

The Spice Trail: BBC Documentary Presented by Kate Humble

The Spice Trail presented by Kate Humble is a three-part documentary tracing the history of spices (aired on BBC2 on Thursday 17 February 2011).

Spice is life to the merchants, growers and traders of the plants that add valuable flavour to our food, and it is that story that is told in this three-part documentary. The main presenter is Kate Humble, who looks at the history of the spice trade, along with its mythology and use.

Her journey starts close to home from the ancient saffron fields of Essex – that's why the town of Saffron Walden is so-called – to the original source of nutmeg and cloves in the Far East. She reveals the gradual and progressive exploration of the world in the age of Western expansion.

Also touched on in the three hour-long programmes is the history of navigational science that allowed western sailors to pinpoint the location of the trading posts that would give access to global spice gardens. Over the series, she will travel from the UK to Mexico, Spain and the Middle East, through India and Indonesia to a remote set of islands following Western expansion in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Bringing the show up to date, she also looks at how spices are grown, used and traded in this century.

The Spice Trail: Cinnamon and Pepper

The first episode sees Kate Humble retrace the steps of fifteenth century explorers as she heads for India and Sri Lanka, the birthplaces of pepper and cinnamon. On India's spice coast, she tells the story of pepper, the most consumed spice in the world. She does the pepper dance to shake the berries from their stalks and meets farmers fighting a disease that is destroying crops.

In Sri Lanka, the story moves to cinnamon and she learns how the spice is harvested and cinnamon quills are made. She also witnesses the negotiations of local farmers trying to sell the crops they rely on to make their living.

The Spice Trail: Cloves and Nutmeg

Indonesia is the setting for the second episode and the spices covered are nutmeg and cloves. These two spices, grown on an archipelago of volcanic islands, drew European explorers in search of wealth but also led to massacres of local people and the decimation of their culture. Kate Humble meets the people who rebuilt their lives and communities around nutmeg and cloves and discovers how the battle for these spices led to the beginning of the British Empire in North America.

The Spice Trail: Saffron and Vanilla

The final episode takes in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco and the plains of Spain for the world's most expensive spice, saffron, before crossing the Atlantic to Mexico in search of vanilla. In the Atlas Mountains, she joins a local saffron farmer and his family to harvest their crop. In Spain, she joins a blind tasting to sort out the genuine from the fakes and meets the man who tests the DNA of saffron.

In Papantla, the birthplace of vanilla, she meets the Totonac, the original guardians of the spice. She witnesses a fertility dance and comes face to face with the people determined to keep Mexican vanilla alive in the face of competition from other producers.

The Career of Kate Humble

Wimbledon born Kate Humble specialises in presenting documentaries on wildlife and science. She did, however, start off as an actress in 1990's *The Secret Life of Ian Fleming*. She then worked as a behind-the-scenes researcher for programmes such as *Top Gear* and *Tomorrow's World*.

Early credits also include *Animal Hospital*, *Countryfile*, *Rough Science* and *City Hospital*. In 2002, her job took her under the ocean in *The Abyss*, a day of live broadcasts exploring life at the bottom of the sea. And in 2006 she travelled around the British coastline for *Seawatch*, which explored the effects of fishing, pollution and climate change on UK marine life.

More recently, she has been a regular presenter on BBC nature programmes *Springwatch* and *Autumnwatch* with Bill Oddie and Simon King.

By Steve Rogerson

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