

Tamil Tea



Most of the hill country is planted in tea plantations - hills and mountains and steep slopes of tea shrubs. Historically, Sri Lanka had been a major coffee exporter, but then a blight killed off all the coffee trees in the 1860s, and tea was brought in as an emergency substitute. It turns out that the Sri Lanka hill country has the perfect climate for tea, and Ceylonese became famous worldwide. It's still one of their largest export earners.

We learned an amazing amount about tea production and tea pluckers during our time trekking through the hill country. Tea plants can grow to 30 feet tall, but they are kept to shrub height by a severe pruning every 4 years. A bush can produce for 50 years or more. Only the bud and top 2-4 leaves are plucked for tea (the fewer the leaves, the higher the grade). The bushes have to be plucked every 4-7 days. By hand. One the side of



a steep mountain. It's hard work, and the British weren't able to convince many of the local Ceylonese (as they were then known) to become tea-pluckers. So they imported workers from Tamil Nadu, in southern India - and they have stayed and worked in the tea plantations ever since. The tea pickers are the poorest of the poor in Sri Lanka - they earn about \$1.50/day. The women do all the plucking, the men do the pruning, terracing, and other heavy work. The absolute poverty line is \$2/day/person, according to the World Bank. A Tamil family of six, with two workers, lives on about 50 cents a day/person. (They do get basic medical care and schooling for free, and are often able to grow a small vegetable garden). They



live in concrete row houses, one family to a room, that were built by the British early last century. Not an easy life.

We met tea workers and their families all along our trek. It was heartening to see all their kids dressed up in school uniforms, coming home from school. It was disappointing to see that about 70% of the students were boys. According to Bruno, the local schools only go up to 7th grade or so; to continue on means going to live in a larger town, boarding at a hostel. Most kids drop out at this stage - their families don't have the money to pay for the hostel, and don't see the value in education when all you're going to do is pick tea. Several kids we talked to said that they wanted to drop out and start working so they could help out their parents, who were getting old. And so the cycle continues.

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To finish our education about the tea industry, we took a tour through a Lipton factory - built by Sir Lipton himself. Although some of the machinery was newer, it looked every bit the 1900s tea factory (see next page)



Freshly picked leaves are dehydrated by blowing air over them for 16 hours



The leaves are moved by hand and shoved down through a hole in the ceiling....



...into a grinding machine that pulverizes them and starts a fermentation process



The ground leaves are hand carried over to a sorter, that separates the stems from the leaves



The ground tea leaves are moved by hand to a section of the factory floor, where they are piled for 20 minutes to ferment. This has to be timed rather exactly.



Once they are perfectly fermented, they get baked for 100 minutes or so - again, this has to be done exactly. At this point, they have changed from green to black tea.



The black tea is then run through several rounds of sorting, by size of the pieces. The size of the broken leaf dictates how it will be branded. The least valuable, the "dust", is for the local market (it's surprisingly difficult to get a good cup of tea in Sri Lanka, ironically).



After being sorted, the tea is scooped into large bags for shipment. The tea master at the facility tastes the tea from each batch, and grades its quality.

