

## Wanderlust: Asian tea plantations

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While artisanal coffee roasting houses sprout up across Asia, another sort of following is quietly forming around caffeine's other liquid fix and I for one look forward to the smooth stimulation.

For my first serious encounter with tea, I alight among the fertile fields of Sri Lanka's south central Bogowantalawa Valley, a cool (for Sri Lanka) 4,000ft above sea level where Dilmah, the country's best-known premium tea purveyor, converted four sprawling planters' bungalows, built between 1890 and 1939, into Ceylon Tea Trails ([teatrails.com](http://teatrails.com)). All are linked by walking trails through working tea estates. I've been invited to a private tea tasting with Merrill Fernando, the Dilmah founder. 'Like liquid gold', the charismatic octogenarian says reverentially over the cups laid out before us. I find myself captivated by the diversity of tastes among these leaves, especially Dilmah's Ran Watte single origin varieties, which Fernando compares to fine wines. More convenient and equally enlightening, private sip-and-spit sessions at the Dilmah t-Lounge ([dilmah.com](http://dilmah.com)) in Colombo teach even tea novices to distinguish full-bodied Maskeliya low grown Ceylon teas from golden hued high grown harvests.

Among the US\$1.5 billion worth of tea exported from here annually, the Sri Lankan tea scene's new kid on the block is 22-year-old Dushyantha De Silva whose Teaeli ([teaeli.com](http://teaeli.com)) range was a hit with the Duchess of Cornwall on her visit to the former British colony earlier this year. De Silva's

refreshing sips like vanilla coconut, marzipan cherry and an Earl Grey with cornflower, bergamot and blood orange can already be found at two of Colombo's most stylish eateries, Ministry of Crab and Barefoot Garden Cafés and among the wild animals of Yala National Park on Leopard Safaris ([leopardsafaris.com](http://leopardsafaris.com)).

"In one valley near Adam's Peak, Tamil tea pickers choose their route into the fields very carefully, so as not to disturb the spirits," Canadian tea explorer Jeff Fuchs tells me over a cuppa in Colombo. The Yunnan based author of The Ancient Tea Horse Road collects oral histories of Asia's ancient yet quickly vanishing communities of tea growers, pickers and traders. This month, the Explorer's Club member and North Face ambassador launches a series of multi-day journeys for travelling tea aficionados among the often overlooked yet colourful cultures and lush landscapes of Sri Lankan tea ([srilankainstyle.com](http://srilankainstyle.com)).

To convince me to expand my tea travels northward towards the ancient tea forests along the Tibetan Plateau, Fuchs hands me a Zhi Ye teacake, made of dark purple leaves that rarely leave Yunnan. These unfermented tea leaves, he explains, are harvested from 30 to 60-year-old plants by the Hani people in Menghai County, deep in Yunnan's culturally diverse Xishuangbanna region.

Though Fuchs trekked 5,000km from China's southwestern Yunnan and down into India to research this region for his engrossing tale of Himalayan teas' last muleteers, I plan simply to check in at Indigo Lijiang ([ihg.com/hotelindigo](http://ihg.com/hotelindigo)) and Lux\* Lijiang ([luxresorts.com](http://luxresorts.com)), two promising new boutique properties in Lijiang Old Town, where sips of Yunnan's fabled Puerh teas are plentiful and curious tourists like me may pursue a blossoming interest in the region's ethnic minorities along with the elusive leaves they harvest.

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