At first flush

A solo wander through India for a lesson on the processing of Darjeeling tea

BY *Bill Giebler*

"Flush" refers to tea's separate plucking seasons, each known for its distinctive colour and flavour.

PAVEL SVOBODA / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

It looks like a dance floor, a three-square-metre section of smooth wood among the rough planks that make up most of the flooring, all surrounded by giant locomotive-like drying machines. I've been waiting at the cool, dark packing station just inside the front door of the tea factory, and alternately in the warm April Sunday morning sun just outside, for my packing shift. Packing represents the final step handled here at the factory, completing my education in the processing of my favourite tea.

At 1400 metres above sea level in the Himalayan foothills of India's Darjeeling region, I'm at the 150-year-old **Makaibari tea factory** (*makaibari.com*) perched on a slope just below the town of Kurseong. I'm just over a week into my physical travels across northern India, but a dozen weeks into the personal journey that began with giving notice on a 20-year career, and planning my solo wander across a land that has existed in my mind as a magical and challenging destination, no more or less real than Narnia or Brigadoon.

In any case, here I am, one man interested in experiencing each step of tea processing as my own process unfolds, far from home

After an hour of waiting, four large full tins of finished tea from the sorting room — carried two-ladies-at-a-time — are dumped on the shiny floor, filling the air with the rich, dark vegetal scent of black tea leaves. A man, barefoot, wearing grey dress pants, a white T-shirt and, amusingly, a Starbucks baseball cap, shovels and sweeps the tea into a single well-blended mountain of the finest grade Makaibari Estate, First Flush Darjeeling Tea. We wait, he and I, for the inspector to ensure the quality of the grade, and then begin filling 20-kilo foil-lined brown paper bags, one scoop at a time into the chute engineered into an upper corner of each bag.

Easy at first, it becomes very difficult once the bag is over half full and has to be repeatedly shaken and shifted — the entire bag lifted and dropped — in order for the tea to settle and make room for more. We've been joined by a woman, swiftly scooping tea and maneuvering the large bags with an urgency and confidence that compensates for her diminutive size and arms that are, at their widest, the size of my wrists.

"She filled two in the time it took you to fill one," the foreman teases after watching my slow struggle with the process, "and then finished yours off for you." It's not true! I started two different bags, handing one off to each of them for the challenging final touches. It is true, though, that each of them has done twice the work I have. He smiles. "She says you should only get half pay."

Packing is the only part of the process that — as far as I've witnessed — employs both genders. The gender roles are strong; each stage of the process (plucking, withering, rolling, firing, sorting) is handled either by men or by women, never both. The process begins and ends with women, and the distinction can be drawn along the lines of precision. If the work is delicate enough that human hands are involved, they must be women's hands. The gross handling of larger actions (and larger machines) is done by men.

In any case, here I am, one man interested in experiencing each step of tea processing as my own process unfolds, far from home.

PAVEL SVOBODA / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

FAMILY TIES

The **Makaibari Homestay Programme** (*makaibari.com/en/sustainable-tourism/homestay-makaibari.aspx*) connects travellers with a family in a village that's close to the tea estate. In addition to lodging, three meals are provided daily, which gives guests the opportunity to taste traditional dishes made with local organic produce.

The homestay programme is run by Volunteer in Makaibari, an independent self-help group managed by Makaibari's youth wing. Profits are shared between the ladies of the community who participate in the programme and the host families.

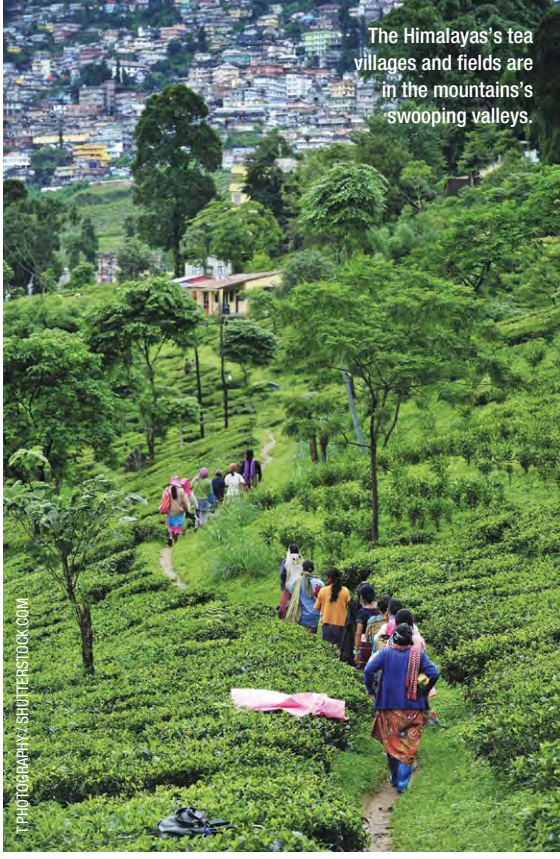
Tea is both art and science. It is the careful, methodical refinement of a bulk raw material that is pure potentiality. If handled correctly, it can become a brilliant and universally captivating expression of this potential. It is a delicate and many-staged process, however. When it's harvested, how — and *how quickly* — it's processed, the precision of brewing, etc. all affect the degree to which the essence is optimally revealed.

I see this clearly from my position here on the tea estate, surrounded by dramatic hills carpeted with hundreds of acres of what many consider the world's finest tea. The drama of the place comes from the geography, the grade. Simply put: it is steep. These are young mountains, the Himalayas, and that must explain their boldness. These foothills burst out of the plains below with such urgency that a flat surface is nearly impossible to find. On a clear night, I can easily see Siliguri, a plains city only 35 kilometres down Pankhabari road, yet more than 1200 metres below me. The roads attempt to follow the ever-ascending ridges, and this is where the towns are. The tea villages and fields are in the startling, swooping valleys.

That's where I've spent these last several days, above nearly vertical fields of the robust little shrub, *Camellia sinensis*, in a village homestay just down the

T PHOTOGRAPHY / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

Each stage of tea processing is handled either entirely by men or by women — never both, except for packing.



T PHOTOGRAPHY / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

The Himalayas's tea villages and fields are in the mountains's swooping valleys.

SANTIBHAVANK P / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

Darjeeling's infrastructure has been unable to cope with the ever-expanding population, but the city is still a colourful and lively place.

road from the factory, the oldest one in the region, still processing tea today the same way they have for more than a century.

"Makaibari" is stencilled in white paint — each letter about a metre tall — on the green corrugated tin roof of the rugged old building. Truly unchanged for well over 100 years, even the machinery inside is pre-1900. The factory opened in 1859, not coincidentally the same year tea production began in the region. Mechanization came in the next few decades, and that's about it. The rest has happened day in and day out with very few changes over the next dozen decades. The place is run by the vital and eccentric Swaraj Kumar Banerjee, the "Rajah of Darjeeling Tea," a man in his early 60s, greying hair around his sharp, handsome Bengali face, and often a somewhat devious smile like a child with a secret. Known simply as "Rajah" Banerjee, he is the fourth generation Banerjee to run the estate, and the man responsible for bringing organic agriculture to India's tea lands, indeed changing the way things are done outside the factory in the fields.

Rajah and I were crouched in the dirt outside of his office one afternoon as he counted types of uncultivated flora growing between the bushes. "...three, four, five..." Then turning to me, "You have a brother? Same genetic make-up, same cultural upbringing... right?" I agreed on all counts. "Tell me, placed in a room together, facing, talking, how long would it take before you had a disagreement?"

"Two hours?" I considered.

"I bet it's more like 15 minutes, but ok." He resumed plucking fronds and flowers, all in reach from his squatting position between bush and building, all voluntary growth, "...six, seven, eight..." He stopped at 15.

"*This*," he declared, handing me the bouqueted cluster of flora, "is what happens naturally." He was referring to the stability of a complex ecosystem versus the fragility of genetic homogeneity, like brothers or chemical-dependent mono-crops. "*This* is what creates sustainability: diversity!"

Makaibari was the first tea estate in the world to be certified organic in 1988.

Diversity is subtext, however, as are the words mulch and dung and compost. To distill Banerjee's ever-ready lecture to a single word it would be: soil. "Healthy soil is healthy mankind," is his mantra. The result is better tea, healthier workers and a product that just might be reproducible for another 150 years, and then another after that.

Days later in his home, in a smoke-filled living room with two enormous taxidermied tigers and two very alive German Shepherds, I sipped sparkling wine with Banerjee and his wife, and their daughter-in-law and six-year-old grandson visiting from Bangalore.

"My father was one of the greatest hunters in India," he proclaimed as I inspected the very large, catatonic, dusty creatures. "He took down 86 such beasts in his day."

I was glad to hear this placed him among the best of hunters, the notion that this might be an average performance made my stomach turn. "I think he might be singlehandedly responsible for putting these on the endangered species list," I said.

He smiled, accepting the jab, but was unapologetic about the contradiction. This man with his impressive legacy in organic agriculture and fair trade business practices, this champion of biodiversity, remained very proud of his family's legacy as well — even those elements that depleted the local tiger population.

It's Makaibari's environmental record that intrigued me into coming here. That and the ad hoc homestay volunteer program. A love of tea, too, factors in, particularly Darjeeling's lighter body, golden-brown liquor, floral astringency and tannic bitterness. But I come without substantial expertise on the beverage, and my work here is not directly related to tea. I'm volunteering among the villagers — many employed by the tea company, but experts, each, in a single process, not a finished product — thus I'm not substantially progressing my tea knowledge save for a few shifts on the factory floor. My expertise on the topic of timing and handling comes from an uncanny sense of fellowship as we, leaves and I, are plucked from our framework and set on course to re-organize ourselves into something new. In fact, that is precisely my work here.

The story for both of us begins after the roots and branches have been well established. After the various feats, cultural and agricultural, that brought us to this point of readiness.

Reprinted with permission. The article appears on TravelersTales.com and BestTravelWriting.com under the title The Tea in Me. *It won the Grand Prize Gold Award for Best Travel Story of 2014 in the Eighth Annual Solas Awards sponsored by Travelers' Tales.*