

A high-angle photograph of a lush green tea plantation in Darjeeling. Two women are seen picking tea leaves in the foreground. One woman on the left wears a red and white striped shirt and a pink headscarf. The other woman on the right wears a purple patterned shirt, a yellow headscarf, and has a woven basket slung over her shoulder. The tea bushes are arranged in neat, terraced rows that follow the contours of the steep hillside. In the background, a dirt path leads up the hill, and a few more people can be seen walking. Large, leafy trees are visible on the right side of the image.

# STEEPED IN DARJE





# DELING

Known as the 'Champagne' of brews, Darjeeling is nowhere better sampled than in its home: the lush green foothills of the Himalayas, where a morning cuppa comes – weather permitting – with sun-spangled views of sacred peaks

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**S**itting on a splinter-plagued bench outside a cement-and-mud hut under a magnolia tree, I watch a young woman with a sad smile bend to offer me a yellowing porcelain cup without a handle. A confused rooster is crowing at the late afternoon sun slashing light across manicured tea trees that cling to the hillside rolling down to the Rung Dung River. In the distance, the hills rise back up, capped by a jumble of buildings in varying states of decay. Darjeeling.

I raise the dirty cup to my lips. The woodsy aroma of tea pushes away the flowered scent of the air. The amber liquid slides into my mouth.

Could this really be it?

High in the foothills of the Himalayas, at the northern tip of the Indian state of West Bengal, between Bhutan and Nepal, I'm searching for the world's best cup of tea. It started innocently enough. One morning at home in New York, I looked at the contents of the cup in my hand and wondered, "Where does this come from?"

Tea today is a £25bn industry, making it, after water, the most popular drink on the planet. But there's only one place that produces 'the Champagne of teas', a distinctive light brew with a telltale muscatel flavour: these slopes in Eastern India. So here I am in Darjeeling.

The British arrived in this part of the Lesser Himalayas, ruled by the Gurkha of Nepal, in the 19th century and set up a military outpost. The area around Darjeeling quickly grew into a summer retreat for colonists who wanted to escape the heat of the plains. The climate proved ideal for cultivating tea, and an industry was born. A narrow-gauge railway (accorded World Heritage status in 1999) sliced through the mountains by 1881, connecting the village to the wider world, and Darjeeling grew. Political unrest came and went and has returned, with many locals striving to establish an independent state of Gorkhaland. Today, Darjeeling maintains a precarious hold on itself. Its buildings balance atop plunging hills, giving way to deep valleys, or cling to precipices with near-vertical drops. Narrow twisting lanes, far too small for the cars that drive along them, carve into the hills. Darjeeling feels like a battered, overtaxed Oz. Yet there's a hardscrabble charm to the chaotic development, which spreads out from Chowrasta, the town's square.

"Darjeeling was designed by the British for 50,000 people," Darjeeling native Sailesh Sarda tells me over a pot of green pearl tea in Nathmulls Tea Room. "We have 250,000 residents now. This has become a concrete jungle. But it's very cosmopolitan; people are happy. I wouldn't give up this town for anything." Sailesh's grandfather opened Nathmulls in 1931, and it's been the family business ever since. "You go to someone's home, the first thing offered is a cup of tea," he says. "Conversation and connection happens with a cup of tea."



To get an idea just how in-demand Darjeeling's prime export is, the region produces roughly 9,000 tons of tea a year, yet thousands of tons worldwide are stamped with the label 'Darjeeling'. A consortium has been created to protect the brand by establishing strict guidelines and growing areas where the tea must be produced if it's to carry the pedigreed label.

While Darjeeling's streets are crowded and much appears to be in decline, this isn't the sweltering, swarming, jumbled India. It's a high-country enclave with cool air that feels as if it has more in common, geographically and culturally, with nearby Nepal and Bhutan than with Delhi or Kolkata. Dress shops selling traditional Tibetan *goecheen chupa* (silk gowns) sit beside Indian shops selling saris. Nepali is the lingua franca. Sipping a mango lassi and eating *momo* dumplings in a small eatery, a picture of the Dalai Lama hanging above the Tibetan man at the counter, I could be in Kathmandu. Yet Darjeeling is very much itself.

Each morning I pay a few rupees to a grinning woman named Jojo, who heats water over an open fire in a corner of Chowrasta, then hands me a plastic cup filled up with a murky brew that could melt steel. I return each day to sit on a wood crate and watch dogs that slept where they dropped rouse themselves as Darjeeling awakes. Nearby, stalls selling produce shake themselves into order. A rope-thin man sells cigarettes, one at a time. The whacking of a butcher's cleaver onto an ironwood stump, dicing up just-throttled chickens, has stout women forming a line. Monks in Buddhist saffron-coloured robes sit five to a bench and whisper. The aroma of wood fires, tainted with the smell of horse manure and frying noodles, scars the crisp air.

Down in the lower part of town, off traffic-choked Hill Cart Road, Chowk Bazaar, is throbbing at all hours. Coriander and turmeric, mustard and aniseed, wait in massive barrels. Muslim men hack apart carcasses. Nearby, Bombay ducks hang. "If this market is closed, Darjeeling is closed," Ratan Lepcha, a small man with a big moustache, tells me from ➤

#### Previous pages:

Harvesting tea, Glenburn Tea Estate.

**From left:** Monks cleaning Tibetan butter lamps, Yiga Choling Gompa monastery; Tibetan workers



the stall where his family has sold tea for 80 years. “You must try the autumn flush; it’s a strong tea, a complete tea, my favourite.” Everyone in Darjeeling, it seems, has a favourite. And with four major harvests a year — each producing very different grades of leaves that can be transformed during processing into black, white, green, or oolong teas — Darjeeling is a connoisseur’s mecca.

### INTO THE HILLS

One afternoon, not far from the monkeys that scamper around Mahakal Temple, on Observatory Hill, I find myself back in the glory days of the British Raj, at the Windamere Hotel. Built as a boarding house for British planters in the 1880s, the Windamere is proudly stuck in time. In a cheerily dingy parlour, two women in lace aprons serve afternoon tea. Framed letters by long-forgotten dignitaries, fading photos of glassy-eyed Brits in silly hats sipping drinks on New Year’s Eve, and stained pictures of monks shaking hands with decorated military officers cover the walls. “We’ve restored, not renovated,” executive director Elizabeth Clarke assures me over a cup of first flush, the light and floral tea made from the first harvest of the season in March.

Down a hill on Nehru Road is the Darjeeling Planters Club, once a meeting place for those in the trade. It’s a relic that maintains no pretensions of relevance. Musty carpets stretch beneath stuffed animal heads lining the walls of a billiard room that’s empty save for an old man asleep on a sofa, wearing what looks like

**Above:** A young apprentice sews in a tailor shop.

**Opposite from top:** View of Darjeeling from a hillside; prayer flags, Tiger Hill

a leopard-skin pillbox hat — a spectre of glory days long gone.

Little else about Darjeeling is so saddled by sentiment, and the tea trade is bigger business than ever. While town affords a nearly endless opportunity to sample every variety of the local brew, to get a true feel for Darjeeling tea you need to head to the hills, to the tea estates.

All of the 87 licensed tea estates here are a variation on a theme: rolling hills covered with millions of low, neatly kept tea trees. Women wearing head scarves or wide-brimmed hats stalk the fields, hand-plucking two leaves and a bud, then tossing them over their shoulders into the wicker baskets on their backs. Each will pick thousands of leaves during a 12-hour shift. The on-site processing centres are filled with long trays, rolling machines, and packaging sectors. Tea estates are micro-universes, with their own caste systems. They support hundreds, sometimes thousands, of people under the supervision of estate managers, such as Rajah Banerjee. A lion of a man with a mane of silver hair and dressed in a vaguely military uniform that implies a nod to the plantation days of British imperialism, Rajah presides over the Makaibari Tea Estates. Born here, Rajah is one of the few owners who run their estates hands-on. But to hear him tell the story, he never intended for things to turn out that way.

During a visit home while at university in London, he was thrown from his horse, landed in a tea tree, and got back up with a white-light realisation that his destiny lay amid the tea trees on the 550-acre estate. More than 40 years later, his passion for Makaibari and its teas is undiminished.

“Not all tea estates are equal; quality and quantity are not synonymous,” Rajah says. “Darjeeling tea is craft, not industry. The personality of each estate is reflected in the cup. You can taste it.” Rajah was the first Darjeeling tea grower to go organic. Part showman, part farmer, Rajah is a Shakespeare-quoting enthusiast, equally ardent when discussing life’s karmic balance sheet, Rudolf Steiner’s theories about the astral body, and the perfect soil pH for growing tea (4.5-5.5). He rambles at length about the spirit of Makaibari, the tranquillity and opportunity for reflection his tea offers, and his desire to bring it to the wider world, thus ushering in a new era of peace for humanity.

### TEA & SYMPATHY

To the north east of Makaibari, beneath magnolia and palmetto trees at the end of a blistered lane, the Glenburn Tea Estate offers what may be the softest landing in the Darjeeling hills. The airy guesthouse of eight casually elegant rooms, set on a 1,600-acre working tea plantation, has me lingering longer than expected. Glenburn is managed by an Indian ‘Indiana Jones’ named Sanjay Sharma. “What keeps us going is the pursuit of the elusive perfect cup of tea,” he tells me. ➤







INDIA





*I take another long pull from my cup.  
The brew has just the right combination  
of astringency and smoothness. It's  
difficult to imagine a more satisfying  
cup of tea than this*







"All of these tea trees, all the people working in the field, in the processing centre — at the end of the day, it's all about what ends up in the cup."

What has ended up in my cup early one morning as I sit in my four-poster bed propped by overstuffed pillows is a strong second flush — made from the season's second, June, harvest — plucked from some of the trees surrounding my bedroom. The infusion has a rich amber colour, a woody strength, and a long finish. The shutters are flung open. The night is yielding its hold. The sky has been hazy for my entire stay; I haven't had a single glimpse of sacred Kanchenjunga, or any other Himalayan peak. But as the dark begins to scatter, the ridge of the famous mountain range asserts itself. I slip from my bed, cup in hand, and walk to the window. As the light gathers confidence, Kanchenjunga rises above the rest. I watch the glistening white of the world's highest mountain range come into focus.

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Later in the day, bouncing along yet another heavily rutted single-lane track, my spine has had enough. At the crest of a rise, across from a vast tabletop of tea trees, relief presents itself. A wooden bench sits beside the road before a small cement-and-wood hut in the shade of blooming magnolia trees. It's a primitive store operated by 26-year-old Bimala. She's of Rai heritage, her people originally hailing from Nepal. I watch as she prepares me a plate of *momos* (dumplings) and brews me a cup of tea. The blush of youth still dominates Bimala's soft, open face, yet there's a weary air about her. Work is scarce in the valley; with her modest shop she supports her parents, two brothers and their wives, and five nieces and nephews. They all share the small home, just a few steps from her roadside stand. Bimala's day, she tells me, starts at 4am. She prepares simple meals and sells vegetables — potatoes, peppers, radishes; cauliflower is growing in the garden — although her best seller is a home-brewed rice wine. The business is a testament to perseverance, yet Bimala is thinking of giving up.

"The people around here get paid once a month," she tells me, "so they buy from me on credit. Then they don't pay."



She invites me into her home. I scan the small, well-kept rooms, the hard-mat beds. We look at a faded photo of her grandparents. Beneath the house is an enclosure with two bony cows. The nearby pigpen is empty. "The pig died." A hen sits in a basket, chicks scamper underfoot.

We walk back to her shop. As Bimala prepares more tea, she tells me an oft-told tale. It seems there was a boy, and a marriage proposal — but her mother is losing her sight, her father is ill. What would they do without her?

She refills my cup. I've had finer tea; richer, more nuanced. But Bimala's hospitality takes away any bitterness my chipped porcelain cup may contain. I'm reminded of something I heard early on in Darjeeling: "Tea is the people's drink."

Bimala's father calls to her from the house; she silently withdraws. I sit and watch the clouds cascade down from the hills above. In time, Bimala returns, as silently as she left. She smiles her sad smile. Finally, she pours herself a cup of tea and sits on the bench with me. Side by side, looking out, we sip our tea in silence. The clouds dip lower, reaching the tops of tea trees across the road. Fog settles around us. I empty my chipped cup, Bimala refills it. As I raise it again, she raises her own. Our rims of porcelain touch — and she smiles again. This time the sadness is gone from her face; she is simply a beautiful young woman enjoying a simple pleasure.

The fog lifts as suddenly as it had descended, the sun pours down, the ground steams. Now I'm grinning too, sipping what is, without question, the single best cup of tea I've ever tasted. ➤

**Previous page:** Indian tourists pose on the tracks of the Darjeeling Toy Train.

**From left:** Preparing tea samples, Makaibari Tea Estates; tea sellers, Tiger Hill





## ESSENTIALS

*Darjeeling***GETTING THERE**

British Airways, Jet Airways, Air India and Virgin Atlantic offer nonstop flights between the UK and Delhi; Jet Airways flies several times daily between Delhi and Kolkata. [ba.com](http://ba.com) [jetairways.com](http://jetairways.com) [airindia.com](http://airindia.com) [virgin-atlantic.com](http://virgin-atlantic.com)

Kolkata has regular overnight trains to New Jalpaiguri, for connections to the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, a UNESCO World Heritage experience. Buses are quicker but the bumpy roads are less scenic. **Average flight time:** 9h.

**WHEN TO GO**

October and November are the best times

to view the mountains. Between March and April is the best for blooms of orchids and rhododendrons. From December to February it can be crisp and beautiful, if a little chilly, around 5-8C.

**NEED TO KNOW**

**Visa:** For Indian visas (£92) apply online: [in.vfsglobal.co.uk](http://in.vfsglobal.co.uk)

**Currency:** Indian Rupee (INR). £1 = INR 99.

**Health:** Vaccinations may be needed. Consult your GP at least six weeks in advance.

**International dial code:** 00 91.

**Time difference:** GMT +5.

**MORE INFO**

Train travel in India: The Man in Seat 61. [seat61.com](http://seat61.com)

[incredibleindia.org](http://incredibleindia.org)

*Kolkata & West Bengal*, by Vanessa Betts. RRP: £5.99. (Footprint Focus Guide, 2013)

**HOW TO DO IT**

**Greaves India** offers a 10-day Darjeeling itinerary from £2,400 per person, based on two travelling. The price includes international and domestic flights, 10 nights' accommodation, private transfers, sightseeing and excursions. [greavesindia.co.uk](http://greavesindia.co.uk)