Pekoe Trail: Stage One and Two – The Start of a Journey

Posted on

Stand at the edge of a cliff along the Pekoe Trail and be mesmerized by the boundless beauty of the island’s tea country. The faraway mist-streamed mountains gaze languidly, a reverie to an energetic hike along the Pekoe Trail that starts from Hantana, a winding journey through nature, communities, and livelihoods. In a series of articles, Explore Sri Lanka will discover the twenty-two stages of the Pekoe Trail and travel through the island’s unique tea country and some of the most captivating landscapes and ecosystems.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

Long ago, the kings of Kandy had their treasures buried on the Hantana mountain range; that's what the rumor is, making it an exciting ground to explore. The Pekoe Trail also starts at the foothills of this famous mountain. It is the amateur climber's foray into hiking, a much-known initiation ritual for undergraduates who trek up to the Hantana summit, their first outing as a group. Hantana was one of the first few areas that demonstrated the potential for tea following the failure of coffee. The Pekoe Trail's Stage One from Hantana to Galaha starts gentler as an ode to Sri Lanka's tea country and colonial heritage that has grown to an eponymous global brand, Ceylon Tea. Hence, it's apt that the Ceylon Tea Museum at the beginning of Stage One reflects the ethos of the Pekoe Trail, as the path winds mostly through the tea country, traversing across existing infrastructure created for the tea industry.

Incidentally, the Hantana tea estate had Hollywood descend on it in 1983 when Steven Spielberg recreated an Indian village for Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom. The Hantana tea estate and its employees' residences became the Mayapore village. Away from the trail, the most exciting remnant of the movie set is hidden in a thick jungle. In keeping with the spirit of the movie's adrenalin-pumping pursuits, the Sankara Stone Shrine remains covered in jungle, away from the trail. Like the movie's hero, the intrepid will have to seek the assistance of a guide and cut through the undergrowth to reach the location. But that certainly would be fun and a bit of Indy adventure away from the Pekoe Trail.

> The Pekoe Trail's Stage One from Hantana to Galaha starts gentler as an ode to Sri Lanka's tea country and colonial heritage that has grown to an eponymous global brand, Ceylon Tea.

Stage 1 of the trail starts at Hantana and takes the hikers through lush, green landscapes.

Humans are mere dwarfs against the Goliath-like trees.

The trail through the Hantana tea estate is less punishing as it takes hikers around the Uragala rock, through the villages, and down to Galaha. One thing, the trail is not about conquering the distance; it's also a journey through a vast terrain of mountain ecosystems, livelihoods, and lifestyles. In a seesawing path of thirteen kilometers and an elevation of 130 meters, people have left their footprints in the small shrines and the crimson gold pieces of cloth they tie on tree branches, a window to their beliefs and spirituality. With the Uragala rock façade on the right, one passes a terrain rich in fauna and flora, varieties of uncommon orchids, and the endemic scimitar babblers. Unbelievable encounters by the side leave one in awe, such as trees with muscular-looking trunks against whose voluminous bodies humans look like Lilliputians. In all its strangeness, the Broken Rock is an exciting place for an eye-level view of the mountains, where some dare to do push-ups on its flat surface, a tad risky on a wet day. Besides that, it's an excellent viewing and resting spot. One also comes across two water sprouts that flow perpetually through the seasons, a popular place for pristine chilled water at no expense.

The best viewpoint of Stage One is off the trail to the left. It provides a 360- degree view of mountains. The surroundings are vast and imposing at eye level, rising and dropping into valleys. The wind takes one's breath away, strong enough to rustle the hairs but soothing to the weary self. At this point, the landscape could be static or shifting, from clear skies to mist-filled distances. From here, one could see the eastern suburbs of Kandy, the immaculate Sandagiri stupa, the Dumbara Valley, the Knuckles Mountain range, the Victoria Reservoir and golf course, the Hunnasgiriya Mountain, the Maduru Oya National Park, Riverstone, and parts of the Uva Province. It's a vantage point to many faraway places, where one sees quite a bit of Sri Lanka from even a distance.

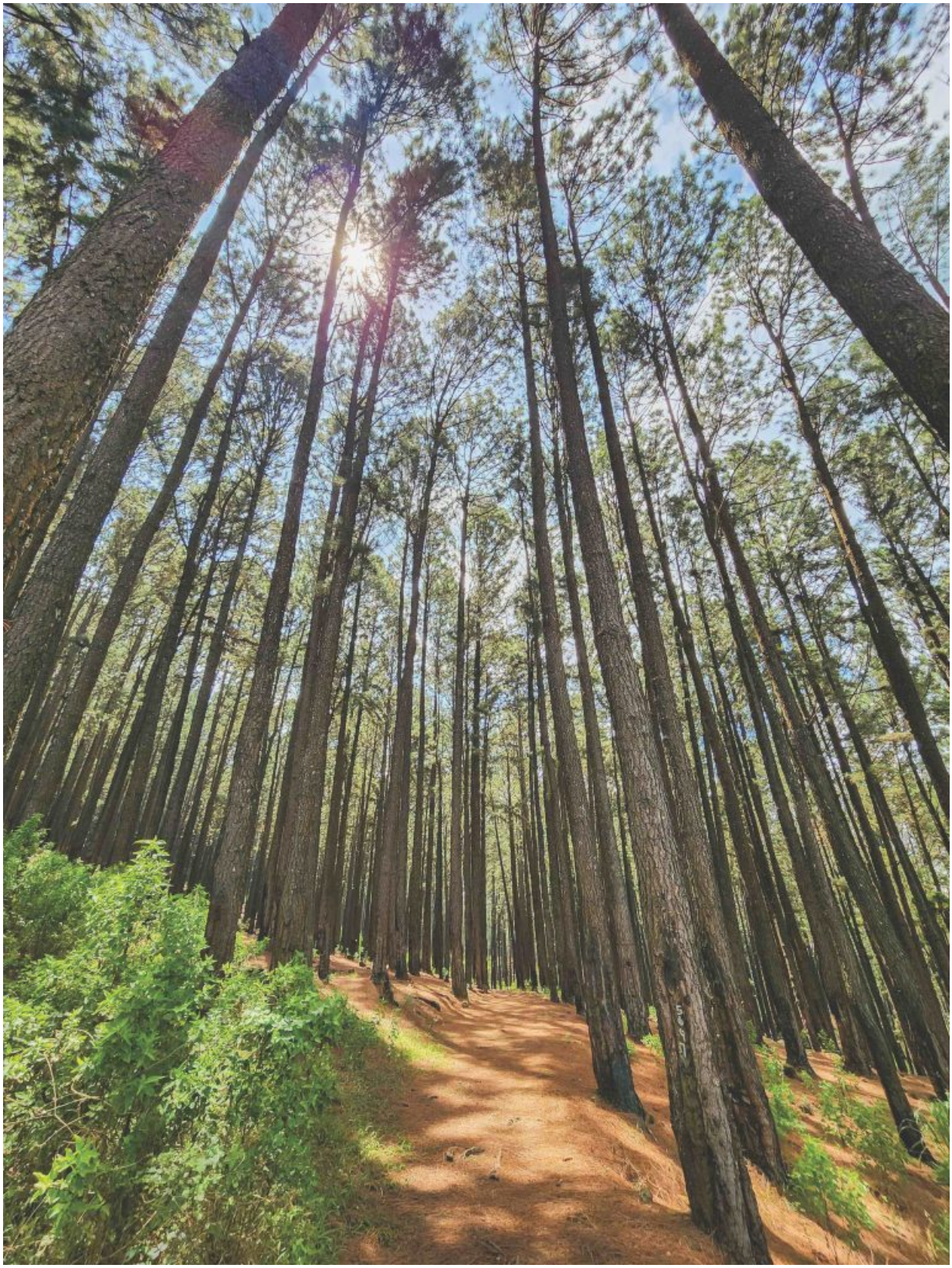
Solitude is one constant companion along the trail; sometimes, the wind is the only sound. Human encounters are sparse. Women plucking tea leaves are a familiar sight, an opportunity to greet them and discover a few tips on harvesting. Occasionally, there's recourse in the shelter of a shrine or a muster shed.

The end of Stage One leads through the Kithulmulla village. The Pekoe Trail is all about stewardship. Hence, the hamlet of two hundred families has graciously acceded to people passing their residences. Respecting their space is crucial for a win-win. The best way to give back to the community of Kithulmulla is to patronize

their small businesses, buy fruits, or enjoy freshly made roti and a hot cup of tea.

Stage Two is in two sections; the first starts from Galaha and goes through Deltota town and the Deltota estate, leading to Loolkandura. Retreating from Galaha town, passing the Galaha General Hospital, and taking the road towards the Deltota estate, one walks into the domain of divinity in the Hindu temples, where the crafted holy places are rare interruptions of color along a vast green tapestry. On a weekday, one is likely to meet school children at the early stages of this fourteen-kilometer trail, some giggles from them to lighten the mood, to whom the terrain and the path are regular journeys. From buffaloes lounging in wayside streams to waterfalls off the track, there are some beautiful spots to visit with a guide.

> The best time to undertake the trail is from January to April and from June to September…



Stage 2 – Deltota Pine Forest with towering trees reach towards the endless expanse of the clear blue sky.

Witness the breathtaking vistas of the terrain and immerse yourself in the tranquil splendor of nature at the Broken Rock.

The breathtaking vistas of high-rise mountains can be admired from Loolkandura.

With elevation, stunning views of the Hantana estate and the mountains appear from behind. The built environment is a constant reminder of people's values, and a Hindu shrine secluded amid greenery is always a solace to the weary body, a place to break and breathe in the sacredness of the space, having already climbed several hundred meters of elevation. The Deltota town, located on an elevation, lies between the start of Stage Two and its end, a meandering path leading into the hubbub of townspeople and vendors in the market, through which you reach the town center to witness the peaceful coexistence of multi-cultures and races, a center brimming with life and liveliness. Passing the clamor of daily life in the town, one takes the main road to start walking towards the next phase of Stage Two, starting from a steep path towards a large pine forest of several kilometers, a terrain of leeches, so beware and the blady grass that cohabits with these majestic and beautiful species of trees whose enormity create a sense of awe and grandeur.

The path out of the pine forest snakes upwards through an old tea estate, taking one higher and higher with each step. The higher one goes, the better the view gets. As you enter the Deltota estate, the road begins to zigzag towards the upper division, from whence begins a challenging path, a path wrought along a cliff façade with incredible views of the valley below; it's a bit nerve-wracking and mind-blowing at the same time to walk along the mountainous edge witnessing twin landscapes of surrounding vastness and the pocket-size view of the Deltota town, whose miniature buildings seem to join the journey from below as if moving in step from so far away. The surrounding area is a repository of biodiversity, home to the endemic rhino horned lizard and unique varieties of flora. So, don't be surprised to pass never-before-seen flowers or some creature darting across.

Walking to Loolkandura is a nostalgic journey. A place where the island's tea industry was started by Scotsman James Taylor, who embraced the remote jungle of Loolkandura as his home. Today, as you walk through Loolkandura estate and witness its surroundings, it's easy to understand Taylor's motivation. The perfectly manicured tea gardens embody sheer beauty. A little off the track is Taylor's house, now reduced to a chimney, but it's filled with the sounds of nature as it remains tucked away from civilization, secluded, and blissful, just like Taylor envisaged. At James Taylor's Seat, eternity gazes in all its resplendence. Loolkandura is dramatic with its high-rise mountains and spectacular rock formations and trees. The Loolkandura tea estate is surrounded by patchy cloud forests where at least seventeen endemic bird species live whose foray into the estate sends out a chorus of birdsongs, a kind of lullaby against the freshness of one of the most beautifully

tiered and immaculate gardens along the trail.

One last community and a Hindu shrine under a banyan tree lead to the trail's end in a slow descent near the tea factory. At Loolkandura, one could stay on the Pekoe Trail or deviate to view tea history and make a twenty-minute hike to the Kondagala rock, which is a popular viewpoint.

The best time to undertake the trail is from January to April and from June to September when the weather is more predictable and given the challenging territory of Stage Two, hiking during dry periods requires shielding from the sun with a hat and ample sunscreen as temperatures soar while traipsing in the rain also demands precaution, being ready with raincoats and leech socks while cautiously treading wet ground. Otherwise, the route has been chosen so that as one gains elevation, it gets cooler and shadier, with an excellent opportunity to rest under a tree and feel the soreness of the ascent simply vanish. The Pekoe Trail is not to be hurried, yet it is an adventure where you feel the sun on your face, the wind caresses your body, and the infinite healing power of nature.