



JOURNEY TO THE KING TEA TREE

WU DE

We woke up early and headed over to the tea shop for some light breakfast and tea. The rain was pouring down and it looked as though we were going to have to spend the day indoors, which wasn't so bad considering we were surrounded by tons (literally) of old-growth puerh. It had started raining during our ten-hour bus ride up the mountains the previous evening, and then continued throughout the night. And yet, I still felt compelled to put on my hiking shoes that morning, perhaps foreseeing the coming respite. Sure enough, right as we finished breakfast the rain slowed to a drizzle and then stopped altogether. We grabbed some rain gear and headed up the mountain, hoping that the gap would be long enough to at least make it most of the way to our goal—the Wild King.

We drove around more winding roads and quite crazily drove our tourist bus through a one-foot-deep river, with a waterfall to our right and another gushing over a forty-meter drop just to our left—lolling up and down over the stones as the driver of the other car guided us through the water. We then parked and began our walk, the rain still abated.

For an hour or so we climbed rows and rows of steps, switching back and forth as we wound our way up the mountain, occasionally stopping to admire the views. There were amazing cascades of waterfalls—the same river falling down steps, each more beautiful than the previous. The dampness of the stone and steps made it seem as if the falls had danced out of bounds, wild and carefree, through a night of crazy spirit. After many hundreds of steps we came to the gate of the protected reserve and were allowed entrance.

At that point, the road began to meander up the river we had moments ago seen tumbling head-over-heels down deep cliffs—now a steady current growing more and more peaceful at each turn further upstream. We walked for some time on cobblestone paths that followed along the river, sometimes crossing narrow log bridges to walk along the other side. The land started becoming more and more forested, the trees growing denser and denser as we traveled. Then, the path narrowed and became dirt, mud-died by the night of rain. Having walked an hour or more, we stopped to look up. I had the distinct feeling that we would spend the whole day dry, despite our guide's insistence that we hurry up or get wet.

After some time we rounded a corner into a clearing where an ancient tribal village once was. There were three large Ku Chuong totem poles guarding what was

now the government watch station for the foresters who work here. We took a break to drink some water and eat some of the fruit and steamed buns we had carried with us. There was also some amazing old-growth tea boiled in a large pot that the absent foresters had made that morning before they left. We helped ourselves and set out refreshed. With brightened eyes, we knew the way home!

The journey over the next couple hours became more arduous. The path inclined steeply, and was muddier as well. It was only a dirt path through the forest, at times only a few feet across, offering only roots and rocks as steps as it wound ever upward through the jungle. The damp, fresh air was amazing, though. And more importantly, we began to come across more and more ancient tea trees, each one over a thousand years old. We stopped to photograph them, put our hands or foreheads to them and tell them how grateful we were. They were all numbered, protected and looked happy, healthy and most importantly completely chemical-free! It was hard going, pulling yourself up, avoiding moist cow paddies left by some of the foresters' cattle grazing along the path, or deep mud patches that flanked the trail. There were plenty of well-positioned roots along the way, though, each perfectly angled to help you up to the next level. All in all, it was a pleasant hike with amazing tea trees all along the way.

There were several varieties of wild trees, each with its own look and feel, and each with a unique energy. Many of the trees were old and quiet, while others seemed to thrum with an awakened energy. They were all well cared for, which brought smiles to all the tea lovers' faces. The gloriously fresh air, the clean forest, Nature and Tea, invigorated us.

Finally, rounding the last corner we came to a man-made deck that looked out over a small clearing at around 2,500 meters above sea level. There, on a little hill, was a small altar facing the Wild King of Tea. This ancient tree is one of the oldest in the world. It is almost 26 meters tall and almost two meters wide, which makes it the tallest of the very ancient trees. Using the rate of growth and cutting analysis, scientists have estimated its age at 2,700 years. It was here before the Buddha walked the earth! People were bringing offerings and prayers to this little shrine hundreds of years before Christ! The coming and going of people like me, full of awe and reverence, was tacit in this place, casting a spell of heaviness over the clearing. I felt the thousand, thousand humans coming and going with fruit and incense, prayers and reverence.



The girls celebrating the Nature surrounding us



Our guide gathered herbs along the way

It opened my heart to the immensity of our world, and the depth and power of life looked down on me from within that tree, older and wiser than I could imagine.

The girls traveling with us were overwhelmed, breaking into song. We all cried a bit and said some prayers. The magnitude of this place, and the deep life energy the tea embodied moved everyone present. There was something lasting and sacred in this place. This was the grandfather of all the tea trees we had passed on our way here, and so we asked him for some of his healing energy in our tea. Like thousands who had journeyed here, over millennia, we asked permission for some of his healing leaves, from his branches and those of his children, and children's children. We prayed for his longevity and continued blessings. His roots guard this mountain, and open our relationship to all the tea from this place. Maybe you'll feel hi in this month's tea!

Seeing such an ancient tree and feeling the sacred intention that has surrounded him for thousands of years inspired us all, and lent a spring to our step on the way back down. Sure enough, our prayers were heard and the mountain left us dry all the way back to the tea shop. I won't ever forget the presence of that great old tree, or the way he answered me from the inside, as if my prayers

echoed all the thousands of prayers others had left at his feet—murmurs heard only briefly, as a small insect passing our ear would sound. I left stirred by a poem that echoed in my heart:

Ancient ones

Sing us your song

Tell us of life without time

Tell us of life without separation

We will listen

As you listen to the Mountain

The Mountain to the Sky

And the Sky to the Stars...

—Wu De

The King reigns over his domain. Long live the king!

