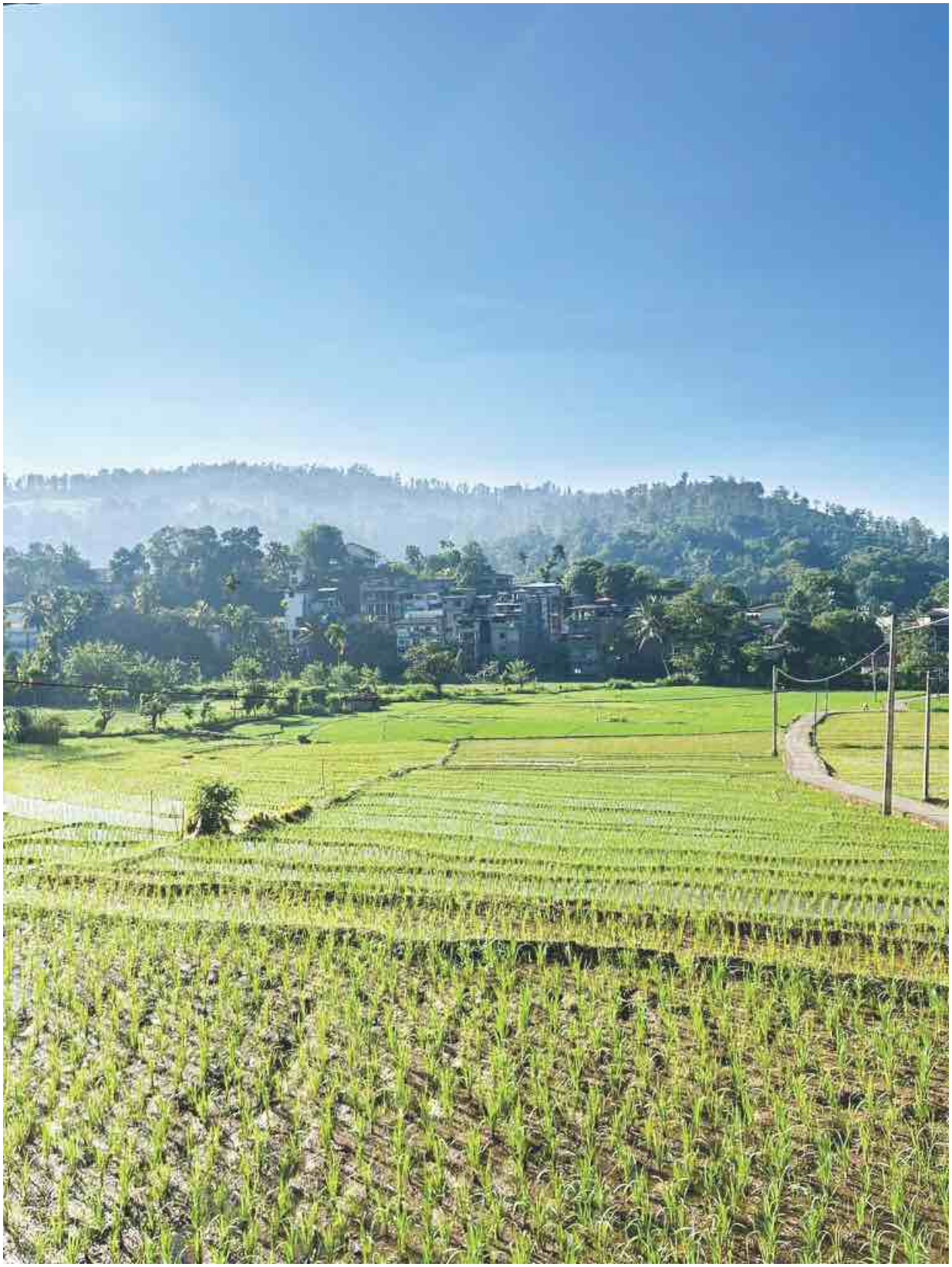
Pekoe Trail Stage 18

Posted on

Stage 18 of the Pekoe Trail is unique in that it features a series of seesawing and zigzagging ascents and descents, weaving through quiet rural roads and undulating terrain.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

Photography The Pekoe Trail Organization.



As hikers walk through the trail, they pass vibrant tea gardens and rice fields before emerging onto the country's national highways. The trail's route connects two significant Sinhala villages—Hali Ela and Ettampitiya in Stage 19—both steeped in agricultural heritage. These villages have long been home to Sinhala farmers, who have cultivated rice, vegetables, and spices for generations.

What makes this segment of the Pekoe Trail particularly fascinating is the seamless blend of two pivotal industries for Sri Lanka: agriculture and tea. While the Sinhala villagers were the original settlers in these areas, the Tamil communities working in the tea plantations were brought to Sri Lanka by the British during the colonial era. The juxtaposition of these two communities is evident in the landscape, where you'll encounter paddy fields alongside tea estates.

While Hindu Kovils and spellbinding tree shrines are frequent occurrences in most stages, important Buddhist temples are present in stage 18, which reminds one of the deep cultural and spiritual roots the Sinhala communities have established in the region over hundreds of years.

While Hali Ela and Ettampitiya were once overlooked by tourists, the development of the Pekoe Trail has opened up new opportunities for locals. Many villagers have embraced the arrival of hikers by transforming their homes into homestays, providing visitors with an authentic experience of rural Sri Lanka. Others offer refreshments, snacks, and homemade meals to travelers, allowing hikers to enjoy the warmth of Sri Lankan hospitality. This newfound interest in tourism has breathed new life into these once-quiet villages, offering a sustainable source of income for local communities and highlighting the trail's potential to support rural development.

Stage 18 of the Pekoe Trail, which begins at Hali Ela and ends at Ettampitiya, represents the lowest point along the route. This 13.6-kilometer stage is a treat for those arriving by train, as the journey to Hali Ela station offers breathtaking views of the lush, rolling mountains of Sri Lanka's Hill Country. The ride culminates at the charming Hali Ela railway station, a relic of old-world colonial charm. The hike can begin from the town for those not arriving by train. Notably, Hali Ela station is the last stop before Badulla, marking the terminus of the railway line that stretches from Colombo through the scenic Hill Country.

The Pekoe Trail from the Hali Ela railway station begins with a small staircase leading down to a bridge that spans the Badulu Oya, eventually connecting to the

main road. Hali Ela is a lively, small town where the pulse of everyday life is evident. A road to the left takes you away from the town’s hustle and bustle, offering a peaceful glimpse into the villagers’ way of life. This road winds through tranquil rice fields, where the serene landscape is occasionally interrupted by the distant sounds of town life, a reminder of the delicate balance between urbanization and the countryside.

As you continue, the path passes the Sri Bimbarama Temple, a significant landmark in the village. This temple serves as a spiritual refuge for the local community, offering a quiet sanctuary amidst the area’s natural beauty.

After a while, the trail brings you back to the Hali Ela-Ketawala Road, which you encounter at the trail’s outset. About 300 meters further, the trail veers left, taking you into the familiar lush landscape.

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The Sri Bimbarama Temple is a significant place of worship for the Sinhala villagers of Hali Ela.

Though not directly on the trail, the iconic 16th-century Bogoda Wooden Bridge is a short detour and well worth a visit for those staying in Hali Ela. This historic bridge is the oldest wooden bridge in Sri Lanka and is a remarkable testament to traditional engineering and craftsmanship. The bridge's intricate carvings and robust construction showcase the skill and ingenuity of ancient Sri Lankan builders, making it a must-see for those interested in the country's rich architectural heritage.

The trail crosses a bridge and follows the river on the right, meandering through several village homes for several kilometers. The path can be overgrown with tall grasses, but if dressed appropriately, it won't pose any harm— instead, it adds to the thrill of hiking through more challenging terrain. The footpath is often barely visible, making it an adventurous experience. Walking through the villages, however, offers a delightful opportunity to witness the simple, everyday life of the countryside. The area remains relatively warm despite the shade from trees and the nearby paddy fields.

> What makes this stage captivating is the dramatic variation in the landscape, taking trekkers from winding roads to lush rice fields, serene tea gardens, and paths that twist and turn with every step, offering a test of endurance.

After nearly three kilometers into Stage 18, the first sight of a tea plantation appears as you begin zigzagging along a mountainous path. This stage is known for being one of the most challenging climbs along the Pekoe Trail. You'll find yourself navigating a series of steep zigzags for three to four kilometers, turning it into an intense cardio workout as you ascend the mountain.

Upon reaching a small community, the trail continues its uphill zigzag, offering hikers the option to challenge themselves by taking the stone steps alongside the path. These steps, often used by villagers as their daily route, are an actual endurance test. Broad and seemingly stretching into the sky, they are a striking feature of the landscape. Young and old villagers frequently use these steps. While the Pekoe Trail follows a less strenuous route through the tea estate, taking the steps offers an intimate view of local life.

From the trail, you can also spot the Keeriyagolla Sri Sambodhi Vivekashramaya,

perched atop a higher ground, offering a serene sight against the backdrop of the mountains. The trail maintains its winding ascent through the Dickwella Tea Estate, immersing hikers in the surrounding hills' dense greenery and scenic beauty.

After walking for about four kilometers into Stage 18, you're rewarded with sweeping mountain views. If you take a moment to look around, the Dickwella Tea Factory appears, perched on the mountaintop. This factory, which can be visited, provides a fascinating glimpse into the region's tea industry. The trail curves around the factory, eventually leading into a small area with shops—a welcome stop to replenish and recover after the demanding hike.

Stairways continue to appear throughout this stage. They act as shortcuts to the top, saving time on the road. However, these steps can be pretty grueling. For the locals, though, the few meters saved by taking the stairs are worth the effort. As you leave the Sinhala villages and enter the tea plantations, Hindu shrines, and Kovils become a common sight, marking the presence of the diverse faiths of nearby communities.

The trail becomes even more challenging as it winds through forest paths, again merging with the plantation land. One of the highlights of this stretch is a stunning viewpoint offering a panoramic view of the Namunukula Mountains and the valley below. As you continue, the trail drops down to the Ketawala-Deegalla-Ettampitiya Road before climbing a stairway back into the tea plantation. From here, you can look down upon Hali Ela town, offering a striking perspective of how much the trail has spiraled up the mountainside to reach this elevation within the Malwatte Valley Plantation. Amid the lush plantation, the trail traverses overgrown sharp grasses, a reminder to appropriately dress for unexpected rough terrain. The following 500 meters of tall, prickly grass are a challenge, but eventually, the path becomes more navigable, though still surrounded by overgrown grasslands.

This section is remote and isolated, as it's cut off from the main tea-growing areas of the estate. Yet, the solitude is accompanied by magnificent views of the valley below and the towering mountains. The wind adds to the tranquility, making it a peaceful, albeit lonely, walk toward the end of the stage.

At nearly eight kilometers into the trail, the elevation gain reaches 1,000 meters, providing a stunning view of the Dickwella Tea Factory up close again. The trail intersects with the Ketawala-Deegalla- Ettampitiya Road once again at this point. A 500-meter walk leads you back onto the familiar, more minor roads and footpaths of

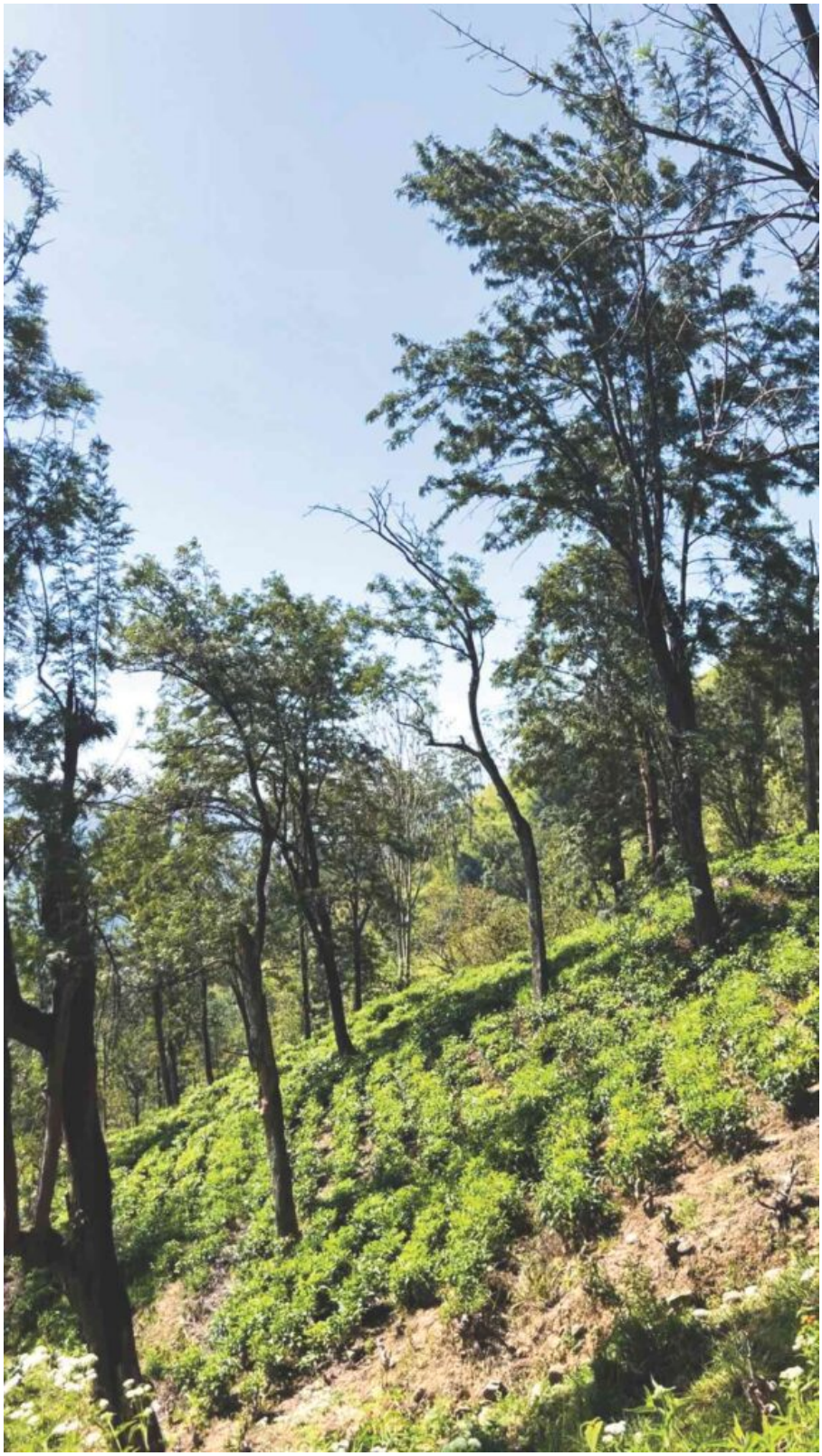
the Pekoe Trail, guiding you through a beautiful tea plantation until, at the 10-kilometer mark, you meet the Ketawala- Deegalla-Ettampitiya Road once more. This secondary road meanders through beautifully cultivated tea gardens before the trail veers onto an estate path parallel to the road.

> As you leave the Sinhala villages and enter the tea plantations, Hindu shrines, and Kovils become a common sight, marking the presence of the diverse faiths of nearby communities.

At the 12.6-kilometer mark, the trail returns to the road, leading toward the end of stage 18. The final stretch feels like a return to familiarity as the tea estates gradually give way to the close of another challenging but rewarding segment of the Pekoe Trail. Stage 18 of the Pekoe Trail offers an exhilarating and diverse hiking experience that challenges both the body and the spirit. What makes this stage captivating is the dramatic variation in the landscape, taking trekkers from winding roads to lush rice fields, serene tea gardens, and paths that twist and turn with every step, offering a test of endurance. The terrain is anything but flat, with each rise and fall providing new vistas and perspectives. As you navigate through this varied topography, the beauty of Sri Lanka’s natural landscape unfolds in unexpected ways, leaving you with a sense of accomplishment and a deeper appreciation for the island’s rich and ever-changing environment.



A Hindu Kovil on stage 18.



The rhythmic rows of vibrant tea leaves stand in harmony with the sweeping landscape.