conditions, soil, geology, and other characteristics of the region. Maxwell was very impressed with the potential for agriculture in the Highlands and the immediate result of this report was the setting up of the Cameron’s Highlands Development Committee in 1926. The committee was responsible for the planning and orderly development of the area.

This committee oversaw the development of the Highlands till 1931 when this responsibility was given over to the government of Pahang. By 1935, the region is reported to have 280 hectares under tea cultivation, mainly British or European owned, a number of mostly Chinese family-run vegetable smallholdings, some fifty privately owned dwellings, two private schools for European children and three hotels.

Life at the Top

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The Cameron Highlands soon became a watering hole for the colonial elite. Private bungalows were being built just as the first tea plantations were producing their tea. A favourite pastime then was to saunter in a “seemingly wonderful English summer-autumn and winter atmosphere all rolled-up into one place.”

One of the oldest hotels is the Cameron Highlands Hotel. Unfortunately a great fire destroyed this once stately hotel, whose terrace overlooked the 9-hole golf course. The ladies often ordered strawberries with fresh cream at the Smokehouse Inn, an Elizabethan mansion adjoining the golf course. Many spent a ‘lazy week’ in the Highlands “walking a little, dancing a little and admiring beautiful begonias,” according to a pre-war visitor.

For the British or those who love a fire in the hearth, Cameron Highlands is really a worthy escapade. Even if those days have now past, they seem to come alive in the twilight as one walks along lonely paths that have hardly been touched by the transient hands of father time.

Sidebar quotation:

A visitor the Highlands in the 1930s had this to say: “it was five-and –a-half thousand feet high, which meant that it was still nice and warm during the days but that the air was fresh and you had wood fires in the evening and blankets on the bed, which was a treat. There were lovely walks and horses to ride and dance in the hotel every Saturday night.”