

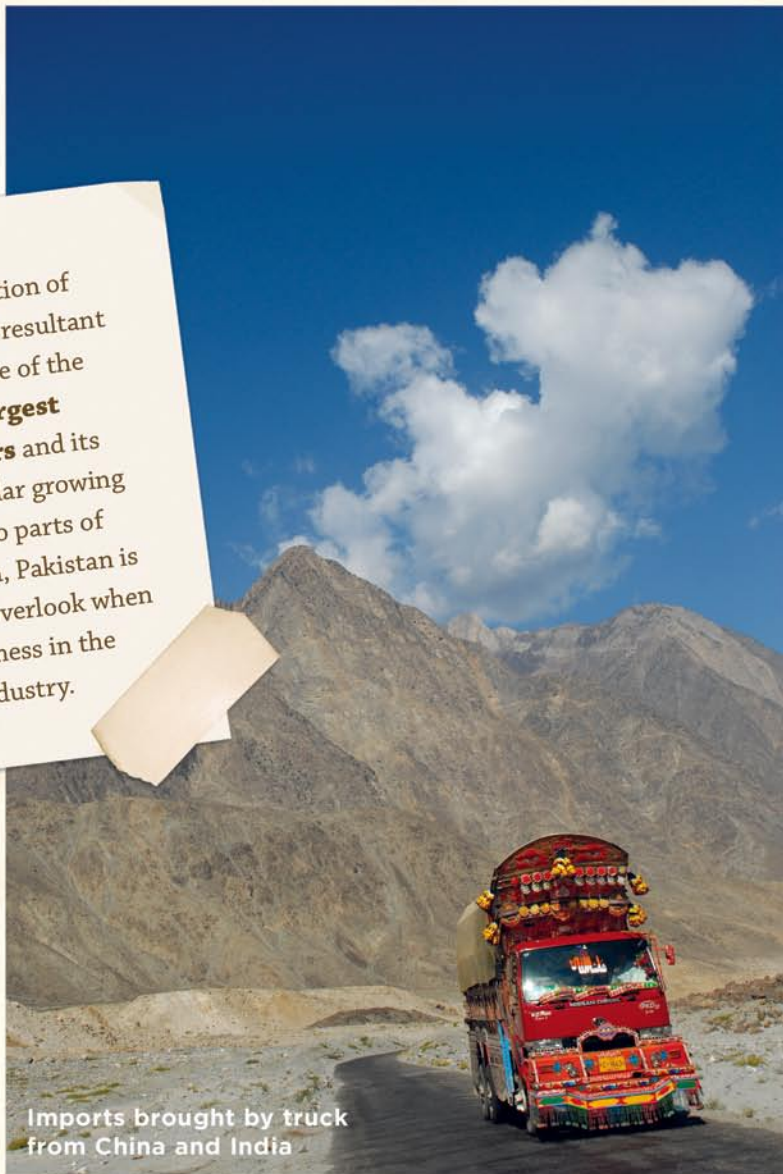
AN EPIC JOURNEY

TRACING TEA

PAKISTAN'S FLEDGLING TEA INDUSTRY

BY SOPHIE IBBOTSON *and* MAX LOVELL-HOARE

With a population of **173 million**, its resultant position as one of the **world's largest tea importers** and its inevitably similar growing conditions to parts of northern India, Pakistan is not a place to overlook when doing business in the tea industry.



Imports brought by truck from China and India



POLY-CROPPING enables farmers to earn a living while waiting for newly planted tea bushes to reach maturity.

Separation from East Pakistan (modern-day Bangladesh) in 1971 turned Pakistan overnight from a tea exporter to an importer, a situation that continues today. However, a tepid relationship with India, concern about over-dependence on Kenya, and the availability of large amounts of suitable land for tea cultivation within Pakistan itself are motivating change in the subcontinent: Pakistan has set its sights on self-sufficiency in tea production.

Each Pakistani consumes, on average, one kilogram (2.2 pounds) of tea each year. Annual imports total \$220 million, which approximates to 225,000 pounds of black tea and 2,200 pounds of green. In addition to this, estimates for the amount of tea smuggled into the country range from 110,200 to 132,300 pounds. Traditionally, Kenya has provided up to 80 percent of Pakistani tea imports, giving Lipton substantial market share, but India is also keen to get in on the act, as much as tripling its exports to Pakistan in the 2008-09 financial year. Political wrangling and infrastructure problems have restricted the seemingly obvious Indo-Pak trade in the past, but the Indian Tea Board remains optimistic, predicting that Pakistan will import 55 million pounds of Indian tea between 2007 and 2010.

Concerted tea research began in Pakistan in 1986, when the

Pakistan Agricultural Research Council established a tea research institute in Mansehra, a few hours north of the capital Islamabad and close to the Afghan border. Soil and climatic conditions in the province were identified as favorable to tea production, and so, under the guidance of Chinese agricultural experts, the institute set about planting some 30 acres of tea. Within three years, a black tea had been produced that was deemed sufficient quality by the Tea Craft Company, and another 150,000 acres of Mansehra and the neighboring districts of Battagram and Swat were assessed as viable for commercial cultivation.

By the late 1990s, Pakistan still had barely 80 acres of tea under cultivation. Concerned that the country was not meeting its potential, the government again intervened, this time launching the \$760,000 Tea Research and Development Program (TRDP). Since its inception in 1998, the program has raised 2.2 million tea cuttings, planted 1.4 million seeds and collected 6,600 pounds of seeds from the Mansehra gardens. Soil and process analysts have concluded that by 2011, each acre could produce up to 2,200 pounds a year, and parts of Baluchistan, a mountainous region in the west of the country, may also be suitable for tea growing. Former President Pervez Musharraf opened the country's first black tea processing plant in 2001, and once the rate of tea

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harvesting catches up, the plant will have the capacity to process 1,000 kilograms of tea a day.

One of the most interesting challenges facing the TRDP is convincing farmers to take up tea production. Although tea clearly thrives in the region, there is a 12-year waiting period between planting new bushes and the tea bush reaching full maturity. In communities that depend mostly on subsistence farming, a delay of this length isn't feasible. To get around the problem, the TRDP has been experimenting with polycropping, which involves planting rows of tea plants between other crops. This ensures that farmers have another source of income while waiting for their tea plants to come to maturity and, as the other plants break down, puts much needed nutrients back into the soil.

The leading tea brands in Pakistan are Brooke Bond Supreme and Tapal Tea. Tapal is the first company in the country to be awarded ISO 9002 certification, the international symbol of the highest quality standards. In an attempt to guarantee regularity of supply from India, Tapal is collaborating with an Indian firm of undisclosed identity in the production and marketing of south Indian tea, tapping into a greater interest in quality tea products, the existing reputation of their brand and the expectations of Pakistan's burgeoning new generation of consumers. Whereas much of Pakistan's tea previously had been sold loose in the markets, supermarkets are on the rise and brand awareness is increasing; appealing packaging, familiar brands, and widespread advertising on television and billboards are beginning to have an impact.



PRE-PACKAGED tea sold by Lipton as well as local brands is slowly replacing loose-leaf tea in Pakistan's markets.

Pakistan has enjoyed an active tea- and coffeehouse culture for decades, and institutions such as the Pak Tea House in Lahore became infamous for the political debates and gatherings of literary figures that took place inside. However, condemned as old-fashioned by those in their 20s and 30s, many of the older tea shops have fallen into disrepair and lost the high-caliber clientele for which they were once known. The traditional teahouses may have taken with them a piece of Pakistani heritage, but the spaces they leave, both physical and functional, offer unrivaled opportunities to companies more in tune with the demands of modern society. Costa Coffee and the Indian chain Café Coffee Day have already made tentative steps into the Pakistani market, and others appear set to follow.

The long-term viability of tea production in Pakistan will inevitably depend on its security situation; both Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier Province in which Mansehra falls have experienced ongoing instability as a side effect of the conflict in Afghanistan. However, a large population in need of sustainable employment, plentiful land suitable for tea cultivation, and a large domestic market that increasingly demands regular, cheap supplies of a consistent-quality product gives the fledgling Pakistani tea industry a reasonable chance of success. Providing that government interest and investment in the industry can be maintained over the next decade, we may all soon think nothing of blending Baluchi or Mansehran teas with those from Darjeeling or Assam to create a truly subcontinental blend. ☉

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