

Spotlight

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TEA MEETS TRAVEL

It might still be nascent, but tea tourism is getting the much-needed push from estate owners, hospitality brands as well as the government and is becoming a much sought-after recreational experience for tourists

KUNAL DOLEY

HUSNA-TARA PRAKASH'S "INITIATION" into the world of tea started when she went on a two-year honeymoon with her tea planter husband on a tea estate in Kerala. The warmth of the local tea planting community was second to none as her fellow 'Burra Memshahib' neighbours inducted her into the art of laying an elegant table, baking a delicious cake, managing a fine garden, and all the tricks of playing rummy at the local club every Sunday.

A decade or so earlier, Kerala was getting its 'God's Own Country' formula perfected. The landscape was spectacular, and tourists were flocking in. "As a tourist myself in those initial months, I could only wonder about how much I had just learned about the world of tea—a beverage that is the most popular drink in the world after water. Living on the tea estate also brought back memories of visits to vineyards in Europe where the resident family would open up their world of wine to visitors. It is a model that now drives the local tourism economy of many wine-producing regions of the world," says Prakash, who went on to create a similar model at their tea estate in Darjeeling, West Bengal.

And so, in 2002, was born Glenburn Tea Estate & Boutique Hotel, an intimate eight-room homestay that allows guests to live the grand life of a tea planter. "The biggest piece of feedback we get from our guests is their absolute wonder at just how much goes into making a single cup of tea. With eight tea picker villages, a hospital and three schools within Glenburn, it really is a little kingdom of its own, and a huge amount of time and manpower go into something that most of the world takes for granted," adds Prakash.

Within two years of running just four rooms at The Burra Bungalow, Glenburn was included in the international magazine *Tatler's* collection of 'The Best 101 Hotels in the World' in 2004. "Imagine what that did for our tiny little foray into tea tourism," adds Prakash. In 2008, she added a bungalow with another four rooms. The rest, as they say, is hospitality history.

Tea tourism, or the opportunity to stay at a heritage bungalow, homestay or a modern property set in the midst of a lush-green tea garden or estate, undertaking a tea tasting session, discovering how tea is made at a tea factory or simply relaxing and enjoying nature, is getting the much-needed push from the garden owners, hospitality brands, as well as the government. It is fast becoming one of the sought-after recreational experiences among tourists, both domestic as well as foreign.

With some state governments allowing tea garden owners to use a part of their unused land for the purpose of construction and promotion of tea tourism, the space is looking more exciting now.



Tea tasting sessions at (above) Taj Chia Kutir Resort & Spa in Darjeeling and (below) Tranquiltea in the Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu



Our most popular activity is the 'tea tour' around the estate and tea factory, which leaves our guests marvelling at the intricate details that go into making that single cuppa

— HUSNA-TARA PRAKASH, OWNER, GLENBURN TEA ESTATE & BOUTIQUE HOTEL, DARJEELING



The government must act as an enabler and simplify the process to start small holiday units such as homestays, vacation rentals and B&B establishments within tea estates

— SANDEEP SUBRAMANI, OWNER, TRANQUILTEA BOUTIQUE EXPERIENTIAL HOLIDAYS, NILGIRIS

rosewood furniture and come with their own team to take care of all requirements — be it arranging for meals, organising a walk in the woods, a sight-seeing tour or whatever else guests might fancy. Each of our vacation bungalows, villas and suites have their own living room, dining room and a manicured garden so you don't need to share your space with anyone else unlike in a hotel or a resort," says Sandeep Subramani of Tranquiltea, a family-run entity that's into its fourth generation



(Left) Guests enjoying tea with a view of Mt Kanchenjunga at Glenburn Tea Estate & Boutique Hotel, Darjeeling; (above) a view of Emerald Lake from Red Hills Nature Resort in the Nilgiris; (below) the 190-year-old Savoy in Ooty, a part of IHCL SeleQtions' portfolio of hotels, invites guests into its charming old-style cottages



TEA IN INDIA

17%

The percentage of the country's total production that the southern part of India produces with the major producing states being Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka

- India is the second-largest producer of tea globally
- As of a 2018 survey, a total of 6.37 lakh hectares was cultivated in India for tea production
- India is also among the world's top tea consuming countries
- India's total tea production for the calendar year 2020 was 1,257.52 million kg and for the financial year 2020-21 it was 1,283 million kg

80%

The percentage that the tea industry in Assam and West Bengal contributes to the country's total tea production

- Assam valley and Cachar are the two tea producing regions in Assam
- In West Bengal, Dooars, Terai and Darjeeling are the three major tea producer regions

specialising in gourmet teas and boutique experiential holidays in the Nilgiris. Tranquiltea is situated in the midst of the family's tea estate on the slopes of 'Tenerife Hill', which is the highest point in Coonoor and offers panoramic views of the rolling Nilgiri Hills. "Each of our guest rooms are extremely comfortable with all the amenities, one may require while on a holiday and each of them also opens out onto their own private garden areas," adds Subramani. Apart from serving authentic local cuisine to its guests, Tranquiltea also offers gourmet tea tasting experience as well as guided walks that range from short two-km walks to all-day walks that extend up to 16 km. The average room rate at Tranquiltea is ₹12,500, exclusive of taxes, per couple per night. "Our guest mix from April to August is 95% domestic and that between September and March is 70% foreigners (inbound) and 30% domestic. Our occupancy rate hovers around the 65%-mark pre-pandemic," says Subramani.

Similarly, Vijay Kumar was born into a tea growing family at the Red Hills Tea Estate in the Nilgiris that was originally built as a tea plantation in 1875. Unfortunately, the original factory was burned down in 1990 and is now in the process of being rebuilt. Kumar is the owner and is proficient at the art of making tea. Kumar and his wife Bama decided to open Red Hills as a nature retreat in 1991. They intended for this place to be a getaway for the adventurous and quite minded. Today, the resort offers several activities like nature walks, BBQ weekends, fishing, star gazing, trekking tours, yoga sessions and cooking classes, besides tea tasting afternoons. "Learn all about the black, green and white tea cultivated on the slopes around the cottages and rooms you will be staying at. Learn the distinctive flavours and the painstaking process that goes into growing, preparing and storing the ambaliquid that has captured entire civilisations," says Kumar, who also enthalls guests with

stories, wisdom and tea lore. Red Hills has eight well-appointed rooms and can be booked for ₹10,000 to ₹12,000 (all meals inclusive) for double occupancy. "About 80% of our guests are Indian, the rest are inbound tourists. Of late, a lot of guests are coming for the overall tea experience," adds Kumar. Meanwhile, at Glenburn, guests can explore the beautiful estate with its acres of tea fields and private forests, either on foot or by jeep. It offers a number of hikes, ranging from gentle to difficult, and from a short afternoon wander through a local village to a longer, full-day trek along the rocky riverbed of river Rung Tung. For a touch of the rustic, guests can even spend a night down at The Glenburn Lodge, with its two comfortable bedrooms and in the heart of the forest, on the banks of the river Rangseet. Guests can camp out, walk across the river to Sikkim, play a game of croquet or beach cricket, have a refreshing dip in the river, fish for some local trout, or simply sit and

rest in the sunshine. "Our most popular activity is, of course, the 'tea tour' around the estate and tea factory, which leaves our guests marvelling at the intricate details that go into producing that morning cuppa," says Prakash, adding: "Although we have many activities on offer, don't forget to just sit back on the verandah, with a book in hand and a cup of tea, and enjoy some peace and solitude." The night rates at Glenburn, inclusive of taxes, are ₹46,376 per room for two persons sharing on double or twin occupancy; ₹27,555 per room for one person on single occupancy; ₹11,682 per extra (third) adult, sharing a room; and ₹3,894 per child sharing parents' room (3 to 15 years). The packages include chauffeur-driven car from Bagdogra Airport, New Jalpaiguri Station. Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Gangtok, Pelling, Rinchencop to and from Glenburn Tea Estate, transport for all activities, accommodation and all meals—including picnics/barbeques, refreshments throughout the



day—among others. Prakash says she's not sure if people visit Glenburn for the tea experience or for the location but adds it's clearly a mix of both. "We are a 1,600-acre estate with 1,000 acre of forests and two rivers. So, there is a lot of hiking and open countryside in addition to the tea experience. There are also walks through villages, interactions with our school children in the schools, plus day trips to Darjeeling and Kalimpong towns," she adds.

Branded foray

In December 2020, Tata Group-owned Indian Hotels Company Limited's (IHCL) iconic brand, Taj, announced the opening of Taj Chia Kutir Resort & Spa, Darjeeling, in West Bengal. The resort is situated in the Makaibari Tea Estate, founded in 1859, and home to the world's first tea factory. Spread over 22 acres, the 72-room Taj Chia Kutir Resort & Spa, often enveloped in mist, has panoramic views of the rolling hills. The design is inspired by the meandering tea terraces and blends with nature. The standard rate for a luxury room at the resort starts at ₹15,500 per night, exclusive of taxes, and can house up to four guests. Apart from several culinary choices, guests can enjoy an elaborate high tea and tea tasting session with the tea sommelier at the Makaibari Tea Lounge. The elegant all-glass bar offers enchanting views of the tea gardens. "There's nothing quite as soothing as sipping a piping hot cup of tea on a misty morning, overlooking the lush greens of dewy plantations. The only fit match is taking in the fresh aromas of a steaming Darjeeling—better known as the champagne of teas—in the rarefied air of the lesser Himalayas," says a senior

official of IHCL. IHCL is among the prominent players that have set up properties amidst tea plantations in the country, offering bespoke experiences for travellers. The 190-year-old Savoy in Ooty in Tamil Nadu, a part of IHCL SeleQtions' unique portfolio of hotels, for instance, invites guests into its charming old-style cottages and colonial-style Anglo-Indian cuisine restaurant. The pet-friendly hotel, set in the queen of Indian hill stations, is ideal to explore the rich Nilgiri tea plantations.

IHCL also offers a collection of seven heritage tea estate bungalows in Munnar, Kerala, under its 'amā Stays & Trails' portfolio. Located in the famous Kanan Devan Hills, on an estate spanning over 58,000 acres of lush plantations and thick forests, the seven original tea planters' bungalows offer an experience like no other. Guests can visit tea factories and the Tata Tea Museum to immerse themselves in the local culture.

Policy push

In 2019, the West Bengal government modified its earlier Tea Tourism Policy to announce the Tea Tourism and Allied Business Policy that is aimed at generating enhanced investment and employment opportunities for sustainable and inclusive economic development through effective utilisation of vacant/surplus land in tea gardens. Accordingly, tea gardens were allowed to utilise 15% of the total grant area, subject to a maximum of 150 acres, for tea tourism and allied business activities. Of this allowable area, a maximum of 40% can be used for construction activities in conformity with extant rules and regula-

TEA LORE

■ Tea first arrived in England as part of the dowry of Catherine Braganza, a Portuguese princess who married the King of England. Apart from the tea chest, her dowry also contained the city of Bombay

■ The Duchess of Bedford started the ritual of afternoon tea to combat the 'sinking feeling' that one often experiences between lunch and dinner

■ Tea drinking in England had become so popular by the late 18th century that there was not enough silver in the Bank of England to pay the Chinese for the huge demand. So, the British grew opium in India and relied on the addiction of the Chinese to this drug to secure enough silver to buy tea from China

■ By the 19th century, world trade was ruled by two plants—Camellia sinensis (the tea plant) and Papaver somniferum (the poppy flower)

■ The British sent a botanical spy into China to steal the secret recipe of tea and smuggle tea plants back to India in order to grow tea in the country

— Husna-Tara Prakash, owner, Glenburn Tea Estate & Boutique Hotel, Darjeeling



(Above) During their stay at Glenburn Tea Estate & Boutique Hotel in Darjeeling, guests can go on a trek till the Manjitar suspension bridge in Sikkim; (left) tea pickers at a tea estate near the hotel



tourists from staying in some of the most spectacular locations there are and, in turn, stops the government from earning taxes. What this finally leads to is small indigenous farmers having to sell out their land as they are simply unable to sustain their livelihoods," he adds.

A sip in time

Tea tourism is still nascent in India. A concerted push is needed to promote it and include it in mainstream packages, at both governmental and travel operator level. "General awareness?" asks Prakash of Glenburn. "But the products also need to be good and tailored for different markets. Each estate has a unique story—some are more luxurious, some are more budget, some are more five-star oriented. We have a niche that works for a certain traveller type. It works for us," she explains.

Prakash adds that a major push is needed into local infrastructure like roads, which make it extremely difficult and expensive for them to run the hotel. "Our roads are terrible, and we really need the government to take this seriously if we are to push business any more," she adds. According to Subramani of Tranquiltea, the government must act as an enabler and simplify the process to start small holiday units such as homestays, vacation rentals and bed-and-breakfast establishments within tea estates. "There also needs to be clarity in the rules and guidelines to be followed to start these establishments," he says.

Up to 70% of the tea estates in the Nilgiris are owned by small tea farmers who own less than 25 acres of land. "These farmers do not have the resources or the time to run around various government departments to get the permissions required. In today's scenario, considering their marginal holdings, these small farmers are barely able to make ends meet. Hence, rules need to be simplified to enable them to earn an alternative means of income. Many of these small estates are situated in stunning locations and many of the farmers live within the property. They can easily convert a room within their houses to take in tourists and supplement their income," Subramani explains. A tourist district like the Nilgiris does not have enough hotel rooms to host the number of tourists coming in. "Homestays and small bed-and-breakfast facilities in tea estates can bridge this gap in ways to welcome tourists. Most of these small estates already have existing buildings which can easily be spruced up to host tourists rather than building new resorts and hotels, which place considerable strain on the already fragile ecosystem," adds Subramani.