

Stages 14 and 15 are not just a trek - they're an experience that transports you through time, connecting you to the people, places, and history that have shaped this spectacular corner of the world.

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Photography The Pekoe Trail Organization.



As Stage 13 wraps up in the captivating hillside of Saint Catherine, the adventure continues with Stage 14 of the Pekoe Trail. This journey promises breathtaking views and a deep dive into the area's rich history. Starting at a lofty 1,875 meters, one of the highest points on the trail, this section stretches 9.5 kilometers, descending toward Makulella. The first two kilometers meander through the upper division of the Dambetenna tea estate, where the air is steeped in the fragrance of centuries-old tea history.

What's particularly remarkable about Stage 14 is the dramatic descent. Throughout the trail, you'll drop an impressive 600 meters - passing through 18 hairpin bends, affectionately dubbed 'mini-devil's staircases' by the Pekoe Trail mappers. Each twist and turn brings you closer to the village below. As you descend, the trail winds through terraced vegetable plots lovingly tended by the local communities. These peaceful patches of

greenery offer a glimpse into the lives of those who have made this land their home for generations. After about a kilometer, a short detour leads you to the Lipton Seat, a vantage point offering an unforgettable countryside view. Here, Thomas Lipton, the visionary British entrepreneur, saw the opportunity to revolutionize the tea industry. His journey to Ceylon, where he created the globally recognized Lipton brand, is part of the landscape's rich legacy.

Beyond the tea estates, the trail enters a tranquil turpentine forest, where the descent continues beneath the shade of towering trees. Just 1.1 kilometers into the journey, you'll encounter a small shrine. The Kovil, a nearby shrine, is nestled beside a tributary of the Kirindi Oya, the eleventh-longest river in the country, adding to the area's spiritual reverence.

As the trail twists along the estate road, it plunges again into the heart of a fragrant turpentine forest. Two kilometers in, the true essence of a tree kovil reveals itself—a massive, hollow pine tree that cradles a small, sacred shrine. Revered by the locals, this tree is a powerful symbol of spirituality, its towering presence exuding a sense of reverence and awe. The atmosphere here is thick with the whispers of ancient beliefs, and for those who pause to reflect, it feels as though the very earth holds something sacred in its embrace.

Stage 14 marks the first spectacular glimpse of the iconic Namunukula Mountain Range rising to the east. Known as the 'Nine Peaks,' this range is a breathtaking sight, and its connection to history is just as fascinating as the view itself. As the twelfth tallest mountain in Sri Lanka, Namunukula holds a unique place in the annals of time, entwined with the storied voyages of the Chinese treasure fleets during the reign of the third Ming Emperor, Zhu Di (1402-1424). These mighty fleets, described as colossal 400-foot-long ships manned by Admiral Zheng He, were on monumental trade expeditions, their holds filled with porcelain, silk, jade, and other treasures.

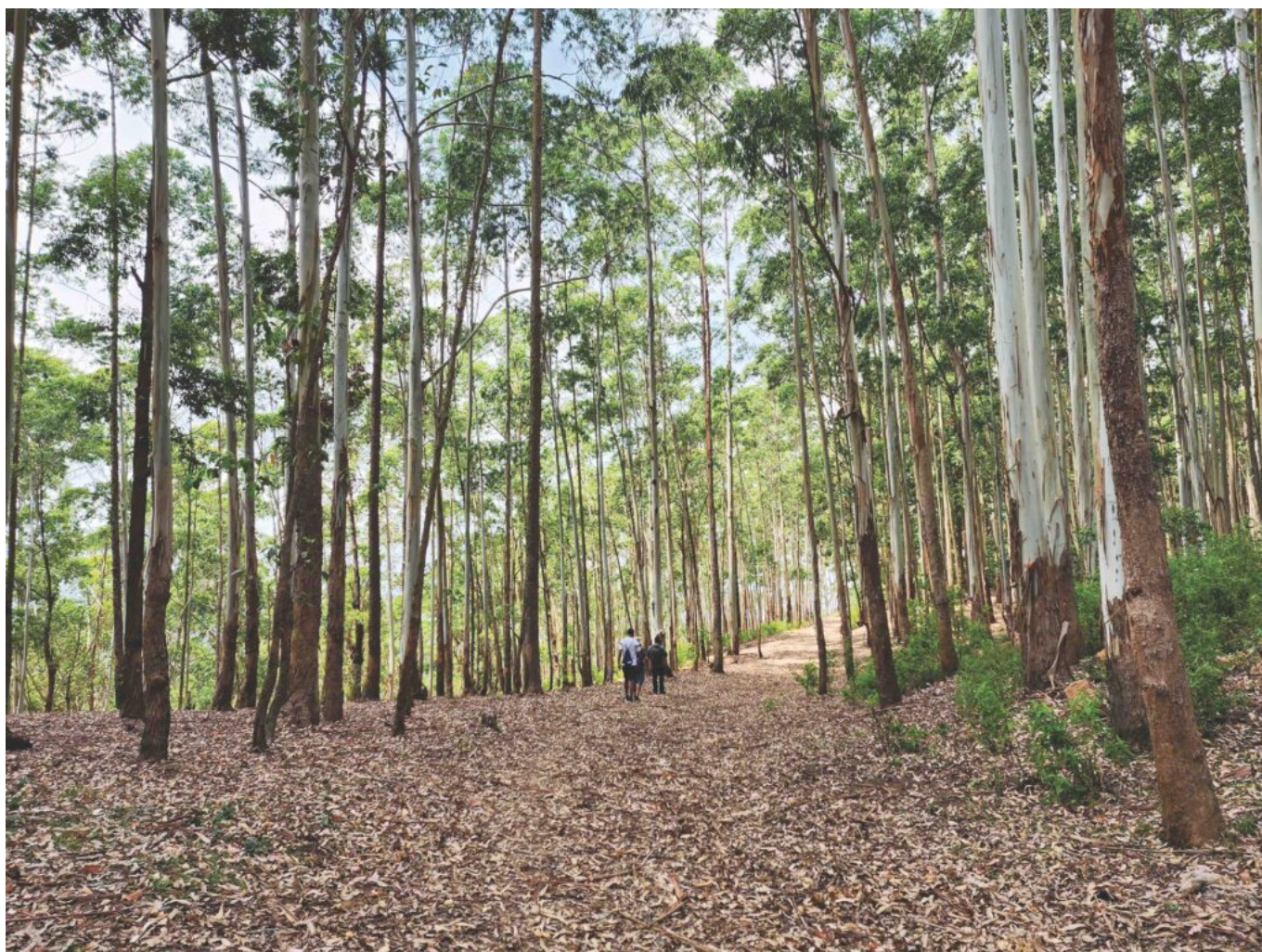
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Vegetable gardens in the village at St. Catherine Estate.



Daisies in the wild.



Eucalyptus forest towards the end of stage 14.



The path that zig-zags down the mountain.

During one such voyage in the 15th century, these Chinese sailors first glimpsed the shores of Sri Lanka, guided by the majestic peaks of Namunukula on the horizon. The fleet's chronicler, Ma Huan, marveled at the mountains, describing them as rich in gems, sapphires, and rubies, which he writes the locals referred to as the "teeth of the Buddha." As the trail winds through the landscape, the stunning views of Namunukula are never far from sight, and it becomes the focal point of the journey. From this vantage point, one is treated to a 360-degree panorama - a symphony of ridges, cliffs, and distant mountain ranges, with Namunukula dominating the scene like an ancient sentinel.

The journey continues as the descent toward the village of Liyangahawela begins. The trail here requires caution, as sharp drops and narrow, winding paths challenge the adventurer's

every step. Navigating these precarious terrains demands patience and care, and it's wise to enlist the help of a guide or local to avoid missteps. But despite the challenges, these moments only add to the thrill of the Pekoe Trail—each twist and turn heightens the sense of discovery.

Occasionally, the trail veers onto old roads, remnants of British engineering from when these paths were used to transport tea leaves. The journey inevitably leads back to the tea estates, where the scent of the plantations fills the air, and the lush landscape unfolds in splendor.

At 4.6 kilometers, the Pears Farm viewpoint offers a dramatic view of the Namunukula Mountain Range once again gracing the horizon. From here, you can see Little Adam's Peak standing proudly alongside its towering neighbors. The Pears Farm, a verdant oasis of pear trees, pulses with life as the fruits are cultivated for the wholesale market, adding color to the landscape.

Just beyond, at the 5-kilometer mark, the Balagala Estate bungalow stands as a testament to plantation culture. This beautiful, traditional bungalow is built to reflect the island's enduring colonial past.

At 5.4 kilometers, the trail once again crosses the Kirindi Oya distributary, with just a few more kilometers before the journey ends. As the path winds toward the village of Liyangahawela, the Liyangahawela Kovil comes into view, framed by the stunning backdrop of Nayabedda Mountain. The trail soon dives back into a dense turpentine forest, the air alive with the rustling of leaves and the gentle whisper of the wind. With each step, you feel the pulse of nature around you, guiding you toward the trail's conclusion. The final descent brings you to the Makulella Allimalai Temple, the end of Stage 14, but not the end of the adventure.

Beyond the temple lies the Ambadandegama Valley, a hidden gem waiting to be explored. Here, rock pools shimmer in the sunlight, inviting you to take a refreshing swim and soak in the tranquil beauty of this pristine landscape. It's the perfect end to a journey filled with history, spirituality, and natural wonders, leaving you with memories that will last a lifetime. While in the Ambadandegama Valley, one must also visit the Amba Estate, which consists of an organic farm and guest house. The project creates and maximizes employment and income generation opportunities for the locals while pursuing an ethos of preserving and restoring the natural environment.

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Stage 15 is a 9.6-kilometer trek leading to the breathtaking town of Ella. Reaching the iconic Ella Rock is the ultimate reward. But before reaching the summit, you'll wind your way through the enchanting Kinigama Forest Reserve - a 342-hectare sanctuary of eucalyptus trees and pristine beauty maintained by the Department of Forest Conservation. This forest is a hidden gem, offering one of Sri Lanka's best forest bathing experiences. As you hike through the dense greenery, you'll follow a ridge stretching to Ella Rock, feeling like you're inhaling the clouds themselves.

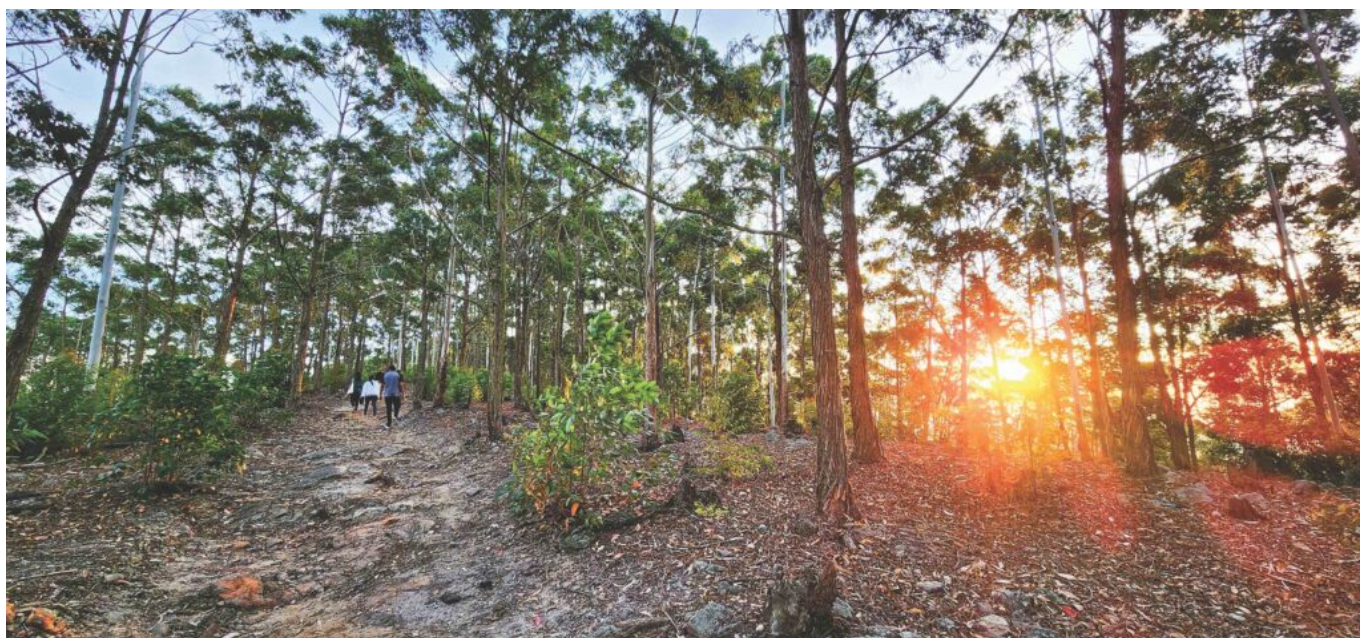




A shrine dedicated to lord Ganesh on the way.



A small shrine on the outskirts of the village of St. Catherine's.



Stage 15 in the early hours, catching the sunrise.



An upper basin of Rawana falls.

Halfway through the forest, a peaceful surprise awaits: a forest monastery and meditation center. Here, you'll encounter the "kilometer of silence" - a sacred stretch where hikers are asked to remain completely silent, allowing those in meditation to connect with their surroundings in solitude. It's a humbling experience, and you may even glimpse serene souls clad in white, seated in deep meditation under the trees. This reverence for nature and mindfulness makes the Pekoe Trail so unique. It's not just about the journey but also about respecting the peacefulness of the space and the people within it. The occasional eerie stillness of the forest only adds to its appeal, with the wind carrying whispers of the southern plains and mist that sometimes rolls in like a soft, ethereal blanket.

However, the silence soon gives way to excitement as you reach Ella Rock, a famed destination for locals and tourists. Before you can embark on your final ascent, you'll pass a ticket counter managed by the Forest Department to access the Ella Rock viewpoint. The view from the top is nothing short of awe-inspiring. From this vantage point, the world unfolds beneath you - high mountains, deep valleys, and sweeping landscapes that seem to stretch on forever. On a clear day, you might even glimpse Yala National Park and the sacred city of Kataragama in the distance. The sheer drop of Ella Rock, surrounded by the lush Namunukula and Narangala mountain ranges, Little Adam's Peak, and other iconic landmarks, makes for a picture-perfect panorama.

As you descend from the peak, which sits at an elevation of 1,350 meters, you'll be reminded that you're in one of the cleanest, most pristine places on the planet, with air quality far superior to most areas in Sri Lanka. It's a place to soak in the serenity, be responsible, and keep it that way. Thankfully, there are plenty of stops to refresh yourself with drinks and snacks from local vendors.

The descent to Ella can be challenging— watch out for rocks, roots, and the occasional razor-sharp grasses. The trail eventually takes you through a Kirindi Oya crossing, into the Kithalella village and railway station, and then encounters the famous Ella Railway Line. Walking along the tracks is a thrilling experience - be cautious, as trains may pass at any moment. But it's also an incredible opportunity to wave to the friendly locals and tourists riding the upcountry train. The Ella Railway Station is a charming spot, full of old-world character and bustling with activity as visitors gather to hop aboard the train.

The energy is contagious once you've made your way into Ella's town. Whether you're in the mood to shop, dine, or simply relax, this vibrant town has it all. For an adrenaline rush, try

the Flying Ravana zip line, where you can soar at 80 km/h over the stunning hills, taking in a bird's-eye view of the breathtaking landscape. And if you're a fan of mythology, be sure to visit Nil Diya Pokuna - the Blue Water Pond hidden in an underground cave steeped in legend. According to Ramayana, this is what made Ravana's underground cave system, which is believed to be connected to several other places referred to in the Ramayana. Ravana had allegedly hidden Sita in this underground cave after kidnapping her before Rama eventually rescued her.

Ella offers an eclectic mix of activities, food, and culture, all set against stunning natural beauty. Whether you're gearing up for the next stage of your journey or simply taking in the sights, there's no shortage of things to do. Be sure to try the town's frozen curd—a local twist on a traditional dairy treat, showcasing the island's rich agricultural heritage. It's the perfect way to cool off after a day of adventure!



Miguel Cunat, the father of Pekoe Trail, forest bathing and meditating.



Patches of paddy from stage 15.



The cave before the second view point of Ella Rock.





View from the second view point of Ella Rock, just off the trail.



Along the railway track to Ella in the last 700m.