

On the tea trail

How far would you go for a cup of tea? How about 24,000 kilometres? In this *Holland Herald* exclusive, the documentary filmmakers who are 'tracing tea' share their stories about their eastern quest to discover the history of this delicious brew

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their cultures and share this knowledge with everyone."

The decision was made to make the journey in a Bajaj 175cc auto-rickshaw, the three-wheeled icon of India, and its European counterpart, the Piaggio Ape. Commonly described as resembling ride-on mowers, the auto-rickshaws continue to keep things interesting en route.

The perfect cup of tea begins with the leaf, so where better to start than in Darjeeling, home of the "Champagne of teas"? The first Darjeeling estate was planted in 1841 with seedlings stolen from China by British spies. The Makaibari Estate holds the world record price for tea sold at auction. We made Makaibari's fields our official departure point and will carry the estate's Muscatel

Tea is the most popular beverage in the world. The Irish hold the record as the greatest per capita consumers, the Indians are the greatest producers and the Chinese the purported discoverers. Tea is a truly global phenomenon. However, it would take committed tea lovers such as us to contemplate driving across two continents, three mountain ranges and 18 countries in the name of tea.

"The world has become very small," explains Max Lovell-Hoare, our producer. "We can go absolutely anywhere but few people are prepared to step out and meet their global neighbours. Tea is something a lot of us have in common, and through our *Tracing Tea* documentary, we want to meet different people, get a better understanding of



Indian Assam tea on sale at a local market

Photo: iStockphoto

BELOW: *Tracing Tea's* team at the top of the Khunjerab Pass



All photography by Max Lovell-Hoare unless specified



LEFT: Presenter Sam Datta-Paulin in Varanasi, India
BOTTOM LEFT: The Chinese-Pakistani border at the pinnacle of Khunjerab Pass



Photo: Ric Egenbright/Corbis

LEFT: A lone tea picker at the Glenburn Tea Estate in Darjeeling, India



— The journey so far
—— Route still to travel
★ Start: xx xxxxxxxx, xxxx
★ Estimated finish: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

tea back to London, sharing it with a privileged few on our travels.

From Darjeeling we headed south to Kolkata (Calcutta), the capital of British India and the modern country's cultural hub. J. Thomas, the world's largest tea auctioneers, sells tea by the tonne at the drop of the hammer and whispers of the infamous East India Company linger on in the air of the city's docks. The Grand Trunk Road, India's communication artery since the 1500s, links Kolkata with

Kabul, and we took to it with trepidation, dodging smoke-belching trucks, homicidal drivers and ambling camels.

A taste for Delhi is seldom acquired, but if you can look beyond the chaos, you'll be rewarded, as we were. Seven cities have stood here, and the Archaeological Survey of India has recorded at least 1,200 historic sites. The Bajaj auto led a road race from the Quwwat-ul Islam Masjid, India's first

mosque, through nine centuries of history to New Delhi, where the ghosts of Gandhi and Nehru rub shoulders with Bollywood starlets and shopkeepers alike. After Delhi it was on to Lahore.

Our Piaggio succumbed to clutch failure a few miles outside of Lahore, though, limping into Pakistan behind a police car. It was the first encounter with the Lahori police: dinner, cola and autograph requests followed. Crossing the short distance from India, ▶▶

RIGHT: Uighur traders at Kashgar Market
 FAR RIGHT: Still a long way to go at the Torugart Pass
 BELOW: Tea bricks and tea shampoo on sale at Kashgar's main bazaar



▶▶ where every other vehicle is a Bajaj, into Pakistan had made us instant celebrities and our autos immediately became superstars.

Heading north, we hit the Karakoram Highway, the hardest section of the route. Ancient rock carvings testify to Buddhist travellers spreading their faith to China in the early centuries AD, and it would be their descendants who first cultivated tea in Chinese monasteries. Regular landslides, steep inclines and hairpin bends tested our nerves to their limits; the slightest slip here could result in a free fall of well over 1,000 metres.

At 4,693 metres, the Khunjerab Pass between Pakistan and China is the world's highest international border crossing. Our little vehicles struggled with the altitude, completing the last few kilometres at just 8 kph. Arrival at the top was a cause for celebration: not only had we completed the journey's hardest leg but we earned the accolade of being the first to conquer the pass with a three-wheeler. Makaibari tea was brewed for on-looking officials and auto-rickshaw history was made.

The auto-rickshaws run better downhill, so we arrived in Xinjiang, China, rather speedily. Xinjiang's highlight is Kashgar, a great Silk Road city. Its Sunday market sells everything from Bactrian camels and stolen Mercedes, to medicinal hedgehogs. More

“Tea bricks were used as edible currency across Central Asia”

appetising were the teas. Xinjiang's first teas came from Beijing by pack animal. Steaming and pressing it into bricks made transportation easier. The further the bricks travelled the more valuable they became; even in the early 20th century, tea bricks were being used as an edible currency across Central Asia. Keen to try spending our new-found currency, we headed for Kyrgyzstan, auto-rickshaw skiing on the way. ◀◀

The *Tracing Tea* documentary team is still on the road and will continue onwards this spring through Central Asia to Iran, Turkey and Europe. Travel with them on: www.tracingtea.com

