



THE JOURNEY OF A LIFETIME

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Everyone who went on this trip expressed that it was life-changing for them, and then got that far-away look in their eyes, sincerely hoping that all of you in this global community have the good fortune to come on one of our trips at least once. We also hope that you have the chance to come with us one year! In the meantime, know that you were in our hearts, and that we made this issue to honor the fact that you traveled with us in spirit, all throughout our journey!

As I am not very much of the traveller-type dude, and as I had never been to Asia before, I really did not know what to expect. But you can be certain that I was excited—so excited! Ask Steve. There was not a day when I did not bring up questions about every aspect of the trip: what to bring, if we would need raincoats, how much money I would need, and so on... Steve was rolling his eyes a lot. But I couldn't really anticipate what was going to happen.

So off we went! Arriving in Kunming, I was super grateful and happy that Steve was with me because instantly I understood that in rural China there is really nothing to do with English. Nobody speaks that language. Suddenly you understand that the world is bigger than the one you could imagine living in the tiny village of Estonia. So I quickly learned “*xièxie*” and kept it with me for the whole journey. Mandarin learned, we went shopping.

There is so much abstraction about how tea arrives to us, and, like many of you probably do, I feel pretty spoiled here, since many of the decisions about which tea to buy

are in large part already made for me. But going out to actually buy puerh, I finally understood what Wu De is always saying about the puerh world being something of a “Wild West.” It's crazy how much crappy tea there is lying around, how much of it you have to drink at teashops, how many puerh cakes are available and again how the so-called “international language,” English, won't help you.

Several days forward, several gems richer and many RMB lighter, we found ourselves at the Crowne Plaza Hotel lobby with many anxious Westerners. Lots of beautiful hugs and smiles later, we all carried our bags to the bus, where the true journey began. We found our seats, trusting our lives to the bus driver's experienced hands. (He was amazing! Many thanks and a thousand prayers to our bus driver!)

Already at the very beginning, it seemed like these two weeks in China would be monumental for me. As my soul is much more the rooted family type, the occasional trips I do take are usually very important for me. I tend to go to learn some important lessons. That was the case this time, too, but what

else would you expect from this kind of atmosphere, where there are twenty-five spiritually-charged people around and you are visiting ancient tea trees glowing with wisdom?

The trip was amazing, starting in Ai Lao at the stunning Auntie Ai's center. What a beautiful being she is, doing great deeds to keep tea production clean and healthy. The over-the-top food she offered nourished our soul and bodies (although those sticky buns were difficult to handle at points). From Ai Lao, the highlights I remember the most are producing red tea, our tea session at the waterfall and, of course, the night with traditional dancing. It felt like the whole village had been brought out to entertain us, and after several pictures with shy local kids, I thought to myself, “Is this how a superstar feels?”

Having been catered to in Ai Lao, we took a long bus ride to Jingmai, where the old village opened up in front of us. The days there were just pure magic! Producing our own sheng cakes, having tea sessions next to ancient tea trees, receiving verbal and non-verbal teachings from humans and



the plant kingdom—transforming! Without exaggerating, and with emotion atypical for an Estonian, it felt like a real fairy-tale in that village! It was in the energy of that area. You could feel it in your core, your *dan tian*, like the Earth was pulling you to the ground; it was felt in the open-hearted talks and hugs. We were all shifted, and our focus was turned to what is most important in life. I can only speak for myself and say that in Jingmai, I felt naked and maskless—without any of my ego stuff. I realized how important it is to take time for myself to reflect and look inwards. My daily life asks a lot from me, and as a family man, there is not any real alone time, so it is essential to make some for myself. I am happy I'm lucky enough to have realized this.

After some beautiful dancing and guitar playing, tea producing and throat singing, we headed back to the city. Getting closer to the city, I felt a gentle hurt inside, since we were leaving the beautiful jungle behind and returning to the World of Dust once again. But the feeling was eased by a stop on the highway due to a huge accident. We had time to stop and play games, share jokes

and laugh. It feels a bit naughty to say, but I feel grateful for the delay on the highway (no one was seriously injured). Those four hours gave us some time to understand that we were leaving Nature behind and returning to business as usual.

We arrived really late in Kunming after some brilliant sixteen-hour driving by our bus driver (a true superstar) and we went directly to our rooms and slept. The next days were filled with tea sessions, visiting teahouses, markets and, of course, the beautiful event at the university where Master Tsai hosted us. Such a lovely place. (There are beautiful dresses in a shop in that university; my wife is very happy!) Overall, the city time served as a transition back to real life. The dust was returning, and busy life was knocking. But the lessons were learned and new views on life were already formed. The dust and business of life does not feel so bad when you have the inner strength to cope with it. To me, it felt like my foundation was solidified and some new, much-needed cornerstones were added to it. I stand now on top of a very strong foundation

filled with life lessons and tea lessons, which I'll carry in my heart and transmit into my actions and words.

I haven't written much about my tea experience in these pages, though I have been a member of Global Tea Hut for a long time. I feel like tea sessions are about life and medicine for life-aches. This trip served as a huge tea session in which there were such beautiful, hidden life lessons. I am grateful to all my Global Tea Hut family for making this trip happen—for me, it was a real life-changer!

Since coming home from this amazing trip, lessons have sunk in, the mind has calmed and I'm steady. Several weeks have passed since the Yunnan trip, and I find myself doing the same old things back home: cleaning the car, putting my baby to bed, plucking my beloved guitar, waking up to go to work, etc. The everyday life of Siim has found its flow again, but the stream of the river is stronger, more unified—and it's flowing in a clearer direction.

-Siim

Friends on the Way, I am sitting on a plane 10,000km high in the sky, taking me away from the tea forests of Yunnan, where we spent the unforgettable days of our tea journey. And while I am high in the sky, my heart and thoughts are still there, below, with the mountains and springs, spiders and crickets.

I knew long before this trip that we were going to make tea with our own hands and would be spending time in the forests of Yunnan, vibrating and pulsating with life, full of exotic bird songs and insects, and that we would also have the opportunity to learn about Cha Dao from Wu De and Master Tsai. However, among the numerous and abundant memories and impressions that I am taking home, there are also unexpected gifts. One of these gifts is the feeling of joy upon meeting my tea brothers and sisters from around the world, and sharing many bowls of hot tea with them. The delight of sharing our experience, hearing their questions and insights and admiring the way their faces were lit by their smiles all helped me to truly realize what the word “*sangha*” means: *friends on the Way*. The first time I saw all of them in the hotel lobby, they were a crowd of interesting strangers, and when we drank tea for the last time together in the park, they’d suddenly become a part of my family and my heart.

Tea is a medicine that puts us in harmony with ourselves, with Nature and other people. And tea friends are people who live on the same wavelength with us. Of course, we meet different people on our way and everyone has their own attitude towards Tea. And it’s not that every time we drink tea with someone we become best friends with him or her. But when we meet a person who shares our relationship with Tea, who has the same amount of reverence and love towards the Leaf, and with whom it is very easy to sit in silence over a bowl of tea, then this kind of person becomes not only our friend, but a family member.

We all came into Tea with our own baggage and suffering. And every one of us has weak and strong sides. Because we drink tea together and serve tea, we can learn from each other how to do everything in the best way. For example, every time my tea brother Ivan comes back from a meditation retreat, he leads tea sessions which turn my world upside-down and fill it with calmness and tranquility. This always reminds me of the importance of meditation and inspires me to sit on the meditation cushion every day in order to become more aware and present and to serve tea to others in the highest possible way. In the same way, when we have tea with our tea *sangha*, we inspire each other and learn from each other, too. We learn how to choose the best teaware, how to boil water and choose music for a tea session;

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how to prepare the space for tea and how to prepare this particular tea so that it reveals its best quality. *Sangha* is also about inspiring examples; it is about people with whom our tea sessions become deeper as we enhance each other’s energy.

In our Moscow *sangha* we have been holding regular tea sessions for the last two years and we have developed our own language of signs and symbols that we use to communicate with one another in silent tea sessions. This happened in the most natural way, as we love tea and share in the same service together. For example, if you leave the kettle’s lid in a certain way, this is a sign for the *chatong*, or water-bearer responsible for keeping the water flowing, that the tea sessions is coming to an

end and no more water is needed. I noticed during our journey that when Mia and Tian Wu were helping in tea sessions, they too had such a silent communication with each other. Therefore, this silent language of glances and gestures is born naturally, to preserve meditative quietness during tea sessions and prepare tea in the best possible way. Such signals display true intimacy.

To be amongst the ancient and old-growth trees in Yunnan was also a beautiful and powerful experience for me, but to be there with friends who share the same deep love for Tea was even better! To see how your joy is reflected in the eyes of others and is amplified by their joy—what a gift!

We tea people prefer silence and meditative immersions in ourselves. But if you met us during our trip to Yunnan, you would have seen that we were opening towards each other both in our hearts and minds, that joy was circulating powerfully within our circle and our voices could be constantly heard, even when we were silent. Our hearts developed a way of signaling and communicating naturally, like the signals *chatong* use during a silent session.

Sangha is one of the most important components of any spiritual practice—a community of people who share the same values and joys. And if you have found your tea *sangha*, I wish with all my heart that you preserve it and make it deeper and stronger. If you haven’t met your tea family yet, I hope you do meet your tea sisters and brothers soon. You can go to Taiwan and meet amazing magical people there who love tea and serve it with all their hearts, minds and bodies; or perhaps come to Moscow, where we will welcome you as family. What I am saying is that if you haven’t yet found a tea *sangha*, this Global Tea Hut is the best one of all!

-Raneta



The best of the tree huggers!

