



## Assam, India Tea Adventure 2022 Singpho Heritage Tea



The indigenous Singpho tribes are believed to be among first tea drinkers of India and have been using it for centuries mainly for medicinal purposes. In 1823 Robert Bruce learned about this unique tea culture and met with Bissa Gam, the chief of the tribe. Bruce was able to get seeds of the wild tea plant which he believed to be similar to the Chinese tea plant *Camellia Sinensis*. Robert died and it was his brother, Charles, who actually continued the quest. Both brothers were guided to the Singphos by Maniram Dewan who is considered the first commercial Indian tea planter in Assam. In the early 1830's this variety was officially classified as [Camellia Sinensis Assamica](#). Supposedly, the first twelve chests of Assam cultivated tea reached London in 1838, grown, processed, and packed in tea chests by a Singpho Tribal Chief, Ningroo Ia. In 1839 the tea was sold at auction in London for a tidy profit and the next year in 1840, the Assam Tea Company began the commercial production of tea at its first plantation, Chabua, in Upper Assam. This was nearly 10 years before the Brits planted Robert Fortune's stolen Chinese Tea saplings in Darjeeling.



The organic tea produced from these leaves is called Phalap. Traditionally the Singpho supposedly drank the tea to aid in digestion. It may also cure hangovers and help with weight loss. Originally the leaves came from wild tea plants. Legend says the trees were very tall and leaves had to be harvested sitting atop an elephant.

Our introduction to this smoky brew was at Singpho Eco Lodge, in the Inthong Village, Tinsukia, Assam - about a 4-hour drive from the Camelia Guest House where we were staying in Dibrugarh. It is a beautiful traditional stilted hut made of bamboo with a thick thatched roof (although the bamboo slat floor was a bit wobbly for me.) The lodge located at the edge of the jungle, has been open to visitors, both local and International, since 2008. It is an appealing getaway - especially for younger travelers or at least those who are more fit. The beds were thick mattresses on the floor. There is no A/C but open windows for ventilation and mosquito nets. The bathroom is located down a stairway with no handrail. There was one large bedroom with a small bathroom nearby but there is still the A/C issue and that wobbly bamboo slatted floor to use in getting to the bathroom in the night. At our age Gary and I need more comforts. But the whole place is so charming and totally tempting.



On our visit the proprietor, Manje La welcomed us with a lunch of typical tribal food for the five of us prepared by his wife. The sticky rice, Myatong shat was steamed in a huge Toku leaf which served as a nice plate for the other food. There was curried chicken, U shán si and pork bar-b-que, Wà shán ping, accompanied by a banana shoot chutney, Ngu jò si, and a fish chutney, Nga shán sihtu. A bitter gourd dry mixed called Shagà hká was included. The food is prepared without oil or fat and is

seasoned with traditional spices and herbs. Guests commonly sit on the floor to eat but they even provided chairs for us. It was a filling, flavorful and unique meal.



Our host at the Eco Lodge Manje La is also the chairman of the Organic Small Tea Growers Association of North East India. Manje built the lodge next to his tea garden which was planted by his father-in-law in 1990. The bushes are planted in a V shape to form a hedge rather than a row. For an extra crop, Betel Nut trees are planted among the tea bushes and shade trees. This was our first venture into the actual tea fields, and I definitely could see the difference between the two varieties. The Chinese variety is much smaller than the Assamica variety. The Indian leaves looked huge to me. But the plucking is still 2 leaves and a bud as shown by our [“Tea Guide”, Jayanta \(Jakes\) Kakati](#)



The tea leaves are processed in the traditional method. They are picked, withered, roasted in a metal pan over an open fire and set in the sun to dry for three days. The leaves are not rolled. Finally, they are stuffed tightly into specially prepared bamboo tubes, sealed and left to age on a shelf above the wood fired open kitchen oven. The tubes are left to dry in a shelf, the dhuang chang. It takes about three months for the tea to harden but the tubes are left to smoke age from 1 to 8 years at least. Some consider this to be Indian Puerh but I am not sure actual fermentation is taking place inside the bamboo tubes.

After lunch we all gathered in the lounge area to enjoy cups of the tasty Phalap. The tea has a light smoky, slightly sweet flavor which is not so overpowering as the Chinese Lapsang Souchong. Our first cup of tea was served with a piece of jaggery on the side. Jaggery is a natural sweetener made from either sugarcane or date palm. It is unrefined without natural molasses removed and is delicious. It seems that a small amount is ok for diabetics. It really enhances the smoky flavor of the tea. After several cups of tea, Manje brought out the prized smoked bamboo tubes. He has





small ones aged for a year and larger ones aged for 8 years. He also took us to see the kitchen fireplace where he smokes the bamboo tubes. His tea is also available in loose leaf form. I wish I had purchased some loose leaf there because it seems to be difficult to find outside India.

Our tea guide, Jakes, sells [Phalap](#). He actually saws the tubes into about ½” slices to cut the cost (pun intended.) It is called coin tea. Smaller coins can simply be added to the hot water for brewing. Larger ones need to be chopped up. I was able to purchase some from his website [teaorb.com](#).

