

Sri Lanka: Geography and Ceylon Tea History

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Sri Lanka is a tropical island! Its location and climate are classified as tropical.

Doesn't that sound wonderful? Well it is!

But where is Sri Lanka exactly and how did it become known as "tea island" celebrating its 150th Anniversary of tea growing?

LOCATION:

Sri Lanka is an island country located in the Indian Ocean, just off the south-eastern tip of the subcontinent of India.

(Sri Lanka and India are close but separate countries located in south Asia.)

See map:

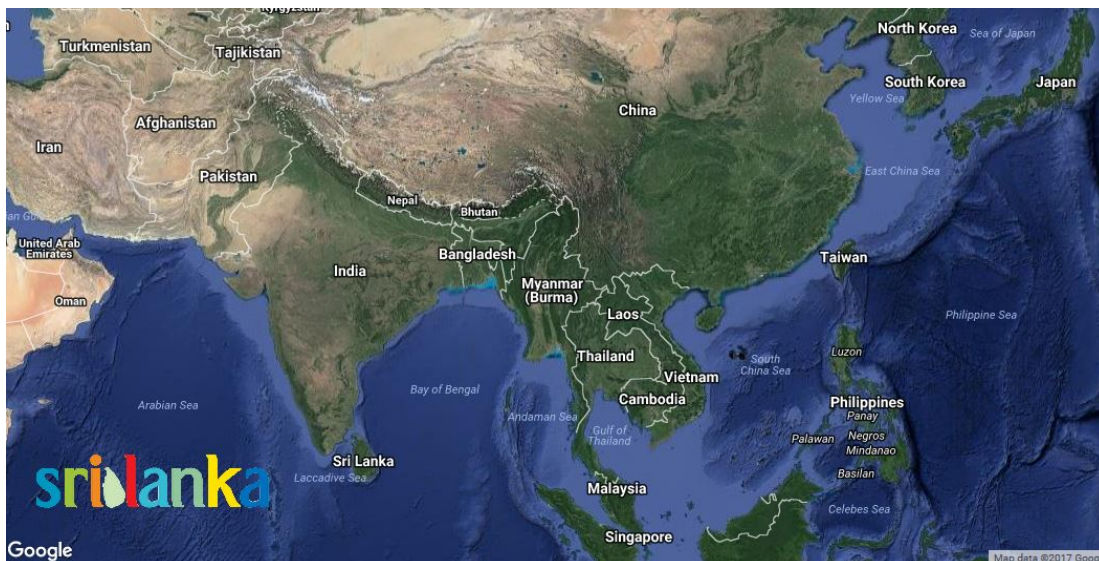


Image: SriLanka.travel / Google Maps

Sri Lanka (officially the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka), while a country of its own, is about the size of just one state in the USA measuring approximately 435 km north to south and 224 km east to west; slightly larger in size to the USA state of West Virginia. Colombo is the commercial capital of Sri Lanka and is situated on the western coast of the island. And, in case you are curious, the currency there is the Sri Lankan Rupee (LKR).

HISTORY:

Moving on to history now. Believe it or not, coffee used to be king of this island.

Now, remember, in colonial times, Sri Lanka was called Ceylon. Experiments with coffee may already have begun by 1824, when the fifth of Ceylon's colonial governors, Edward Barnes, arrived on the island, but it was he who first saw in coffee a solution to the colony's perennial balance-of-payments problem. The plant had already been found growing naturally among the approaches to the central hill country.

Most important of all, Barnes provided the infrastructure – a network of roads, including the all-important trunk route from Kandy to Colombo – that enabled coffee-planters to get their produce to town, and thence to market in England.

In the mid-1870s Ceylon became the world's largest producer of coffee. Profits and revenues generated by the enterprise turned the colony into an imperial showpiece, prosperous, civilized and modern. This was short-lived. In 1869, the first signs of a new plant disease, coffee-rust, appeared on a plantation in Madulsima. The blight took slightly more than a decade to wipe out the entire coffee enterprise in Ceylon.

But. . .Tea Saved the Day!



Father of the Ceylon Tea Industry
James Taylor

Up in the hills where the Kandy and Dimbula plantation districts meet, a reclusive Scots planter named James Taylor had been experimenting with a new plant, planting it along the margins of the divisional roads on his coffee-estate, Loolecondera.

The plant was tea. Already in 1866 he had withered the first leaves on this bungalow veranda, trying to emulate the process used by tea-planters in Assam, India. By the time the coffee-blight struck, Taylor had twenty acres of Loolecondera planted in tea and had shipped his first modest consignment – 23lb. in all – to England. Soon, planters from all over the hill country were visiting Loolecondera to learn how to grow and manufacture tea. Ceylon and its plantation industry were saved. Within a decade a new plantation enterprise had been built in Ceylon on the ruins of the old, and the colony was prosperous again.

Once established, the structure of ‘the tea trade’ was little altered. Overseen by trade associations such as Ceylon Chamber of Commerce (est. 1839) and the Colombo Tea Traders’ Association (est. 1894), it continued to function with little change in operational procedure, management style or ownership structure throughout the colonial period, taking two world wars and a global depression in its stride.

The Tea Propaganda Board, a privately-funded industry initiative that was the earliest ancestor of today’s Sri Lanka Tea Board, was formed in 1932, and legislation to prevent the export of tea of inferior quality was introduced two years later.

In 1970, a new government was voted into office. On 22 April 1972, a new Republican constitution was signed into law, and the old Dominion of Ceylon became the new Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka. The change of name created problems for the country's biggest international 'brand'; over considerable opposition from nationalists in and out of government, the industry decided to stick with the old name, Ceylon Tea, for marketing purposes. The decision was to prove sound, and remains in force to this day.

In 1891, a consignment of Ceylon tea fetched a record-breaking price of £36 15s at London. By the end of the decade, tea had entirely superseded and surpassed the achievements of coffee in terms of export volume, revenue and area under cultivation.

In the twentieth century, kopi kalé ('the coffee times') would become a Sinhala colloquialism meaning ancient, worn-out and irrelevant. From now on, Ceylon, later Sri Lanka, would be 'the country where the tea comes from'.

Read more about the history of the Ceylon tea industry [HERE](#) via the Sri Lanka Tea Board website.

Keep watching this blog for more about Ceylon tea.

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