

Loolecondera: The Beginning of an Illustrious Brew

Posted on



The Loolecondera Tea Factory built in the 1920s

Our hands were cold and we were out of breath. 4,100 feet above sea level, we stood quietly at the heart of the old Loolecondera Estate in Kandy, amidst what remained of the cottage that was once home to the Father of Ceylon Tea.

Words Keshini de Silva | **Photographs** Vishwathan Tharmakulasingham



The plantation curved, sloped, expanded and rose with the ground in absolute symmetry. Big boulders in between almost seemed like islands amidst an emerald sea. As we travelled through the neatly pruned tea fields of Loolecondera under the canopy of red gum trees, the breeze swirled whispering ancient tales in our ears.

Coffee Planters brought the estate culture to Sri Lanka. Amidst the boom of coffee berries (cherries), Scotsman James Taylor, the then Superintendent of Loolecondera Estate, was tasked with planting a few acres of tea. These Assam seeds soon took root and of the 19 acres planted in 1867, even today five acres continue to be plucked for production. Thus began the decades long journey of Ceylon Tea. Taylor learned to tend to these seedlings from Assam planters. The five acres that remain in Field No 7 are pruned in the rounded Japanese method; rather than the flat table-style that is the predominant method of pruning tea bushes in Sri Lanka.

We then hiked farther upwards, hugged by the cold of the highlands. Over 4,000 feet above sea level we came upon the well or spring that was Taylor's water source. A few metres on and the forest dissolved into a neat, beautiful flower garden. A fireplace and chimney towered through; the only remains of Taylor's log cabin. The untamed beauty of the Kondagala hill a complementing and suitable background. Upon the verandah of this cabin, Ceylon Tea was first produced; rolled by hand from wrist to elbow and fired in clay chelas over charcoal fires. In 1872, Taylor sent the first batch of tea to the Colombo Auction, sold by the pound for 1 rupee and 50 cents.

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The well-equipped Loolecondera factory built in the 1920s, currently outputs up to 18,000 kilogrammes of tea per day. In length, it is only second to the Dambetenna Tea Factory. The surrounding forest, fertile soil, yearly tropical rains and a production process where time is of the essence contributes to the factory manufacturing a coppery coloured full-bodied brew. One that is sought after both near and far.



All that remains of Taylor's cottage is the fireplace

The sprawling 1,048.03-hectare estate of Loolecondera, is currently divided to five divisions with two actually being a part of the Nuwara Eliya District. Apart from land being cultivated with tea, the remainder is allocated for the wild Loolecondera Conservation Forest where leopards dwell and housing for tea pluckers and factory workers. Estate workers find little interest beyond the estate, as their schools, temples, hospital and even post office are in the field. Their lives, customs and traditions are intricately woven into the fabric of the tea industry.

One such custom created within Loolecondera itself is worship of the deity 'Rodamuni' (god of wheels). During the colonial era, tea from the top of the hill was transported down through a rudimentary cable car system. The place where the cable cars would switch goods used to be prayed at and now a colourful shrine for this god of wheels has been established here.

In Loolecondera James Taylor initiated a difference. The name of the estate, unlike other tea estates that borrow theirs from the English, is derived from the Sinhalese name "Lool Kandura" or 'Pool of Loola Fish'. The pockets of forest amidst the estate show Taylor's respect for mother nature amid a will to thrive economically.

On high elevation is also James Taylor's Seat, two modest slabs at the edge of a cliff. From here, it almost seems as if you are in the heavens glancing down on a glorious scene of nature and man below. The towering Scotsman must have from this seat admired the pruned neat rows of tea. His gift to Sri Lanka, which even today gleams in the sun with the promise of much more to come.

