

Darjeeling Tea Is Only from Darjeeling

Happy Valley Tea Estate: the name was charming and befit the lush, sunny hills rolling before us. The hills were covered in tea bushes: clumped together and covering acres. Visiting Darjeeling, India immediately evoked thoughts of tea, so we decided to visit a local plantation. We walked to a small wooden house overlooking the tea fields, thinking it was some sort of information center. A woman in a blue dress and red headscarf opened the door and smiled.

“Come in,” she said, as though she’d been waiting for us.

My boyfriend and I exchanged a look – but extensive travel had taught us that the best experiences meant you had to say *yes*, even when you weren’t sure. We stepped into a two-room house with colorful pillows; tea was warming on the table, ready for guests.

She said her name was Bina and she was a tea picker for *Happy Valley*: the tea plantation that supplied the famous *Harrod’s Department Store*. We chatted about her life, her children, her work. It was like we were old friends. Then she haltingly asked us if we would like to stay for the night; and if we did, that it would cost \$20 USD. It was an awkward moment, but we understood that she had to earn a living however she could. Unfortunately, we had to decline because we had a train to catch. She nodded.

“We’d love to explore the plantation,” I said, and fumbled around the word with so many negative connotations.

Bina beamed. She slung a large wicker basket on her back; it was so big, it reached from her neck to her thighs. For extra support, she wrapped a strap around her forehead that was tied to the basket’s sides.

As we followed her out of her house and down to the tea bushes, Bina looked embarrassed. “It will be hot today.”

“We don’t mind.”

“If you are...planning to take pictures: the other pickers will expect...payment.”

“Oh – of course.” Another awkward realization that our tourism was their lives.

We reached a plateau where tea bushes were so thickly packed together it looked like a waist-high carpet. Four other pickers, also with wicker baskets on their back, were leaned over, plucking leaves. Bina introduced us, and they looked at us from weather-beaten faces wrapped in scarves. We followed Bina into the bushes and she started picking, one leaf at a time.

“How many do you have to pick today?” my boyfriend asked. He pulled out his Canon DSLR camera and started snapping pictures of her fingers, her dress, the landscape.

She laughed and gestured at her basket.

“Right; but how much of it for one day?”

She laughed again.

It took us a moment, and then: “The entire basket?”

She nodded and the other tea pickers, who had gathered around us, also laughed.

The basket was huge and we learned that it held 8 kilograms, or 17 pounds. As they bent over to pick one leaf at a time, we were shocked at how much it would take to fill a basket with 17 pounds of leaves no larger than my thumb.

My boyfriend put away the camera. "Please let me help," he said. Bina shook her head.

"You have to know which ones to pick. We are picking for white tea today. That is only some of the leaves." She handed one to him, and he held it delicately as she returned to work, deftly throwing leaves over her shoulders into the basket without looking.

I thought about the tea Bina had made for us in her home and wondered if I had drunk some of her paycheck.

"How...how much are you paid?" There was no delicate way to ask and my heart clenched.

Another picker standing at my shoulder bluntly said, "Two dollars". She wore a purple dress. Her eyes were narrowed at us; but her hand was gentle when she patted my shoulder, probably sympathetic at the shocked, naïve look on my face.

We stood among the pickers as they bent to their work, too busy to pay attention to us. My boyfriend felt it was inappropriate to take more pictures. We wandered among them, gently asking questions when they stood up to wipe off sweat. We offered to help, and they chuckled as we tried to find the right leaves. "You're taking too long," the stern one said, but then pointed them out to us for the third time.

The sun continued to shine on *Happy Valley* and a gentle breeze stirred the tea bush tops. When the pickers took their lunch break, they invited us to sit with them. I took out my small camera and they all crowded around, asking to see our travels. I clicked through pictures of the Taj Mahal, yak dumplings, Ganges River rowing. They poked each other and giggled in their native language. One of them mimed at me to take their pictures, and I happily obliged, focusing on their happy smiles and tired eyes, colorful dresses stark against the endless green bushes.

Eventually, they stood up and readjusted their baskets. If they didn't fill them to the top by the end of the day, they wouldn't receive their \$2 USD. My heart clenched again and my boyfriend's lips thinned with frustration. Travel is not always wonderment at the novel. Sometimes it is heartbreak at the injustice. Sometimes it is bitterness at the inability to help.

We realized it was time for us to leave so we could catch our train. We hugged them goodbye and my boyfriend surreptitiously slipped cash into their hands.

Bina squeezed us and said we were always welcome. We knew she meant it. The stern one shook my hand, too.

"Thank you for letting us be here," I said.

"You will forget us when you leave," she said. She shrugged.

"I won't," I said loudly, defensively.

"Most people do."

Her friend beside her said: “I like your scarf.” She pointed at the blue fabric wrapped around my neck.

I hesitated – the scarf had been with me for 11 countries by then. But I unwound it and handed it to her. I don’t know if that was generous; but I know her toothy grin has stayed with me.

I didn’t forget them. After India was Singapore – in Singapore was a *Harrod’s Department Store*. We walked to the second floor, the luxury tea department, and found the purple box of “Darjeeling”. The word “Harrod’s” was written in gold at the top, and the bottom corner had the Darjeeling symbol: only boxes with this symbol have tea from actual Darjeeling, India. Boxes without the symbol were fakers – like how champagne can only be from Champagne.

I picked up the box and saw the price: \$25 USD for 250 grams. I thought about buying it so I could smell the same tea leaves I had smelled rubbed between pickers’ warm fingers. But I felt sick remembering they had picked 8 kg for \$2 dollars per day – this was a 40,000% markup from their labor. Pickers only get 0.25% of the final tea price.

Harrod’s is not the only company to exploit workers. Maybe they’re not even the “worst” (though false equivalency is dangerous). But I know I am always torn between disgust at their ill-gotten profits and having another chance to sip the tea that Bina warmed for us at her table.