

Putting the T in Taiwan

I really did not know before I visited that they grew tea in Taiwan. I knew they made microchips for phones, and that there are beautiful mountains running down the middle of the country, but I had no idea about the tea.



The area just outside Taipei is green, lush and mountainous. The history of tea begins properly in mainland China, spreading across the world with international trade. At the Pinglin Tea Museum they took us through the history of tea on the island, and how it became one of the three big exports during the Qing dynasty along with sugar and camphor.

These were the three treasures and the national economy

clearly depended on them in the 19th century. Tea exports grew from 82 metric tonnes in 1865 to a staggering 8,210 metric tonnes by 1894. Tea was attractive to both Chinese and foreign tea merchants and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 was important in allowing Taiwanese tea to reach New York.

It was a Scottish businessman John Dodd who pioneered the tea trade in Taiwan. He arrived in 1865 to investigate trade opportunities and discovered that the north of the country was perfect for planting tea. He introduced Fujian Anxi tea to the hills around Taipei and refined it using fairly sophisticated production equipment before selling it in the US. Formosa Oolong tea became the tea of choice, although Chin Shin Oolong has been cultivated longest in the country's mountains.



Sadly the Japanese occupation spelled the end of the glorious era of tea and today the country's tea exports total around £100 million.

We learned that you only pick the tips of the leaves and that each tea plant might be harvested four times a year – although

the best tea is generally picked in the winter before March. Tea picked in summer is more bitter.

We were told that the smell of tea is everything – if the smell is rancid or sour then it may indicate poor quality. We were invited to experience different aromas with a nifty device on the wall which puffed across the top of some tea leaves to send the tea smell our way. We tasted some very lovely tea made with huge green leaves in a glass teapot in very small cups such as you would get in a Chinese restaurant here – the pot was refilled several times allowing each cup to be slightly weaker.



Then there's the bubble tea. We visited the home of Bubble Tea – where it all started – Chun Shui Tang – where the gorgeous tea was only surpassed by the excellent food they serve there – but that is another story all of its own!



At Din Tai Fung the dumplings were hand made by a team of specially trained chefs – and delicious!

Johnna French was the food expert on our trip. Based in Washington DC she writes Johnna Knows Good Food. She said : “I thoroughly enjoyed the dumplings from the original Din Tai Fung. The thin, delicate dough was the perfect contrast to the bold flavors that were hidden inside the dumplings. Because of the relationship between tea and the Taiwanese culture, The Pinglin Tea Museum was another favorite.”



Bubble tea was a universal favourite for all of us. Elise Kirsten writes for South African title Getaway from Cape Town. She wrote : "Taiwan is a tea drinker's Heaven and as I'm addicted to the stuff, I was delighted to enjoy the island's

Oolong tea at the Pinglin Tea Museum. The warm pearl milk tea from the store where bubble tea originated was also a hit. There's a playful element to spooning up the black tapioca balls, some of which spilt over my teaspoon and drifted down to the depths of my mug, only to be stirred up by the 'currents' as I fished for more."

Lisa Kadane is a freelance travel writer. She said : "A highlight for me was the food—I didn't realise there are so many must-try dishes, from soup dumplings to stinky tofu. Ditto the bubble tea. I loved the people. I've never felt so welcome—or safe—as I did in Taiwan. I've also never had a stranger share guava and tomatoes with me on top of a mountain. It was definitely worthwhile to get out of the city and hike in Yangmingshan National Park, and neat to see so many Taiwanese out in nature without any face masks!"



John shared both a fresh guava and a beautiful tomato with us during our hike. Everyone wanted to be nice to us!

Dean Nestor travelled all the way from St Lucia and is a reporter at the STAR Publishing Company. He was not as keen on the food as he was on the Bubble Tea which he loved. He enjoyed this part best though. He said : “The most surreal experience was that unforgettable journey at the i-Ride Experience Center, an unforgettable if nerve-wracking ride through many of Taiwan’s major attractions. It was incredible.”



I was a guest of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of China (Taiwan) for six days enjoying a tourism and culture trip.