Pekoe Trail Stage 21

Posted on

Stage 21, stretching 16.9 kilometers from Uda Pussellawa to Kandapola, is not for the faint of heart.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

Photography Pekoe Trail Organization.



The enchanting views from the mystical mountains seem to stretch out infinitely.

Known for punishing elevation gains, stage 21 is a challenge that rewards the

determined. As with all trails, this one begins in the heart of Udapussellawa town, requiring a 700- meter walk along the Udapussellawa– Nuwara Eliya Road, where the stage's lowest point rests at 1,274 meters above sea level. A left turn onto a steep flight of steps signals the actual start of the adventure—and if these steps are any hint of what's to come, brace yourself. For nearly 1.5 kilometers, they seem to climb forever, giving you the strange sense that you've stepped into a staircase without an end.

Stage 21 claims one of the highest elevation gains of the Pekoe Trail, reaching up to 2008 meters. But what makes it unique is its rhythm: two significant ascents with a descent in between, as if you're climbing two mountains in a single day. The first climb begins at the stage's lowest point—1,274 meters—and winds relentlessly upward to 1,588 meters by the four-kilometer mark. Amid the struggle, as expected, there's beauty to soften the challenge—immaculate tea gardens unfurling in every direction, their greens so vivid they hum with life, and mountain views that offer a welcome pause from the steep demands of the trail. Along the way, you pass through estates with names that carry a touch of British grandeur. Alnwick Estate, for instance, likely nods to the historic Alnwick Castle, the 11th century seat of the 12th Duke of Northumberland and a celebrated filming location for Harry Potter and Downton Abbey. And there are more—Waldemar, Amherst—each name a small story tucked into the hillside.

Shrines are a signature along the Pekoe Trail, and the first one you'll encounter in Stage 21 appears at a crossroads 1.8 kilometers in, perched at 1,400 meters. There is something special about this shrine. Here, a sacred Bo Tree revered by Buddhists stands alongside Hindu deities, their symbols sharing the same space in quiet harmony.

The tea gardens along this stretch hum with life, often dotted with the movements of tea pickers at work. At the two-kilometer point, the trail rewards you with a sweeping panorama: the Mahakudugala mountain range and the distant peaks of the Victoria– Randenigala–Rantambe Forest Reserve. Far below, Uda Pussellawa town appears like a toy village, a reminder that this stage is about climbing higher and higher. The views only get better the more you ascend. With each step upward, the horizon unfolds just a little further, revealing a never-ending gallery of mountains, valleys, and tea-covered hillsides. Stage 21 may make your legs sting, but it more than makes up for it with scenery that feels like it belongs on a postcard.

Like Stage 20, Stage 21 also waltzes along the crossroads of the Uva Province. Though it begins in the Central Province, the trail soon brushes shoulders with Uva—at one point even passing through an estate that straddles both provinces. At the 3.7-kilometer mark, perched at 1,537 meters, you can choose your province: turn left and step into Uva, or follow the Pekoe Trail's right turn and remain in the Central Province.

By this point, you've already climbed over 200 meters—a solid warm-up considering there's still more than ten kilometers to go. Soon after, at 4.3 kilometers, the path swings into a sharp U-turn, climbing into the Gomale Division of the Waldemar Estate. This is still part of the first phase of Stage 21's double ascent, and by 4.8 kilometers you'll hit the highest point of this opening climb: 1,588 meters.

If the legs feel the burn, the reward is a two-kilometer descent that drops 110 meters, carrying you to the 6.7-kilometer mark. Along the way, at 5.2 kilometers, a stunning viewpoint offers a sweeping look at the Udapussellawa–Nuwara Eliya Road snaking through the hills. Finally, at 6.8 kilometers, you'll reach the lowest point of this descent, resting at 1,467 meters— before the trail tilts upward once more.

The two-kilometer breather ends too soon, giving way to Stage 21's second act—a climb far more demanding and longer than the first. This ascent stretches unbroken for at least eight kilometers, a steady upward grind that tests stamina and spirit. Thankfully, deliverance arrives in Ambalama Junction, a T-junction with two small shops—perfect for a quick break to top up water, grab a snack, or even, with a bit of notice, enjoy a freshly prepared lunch.



Embracing the beauty of the scenery while hiking in stage 21.



The walk takes you along beautiful tea trails across valleys, verdant tea fields and vegetable plots.

At 7.6 kilometers, the trail toys with the provincial border again, carrying you back into Uva at 1,540 meters. From here, the views open up dramatically—Saint Catherine’s Seat and its distant communication tower punctuate the skyline, while the proud bulk of Dambetenna Mountain comes into sight. The Uva stretch lasts 1.2 kilometers before you re-enter the Central Province at the 8.8-kilometer mark. Along the way, a ribbon of pine forest shades your right shoulder, while sweeping tea gardens spill gracefully down the hillsides to your left.

One of the most captivating stretches of Stage 21 begins at the 10-kilometer mark, where the trail slips quietly into the Kandapola–Seethaeliya Forest Reserve. This

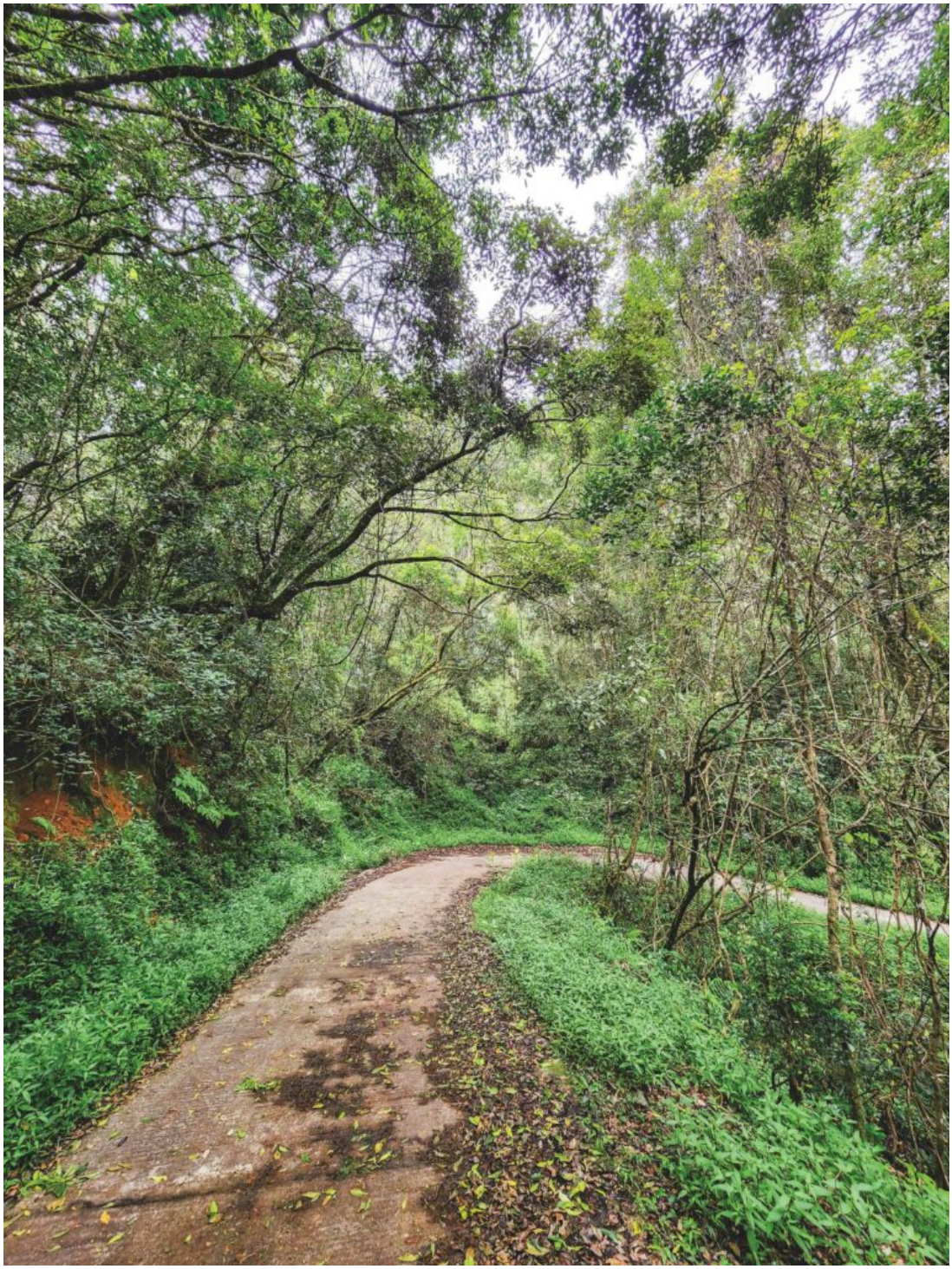
three-kilometer expanse of jungle is an autochthonous—or truly indigenous— forest, existing not because of human planting, but because it has evolved entirely on its own. Inside, the world feels remote. A paved road winds through, occasionally visited by a passing vehicle, but mostly it’s a quiet stretch peppered by the rhythm of nature. This forest is alive with the calls of countless birds, the rustle of the elusive purple-faced langur, and— if you’re fortunate – a leopard’s quiet presence. Water sings its song here, tumbling over rocks and spilling into small waterfalls, their clear streams tracing the path beside you.

Emerging from the reserve at the 12.9-kilometer mark, the trail returns to the familiar embrace of tea plantation roads. Here, the climb continues toward the stage’s highest point, and you’re now closing in on nearly 2,000 meters. The mountain views stretch endlessly, pulling your gaze to eternal horizons.

> What sets Stage 21 apart is the sheer stamina it demands—this is a trail of climbs upon climbs.



Winding through gentle slopes while enjoying the refreshing coolness of the surroundings.



Walking along the path, the peaceful trail lets you enjoy nature’s beauty.

Along this route, you'll pass the grand 19th-century tea factory—now the elegant Heritance Tea Factory hotel—perched like a crown atop Concordia Estate, one of the highest tea estates in Sri Lanka. When you reach the trail's peak at 14.8 kilometers— an impressive 2,008 meters above sea level—you truly feel on top of the world. The total elevation gain at this peak point is 730 meters. The vastness below seems almost miniature from this height, with Piduruthalagala Mountain and Kandapola town now in sight. From there, the final kilometer is a gentle descent, carrying you from the Heritance Tea Factory into Kandapola town to 1933 meters.

What sets Stage 21 apart is the sheer stamina it demands—this is a trail of climbs upon climbs. The path itself is mostly kind, save for a few rough detours thrown in to keep things interesting, but the reward at the end is priceless: that deep, satisfying rush of having conquered the ascents. It's the kind of achievement that makes you grin through the exhaustion. Because this stage is demanding and time-consuming— with plenty of breaks to catch your breath or simply take in the views—the Pekoe Trail organizers recommend starting early, armed with plenty of water and a reserve of snacks to fuel the journey. After all, victory tastes better when you've prepared for the climb.