

Traveling through the Tea Lands of Sri Lanka and India

It's no surprise why they call Sri Lanka the "Island of Delight," with its tropical island weather and warm, friendly greetings, "Ayubowan" (hello and long life) everywhere we went. Our stay here was during their New Year Holiday, giving us the opportunity to see many of their holiday celebrations. In traveling through the tropical landscape to the different tea estates, we stopped at roadside fresh fruit stands, an old British-built Anglican Church, and a Batik workshop where we saw the beautiful Batik artwork being created by hand.

At the New Vithanakende Tea Estate, owner Navaratna Pilapitiya showed us how their tea is manufactured under the most hygienic and modern conditions. This tea estate is situated next to a tropical rain forest in the beautiful mountains of Ratnapura. Their teas were exquisite, my favorite being the extra special grade.

My most tranquil experience in Sri Lanka was when we stayed at the Strathdon Tea Estate Bungalow. We awoke early to catch the magnificent sunrise on the veranda. The Bungalow was beautiful, surrounded by rolling hills of tea and a plethora of flowers. When the sun peaked from behind the hills, time stood still for a moment and all the elements of nature created a peace you could feel deeply within you.



ter leaving Strathdon, we traveled to the Kirkoswald Tea Estate where Mr. Venmathirajah provided us with an in-depth tour of his factory and a unique visit to the nursery. Here, we learned the process of producing different varieties of tea, as well as how to grow new bushes from seed or a grafted mature plant. Our next visit with Anil Cooke, President and CEO of the Asia Siyaka Commodities, was enlightening as he explained the 'ins' and 'outs' of how the brokerage firm works.

All of our accommodations in Sri Lanka were fabulous, including our one-night stay in the glorious Mahaweli Reach Hotel in Kandy. We were surrounded by endless amounts of brightly colored tropical flowers and trees, had a choice of multiple pools to lounge by off the veranda, and were treated to buffets of exquisite food!

Our stay in India was equally spectacular. Our gracious hosts, Mr. Udayakumar, Owner of the Glendale Tea Estate and Mr. Vinod Shenai, Group Manager made sure that our trip was exceptional from the moment we landed. We stayed the entire time in the Adderley Tea Estate Bungalow, situated high in the Nilgiri Mountains, surrounded by tea fields wherever you looked. The grounds were impeccably kept with hundreds of varieties of plants and flowers, each labeled with their Latin and English name, and the staff was outstanding.

Our first stop was at the Glendale Tea estate in the spectacular Nilgiri Mountains. The Glendale estate is a leader in the industry for their Ethical Trade practices and their highest standards received from the Rain Forest Alliance and ISO. They provide schooling for the children on their estates as well as education for the workers through their "Tea Research Institute." And now, Mr. Udayakumar's commitment to education will continue internationally--I'm incredibly grateful to him for the opportunity to share writings from our fifth grade class in Brookline, NH with the fifth grade class on the Glendale Tea Estate, and to begin international communications between the two schools. While visiting with Mr. Udayakumar, we enjoyed an SFTGOP white tea which was exceptionally smooth, along with fried tea leaves that were "Naladiku" (very good)! It was interesting to learn that they've broadened their agricultural production not only with tea, but with a variety of tree farms; cloves, nutmeg and cinnamon to name a few. From there, we enjoyed a tour of one of the only green tea producing tea estates in the Nilgiris, the Glenmorgan Tea Estate with owner Rasik Vadera. Here, they produce a shiny gunpowder tea, along with other types of primary grade green tea.

After visiting the auction house where we watched the tea buyers purchasing at raging speed, we met with Mr. Indrajit Chatterjee, of Container Tea Commodities, who refers to his organization as the "voice for the planters." He explained to us the flow process of the tea from estate to the broker house and how important it is to them that the workers on the estates are well cared for.

Throughout our stay in India, we had the opportunity to have lunch with the owners of the tea estates in their homes. Their wives were incredibly gracious, preparing elaborate 8-10 course meals, and sharing with us stories of their work in India. In addition to a stop in Coonoor to have spectacular hand-sewn Sari's made for us, we had the opportunity to ride in the old fashioned steam train. We started in Coonoor and exited the train with a special stop in the middle of the Glendale Tea Estate. The cramped ride and the fever of excitement on the train conjures up a memory I will long remember!

The last estate we visited in India was the Warwick Tea Estate, now part of the Havukal Tea Estate. We met with the Manager, Mr. Surrendra Mohan. This Tea Estate looks like a scene from an Irish countryside – impeccably built rock

walls that outline the crossroads of the tea fields with built-in staircases for the tea pickers to climb to get to the bushes. At this estate, they produce a very unusual tea, called Frost Tea. It was absolutely magnificent - slightly dry with hints of honey and a lightly scented aroma of sweet flowers – almost like a very lightly oxidized oolong. As we drove through the estate, we were surprised to find that we had to share the thin, winding road with an enormous water buffalo grazing on the grass on the side of the road! Also grown on this estate are coffee and cardamom plants, where we witnessed a “monkey watchman” chasing the monkeys away with his slingshot. I was very pleased to hear that the Havukal estate sponsored a school for the mentally challenged students, which the Havukal owner’s wife set up. It was indeed a pleasure to learn that the estates in this region are all well aware of sustainability, the importance of fair trade, and helping those less fortunate in the community.

In closing, take a moment...picture yourself with a steaming cup of freshly brewed tea from yesterday’s harvest-- seven-thousand feet high in the mountains, surrounded by hundreds of rows of tea bushes glistening in the warmth of the hot sun, and the soft song of Buddhist prayer heard off in the distance. This connectedness with nature and the beautiful people who labor in the fields each day, reminds me to thank them with each perfect cup of tea I sip.

Namaste.

Danielle Beaudette
Owner, The Cozy Tea Cart
www.thecozyteacart.com

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