

AN EPIC JOURNEY

TRACING TEA

FOLLOWING THE SILK ROAD

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Butter tea is served in every bonzui.



The way to begin any Central Asian meeting, be it in Almaty or Ulaanbaatar, is with half a cup of tea. Whether green or black, with milk or without, the proffering of half a steaming cup shows that your host is willing to listen and that your presence in the room is accepted. Conversation will continue only as long as each cup is poured half full; once the tea cup is filled to the brim, your host has given you a sign: This is your final cup of tea and your allotted time is up, so please finish your spiel and leave. The ceremony is repeated a thousand times each

day by businessmen and bureaucrats, and it's so finely polished that while the message is clear, no offense can possibly be taken.

In popular imagination, mention of the Silk Road conjures pictures of wily merchants and pilgrims, horseback warriors and cities made rich on the trade of textiles and spices, precious stones and curios. It's way down the list that we think of tea, but despite the fact that not a single tea plant could survive on Central Asia's mountains and steppe, tea is a treasure highly prized, an essential part of everyday life.

Well into the 20th century, when the Soviet Union confiscated land and forced people into the cities, the populations of Central Asia were predominantly nomadic. Land suitable for farming was in short demand, so extended family groups herded their flocks wherever new pastures could be found. As a consequence, meat and dairy products dominated people's diets; not only were they easily available, but the high fat content offered much-needed protection in long, harsh winters. The only problem with this diet was that it lacked vitamin and mineral content; diseases such as scurvy and rickets were rife. Tea was the miracle product that fixed this predicament.

On the westernmost reaches of the Mongol Empire, near Beijing, low-grade green tea leaves were steamed and pressed into solid cakes or bricks. Thanks to their shape and density, these bricks could be transported with relative ease by caravans of camels and donkeys. The farther the caravans traveled from the area where tea was grown, the more valuable their goods became. Tea was such a desirable product that the back of a brick was scored into blocks, facilitating its accurate division for distribution between a number of customers. As late as the 1920s, squares of tea bricks were exchanged as an edible currency, valuable relics of a bygone age.

The Chinese knew they possessed the supply side of this vital and lucrative commodity, so they kept tight control over all tea exports to Central Asia. Trade was not biased entirely in their favor, however, as the Central Asian nomads were the main providers of horses for China's army. In order for the Celestial Empire to be continually patrolled and uprisings effectively suppressed, regular imports of high-grade horses were necessary. The solution was the Tea and Horse Commission. Established in the 10th century, the commission oversaw every horse and packet of tea crossing the borders between China and Central Asia for almost 500 years. Bureaucrats and customs officials became hugely wealthy and exerted great influence in the region. Those who were caught trading outside the commission faced certain death; even a son of the Hongwu Emperor (who ruled during the 14th century) was executed for smuggling tea.

In Central Asia today, the tea market can be neatly divided in two: the traditional and the modern. On the traditional side, two styles of tea drinking are popular, both of which use the ancient Chinese tea bricks. The first tea is a lightly colored and fresh-tasting brew, sweetened with a generous dollop of red fruit jam. Berries and currants grow wild on the lower mountain slopes and, when in season, they are picked in large numbers and preserved for consumption throughout the winter months.

The second tea, far less in line with Western tastes, is the infamous butter tea. In fact, it's more akin to a thick, oily soup than the light refreshment one expects from tea. In a darkened bozui, the traditional felt and animal skin tent of the Kyrgyz nomads, we crouched by the fire to watch our host prepare the drink. The first step is heating a cauldron-like pot over the open fire and adding fermented milk, which hisses as it hits the scalding metal. The milk comes predominantly from mares and yaks, and by the

time it's used for tea, it's already several weeks old, having been left to turn fizzy in a watertight, animal-skin bag. The woman of the house squats on her haunches by the fire, adding grain, salt and dried tea leaves to the now-frothy milk. For an hour or more we watched the steaming vat, stirring the ever-thickening liquid to prevent it from burning on the pan. The butter tea can be on the fire all day, and the ever-changing patterns on its surface are quite entrancing.



AFTERNOON TEA: Writer Sophie Ibbotson (left) enjoys tea with red fruit jam.

The best way to drink butter tea is with your eyes firmly shut; it would also be somewhat beneficial to turn off your senses of smell, taste and touch. Liquid fat glistens on the surface of the tea, the smell bordering on rancid, and as you take a sip, the thick, glutinous brew coats your tongue, lips and teeth. Etiquette, of course, demands that you ignore your desire to gag and gulp down the tea. You steel yourself and glug, glug, glug until the bowl is empty in a race against time (the only thing worse than hot butter tea is cold butter tea).

In urban areas, more Westernized tea-drinking habits prevail, a reflection not only of 70 years of Soviet rule but also the billions of dollars flooding the region each year in exchange for oil and gas. Conspicuous consumerism is all the rage, and modern, foreign products have a great deal of cache. In defiance of the global recession, imports of Indian teas to Kazakhstan actually increased by 1.82 million kilograms in 2008, demonstrating that when oil prices rise, foreign reserves of mineral-rich nations inevitably increase and, as a result, so does consumer spending. Indian and Sri Lankan teas in particular appeal to wealthy urbanites—while

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GIDDYUP: For centuries, nomads in Central Asia used horses as a bargaining chip when buying tea from China.

Russian and Chinese teas are seen to be common, those imported from the subcontinent are seen as fashionable (and expensive) choices that allow urbanites to express their cultural capital. Tea imports to Central Asia have grown as much as 24 percent a year during the past decade and look set to continue at a similar rate as the middle class expands and oil and gas prices remain high.

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Although foreign teas are increasingly attractive to Central Asia’s consumers, a more local producer is also experiencing a revival. At its height, the Georgian tea industry accounted for 95 percent of all tea consumed within the Soviet Union (which, of course, included Central Asia). Georgia’s economic collapse occurred alongside

that of the USSR; the tea industry declined, and many previously productive estates fell into disuse. Georgia, however, is starting to slowly recover from the disasters of the 1990s. Since 2003, the Georgian tea industry has benefited from both government subsidies and foreign investment. Georgia’s relative proximity to Central Asia—only the Caspian Sea divides the Caucasus from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan—is certainly advantageous: Transport costs are low and fresh product is delivered quickly. The Georgian Agriculture Ministry is actively backing tea producers who attend foreign exhibitions in new markets, a strategy that has been stepped up even further since a Russian embargo was imposed on Georgian produce in 2006.

Despite its rich trading history, Central Asia largely slipped from international consciousness during the 20th century. It is only now, as a result of its renewed geo-political importance and sought-after mineral reserves, that the region is once again attracting attention from the global community. Centuries of tea drinking have saturated national identity and protocol, making it an essential part of any interaction, be it business or personal. The combination of this tradition with a fast-growing, Western-looking population toting high levels of disposable income makes Central Asia a tea market with great potential: Eighty million consumers, all of whom desire a cup of foreign tea. ☪