Why Does Tea Taste Different Abroad?

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Why tea tastes different abroad, in summary:** Water, heat, blend, and milk differences compound. Four reasons and four practical fixes.

It is not in your head: tea really does taste different abroad, for clear reasons. This sits at the centre of the tea travel cluster beside why tea is better in England.

Last reviewed by the teas.co.uk team in May 2026.

Why tea tastes different abroad, at a glance

Reason	Effect on cup
Water hardness varies	British blends tuned for British water; soft/hard water elsewhere shifts flavour
Chlorine and minerals differ	US municipal water often heavily chlorinated; affects taste directly
Boiling temperature reached	Many countries don't reach a full rolling boil; black tea under extracts
Kettle infrastructure absent	Coffee-machine or microwave heating produces inadequate temperature
Same brand, different blend	Export-market blends sometimes reformulated for local water
UHT vs fresh milk	UHT (long-life) milk tastes different and reacts differently with tea
Different milk fat content	US whole milk, European milks differ from British semi-skimmed standard
Altitude effects	Higher altitude lowers boiling point; under-extraction at mountain destinations
The compound effect	One bad variable survivable; four together = the disappointing holiday cuppa

Reason 1: the water

Water is about 98% of a brewed cup, so it dominates the character more than anything else. British blends are tuned for British water, which itself varies (hard in London and the South East, soft in Yorkshire and the Lakes, very soft in Scotland). Abroad it differs sharply: US municipal water is often heavily chlorinated and hard, Mediterranean water is hard and mineral-heavy, Asian and African water vary widely. The same teabag makes a noticeably different cup depending on the water. The fix is low-mineral bottled spring water (Volvic and similar) or a filter jug if one is available. See best water for tea.

Reason 2: the heat

British brewing assumes near-boiling water (95 to 100C, a fierce rolling boil), and many foreign systems never get there. Hotel coffee machines heat to around 85 to 90C, right for coffee but too cool for black tea; US kettles often stop short of a full boil; microwaves heat unevenly and rarely reach a proper boil; and many in room kettles are underpowered or cut out early. Under-extracted tea tastes weak and flat whatever the leaf quality. The fix is a proper kettle, ideally a travel kettle where hotel kit is poor, or at a pinch microwaving the water to a real boil before pouring. See hotel tea.

Reason 3: the blend

British blends are formulated for British water and the milky style: CTC-led leaf that brews fast and strong in three to five minutes. Foreign markets sometimes get a reformulated blend under the same brand name, Tetley in the US differs from Tetley in the UK, and some PG Tips export blends differ from the UK retail one. So buying your usual brand abroad does not guarantee your usual cup, which is one reason packing UK-bought teabags works better than buying the nominally identical brand overseas. See are English teabags better.

Reason 4: the milk

British tea with milk is unusually milk-sensitive. UK semi-skimmed (around 1.7% fat) is the standard, and its freshness, fat and proteins interact with the tannins in a particular way. Abroad the milk differs: US whole milk is fattier, European hotels often serve UHT long-life milk with different proteins and taste, warm climates lean on UHT for shelf life, and some markets have little fresh dairy at all. The same teabag with UHT instead of fresh semi-skimmed makes a noticeably different cup. The fix is to ask for fresh milk specifically, or take it black and adjust. See milk in tea.

How the variables compound

Each variable alone produces a noticeable but tolerable change; the trouble is that on holiday they usually arrive together. A cup made with hard chlorinated water, coffee-machine heat at 88C, an export blend and UHT milk is structurally inferior to a home cup of soft Yorkshire water, a kettle boil, UK-market Yorkshire Tea and fresh semi-skimmed. The cumulative gap is large enough that British travellers consistently notice, so it really is not imagination. Knowing the four variables is what lets you fix each one in turn rather than just suffer the cup.

Country by country

Some destinations are systematically harder than others. The United States is consistently the worst for British-style tea, hard chlorinated water, no kettle culture, weak hotel provisions and often only UHT or very fatty milk. Mediterranean Europe (Spain, Italy, France, Greece) tends to disappoint too, with very hard water and UHT milk. Northern Europe (Germany, the Netherlands, Scandinavia) usually manages an adequate cup. East Asia runs an entirely different tea culture, where the local green and specialty tea is excellent but Western black tea is an afterthought. Australia and New Zealand are the most British outside the UK and usually the best non-UK cup. India is a producer with a deep tea culture, but built around masala chai rather than the British style. So plan accordingly: pack a heavier supply for a US trip than for New Zealand.

What to buy

For travel-worthy British black buy Yorkshire Tea, PG Tips or Twinings English Breakfast; for hard-water destinations buy Yorkshire Tea for Hard Water. For a premium travel tea buy Yorkshire Tea Gold. For the kit buy a travel kettle or a portable infuser.

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Travel reading

For related travel context see should I take my own teabags on holiday and are English teabags better. For the British comparison see why is tea better in England. For hotel-room brewing see how to make tea in a hotel room. For the water question see best water for tea. For the milk question see milk in tea.

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