

Assam, India Tea Adventure 2022

Haroocharai Tea Estate - Jorhat

Puroni Bheti Guest House



If Dibrugarh is known as the Tea City of Assam, Jorhat can be called the Tea Capital of Assam and that was our destination after Dibrugarh. We stayed two nights at the Puroni Bheti Guest House, and It was definitely my favorite overnight location. It is situated in the Haroocharai Tea Estate which dates to 1904 when Indian Siva Prasad Barooah, Rajib's grandfather, purchased and further developed the estate and eventually became the richest planter in Assam. Rajib was only 17 when his father died, so he started working in the



family's tea business at an early age. Today Rajib has sold most of the tea gardens at Haroocharai as well as the factory to family friends whose ancestors were also bidding to buy the estate back in the day. Rajib has kept a small section of tea bushes and plans to build a small factory on his property for processing specialty teas.



Rajib has lived in the original tea garden bungalow since 1997 and has remodeled and expanded it. In addition he has built a Tea Garden Escape Resort on the property called Puroni Bheti. He has repurposed some original buildings and built some multipurpose new ones. Set away from the busy city of Jorhat the resort is a haven among the tea bushes, flowering plants and so many varieties of trees. Rajib admits his true love is growing trees. Rajib says he has seen a tiger and there was a leopard captured on the property and he has seen many Banded Krait snakes which are more poisonous than cobras. Fortunately all I saw were butterflies and a big slug in the tea gardens. At Puroni Bheti Resort Rajib currently accommodates local and international travelers and hosts many tea related events.



Our group stayed in this three-bedroom lodge which originally served as the offices for the tea gardens but was rebuilt in 2010. Our room was lovely with vintage furniture but a completely modern bathroom with a hot shower which was not always available on our trip. There was a wonderful patio attached where we had morning coffee or tea and enjoyed relaxed conversations with the group.

River water-level issues caused us to cancel a planned trip to Majuli Island so we had an impromptu afternoon tea on the deck by Rajib's pond. We had kiwi bread and cakes we had bought at a local bakery and Amy made some tea sandwiches. Of course we had plenty of tea that we had purchased during our trip. I



I had given Rajib a copy of my Texas Afternoon Tea Cookbook and he graciously said he wanted to make something from it for our celebration, but he did not have any of those ingredients on hand in his kitchen. Imagine that?? – after all, I don't usually have ingredients for Indian cooking in my Texas kitchen!!!!



Later that evening we had a special treat. Rajib arranged for a visit from some dancers. It wasn't Bollywood but they performed a traditional dance, the Jhumur Nach. The dancers were actually the children of the Harooharai Tea Garden Village, and it was a tea workers' dance accompanied by drum music. They even got Gary to play that drum while they danced! Amy and Amanda dressed in Sarees and joined in, but I declined. I had a vision of trying to dance in a saree but falling and dragging all the intertwined dancers down to the ground in a domino effect. So I remained an appreciative member of the audience. They were there for only a couple of hours, but I was ready for bed – but, of course, we still had to eat dinner! Rajib also presented each of us with a lovely Gamusa to remember the magical evening.



Food was an experience at the Purni Bheti Guest House. The cook and kitchen staff will prepare literally anything requested. The first night we had Chinese food. Rajib later confessed that he made it himself for us because the other guests had requested something else. That orange chicken was tender and delicious. Every meal was prepared and served with a flourish in the dining pavilion. Wherever we went on the resort there were workers to assist us.



The next morning after a breakfast of banana crepes we left Jorhat toward Guwahati. But on the way we were allowed to have a quick peek at the tea workers' village of Harooharai Gardens. We stopped at a new middle school where I met the staff and some of the students and visited an area with water buffalo and rice paddies. It seems the residents provide some of their own food. We drove through the living quarters. The houses were not too modern, but they were substantial and not huts. It seemed like a typical, but poor, rural Indian village. There were many residents out and about and they were very curious about us as we passed by. It surprised me that the permanent tea garden workers are provided for by the estate and the estate manager is responsible for seeing to all their needs as well as settling all disputes. The tea-garden



community includes multi-ethnic groups of tea garden workers and their families. Many are the descendants of people brought by the British colonial planters as laborers during 1860-90s to work in tea plantations. In British times tea workers were called “coolies” and were the property of the tea estate. They are now called “Tea Tribes.” The Plantation Labour Act of 1951 improved the circumstances and detailed everything to be provided by the tea garden estate for the

health, education, and welfare of the tea workers. New legislation is pending today. It is a hard life with low wages and only Sundays off work. Some of the other workers live in villages nearby that are not part of the plantations. Still, the relationship between planters and the workers is sometimes tense.

