

Right place, magic results

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Ruling over estates is the manager, described as a benevolent despot who like his British antecedents still retains a large staff and observes strict protocol. His bungalow, in the words of one Indian author, "is to the garden folk what Windsor Castle is to British citizens."

"And why did tea tourism get started?" we asked Ahmed.

Smaller, private estates began welcoming guests in the 1990s as a marketing strategy to help pull them out of a worldwide tea glut. Another slump followed in the early 2000s when India opened up its markets to cheaper imports, forcing some growers to seek alternative sources of revenue. There's been no looking back.

From the lowlands of Assam, we ascended 2,100 metres to the Olympus of tea: Darjeeling, where

altitude, soil, slope and sunlight come together to concoct magic. Among the hill stations the British founded to flee India's blazing summers, Darjeeling's gems include the Windmere, haunt of tea people and often cited as one of India's finest colonial-era hotels.

Originally a hostel for bachelor tea planters dating back to the 1880s, the hotel is owned by the Tenduf-Jas, a prominent Tibetan family with close ties to the Raj who maintain the aura of those bygone days.

There's afternoon tea with scones, served daily since 1939 in Daisy's Music Room where family albums are stacked atop a piano lighted by candelabras. Hot water bottles are tucked into beds each evening, and real English porridge dispensed by white-gloved waiters at breakfast.

Around Darjeeling are nearly

90 tea estates, including Makaibari, producer of India's first organic tea and a pioneer in tea tourism, offering 21 homestays with estate workers and an upmarket residence. Its factory has changed very little since it was erected in 1859, and barely relies on modern technology to produce high-end tea for export to the U.S. and Europe.

"We need the human touch — and nose — not a robotic arm or an aromatic sensor," says production manager Sanjoy Mukherjee, inviting us to sample six of his teas, including Silver Tips Imperial which fetched a record \$1,000 per kilogram at an auction in China.

Back at the Windmere, we dined by candlelight with music of the 1920s and '30s softly in the background. Served is honey glazed lamb and chocolate soufflé, which our French friends pro-



DENIS GRAY, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Bungalow that once housed senior British tea estate managers, in Balipara, Assam state, is now a luxury lodge for overnight guests.

nounced "delicieux."

Before dinner, Sherab Tenduf-la, the hotel's owner, offered us pink gins, the quintessential colonial drink, by the fireplace as cold mists veiled the looming Himalayan peaks.

The gentleman, exuding charm

of another era, told us that the last of Darjeeling's British tea planters, Teddy Young, died earlier this year.

But along the subcontinent's tea routes, much of the style and substance they created remains firmly implanted.



IF YOU GO

■ **Entry requirements:** Passport plus visa, to be obtained before leaving Canada. For more information, go to the website of India's consulate-general in Vancouver, cgivancouver.org. To obtain an application form, go to indianvisaonline.gov.in/visa

■ **Currency:** Indian rupee. Recent exchange rates:

\$1 Cdn = 55.452 INR

1 INR = \$0.01803

■ **Health:** Consult a doctor or travel medicine clinic six to eight weeks before leaving Canada.

■ **Getting there:** NSCB Airport in Kolkata,

India, has the best air links to both Assam and Darjeeling regions. Taxis can be hired in most larger towns.

■ **Traffic moves on the left.**

■ **When to go:** In Assam and Darjeeling, the weather is best from October through February. However, tea production takes a winter break toward the end of November.

■ **Tea Trail accommodations:**

Thengal Manor, Jorhat, India, doubles \$120, heritagetourism.india.com

The Heritage Bungalow, Balipara, India, dou-

ble occupancy, \$460 including meals. Other bungalows are \$156, including meals, wildmahseer.com

Windmere, Darjeeling, India, Colonial Suite, double occupancy, \$210 including meals, windmerehotel.com

Makaibari, Kurseong, India, homestays \$11 per person including meals. Tea is free, makaibari.com

■ The Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs revamped its travel advisory website recently. For details, go to: travel.gc.ca/travelling/advisories