Pekoe Trail Stage 20

Posted on

Stage 20 may not glitter with landmarks, but it holds quiet splendors in nature and history, the essence and magnificence of Sri Lanka.

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Photography Pekoe Trail Organization.



The trek takes travelers through serene mountainsides, offering many sights to discover along the way.

Stage 20 of the Pekoe Trail begins in the small and spirited town of Lunuwatte. The bustle of daily life, a medley of tiny shops and local chatter, fades quickly behind as the trail turns— the urban hum gives way to paddy fields. Here, the essence of an ancient Sinhala village reveals itself, where generations have lived with the land.

The trail sets off at an elevation of 1,000 meters and steadily climbs to 1,600 meters over the first nine kilometers—a challenging stretch, no doubt. This ascent takes you up the slopes of Isthripura Mountain, a place steeped in legend and local lore, lending a layer of mystery and historical intrigue to an otherwise serene walk.

As it approaches Udapussellawa, the trail gently descends to around 1,280 meters. The descent is a welcome change, though the sunlit trail—often exposed and dry—demands resilience. The terrain shifts through eucalyptus forests, casting long shadows and releasing a sharp, cleansing scent into the air.

The village of Dodampagala marks the Stage's physically demanding phase. Beginning at 1.5 kilometers, the trail becomes a vertical challenge—a path that seems to test both endurance and will. At the 2.5-kilometer point, a summit, the view, and the sense of accomplishment make it all worthwhile.

At the three-kilometer mark, the trail takes a dramatic turn, leading into the hushed, sun-drenched depths of a eucalyptus forest. From this point onward, the forest becomes a defining feature of the journey, stretching across a significant portion of the trail in a haunting, bone-dry expanse. At an elevation of 1,295 meters, the trail begins its climb—gaining nearly 150 meters more—towards the historical Isthripura cave.

The eucalyptus forest is otherworldly. Arid and stark, it mirrors the parched vastness of the Australian outback, though nestled in Sri Lanka's mountainous Uva Province. There is an eerie stillness here—a silence broken only by the occasional creak of dry bark or the crunch of boots on brittle undergrowth. The dryness is not

incidental. These thirsty trees, introduced decades ago to stabilize the cleared slopes, are infamous for their insatiable water consumption, slowly draining the land of life and leaving the forest floor cracked, bare, and starved of biodiversity.

As the trail winds through this austere terrain, it clings to the eastern flank of the forested hill. The incline is demanding—its surface is fragmented by tree roots, narrow ledges, and sudden drops that fall steeply to one side. Where water once trickled through hidden channels, only deep, empty gullies remain. Walkers must move carefully; the path is choppy and often sloping, requiring constant attention underfoot.

August is the ideal month to attempt this section. Water sources are rare at this time, so carrying a generous supply is essential; unlike in other stages of the trail, there are no gurgling streams or forest springs to be found here.

Through this sunburnt corridor, glimpses of green do appear: tea gardens unfurl across adjoining slopes, a soft contrast to the towering columns of eucalyptus.

At 4.5 kilometers, deep within the eucalyptus forest and hidden from plain sight, lies a mysterious—and mythical— landmark: the Isthripura cave. Whether born of history or legend, its story adds an unforgettable layer to this otherwise quiet stretch of the trail. Unlike many so-called “caves,” which are little more than shallow rock shelters, Isthripura is a genuine underground formation—narrow, deep, and twisting with interconnected passageways. Local lore claims this was one of the secret chambers where the demon king Ravana hid Sita after her abduction from India. A city of women— Isthripura—its name alone stirs the imagination. Some believe it once formed part of a vast network of tunnels leading to places of Ravana’s mythical kingdom.

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Grace in bloom – the lotus pond shines beautifully along paddy fields at the beginning of Stage 20.



A sunlit path through highland beauty.

Legend also ties the cave to a real historical figure: King Walagamba. According to tales passed down through generations, he concealed 500 of his consorts within this cavernous network— an image as fascinating as it is implausible, given the cave’s low ceilings and constricting passages. To move within it demands a bent posture, steely nerve, and a tolerance for discomfort, making it a place best left to seasoned

spelunkers.

Researchers estimate the cave sits at an elevation of approximately 1,390 meters. At this point of Stage 20, its main entrance is a vertical, elliptical shaft over 8.5 meters deep. It’s a descent not taken lightly but certainly not without proper equipment and guidance. Exploring it is an adventure for another day.

The landscape softens as the trail rises and bids farewell to the eucalyptus forest. The austere dryness gives way to the lush, manicured order of tea country at the Waldemar Estate.

Stage 20 holds a quiet yet remarkable distinction—it straddles the border between two provinces, Central and Uva, by the subtlest of margins. Just a few inches separate these two regions of Sri Lanka, and along the trail, you’ll find yourself quite literally stepping between them, sometimes with one foot in each.

A spectacular viewpoint opens up before you reach this gentle seam in the landscape. From here, the sweeping panorama offers a kind of retrospective— the trail seems to reflect on its own journey. You can spot familiar giants from earlier stages in the Central Province: the misty Horton Plains, the Thotupola Mountain, the twin crests of Udaweriya, and the iconic silhouette of Idalgashinna.

At 6.9 kilometers in, the trail reaches Kondagala Estate, and it’s here that you arrive at the precise ridge where the two provinces meet. There’s something playful and surreal about standing at this point— move a step to the left, and you’re in Uva; shift to the right and back in Central.



Traveling through tea fields and sunshine.

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Not long after, the trail re-enters a eucalyptus forest at Alanwick Estate, but the mood is different this time. It’s no longer the dry, desolate grove of earlier; now, the walk feels more dynamic. On your right, in Uva, the eucalyptus rises tall and stately; to your left, in Central, sloping tea gardens cascade down the hills, framed by breathtaking mountain vistas.

At 8.3 kilometers, you reach the highest point on Stage 20: 1,613 meters above sea level. This elevated perch opens out onto the spectacular Uva bowl, revealing a

triumphant sweep of natural wonders— the dramatic lines of Ella Rock, the vast undulations of the Namunukula Mountain Range, and the famous Lipton’s Seat.

From here, the descent begins, and the winding Ragala–Udapussellawa Road soon curls into view. At the highest point, you cross once more—from the Uva Province back into the Central—carrying on for the final 4.3 kilometers. The trail flows gently through Waldemar Estate, into Luckyland Estate, and finally down to Udapussellawa, where 12.4 kilometers of Stage 20 ends, resting once more in the Central Province.

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Stillness draped in silver – the sun rises through the mist.



Eucalyptus trees shrouded in a veil of calm.