



Originally a coffee growing country, the first tea was brought over from India in 1845. Ceylon tea, as it is still known despite the country's change of name, is much loved by the British - often evoking that sense of it tasting "just like mum/grandma's tea". Here, Liz MacKenzie shares her experience of a very special tea tour with Robert Wilson's Ceylon Teas ...

Tea in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is a country that continues, in the North, to live through civil disturbance; fought back after the horrors of the Tsunami in late 2004; has lived through occupation by the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British until its independence some 50 years ago. In one area it has achieved and retained dominance - that of tea. Ironically, coffee preceded tea in Sri Lanka but, in the early 1800's coffee blight brought it to an end and tea rose up and has thrived as the country's finest product ever since.



Why go on a tea tour?

Ceylon tea as it is still known today despite the country's change of name to Sri Lanka, has been enjoyed for generations. It's golden liquor and excellent taste has satisfied British people through good times and bad.

When I first noticed the information detailing a tea tour in Sri Lanka, it seemed

far too good an opportunity to miss. In this issue and over the rest of this year's issues of **tea** I will chronicle a fascinating journey, introducing you to a tea auction, visiting a tea broker, tea estates, the Sri Lankan Tea Research Institute, a tea factory turned hotel and some very fine places for tea in this beautiful and surprising country.

What inspires people to go on a tea tour? For myself, the reasons are perhaps obvious but what of the others in the small group setting out to immerse themselves in the world of tea on a small island below India? This was the third of such tours organised

by Robert Wilson's Ceylon Teas. Robert has Sri Lanka in his blood;

his father and grandfather before him being tea planters and Robert following in their footsteps until the time before nationalisation of the tea estates came about over 30 years ago. (This was actually reversed within 9 years)

There was a variety of reasons for going

on the tour. Nadia is English but now lives in Italy. She discovered the tour in Country Living magazine and phoned her parents to see what they thought - dad aged 86 and mum who keeps her age to herself. Within days they had all agreed to give the tour a go. Patrick and Maggie from London saw an article about the tour in The Guardian, tried some of Robert Wilson's teas and wanted to explore the country those teas came from. Dennis had been on the previous tour in 2005 and he wanted to come again; for him a journey to reminisce on the 9 years he spent on a tea estate in Sri Lanka many, many years before. For Barbara, her love of tea was all the encouragement she needed.

We all met briefly at Heathrow airport, with the exception of Nadia who was flying from Italy, and then again, somewhat bleary-eyed, in Columbo at some ridiculously early hour of the day when we looked at each other across the hotel lobby as we sipped some delicious fruit juice and longed for sleep.

We may (well, some of us at least) have read the itinerary and the accompanying notes sent to us by Robert Wilson and prepared by himself and Manthi Delwita, his Sri Lankan colleague of many years, but had no real idea of what lay ahead. Theory

is all very well but we were about to embark on a journey of discovery, learning the inside story on tea and the tea trade in this, the home of tea. We were to see for ourselves what fairtrade means at the 'coal face', meet many enterprising and extremely hospitable people, have opportunities that most tourists don't have the privilege to enjoy and, of course, discuss our thoughts whilst sipping many a cup of Ceylon tea.



Ready for tasting ...

Over the forthcoming issues of **tea** magazine you will be able to share in the learning and discovery from this tea producing island. The visits to the estates were both fascinating and surprising. We not only saw first hand the many labour-intensive processes that occur for tea to be produced but also the facilities available to tea estate workers. The tea auction was, to say the least, rapid-fire. Tea tasting was, naturally, a central part of many of our visits - both the traditional method used by

professional tea tasters and the sitting down for a cup of tea variety.

Both Robert and Manthi, the tea experts who accompanied us and gave endless time to answering our questions and introducing us to the various different teas produced on the island, are both passionate about Ceylon teas. Each has many years experience of the tea trade and Manthi continues all year round to promote Ceylon tea in Sri Lanka and beyond and encourages the estates in what they are doing to achieve the high quality Ceylon tea we all love so much.

Their perspectives on tea from this long-standing experience added, for me, a most valuable dimension to the tour. What they said helped to make it come alive and enabled me to develop a much deeper understanding of both the problems and the beauty of tea. I contacted each of them on my return to England, curious to know their thoughts and, in particular, what they wanted to convey to readers of **tea** magazine. As with all countries, times change and Sri Lanka is no different - it's people have different aspirations than they had 50 years ago but this is not without problems in terms of tea.

This is reflected in Robert Wilson's thoughts.

"I feel strongly that consumers should appreciate the efforts that the

tea estates have made to keep workers on the estates," says Robert. "In my time we had more than enough workers on the estates but today education programmes are geared to allow everybody a chance at University education and that is causing some disappointment on the island as it has done here in England."

He continued by saying, "If consumers can appreciate the huge costs of production and the complexity of production to achieve the aim of top prices all the time, then I think they might appreciate the product more and be willing to be more selective in their purchases and pay more for the product. I am passionate about the tea industry and have a vested interest in its future as my relations were partly responsible for it happening."

Manthi Delwita shares Robert's passion for the tea industry and he too has concerns that he wished to convey to people reading this magazine.

"Ceylon tea has a greater number of varieties of tea than any other tea producing country. It has



approximately 32 agroclimatic districts that produce teas with their own characters like different vines do in wine production. Even within a sub-district some estates have their own varieties of tea bushes and are affected by the angle of the cliff slope, the wind and sunshine. These characteristics are being killed by commercial considerations of profit and standardisation. When I was in the UK some of the prices for tea were ridiculously cheap. It is a labour-intensive product employing large numbers of workers who must be paid a living wage and that must keep up with inflation."

Manthi told me that he sees the public image as being that tea must be cheaper than water - a status quo that cannot be sustainable if people want good quality tea and have genuine concern for the workers and their families. Much to think about there for us all as we contemplate our tea purchases, in the 'buy one get one free' culture that Britain has readily embraced.

These concerns certainly gave me food for thought and, on my return, I discussed this with my colleagues at tea. We are all agreed that these issues must surely be of interest to anyone who cares about good tea, and we have plans for some future features focusing on such issues as Fairtrade as it affects those in the industry.



Manthi preparing tea for tasting

Having heard the views and concerns of our tea experts, I was also, on my return to England, keen to know what effect the tour might have had on the others who were there - those who did not consider themselves experts about tea in any way. I caught up with Nadia back in Italy to discover what had most impressed or affected her from the tea tour. Here

is what she told me.

"My thoughts on tea are that I have basically been taken for a ride all these years by the big tea producers who have been offering me sawdust. I had vague memories as a child of drinking tea that came from the teapot - tea tea - which had colour and perfume to it. I got home from Sri Lanka, put the kettle on and popped a Twinings tea bag into a mug - and felt a mug too. I recalled all we had heard about the smallest particles of tea being put into tea bags and what did I have? A mug of sawdust with no flavour at all. What had happened to me? I realised I had become a mutated tea drinker - what had more or less satisfied me as a decent tea now became a horrible old bag with a beautiful coloured packet on the outside."

"I went into a café in Turin a few days later," she continued "and I was dying for a cup of tea. I asked what sort of tea they had and hey presto it was the beautiful coloured packet again. I asked if they had another brand and the answer that came was that they sold ten teas, all the same brand. It's not just about the tea bag, it's about flavour - or lack of it. I feel like Buddha sitting under the tree and becoming enlightened. It has taken me 50 years but I think I have got there. I know what good tea tastes like now and I would not be able to drink tea from those tea bags again."

"My taste buds do work and none of those big sellers of those tiny tea particles that no one else wants are going to get me again. It's the national drink in Britain and I urge tea drinkers to buy in a bit of quality, get some flavour because it is definitely worth it. There is real satisfaction in a tasty teapot cuppa. Yes, I am a tea drinker and now a fussy one - or should I just say enlightened? I think the Queen should contact Mr Wilson and give him some recognition for what he is doing to encourage the interest in good quality Ceylon tea."

Afternoon Tea at ... The Galle Face Hotel



Overlooking the sea, the Galle Face Hotel was built in 1864. It was the first hotel in Colombo and has served High Tea for the last 140 years. You can sit on the veranda and enjoy the buffet-style tea, which is a fusion of what we

recognise as traditional English style - finger sandwiches, scones with jam and cream, delicate cakes - alongside small Asian savoury snacks that are all freshly cooked to order including mini samosas. You can also have freshly prepared waffles with syrup. Large, slim glass jars house small biscuits such as 'Rock Coconut' and 'Brown Biscuit'.

A good pot of Ceylon tea is served to the table, the leaves having been removed. This can be taken with or without milk, the milk provided being warmed.

I sat on the veranda at Galle Face Hotel as the sun began to set over the sea. The bright orange glow only added to the atmosphere and the sure sense of being far away from home. The Galle Face Hotel has a colonial style with marble



floors and carved wooden decoration. Barbara Hanson from the Los Angeles Times said in 1990, "I had thought that gracious hotels such as this no longer existed."

That remark holds true today.