The New York Times
nytimes.com

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT SPONSORED BY THE DARJEELING LIMITED

October 14, 2007

High Tea, India Style

By MATT GROSS

THE Himalayas rose almost out of nowhere. One minute the Maruti Suzuki hatchback was cruising the humid plains of West Bengal, palm trees and clouds obscuring the hills to come; the next it was navigating a decrepit road that squiggled up through forests of cypress and bamboo. The taxi wheezed with the strain of the slopes, and the driver honked to alert unseen vehicles to our presence — one miscalculation, one near miss, could send the little car over the edge and down thousands of feet, returning us to the plains below in a matter of seconds.

For an hour or more, as we climbed ever higher, all I saw was jungle — trees and creepers on either side of us, with hardly a village to break the anxious monotony. Finally, though, somewhere around 4,000 feet, the foliage opened just enough to allow a more expansive view. From the edge of the road, the hills flowed up and down and back up, covered with low, flat-topped bushes that looked like green scales on a sleeping dragon's flanks. Tiny dots marched among the bushes and along the beige dirt tracks that zigzagged up the hillsides — workers plucking leaves from Camellia sinensis, the tea bushes of Darjeeling.

Flying to a remote corner of India and braving the long drive into the Himalayas may seem like an awful lot of effort for a good cup of tea, but Darjeeling tea isn't simply good. It's about the best in the world, fetching record prices at auctions in Calcutta and Shanghai, and kick-starting the salivary glands of tea lovers from London to Manhattan.

In fact, Darjeeling is so synonymous with high-quality black tea that few non-connoisseurs realize it's not one beverage but many: 87 tea estates operate in the Darjeeling district, a region that sprawls across several towns (including its namesake) in a mountainous corner of India that sticks up between Nepal and Bhutan, with Tibet not far to the north.

Each has its own approach to growing tea, and in a nod to increasingly savvy and adventurous consumers, a few have converted bungalows into tourist lodging, while others are accepting day visitors keen to learn the production process, compare styles and improve their palates — a teetotaler's version of a Napa Valley wine tour, but with no crowds.

Still, such a trip requires a certain amount of fortitude, as I discovered when I set out to blaze a trail from estate to estate last March, during the “first flush” harvest, said to produce the most delicate, flavorful leaves. (The second flush, in May and June, is really just as good.) It wasn't just the roads — once marvels of engineering, now tracks of terror that produce daily news reports of fatal plunges — that made the journey a challenge. It was the egos.

The men who run the estates are royalty — and they know it. When visiting their domains, you are at their disposal, not the other way around. At times, this can be frustrating; at others, delightfully frustrating.

I HAD my first such encounter — the latter sort — at Makaibari, an estate just south of the town of Kurseong, around 4,500 feet above sea level. Founded by G. C. Banerjee in the 1840s, during the region's first great wave of tea cultivation, Makaibari remains a family operation, run by Banerjee's great-grandson Swaraj — better known as Rajah.

Rajah is a Darjeeling legend: He's arguably done more for Darjeeling tea than anyone else in the district. Back in 1988, he took the estate organic; four years later, it was fully biodynamic, the first in the world.

Today, it produces the most expensive brew in Darjeeling, a “muscatel” that sold for 50,000 rupees a kilogram (about $555 a pound, at recent exchange rates of around 41 rupees to the dollar) at auction in Beijing last year. You won't often spot his logo — a five-petaled flower that resembles the underside of a tea blossom — on grocery store shelves, but you'll find his leaves in boxes marked Tazo and Whole Foods.

After checking into one of the six no-frills bungalows he has erected for tourists, I marched into the Makaibari factory (opened in 1859), climbed the wooden steps to Mr. Banerjee's office and sat down across the desk from a vigorous patrician with thick gray hair, a clean-shaven angular jaw and black eyebrows in permanent ironic arch. What, he asked, smoking a borrowed cigarette, did I hope to accomplish at Makaibari?

“Well,” I began, as the smell of brewing leaves wafted in from the adjacent tasting room, “I guess I'd like to see how tea is made.”

“Ha! You've come to the wrong place for that,” Mr. Banerjee declared with an eager grin. “This is the place to see how tea is enjoyed!”

Then he poured me a cup — bright but mellow, with a faint fruity sweetness that lingered on my tongue. It was to be the first of many perfect cups.

Enjoying tea at Makaibari was an involved business, one that began before I'd even woken up. At 7:30 every morning, a knock would come at the door of my bungalow, and Mr. Lama, the grandfatherly caretaker, would present me with a cup of fresh, hot “bed tea,” which I'd sip groggily before leaving my woolen blankets for the chilly mountain air.

At breakfast in the glassed-in common room, more tea, after which I'd march down to the factory. On one side of the road were the dragon's green flanks. On the other, the red, white, yellow and blue prayer flags of a tin-roofed Buddhist monastery fluttered in the Himalayan breeze. Uniformed children on their way to school would shout “Hello!” while their parents, many of them Makaibari employees, would put their palms together and quietly say, “Namaste.”

In Makaibari's wood-paneled offices, I'd have a cup while waiting for Mr. Banerjee to arrive — it was with

him, not some hospitality manager, that I would plan my days. Sometimes he'd show up early, other days late, but the office was filled with memorabilia with which to pass the time: portraits of Mr. Banerjee's father, grandfather and great-grandfather; certificates announcing new record prices; a chart of tea-tasting vocabulary; and a small tea plant that concealed two “tea devas,” curious insects whose bodies mimic the shape and color of a tea leaf.

After making his entrance — sometimes on his black gelding, Storm, but always wearing a high-waisted safari suit he designed himself — Mr. Banerjee would expound on everything from Rudolf Steiner's biodynamic farming theories to the fall of Atlantis to his youth on Carnaby Street in London, where he made a fortune before retreating to Darjeeling to grow tea.

Eventually, we'd move into the tasting room, where Mr. Banerjee would inspect the day's production. No tea bags here — this was “SFTGFOP,” the labels noted: super-fine tippy golden flowery orange pekoe, the healthy, unbroken leaves from the very top of the bush. Earlier, an assistant had weighed out precisely two grams from several batches, steeped them in nearly boiling water for five minutes, and strained the tea into white ceramic bowls.

As with wine, tasting tea is no simple process of gulping and grading. Mr. Banerjee first inspected the infused leaves for color and nose, and only then sipped from each bowl, inhaling sharply to oxidate the liquid and release its flavors, and sloshing it loudly around his mouth before spitting it into a nearby tub. Then, with hardly a moment's hesitation, he'd move on to the next bowl, and the next, and the next.

Then it was my turn.

“Taste those two,” Mr. Banerjee ordered the first day, “and tell me which you prefer.”

I did as he said. Both had the gentle floral aroma typical of first-flush Darjeelings, but the second had a pronounced strength and astringency that appealed to me, even though I knew that Darjeeling growers try for subtlety over punch. I told him my decision.

“Bah!” he said after resampling them. “That one only has undertones of peach. The first one has peach flavors and is much more complex. It's far superior!”

I blushed — I had much to learn. And for the next few days, I studied hard.

First, I followed the tea pickers — mostly ethnic Nepali women — into the fields, where they spent all morning and all afternoon moving across the steep slopes like mountain goats, with bamboo baskets on their backs. “Dui path, ek suiro” was what they plucked — “two leaves, a bud” — slowly transforming each bush from bright yellowish green to the deep sheen of the older leaves.

In the factory, massive steel machines were turning the harvest into drinkable tea by the “orthodox” method. After 16 to 20 hours in withering troughs that remove much of their moisture, the fresh leaves go into rollers that curl them into precise formations once achieved only by hand. Then comes the

fermentation, during which the tea develops its flavor, becoming a half-fermented oolong or a fully fermented black tea. Next the tea is fired — baked — to stop the fermentation, and the leaves are sorted, graded, packed and sent to the tasting room for Mr. Banerjee's approval.

One day, he asked his manager, Deb Majumder, to bring me into “the inner sanctum,” the room where he prepares his special biodynamic fertilizer ingredients: oak bark, valerian flower, chamomile, dandelion. Another, quartz crystal, is ground up and mixed with large quantities of water in direct sunlight, supposedly absorbing cosmic energy and transferring it to the crops.

“At first,” Mr. Majumder said, “I didn't think it would work. I thought things would go down. But after a few years, things began to improve.”

The harvest increased, but he said he noticed other benefits: two troublemakers assigned to mix the quartz solution calmed down and became friendly, a result perhaps of the cosmic energy.

After a few days of studying tea, exploring Makaibari's hundreds of acres of wilderness and devouring home-style vegetarian meals, it was time to move on. For one thing, other teas were awaiting my taste buds, but I was also growing uncomfortable in my bare-bones bungalow, with its low-wattage lamps and frequent water problems. (Mr. Banerjee is in negotiations with hotel companies to turn the bungalows into an upscale eco-resort.)

A COUPLE of days later, however, I found myself no more relaxed. Instead, I was on a spine-shaking early-morning jeep ride down the worst roads I'd yet experienced. In 90 minutes, we'd traveled only 20 miles from Darjeeling town, the gritty, urban heart of the district, and I could hardly imagine a pleasant ending to the journey.

Then we reached an oasis, Glenburn. This century-old planter's house, meticulously restored, stood on the edge of a plateau, its porch, strewn with sofas and chairs, looking out to the terraced slopes of the valley. The suites were vast, kitted out in teak club chairs and four-poster beds that evoked the Raj.

Breakfast had just begun, a fabulous spread of fresh-baked croissants with pomelo marmalade, a spicy Parsi scrambled egg dish, bacon, sausage, papaya, custard apple, orange juice. ... I sat down among the other guests, a mix of 10 Indians, Britons and Americans, and gorged in bliss.

The man responsible for Glenburn's tea was Sanjay Sharma, 33, whose self-satisfied smile suggested he was well on his way to developing a Rajah-size ego. And perhaps with good reason — at 28, he was appointed estate manager, the youngest ever in Darjeeling, he said. He has tried to push the production in new directions, and he asserted that Glenburn now ranked No. 17 in the district.

In my limited experience, it could have been No. 2 after Makaibari. Mr. Sharma's first-flush teas had that wonderful flowery scent and a long, lingering aftertaste, with just a hint of bite.

Alas, Glenburn was booked, so I endured the jackhammer trip back to Darjeeling, consoled by a single

thought: soon, I'd be checking into Goomtee, a resort recommended by Nathmull's, the best tea shop in Darjeeling.

In terms of luxury, Goomtee stood somewhere between Makaibari and Glenburn. The comfy planter's house recalled 1950 rather than 1850, with huge rooms and a garden of azaleas in purplish bloom, and since the owners of the cypress-dotted estate were strict vegetarians, so were the guests — myself and four Japanese women from a tea-appreciation society. After checking in and getting a traditional welcome dollop of green-tinted rice pressed to my forehead, I followed them and their translator to the fields.

And I began to fade. Maybe it was that I'd seen too many tea bushes, maybe that I couldn't understand Japanese, maybe that later I once again found myself waiting in the office of another estate manager, wondering if I'd ever get a taste of his leaves.

I was about to drop off entirely when an assistant brought in a full tea service and poured us each a cup. I sipped. This is what they mean by “brisk,” a bright flavor that fills your mouth and wakes you right up.

“Oishii!” the women cooed. “So tasty!”

I soon learned more about briskness, when I set off one morning for Muscatel Valley, Goomtee's far-flung organic fields. It was a more serious hike than I'd expected, about four and a half miles up narrow, rocky paths that eventually led to an awe-inspiring landscape.

If Makaibari had been wild and Glenburn a fantasyland, then Muscatel Valley was positively prehistoric, with massive stone outcroppings amid lonely fields of tea bushes stretching into the Jurassic distance. Sunlit mist shrouded the far mountains, and all traces of civilization vanished. There was nothing but me and the tea.

When I returned to my room, I flopped down in exhaustion. It wasn't the hike, though: I was tea'd out.

How, I wondered, could these professionals differentiate among the infinitely subtle gradations of flavor and scent? What stuck in my mind was the tea-ness of tea, floral aroma, hints of fruit and wood on the palate, and a fragile astringency that buzzed in my mouth long after the liquid had gone down. But which cup had that been, the Makaibari or the Glenburn? Or had I just imagined it?

A day later, on a slow Internet connection, I received an instant message from a friend in New York: Could I bring her some first flush?

“It's for a dear friend from Darjeeling,” she wrote. “He's dying, and he hasn't lived in India for more than 60 years, but he still dreams about the tea.”

I had a mission. On my way home, I bought a wooden box of Makaibari's first flush and delivered it to my friend soon after my return. A few weeks later, she forwarded me her 97-year-old friend's thank-you e-mail note.

“It was so precious,” he wrote, “that I shared part of it with the Namgyal Monastery” in Ithaca, N.Y. The “beautiful little casket” of tea now sits at the feet of the monastery's Buddha, he added, and “in the major pujas to come, it is your gift that will be brewed.”

Prayer ceremonies in the Finger Lakes, I thought: a fitting end for this tiny box of fragrant leaves. Namaste to that.

VISITOR INFORMATION

HOW TO GET THERE

Continental Airlines has daily direct flights from Newark to New Delhi; round trips start about $1,250 in early November. From New Delhi, Jet Airways (www.jetairways.com), Indian Airlines (www.indianairlines.in) and Air Deccan (www.flyairdeccan.net) fly to Bagdogra Airport near Siliguri, about 50 miles from Darjeeling.

The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway or Toy Train — a quaint, steam-powered narrow-gauge railway — will get you to Darjeeling town in seven hours from Siliguri; first-class tickets are 247 rupees; second-class, 38 rupees (about $6 and $1, at 41 rupees to the dollar).

A taxi ride will take three hours and cost 700 to 1,000 rupees. Hotels or tea estates can arrange for one.

VISITING THE TEA ESTATES

Makaibari (91-354-233-0181; www.makaibari.org) charges 750 rupees a person a night or 1,400 rupees for two, all meals included. Reservations can be made through its Calcutta office (91-33-2287-8560). Homestays with Makaibari workers can also be arranged.

Those seeking more comfortable lodging can book Cochran Place (132 Pankhabari Road, Kurseong; 91-354-233-0703; www.imperialchai.com), a colonial-style lodge about 15 minutes' walk from Makaibari. Doubles range from 2,200 to 3,700 rupees with breakfast, but 50 percent less during monsoon season, mid-August to mid-September. Cochran Place will also arrange tours of Ambootia, another organic estate.

Glenburn (91-33-2288-5630; www.glenburnteaestate.com) charges non-Indians $400 a night for two, all meals included; day trips from $50 a person, including transportation. Glenburn will arrange helicopter arrivals for those unwilling to brave the bumpy journey.

Reservations for Goomtee (www.darjeelingteas.com) are handled by Girish Sarda at Nathmull's Tea Room in Darjeeling (91-354-233-5066). Doubles are 5,600 rupees a night, all meals included.

The best place to stay in Darjeeling town is the Elgin (91-354-225-4082; www.elginhotels.com). Doubles with all meals are 6,445 rupees. It offers quite a nice high tea every afternoon (250 rupees).

BUYING TEA

Every estate sells its own tea at a good price, but for the full spectrum, head to Nathmull's Tea Room (Laden La Road, Darjeeling; 91-354-225-6437; www.nathmulltea.com). It sells the best of the district, except Makaibari.

MATT GROSS writes the Frugal Traveler column for the Travel section.

Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company

Privacy Policy | Search | Corrections | RSS | First Look | Help | Contact Us | Work for Us | Site Map