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## Sri Lanka's Tea Trails

### - and a renaissance in tea ethics

By Cindy-Lou Dale

A cockerel announced the break of a new day. The world was bathed in that predawn light that seems to come from nowhere. An elusive bouquet wafted across the room, rousing me to a freshly-brewed cup of Ceylon tea. Wrapped in a duvet, cup in hand, I shuffled across to my window seat.

Set in a deep bowl of emerald velvet was a small mist shrouded village stirring to wakefulness. The first golden rays of dawn unfolded across a dewy plantation of shimmering mint coloured tea bushes, as trim as urban hedgerows, punctuated by scarlet and turquoise coloured saris of the early shift tea pickers. Their poised silhouettes, slightly stooped, merged with the tea bushes. This was a landscape so timeless and fetching, so companionably rooted to an ancient past it all but reduced me to verbal paralysis.

Some four thousand feet above the Indian Ocean, in the central highlands of Sri Lanka, lies Bogawantalawa Valley, known as the golden valley of tea and home to old Ceylon, the country's former name, synonymous with the world's finest tea.



Numerous myths and legends surround the arrival of tea plantations in Ceylon, but in reality it was due to the skill and foresight of Sir James Taylor, a Scottish coffee plantation manager, who initially experimented with just nineteen acres (eight hectares) of tea in 1867. Three years later the colonial coffee plantations were struck by a rotting fungus. Within a few short years of the coffee crop failure, the island's plantations changed to tea and today Ceylon is the world's largest tea exporter. The tea sector in Ceylon is a vital component of the economy - the country's largest employer, both directly and indirectly, to over one-million people.

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Ceylon's very best teas draw their distinctive essence and flavour from the stimulating environmental conditions of the mountainous regions of the hill country.

I stood beside Andrew Taylor, a kindly and deferential fellow, whose ancestral lineage dates back to Sir James, the founding father of Ceylon tea.

We quietly surveyed the glorious swathes of intensely green tea acreage containing some of the original tea bushes planted by Sir James.

I was spellbound by the vivid saris of the women, whose hands resembled butterflies flitting over the shrubs, moving independently of one another, nipping off the youngest and topmost leaves by snapping the stem with a sharp movement of the index and middle fingers, then tossing their pickings into large baskets on their backs.



Following my gaze to the colourful swirls interspersed amongst the tea bushes, Andrew smiled. "It is said that only small and agile feminine hands, and the patience of the female temperament, can achieve high yield plucking."

This interpretation aside, quite clearly plucking tea leaves requires exacting skills, more specifically nimble fingers.

### It's all in the wrist



"That," Andrew pointed out, "is what we refer to as a fine plucking. Those ladies are removing only the bud on the stem, together with the first two leaves directly below it." We watched them in silence, listening to their whispered voices and soft humming.

Here and there turbaned men, clothed in crisp white linen jacket and sarongs, pruned and supervised the plucking process. Once the pluckers had filled their baskets they would meet at an assembly point where the leaves were inspected and weighed before being transported to the tea estate factory, a rectangular white building at the end of the valley.

"Ceylon's tea bushes, if left untended, shoot up to become immensely tall trees," Andrew explained. "They are pruned regularly for tea growing purposes and are never taller than a squat bush – thus making the plucking process of the tender young top leaves easier."

"Teas are graded according to the geographic heights at which they are grown," Andrew continued. "The low-grown tea, which accounts for about half of Ceylon's total production, is found from sea level up to 600 metres. The principal Ceylon crops



come from these lowlands and are popular in Western Asia, the Middle East and Russia as the tea leaves are twisted and retain much of their original length. Medium-grown teas are found from around 600 to 1,200 metres and produce a thicker tea popular in Australia, Europe, Japan and North America. But it's at the slow-growing higher altitudes of 1,200 metres and above where the optimum grades are nurtured and where Ceylon's reputation for taste and aroma is found."



He continued, detailing information about medium-grown and high-grown territories which are further subdivided into western (Dimbula) and eastern (Uva) regions.

"Teas from these regions have their own characteristics, depending on factors like the direction of the slope and weather conditions at plucking time; also basic climatic conditions like temperature - cool nights for example, produce a better tea."

### Where the transition takes place

We took a torturously slow drive along a steep mountain path to the Norwood factory. On route Andrew explained the production process, which starts with the withering of semi-dry green leaves which are then transferred to a machine to be rolled, causing them to rupture and twist. These crushed leaves are left to oxidize for a while and then fired, producing black tea.



"The secret of producing a good quality tea," Andrew said, "is in the precise timing of each process along the way."

Whatever feelings of unhurried tranquillity the plantations may have evoked, the opposite was true of the stifling hot and dimly lit tea factory where barefoot labourers toiled amid a jumble of roaring mechanical contraptions.



Andrew broke off to speak with a supervisor, slipping into fluent Sinhala, one of Ceylon's official languages – the others being English and Tamil, spoken mostly in the north.

He went on to explain that it is a common misconception that black and green tea leaves are derived from two different plants.

"They are in fact from the same bush, *Camellia Sinensis*, the only difference being that green tea is unfermented tea while black tea is oxidized and turned into black tea by drying. In green tea production, the leaves are first steamed to prevent any fermentation taking place, then sun-dried and pan-roasted, while with black tea, the leaves are withered, rolled, oxidized and dried in high heat."

Andrew's voice was all but lost amongst the deafening factory noises. He pointed out a machine and detailed the happenings of the mechanical rolling process.

"The withered leaves are rolled - actually it's more of a twisting and crushing action - which causes the cell walls to break down, releasing the leaves green tannin, which gives tea its distinctive flavour. The more the leaf is twisted and broken the more superior its strength and flavour." He considered his statement for a moment, then added. "Historically this was done in the palm of the hand, but was considered unsanitary and now the rolling machines' rotating metal disks perform this task."



The process continued onto roll breaking, a procedure which separates the twisted balls of leaves and allows them to cool. The roll-breaker is a long mechanised sieve that vibrates while pushing the leaves over the mesh from one end to the other.

The leaves are then fired and dried for 21 minutes in an enormous dryer on a series of trays exposing them to temperatures as high as 260°F (120°C). If the drying period is too short, the leaves may become mouldy in time; too long, and the flavour becomes a bitter and caramelised.

Before packing, the dry leaves are graded and sorted by vibrating sieves into two main categories, namely whole leaf and broken leaf, and then still further subdivided.

### How the tea is graded

Grading machines are fitted with meshed screens of different sizes - uniform to those used in tea plantations around the world.

"Ceylon's fragrant liquor teas are famed the world over for the luxuriously full bodied, sharp black leaves that come from these hills," Andrew announced.



Purists flinch at the notion of adding sugar and milk to tea, but it works well with a sweet breakfast or afternoon pastry. Unlike pale-pink or jade-green Oriental brews, the average tea lover finds the familiar golden buttercup hues of black tea, somewhat pleasing.

To experience life on a working tea estate I reserved a suite at one of the Ceylon Tea Trails four converted colonial bungalows which were originally built for the British tea estate managers in the days of the Raj. Now, sitting on the shaded veranda overlooking Norwood Estate, Andrew critically inspected the contents of a tea pot placed before him; then dutifully went about pouring me a brew.



“This tea was given almost no oxidation time,” he said, pointing an accusing finger at the cup. “I’d say it’s given the final product a characteristic rawness.” I nodded, agreeing with what tasted like a mouthful of amber liquid infused with something remarkably silken.

“The flavour is extraordinarily bright and invigorating,” Andrew pursed his lips; this particular tea evidently soothed his soul. “This is a creation of the slow growing altitude.” He closed his eyes, savouring the after-taste.

After a moment he continued. “Ceylon’s tea grades are encoded in obscure initials on the packaging, identifying the grade of leaf.”

He spoke to a member of staff, asking for a few samples of sealed packs to be brought to the table and spent the next hour dutifully explaining the tea grading process to me.

### It’s all in the tasting

“The final and equally important part of the whole process is evaluating the taste,” Andrew announced.

“A producer would taste his tea merely for quality control purposes and then the broker would do a tasting and inform buyers as to what qualities are available. In turn the broker advises what the requirements of the buyers are seeking. The buyers will also do a tasting, either to assess the broker’s appraisal prior to purchase or for blending purposes. However, we deal directly with the buyers who all have expert palates and can instantly establish any miscalculations in the production process.”

### Going Native

Heading back to Castlereagh Lake, where my airtaxi waited to take me back to Colombo, we followed a windy road which led through a magical montage of deep valleys and high mountains draped in hues of moss and jade. I asked my driver, Gunapala, if we could stop off at a tea room at the nearby village. He smiled broadly, nodding enthusiastically.

I tried to ignore the abject poverty around me and quietly wondered after the efficiency of Fairtrade.

We were each handed a cup of treacle-like black tea and what appeared to be a cube of sugar.

“This is the way locals drink Ceylon tea,” Gunapala informed me, picking up the sugar cube.

“To drink tea with us you need to take this jaggery and place it here, in front of your teeth. Then you carefully sip the tea through the cube.” We exchanged smiles and I



followed his direction.

Jaggery is an intensely sweet, solid block of sugar derived from the reduction of the sap from the coconut flower which, when evaporated and caramelised, has a sugary-fudgy character, making it an ideal accompaniment to the intensely thick, strong, smaller-leafed teas favoured by the local market. Without jaggery, these teas would be a real trial to drink. The sugar counteracts the strength and bitterness of the tea and ensures an energy boost which will keep the recipient purring on productively for several hours.

## Sri Lanka's Tea Guerrillas



“We are way beyond Fairtrade,” announced Malik Fernando, the dynamic Operations Director of Colombo based Dilmah Tea, who dismisses Fairtrade as a once noble concept which has been exploited and developed into a marketing strategy.

Spearheading the commodity culture of multi-origin blends some thirty years ago, ruthless traders began acquiring the many family owned, quality oriented tea brands. Those brands who did not willingly sell out were doomed to bankruptcy.

Heavily discounted multi-origin blend supermarket teas all but guaranteed a nose-dive in quality, creating in its place brand-name consumer dependency. As such, almost any tea brand bought today is a commodity tea, made from a blend of thirty or more countries.

“My father created Dilmah Tea in 1988, providing tea lovers around the world with a single origin pure Ceylon tea, and a personal guarantee of distinctive quality and absolute freshness.”

Dilmah is the world's first fully integrated family tea company who grow, pick, process, package and market tea under their own international brand-name.

“Most Fairtrade stamped products are typically littered with three to five middlemen who wedge themselves between the tea farmer and the consumer,” Malik paused for reflection. “This means poverty stricken farmers remain penniless as the middleman purchases their crops at very low prices, seldom enough for the farmers to cover their production costs.”

“Earnings from Dilmah remain in Sri Lanka,” Malik continued. “We focus on business ethics and social responsibility by sharing our proceeds with our workers and the community - reinvesting in the industry, making tea a sustainable commodity for all.”

As the world's top tea exporter for 2006, Sri Lanka's tea industry earned \$850-million dollars in 2006 (\$750-million in 2005) by exporting 327-million kilograms of black tea (309-million kilograms in 2005).

Merrill Fernando, the founder of Dilmah and the Godfather of Tea, strode into reception where I was waiting for my driver. He had a certain Nelson Mandela air about him. We exchanged smiles when he saw my parcel of tea. “Our tea is

different," he said "I know you'll like it."

## Mile High Club

"Tea? Coffee?" the airline stewardess enquired.

"Depends," I said, "got any Jaggery?" She looked at me with a touch of wonder.

"No Jaggery here, I'm afraid, but as we're the country's official airline we consider ourselves ambassadors to Ceylon's best."



She produced a distinctively marked "T" tin of Dilmah. We swapped smiles.

"Go on then," I said, inclining my head at my cup.

I considered the destiny of the sweet-scented leaves as they travelled to their final destinations and envisioned well dressed tea-trays in homes around the world, bearing scones and china tea pots, warm milk and sugar lumps.

Andrew Taylor's easy smile came to mind. "Splendid stuff, wouldn't you say?" I could hear him ask.

Dilmah Tea is a Sri Lankan based family company who challenges multinational control of the global tea industry. Dilmah is a global tea brand which markets its pure unblended Ceylon tea directly to the consumer in more than 80 countries worldwide.

[www.dilmahtea.com](http://www.dilmahtea.com)

### GETTING THERE:

Start your trip on the culturally right foot and travel with SriLankan Airlines who fly from JFK. [www.srilankan.lk](http://www.srilankan.lk)

SriLankan Airlines offers an air taxi service from Colombo International Airport to the inland tea country, with a first touchdown scheduled for Castlereagh Lake in early March 2007, thus avoiding many hours of torturous road travel.

[www.srilankan.aero/airtaxi](http://www.srilankan.aero/airtaxi)

### ACCOMMODATIONS:

There are four sprawling single storey Tea Trails bungalows in the tea country ranging from four to six rooms each - twenty luxurious rooms and suites in all. Each has been sympathetically restored offering a unique experience of life on a working tea estate. All the bungalows differ: on the shores of Lake Castlereagh is Summerville which has an air of a country cottage and on the opposite bank is Castlereagh, with an eclectic style of its own; at the opposite end of the valley is Norwood, modern with a twist of history and in the valley beyond is Tientsin, regally colonial. Each bungalow comes with its own chef, butler and several houseboys. All inclusive rates start at \$180 per person. [www.teatrails.com](http://www.teatrails.com)

Round off your trip with a night at Colombo's colonial Grande Dame - the Galle Face Hotel. Reserve a room in the Regency Wing and savour high tea on the lawns

overlooking the Indian Ocean. B&B rates start at \$125. [www.gallefacehotel.com](http://www.gallefacehotel.com)

The word pekoe comes from the Chinese pak-ho, which alludes to the fine hair of the newborn infant and was applied to young tea buds still covered with light down. Orange, contrary to popular belief, has nothing to do with colour or flavour but refers to the princes of Orange, who were descended from the house of Nassau. The word thus conveys the idea of noble quality and was probably first used by Dutch merchants to give distinction to the product.

### **TEA TASTING TERMS:**

Blackish: a satisfactory appearance in CTC-type teas;

Bloom: a sign of good manufacture; a sheen that has not been lost;

Brown: an appearance in CTC-type teas indicating harsh treatment;

Chesty: a taint created by inferior or unseasoned packing material;

Crepy: a crimped leaf feature common to BOP teas;

Curly: the appearance of whole leaf teas such as OP;

Grainy: describes primary grades of CTC teas;

Leafy: tea in which the leaves tend to be on the large or long size;

Mushy: tea that has been packed with high moisture content;

Musty: tea affected by mildew

Neat: a grade having good make and size;

Ragged: an uneven, badly manufactured tea;

Stalk: and fibre should be minimal in superior grades;

Tip: a sign of fine plucking apparent in top grades;

Wiry: leaf appearance of a well-twisted thin-leaf tea.

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