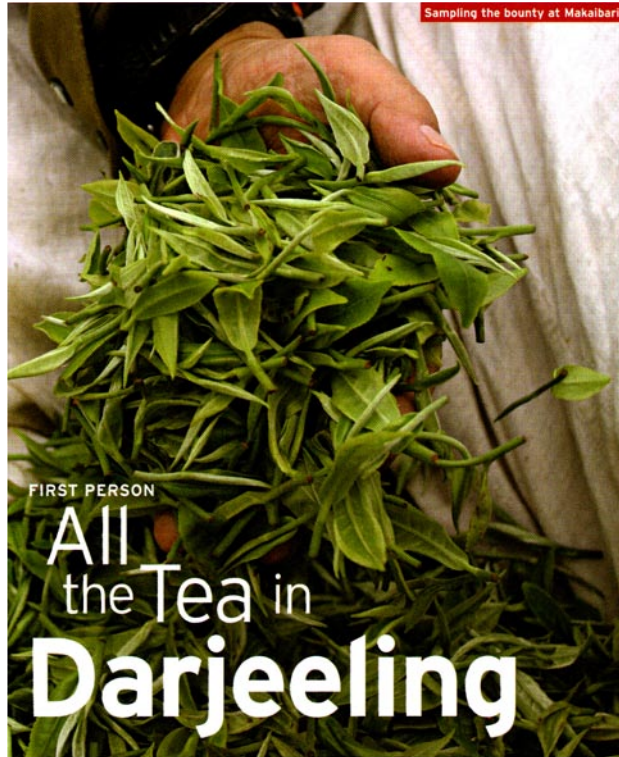


DEPARTURES

CIRCULATION: 797,822
IMPRESSIONS: 2,632,813

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blackBOOK



Sampling the bounty at Makaibari

FIRST PERSON

All the Tea in Darjeeling



Dwarika's tea service...



Rajah Banerjee at Makaibari



...ancient details...



...traditional cooking...

TRAVELED TO Darjeeling, in northeastern India, to smell tea leaves. Seriously. But I went with Steve Smith, the CEO of Tazo Tea. Smith's mission in life is to find the most succulent leaf, from Africa to Japan, and to do it—even in this not-exactly-luxe part of the globe—with style. We could all learn a few things from him.

Our first stop was in Kathmandu, at **Dwarika's**, one of Smith's favorite hotels. It's a stunning place—one can simply note that Nepal has won three UNESCO awards, two for buildings in Kathmandu and the medieval town of Bhaktapur, the third for Dwarika's. Behind a high brick wall in a calm, lush garden, the hotel is constructed of ancient carved wood, handmade brick, terra-cotta work (some dating back to the 1200s), and 16th-century windows looking out onto private courtyards. In my suite—spacious, old, beautifully draped in handwoven fabrics—Anuj, the 29-year-old masseur, administered a traditional Nepalese massage using oils of mustard, eucalyptus, mint, and a native herb called tulsi.

The next morning Smith and I took a Buddha Air flight to Darjeeling, a city so unearthly in its Himalayan beauty, it looks as though it belongs in *Star Wars*. Darjeeling's name comes from the Sanskrit word for lightning bolt; indeed, electrical storms illuminate the buildings and roads that cling to the steep, cloud-piercing mountains. Near the top of one, at 7,200 feet, is the city's loveliest hotel, the small **Elgin**. It feels untouched since the days of the young Elizabeth II, whose portrait from the fifties hangs above the stairs. This is not really a hotel, in fact, but a time machine that transports you to another world, one where you sip tea on the veranda, under a black-and-white photo of Indian and British gentlemen in tails, wives by their side. The caption reads "Independence Day Party, Gymkhana Club 1950." In the 23 rooms are broad-mantel fireplaces, delightfully mismatched furniture, Victorian faucets, faded scarlet car-

pets, and the scent of wood and cotton. Due to power outages, you may at least once have no choice but to see your room by candlelight.

Smith took me to no less than two tea gardens a day (as is his custom) after arranging with one of them to rent an SUV (the hotel can also take care of this). You'll need a four-wheel drive to get to such mountainside estates as the Gorkha, Singtom, and See-yok tea gardens. The emerald-green fields of tea bushes are astonishing; you will smell, taste, and accumulate precious bags of the stuff along the way. Always welcoming to visitors, the estates serve some "spectacular leaf," as Smith put it. He tastes, sniffs, inhales, gulps the varieties. "We have found a great Assam for around three dollars and fifty cents a kilo," he told me over a cup of the tea. "We've bought Kobong at four. But Darjeeling? It is five to six times that, up to thirty-five dollars." Smith finds this most luxurious and expensive kind at Makaibari Tea Estates. (In 2003 he broke a record for paying the highest auction price for tea at the time—Makaibari Silvertips Imperial for \$400 a kilogram.) During our visit, Rajah Banerjee, the handsome and energetic owner of Makaibari, had us smell a Gyokuro tea, processed on-site employing the method of a Kyoto master with whom Banerjee trained. It can run \$1,000 a kilogram—which is about a hatful—and possesses a mesmerizing smell: a pure, exquisitely delicate green-gauzy scent. Banerjee sells only about half a ton of Gyokuro a year. But if you call him in advance and tell him you want some, you can buy as much of it as you want when you go. I certainly did. *Dwarika's*: from \$165 to \$1,500; 977-1/447-0770; www.dwarikas.com. *The Elgin*: \$110; 91-354/225-7227; www.elginhotels.com.