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A Modern-Day Tea Journey



CEYLON, HOME OF GOOD TEA, INDIA (BOMBAY), 1950s.

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“The island of Sri Lanka, historically known as Lanka (or Illankai) to the Sinhalese and Tamil inhabitants, was called Ceylan by Dutch conquerors of the 17th century. The British overtook the Dutch in the early 19th century, altered the name to Ceylon, and proceeded to develop coffee, rubber and tea plantations on a massive scale. Upon gaining independence in 1948, the name of the new island-country became Sri (meaning “auspicious”) Lanka, affirming its rich heritage. The coffees produced on the original British plantations – and the teas that replaced those coffees starting in the 1860s when devastating disease overcame the coffee trees – are still called Ceylons.”

-Upton Tea Quarterly, Fall, 1999

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A Modern-Day Tea Journey

*I Left My Heart
(and My Sneakers) in Sri Lanka*
-by Rebecca M.

When I was approached about guest writing the article for this issue of the Upton Tea Quarterly, I was thrilled at the prospect of sharing my visit to Sri Lanka this past summer. Included in the responsibilities of a customer service representative at Upton Tea Imports is the role of tea consultant. I have developed a passion for tea during my 10 years with Upton Tea Imports. If you have phoned in to place an order or for some consultation, we have probably had the chance to speak. In addition to my avid enthusiasm for tea, I have always wanted to travel. Upton Tea Imports is investing in its employees to travel to country of origin to experience tea, and I did not hesitate when offered the opportunity. My appreciation for Ceylon teas has grown exponentially, as well as my fascination with the effects of the various microclimates in which they are produced. I am always amazed by the diversity of flavor imparted by a simple change in elevation. I lean towards a slight preference for the teas from the lower growing region, and I was honored to have the rare opportunity to indulge this growing interest. This visit was especially timely since it coincided with the 150th anniversary of Ceylon tea production.

The length of the flight itself was a singular experience. It was my first time

spending nearly twenty hours on a plane only to end up nine and a half hours ahead of where I left. The time zone change took some getting used to. Excitement reasserted itself after landing and a good night's rest. After a day of acclimating and taking tours of local Buddhist and Hindu temples in Colombo, the capital city, I was ready to make my way up the winding switchback roads to the Nuwara Eliya district, a high-grown region with elevations over 6,000 feet.

The approach quickly became enveloped in mist as the road stretched up into the clouds. There was a wide range of flora and fauna as well as an impressive waterfall to observe, which served to make the long drive to the Heritage Tea Factory Hotel fly by.

Bright and early the next morning, I visited the Idulgashinna and Dambatenne Estates. At the Idulgashinna Estate, after being very warmly welcomed and given a short talk on the history of the estate, there were teas to taste. The lineup of 16 different teas ranged from hearty, broken-leaf black teas to rich, complex black teas with wiry leaves and golden tips to a selection of green teas, including the bold-leaf "Blink Bonnie," and a set of flowering display teas. You may find our new offerings from the Idulgashinna Estate on page 35 of this catalog. There was much touching and smelling of wet and dry leaves followed by smelling, sipping and slurping from the brewed cups. As I progressed down the line, I was sure that the tea I was sipping at

that moment was my favorite, and then I quickly revised that assessment as I tasted the next cup. Each tea had a familiar style but an unmistakably unique character in which I could discern the influence of the flowers and spices that shared the growing area. It changed the entire tea tasting experience for me and emphasized the role that the growing environment plays in the flavor of tea. Finding notes of jasmine and cinnamon when tasting a tea, while the air around me was redolent with those scents, was an experience I will not soon forget. During the visit to the Dambattenne Estate, I had a close-up view of row upon row of tea bushes. Peering from the top of rolling slopes full of waves of vibrant green, pictures do not capture it entirely; it surrounds you and fills you with a sense of true awe. I took a moment to seek out those bushes that might still be flowering. I did find quite a few of the delicate white tea blossoms, lower down than I had expected. While crouched down, I got a good look at the tangled, knotted trunks of the bushes, which reminded me very much of Bonsai trees. They appeared to be cultivated and pruned in much the same way, care taken to keep them at approximately hip height for ease of harvesting. Lunch followed at Sir Thomas Lipton's bungalow, which afforded a view of an impressive English style garden, one of the remnants of colonial influence.

My next visit was to the Somerset Estate, where I had the chance to visit with some of the tea pickers in the tea garden.

They were kind enough to demonstrate the proper, two leaves and a bud, tea plucking method. Then I was able to try my hand at picking some. It was such a beautiful experience to be able to touch and smell the leaves in the bright morning air. The proper technique became easier after a few tries, though my speed could benefit from a bit more practice. After that, I had the chance to tour around the factory, where all the drying, processing and sorting takes place. The equipment, machines and drying beds made for quite an impressive sight. When I was handed a paper surgical mask at the beginning of the tour, I was not sure why it would be necessary but, as the tour progressed, it became clear. As tea dries, the lighter material, such as stems, gets separated from the leaves. As sifting and sorting take place, much of that particulate ends up in the air. The tour ended and I walked past the finished product, a large stack of tea sacks, ready for their destination.

After the factory tour, I headed to the Tea Research Institute in Talawakelle, established in 1925. There was more history and information than it would be possible to absorb in an afternoon, particularly a library of tea journals that I would have loved to peruse. There were panels on the walls, as well as displays, outlining everything from the very beginnings of tea cultivation to soil sampling and testing to steeping instructions.

From there, it was on to a tour of the Matale Spice Garden in the Kandy district, a mid-grown region with elevations averaging 4,000 feet. You may find our new offerings from this district on page ___ of this catalog. It was a lovely, fragrant concentration of all of the spices that I kept noticing earlier in the trip. It served as a very informative tie-in, offering an in-depth perspective on some of the plants that tea shares the soil with.

Sigiriya Rock was the first stop on the final day of the trip. Not only is Sigiriya Rock beautiful, stately and enormous, the approach to it on the paths through the water gardens was stunning and evocative as well. I will admit that I did not make more than a quarter of the climb up towards the top but even the view from where I stopped provided definitively majestic vistas so captivating that I felt solitary tranquility, even though there were lines of other visitors continuing the climb past me as well as noisy monkeys playing in the trees around me. This was another moment among many where pictures could not do the experience justice. After my visit to Sigiriya Rock, it was time for a safari tour in Minneriya National Park, which was established in 1997 after having been declared a wildlife sanctuary in 1938. The tour was by jeep, which was a fun and energizing, if bumpy, way to travel. As we made our way near the edge of a forested section, there were a lot of birds and other wildlife along the way, culminating in a group of elephants, which we stopped to

watch and photograph. It was a perfect vantage point to observe from.

And, just like that, I had reached the end of my trip. It had been a fantastic whirlwind, with so much to reflect on as I prepared to make the long journey home from this amazing, life-changing experience.

Visiting Sri Lanka was invaluable in exploring and furthering my tea education. The tea knowledge I have gained over the years, my outlook and everything about the way I see, smell and taste tea has been enhanced a thousandfold. Everyone that I met was so warm and welcoming and the itinerary was a perfect balance of information and exploration. Visiting the tea gardens, walking around and experiencing tea culture, being immersed firsthand, was a wonderful, energizing step on my tea journey. It has also resulted in the cultivation of contacts from which Upton Tea will be purchasing teas directly. In this issue of the Upton Tea Quarterly, we have expanded our offerings to include new selections from each of the seven tea growing districts: Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, Uda Pussellawa, Uva, Dimbula, Sabaragamuwa and Ruhuna. You may find this special section starting on page 32. I hope to visit again someday. Until then, I have cherished memories of a once-in-a-lifetime experience to take with me, as well as the warm greetings and farewells - Ayubowan: May you live long!