

More tea in Sri Lanka



The third in a series of features on a tea tour to the home of tea, Liz MacKenzie takes us to the Tea Research Institute of Sri Lanka and the Laxapana Tea Estate, introducing us to more thought provoking material on the subject of tea ...

The Tea Research Institute

Founded in 1925 and currently managed by the Tea Research Board that was established in 1993, the **Tea Research Institute** in Sri Lanka serves the purpose of encouraging and conducting research and investigations into problems and concerns related to tea manufacture and production. Contributions to its funding come from levies put upon exported tea from Sri Lanka.

The Institute is the largest of its kind in the world, with its main laboratories at Talawakelle, and is proud to declare that Ceylon tea is "the cleanest in the world." This refers to the amount of fungicide and pesticide residue left after the control of pests and diseases. Each country sets the lowest acceptable limits for amounts of fungicides and pesticides used. Japan's standards are the highest to meet but Sri Lanka has reduced its usage to half that which is allowed by the Japanese and is looking to reduce it even further still.

The main problem for the tea growers is "blister blight." The Tea Research Institute has a well established education programme for the growers and producers, making them aware of some of the facts that the fungicide and pesticide sellers may not appraise them. They encourage the use of natural solutions such as copper and on focussing treatment in the case of infestations to a specific area rather than simply going about mass spraying. Some pesticides have been banned because of concerns about the effects on the health of the workers at the estates, especially pregnant mothers. The overall view of the Tea Research Institute is that the health properties of tea far outweigh any trace elements left by fungicides and pesticides.

As we had become accustomed by this point in the tea tour, a general discussion ensued about thoughts on recent research such as that which indicated that adding milk to tea reduces the health benefits that tea can offer; pressures from buyers to

produce cheaper tea; the role of the Ceylon Tea Board in promoting loose leaf tea and encouraging the tourist industry to promote the use of good quality varieties of loose leaf tea rather than cheap tea bags. A further discussion related to media and marketing in the UK, which sets benefits in the mind of the general public such as green tea being better for you than black tea, which is not now thought to be the case at all. The discussions, of course, were conducted over a good cup of tea.



protective clothing. Here we saw the huge tea sacks ready to be sent out. Tea chests are no longer used for the packaging of tea and, instead, large lined paper sacks are filled with tea by machine. We were also taken to the Maternity Wing based within the estate, where the enthusiastic doctor proudly showed us the facilities. Maternity leave begins two weeks

before the expected birth of a child and women are paid for 84 days leave for 1st and 2nd children and 42 days thereafter. Not only is full care given throughout pregnancy and birth, there is advice on contraception, taking responsibility for health, HIV (although this is not prevalent) and, particularly with fathers in mind, alcohol consumption, which is more of a problem. The doctor was taking calls directly from his patients on his mobile phone as we visited - hardly a service we might get within our own National Health Service in Britain!

Having heard all this, we proceeded to the tea 'nursery' to learn about propagation. In the main, vegetative propagation is used as this guarantees the reliable strain of the plant in a way that seed propagation cannot. Vegetative propagation occurs by taking a mature leaf with about an inch of stem and pushing it into a tube containing good soil. No rooting hormone is used in this process. Our expert guide made it clear that this is not cloning as the Tea Research Institute is absolutely against genetic modification. In around nine months this single leaf has grown to about half a metre and can be planted out to mature into a tea bush that will survive for around thirty to forty years.

This was a fascinating visit and I felt very privileged to have seen the work of the Institute first hand, meeting with some of the key people behind the important work being carried out there. Once again we had been made very welcome and given every opportunity to learn all that we could about this vital part of Sri Lanka's economy.

Tea in the Superintendent's Bungalow

At the Laxapana Tea Estate we were given a thorough tour by the Superintendent and, at the factory, once again donned



Following this interesting visit, we were invited to the Superintendent's bungalow for tea - a real honour. On each tea estate there is a Superintendent who has overall responsibility for the running and management of the plantation, factory and all the staff. He may have 20 more assistants, dependent on the size of the estate. Each estate, therefore, has a Superintendent's bungalow, where he and his family will live. At Laxapana, the Superintendent's bungalow was set in the heart of the tea plantation, up a very rocky pot-holed road. Once we arrived, we found the bungalow surrounded by beautifully

maintained gardens and with sublime scenery. We were taken to the far edge of the garden overlooking the hills and lake, where we sat beneath a wooden gazebo and were served tea and snacks. The tea was, of course,

single estate and hadn't gone through the process of being blended, packaged and shipped. It tasted



much different to that to which we are accustomed because of its freshness - much like the difference between the salad you eat directly from your own garden, picked the day you eat it and salad that has sat for days or even weeks waiting to be sold. The conversation, not surprisingly, related to tea, its production and the high level of facilities available at the estates, which was a surprise to many on the tour.

The Planter's Club

Life for tea planters and the Superintendents is extremely isolated. They are largely cut off from people outside their own estates and the Planter's Club serves as a regular meeting point where they can discuss the whole range of issues affecting the estates - from pest control to the unions. We were taken to the Planter's Club attached to the Brunswick Estate, which in many ways was like any working men's club complete with Tombola barrel, bar, stage and large TV screen. And what did we find ourselves discussing? Tea, naturally, though this time not over a pot of tea itself but with cold drinks from the bar and yet more food. Manthi Delwita, one of our tea gurus who accompanied us throughout most of the tour, amused us by relating the hierarchy that used to exist when only Superintendents were allowed to sit upon the high stools by the bar, whilst the assistants must sit around the edges. He, however, when in this position, would arrive early to try out the high stools before the Superintendents arrived.

Tea at the St Clair Tea Centre

Situated on the Hatton Road to Talawakale above the St Clair falls is the St Clair Tea Centre,



easily visible by the huge ornamental copper samovar-like structure standing in its grounds. We stopped here on our return from the Laxapana Estate. There are two parts to the Centre; a kiosk from which you can order tea, cakes and ice creams which are then served to your table, and a shop. Inside the shop is a vast array of tea paraphernalia as well as tea itself.

Tea is taken outside on white wooden garden benches and tables. The view is quite stunning, where you are surrounded by high mountains, the waterfalls and deep valley. The tea was bright, light and most welcome on a hot day and went perfectly with a slice of chocolate cake.



In the midst of this tranquillity one of our tour party managed to knock from its

place the plaque that details the history of St Clair Estate, first owned by Mr Devon who bought the land from the British Government to grow coffee and transformed the estate when coffee blight desecrated crops.

In the Winter Issue of **tea** we complete the tea tour journey with a stay at The Tea Factory Hotel, a visit to the Ceylon Tea Museum and a green tea factory, plus a final tea tasting.