Pekoe Trail Stages 11, 12 and 13

Posted on



Stages 11, 12, and 13 of the Pekoe Trail offer a fascinating exploration through some of Sri Lanka’s most picturesque and rugged landscapes. From the high-altitude plains of Horton Plains to the charming tea estates and serene forests, these sections provide hikers with a blend of challenging terrain, breathtaking views, and a deep connection to local communities and history. Whether it’s the exhilarating descent along the Devil’s Staircase in Stage 11, the challenging climbs and panoramic vistas of Stage 12, or the lush tea gardens and historical landmarks of Stage 13, each segment is a rewarding experience for those seeking adventure

and natural beauty.

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Stage 11 of the Pekoe Trail kicks off from the heart of the Horton Plains National Park, right near the Farr Inn, which now serves as the park's visitor center. The journey begins in one of Sri Lanka's most protected natural environments, a strictly regulated nature reserve where straying off the designated paths or disturbing rare species is forbidden. As such, hikers are urged to embrace the spirit of environmental stewardship while trekking through this precious sanctuary.

This stage offers a tempting detour to the World's End, a dramatic cliff offering sweeping views over the southern plains. However, sticking to the Pekoe Trail, you'll stay on the marked route. The first part of the hike takes you six kilometers along the Horton Plains-Ohiya Road, where the landscape unfolds spectacularly. Sambar deer roam freely; on rare occasions, lucky hikers may even spot a leopard in the distance.

At this point, the trail branches off to the right onto a narrow forest track – the upper section of the notorious Devil's Staircase. The Devil's Staircase is a steep, zigzagging descent with twenty tight hairpin bends, each more daunting than the last. As you go down, the breathtaking views unfold in layers, with locals tending to vegetable plots that seem to exist in harmony with the land's wild beauty. The descent is an adrenaline rush, but for the truly adventurous, ascending the Devil's Staircase in reverse is a challenge that has earned it a reputation as one of the most perilous routes in the region. Built by the British, the path offers spine-tingling views, including the Kuragala Mountain and Temple, Udawalawe National Park, and the Samanalawewa and Hambegamuwa reservoirs. On a clear day, the sight of the southern Indian Ocean in the distance is a welcome reward, seen from an altitude of over 2,000 meters.

The descent is equally thrilling, taking you from 2,000 meters to about 1,656 meters in the Udaweriya Valley. This remote valley, despite its isolation, is home to resilient communities whose lives seem to have little connection to the outside world. The valley, once home to two bustling tea factories, now stands quiet, with their abandoned remains scattered throughout. The only sign of community life is a

Hindu Kovil, offering spiritual solace to those who call this serene yet rugged place home.

The Devil’s Staircase’s unpredictable weather mirrors its intensity, with sunshine turning to mist in the blink of an eye, keeping hikers on their toes. Despite the occasional fog, the stage remains a feast for the senses, with awe-inspiring views of the surrounding mountains and the valley below. Stage 11 is undoubtedly one of the most scenic stretches of the Pekoe Trail, with dramatic elevation changes leading you from 2,000 meters to the valley below. However, as the trail nears its end, it gently ascends again before concluding at the Ohiya tea factory.

One quirk of Stage 11 is that it ends near an abandoned tea factory and a small community, meaning accommodations are limited. If you want to rest, stay a few kilometers before the trail’s official end and finish the stage the next day.



Chimney Pool at Horton Plains.



Stage 11 – Devil’s staircase with 20 hairpin bends at the descent and the edge of Horton Plains to the right.

The Pekoe Trail was designed with local communities in mind, allowing them to benefit from the influx of hikers. Along the trail, hikers can purchase essentials like snacks, water, fruits, or even hiking gear from the locals, who see this trail as an opportunity to cater to the needs of the trail’s visitors. The carefully planned route helps create a symbiotic relationship between hikers and the communities, bringing a boost to local economies while enhancing the overall hiking experience.

Stage 12 of the Pekoe Trail, stretching 17 kilometers from Udaweriya to Haputale, is a challenging and immensely rewarding section. It offers hikers a dynamic blend of spectacular views and rugged terrain. This stage introduces the stunning southern plains and the Uva Basin while also passing by the only railway tunnel on the entire trail. The path runs parallel to the railway line for some distance, adding intrigue to this breathtaking journey.

The hike begins on the Ohiya- Kalupahana road, and right from the start, the ascent is steep, with several undulating elevation gains and drops. It’s a physically demanding stage, with the highest point reaching 1,900 meters after the first two kilometers. After a kilometer along the Ohiya-Kalupahana road, the trail veers off toward a community at 2.3 kilometers, marking the highest elevation of the stage. From here, the descent begins, leading down to Idalgashinna after about six kilometers.

Stage 12 is the third longest segment of the Pekoe Trail, after stages 19 and 3, and offers an intriguing glimpse into the daily lives of locals. Terraced vegetable gardens dot the landscape, showcasing how farmers navigate this rugged terrain. Along the way, hikers are treated to panoramic views of the Idalgashinna mountain range, the Walawe Basin, and, in the distance, the iconic Kuragala Mountain and its pagoda.

As you continue, the landscape evolves into a narrow forest path, about 1.1 kilometers long, flanked by thick shrubs and thorny bushes. Proper attire is essential to avoid scratches, and the undergrowth requires careful navigation. For those trekking during the rainy season, leech protection is a must. The end of this dense forest path brings you to a simple tree kovil, marking the transition to an upward path that leads into a pine forest. While the pine forest has a different feel than the previous section, its peaceful ambiance, complete with the creaking of trees and the gentle whistle of the wind, provides a serene respite.



Tunnel 36 – a memorable feature in stage 12 is walking through a railway tunnel, the only such instance on the Pekoe Trail.



Dondra View Point in Udaweriya.

The 650-meter pine forest trail opens up to the Idalgashinna estate, where the sound of a distant train adds an intriguing note to the journey. Once out of the pine forest, the trail offers magnificent views again, stretching towards the Uva region and including the impressive Nayabedda, Namunukula, and Narangala mountains.

After descending toward the Idalgashinna train station, you come to a viewpoint with sweeping views of Idalgashinna and the railway line below. If the trek has taken its toll, there are accommodations near the station where you can rest before continuing.

The trail then follows the railway line for 1.2 kilometers, leading you to one of the most memorable features of Stage 12 – a 65-meter railway tunnel. This tunnel is the only one on the trail, and passing through it requires caution and quickness. After emerging from the tunnel, the trail veers off, following a right turn for about 200 meters before entering the Haldumulla estate.

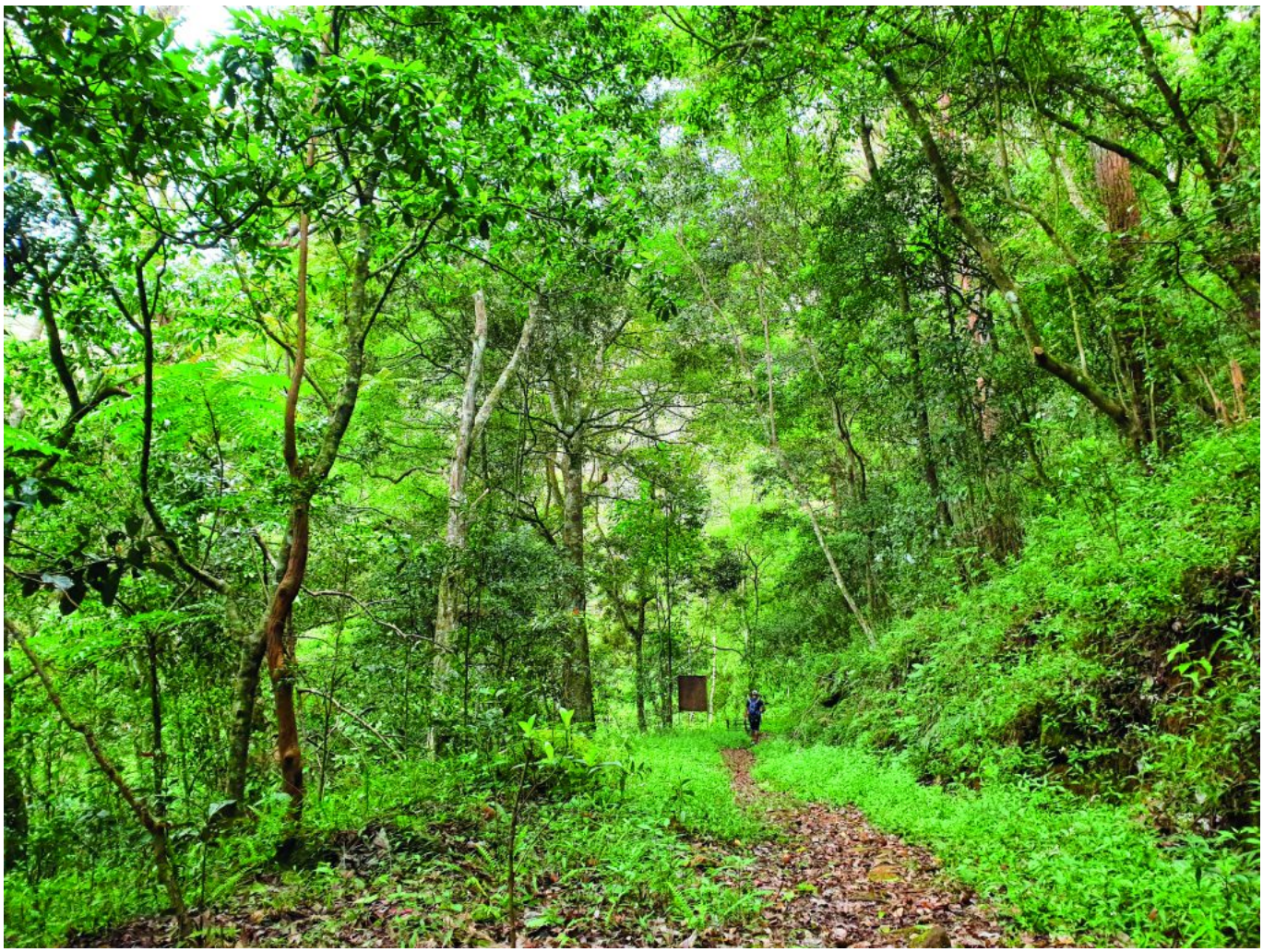
The path now runs along the southern edge of the Thangamalai sanctuary, winding

through rough terrain with a sheer drop to the right. The dense undergrowth along some sections requires careful attention, but the high altitude offers breathtaking views of the surrounding landscape. This part of the trail is often called the “Devil’s Seat” due to the challenging nature of the route. You will also circle around Beragala Mountain, passing along its slopes before entering more forest paths leading to the sanctuary’s heart. As the path descends, the landscape gradually opens up, with views over the Walawe Basin, but caution is vital to stay on the trail.

> For much of Stage 13, the trail meanders through scenic tea estates, interrupted only by a few forest patches, including one at the start and another further along the route.

For history enthusiasts, Stage 12 offers a detour to the ruins of a 16th-century Portuguese fort. The foundation is all that remains of this once strategic site, now nestled among the forestry area, accessible to those with time to explore.

Given the often unpredictable weather in this region—winds, fog, and clouds—hikers should ensure their phones are fully charged and equipped with GPS for navigation. Once in Haputale, the trail concludes at the Haputale railway station. Here, you can take in the sights of the quaint St. Andrew’s Church, a small neo-gothic Anglican building dating back to the 19th century, complete with stained-glass windows and a baptismal font—a perfect end to an unforgettable stage of the Pekoe Trail.



Traversing through Haputale forest in stage 13.



Beautiful tea gardens from Stage 13.

Stage 13 of the Pekoe Trail, spanning 13 kilometers from Haputale to Saint Catherine, begins at the Haputale railway station, a historic spot marked by the unmistakable colonial-style post office. From here, the path winds upward, passing the forest range office before entering the serene Haputale Arboretum. The post office serves as a reliable landmark, along with a stone bungalow owned by the Forest Department, embodying the colonial era’s architectural charm.

The trail leads through the arboretum, a lush expanse of about 185 acres. Despite being immersed in nature, this stretch doesn’t feel entirely remote, as the sounds of Haputale—especially the occasional train whistle and distant horns—carry through the stillness of the forest. The path ascends steeply via a stone stairway, climbing

further into the arboretum, which sits 1,400 meters above sea level. This tropical rainforest is teeming with biodiversity, with its cool temperatures often dipping below 16°C and an annual rainfall of 2,000 millimeters. The path eventually exits the arboretum, opening into the Sherwood estate and marking the end of this forested section.

For much of Stage 13, the trail meanders through scenic tea estates, interrupted only by a few forest patches, including one at the start and another further along the route. After about a kilometer, hikers enter the Sherwood Plains—though it’s not always easy to distinguish the “plain” in this terrain. The path gradually climbs uphill along an estate road, with a large water tank and a muster shed marking an ideal spot for a break. From here, views of Kuragala and Budugala unfold to the left. At the same time, the Sri Pada Forest Reserve, Pettigala, Hawagala, Gommolliya range, Horton Plains, and the twin peaks of Udaweriya become visible to the right. A guide is invaluable here, helping to point out the numerous significant landmarks that dot the landscape.



The Pekoe Trail provides a beautiful inside view of the island’s tea industry and what goes into making the iconic Ceylon Tea.



Beautifully layered tea bushes are central to the spectacular experience hikers enjoy the trail.

As you continue, you'll see the Sherwood rock at an elevation of 1,700 meters. Beyond the rock, the trail enters another dense forest section, where thick undergrowth obscures the views. However, after a while, you'll catch sight of a communication tower perched atop a distant peak—Saint Catherine, your destination. The tower seems so far away, yet it's a tangible marker that signals the end of the stage. This forest path demands attention, as sharp grasses and towering trees line the trail, requiring careful navigation. Once out of the forest, the terrain becomes more manageable, and a sweeping aerial view of Richmond Lake, surrounding villages, and line houses appears on the horizon.

These three stages of the Pekoe Trail culminate in a truly immersive hiking experience.

The trail continues upward, a steep climb leading to Prabhawa Mountain at 1,700 meters. At this point, a slight detour off the main path takes you to the Surangamuni or Prabhawa Mountain viewpoint. You can see Haputale below, with views extending to Horton Plains, Idalgashinna, and other landmarks from Stage 12. The distant sound of a train's horn is carried on the wind, further enhancing the sense of accomplishment at this viewpoint, which stands 300 meters above Haputale. This deviation is well worth the effort, but only if time allows, as you'll have covered just five kilometers of the stage.

A highlight of Stage 13 is the Greenfield Bio Organic Farm, a model of sustainability. The farm cultivates organic tea and promotes ecological restoration by creating an analog forest—an ecosystem deliberately designed to restore degraded lands and boost biodiversity. The Greenfield Estate is often hailed as one of the most beautiful tea estates along the Pekoe Trail, thanks to the owners' careful planning and innovative planting techniques. The variety of trees and shrubs here offers a refreshing change from the usual tea estate landscape and provides a welcome shade for tired hikers.

The following eight kilometers of the trail involve a challenging series of ascents and descents, an actual test for seasoned hikers. However, the final four kilometers of the stage offer a steady climb to the summit of Saint Catherine. The communication tower, perched at 1,875 meters, becomes a symbol of triumph, its imposing presence visible from a distance as an almost insurmountable peak. But reaching the summit is a moment of achievement, and the mountain plateau leading to Saint Catherine offers a rare and satisfying sense of conquest.

Once at Saint Catherine, the trail descends towards the end of Stage 13. From here, hikers can opt for another detour to Lipton's Seat, a scenic viewpoint at the edge of the Dambethenna tea estate. This spot holds historical significance, as it was once

where Scotsman Thomas Lipton, who moved to British Ceylon in the 19th century, would survey his vast tea estate with a cup of tea in hand. Today, Lipton’s Seat offers stunning panoramic views that continue to attract visitors, making it a perfect spot to reflect on the region’s beauty.

Stage 13 concludes at Saint Catherine, with the opportunity to explore this remarkable landscape, its historical landmarks, and the breathtaking scenery that makes this section of the Pekoe Trail one of the most memorable.

These three stages of the Pekoe Trail culminate in a truly immersive hiking experience. Combining steep ascents, tranquil forests, and striking viewpoints, they not only challenge hikers physically but also provide an opportunity to witness the unique cultural and ecological richness of Sri Lanka’s central highlands, making them an essential part of the Pekoe Trail journey.