

Pekoe Trail Stages 16 and 17

Posted on

Stages 16 and 17 of the Pekoe Trail offer a fascinating journey through Sri Lanka's rich tea history, transitioning from the ease of Stage 16 to the moderate challenge of Stage 17. What distinguishes these two stages is their deep connection to the Uva Province's tea heritage and the pivotal role of the railway network in shaping the island's tea industry. These stages reveal two of the most impressive innovations of the 20th century—archaeological marvels that stand as a testament to the engineering brilliance of both British and Ceylonese pioneers. The ingenuity that allowed the construction of railways through rugged, uninhabitable terrain to link distant regions is something visitors can still admire today.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

Photography The Pekoe Trail Organization.



The railway network of Sri Lanka, initially developed by the British to support the

growing plantation economy, plays a crucial role in the story of the Pekoe Trail. This trail is not just a path through lush landscapes but a journey into the heart of Ceylon Tea, offering an immersive experience of history once walked by British planters and their workers. The railways were instrumental in connecting the island's tea estates, facilitating the transport of tea leaves from remote plantations to processing centers and the capital.

Stage 16 is one of the shortest and easiest treks on the Pekoe Trail, spanning just 8.74 kilometers from Ella Railway Station to Demodara Railway Station. Both towns lie within the Uva Province, a region steeped in history. Uva's story begins with the Uva Rebellion of 1818, a local uprising against British colonial rule. The overwhelming might of the British against the islanders' rudimentary weaponry swiftly quashed the rebellion. Yet, Uva would rise again, emerging as a central hub for Sri Lanka's burgeoning tea industry.

Historically, Uva was isolated, with limited infrastructure and no established road or rail networks, making it challenging to begin large-scale tea cultivation. The considerable distance to Colombo also delayed the industry's growth in the region. Additionally, Uva's patana grasslands were less fertile, further hindering productivity. Nevertheless, the persistence of British planters, particularly the courageous Henry Oswald Hoseason—often hailed as the Uncrowned King of Uva—turned the tide. Hoseason was the first to plant tea on Uva's challenging patana land, laying the foundation for some of the island's finest teas.

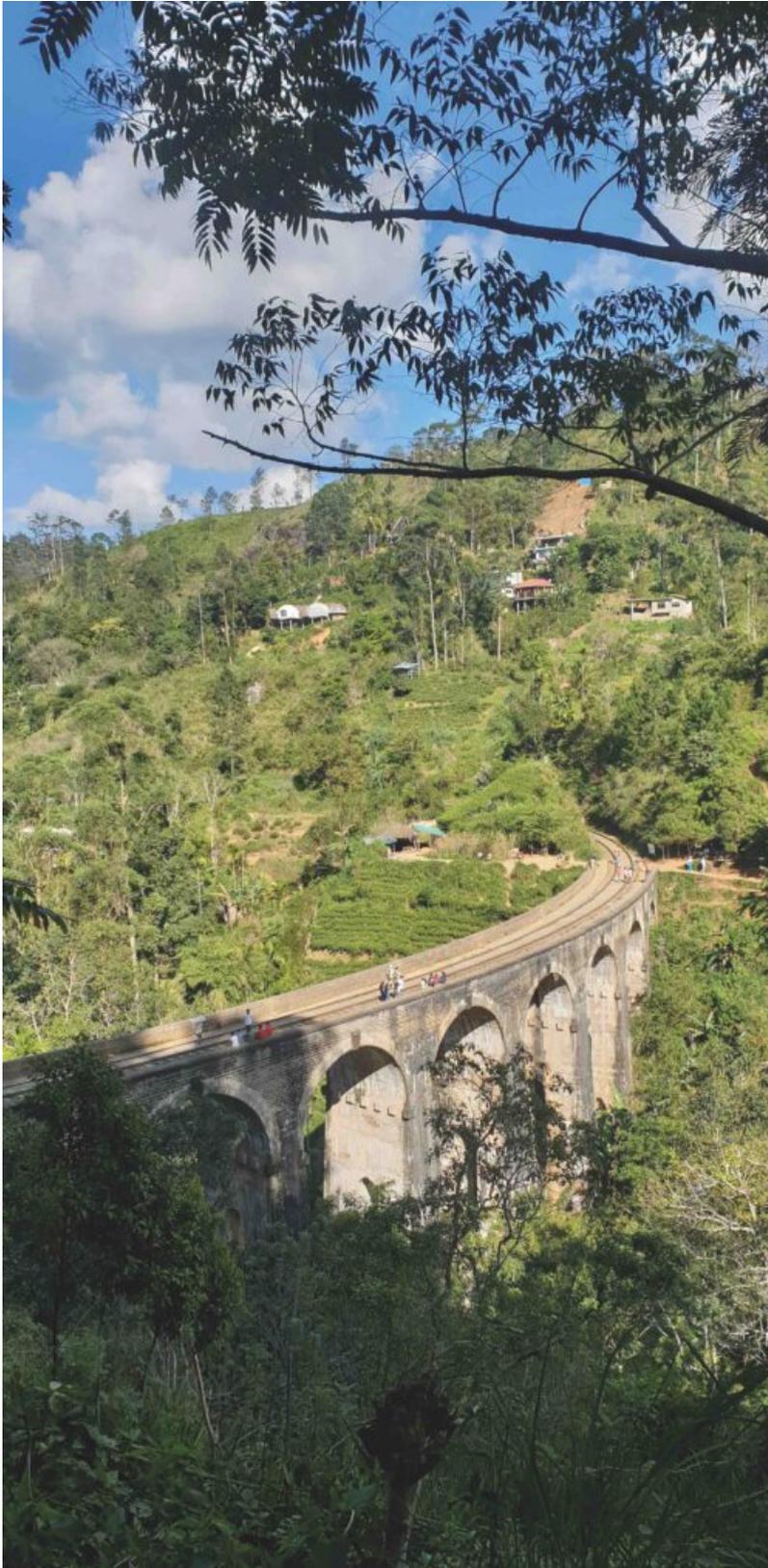
Stage 16 of the Pekoe Trail begins at the picturesque Ella Railway Station, perched at 1,025 meters. This well-maintained station, cared for with meticulous attention to detail by the Railway Department staff, sets the tone for the journey ahead. From here, the trail leads through Ella town for 1.15 kilometers along the Ella-Namunukula-Passara Road before veering off onto a path that takes hikers to the iconic Nine Arches Bridge.

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A closer view of the Nine Arches Bridge.

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A view of the iconic Nine Arches Bridge from a vantage point along stage 16.

The Pekoe Trail, designed by a team led by Miguel Cunat, was intentionally crafted to immerse hikers in local communities and the vibrant life of the tea estates and connect them with the wildlife and wilderness of Sri Lanka. Walking through Ella town reflects the spirit of this vision—a bustling, cosmopolitan town brimming with life. Ella, often seen as a ‘bucket list’ destination, is anything but a quiet retreat. It’s a lively, urban space pulsating with energy and human presence, starkly contrasting to the tranquil, remote paths that define much of the trail.

After about a kilometer, Leaving Ella town behind, the trail takes a gentle turn to the left, leading hikers through a tranquil forest patch on their way to the renowned Nine Arches Bridge. This section, flanked by towering pine trees, is part of the Ella Forest Reserve. Along the way, small vendors have set up booths offering refreshing local treats, and on a sunny day, a chilled king coconut drink is the perfect pick-me-up.

At one point, near a quaint stall, hikers cross the Bridge of Saint Francis, a charming crossing that adds a touch of history to the natural surroundings. Despite its forest setting, the path is far from quiet, as locals and visitors use it to reach the iconic Nine Arches Bridge. The journey involves an uphill climb, with rough terrain and a flight of concrete steps leading to the bridge. As you approach, the sight of the Nine Arches Bridge is nothing short of spectacular—a testament to its popularity, as it is never without visitors eager to cross or catch a glimpse of the trains that chug beautifully through the bridge.

The area surrounding the bridge is lively, with shops lining the route and the bridge itself to the right, while a tunnel waits to the left. For those feeling adventurous, navigating through the tunnel offers an added thrill—just be sure to check the train schedule first, as it can be quite the rush when the train passes.

The Nine Arches Bridge, stretching 300 feet long, 25 feet wide, and towering 80 feet high, is an enduring symbol of architectural brilliance and the colonial legacy woven into Sri Lanka’s Tea Country. Completed in 1919, it was a key feature in the expansion of the railway line to Badulla, finished in 1924. The Nine Arches Bridge is a testament to the meticulous craftsmanship of the era and the ingenuity required during a time when war-torn Europe desperately needed metal resources. It is said

that, as a result, the metal initially allocated for the bridge was redirected to support Britain's war effort.

Beyond its striking design, the Nine Arches Bridge is remarkable for its resilience. The stone, brick, and mortar structure has withstood the ravages of time, offering breathtaking views of the surrounding hill country as trains pass. The bridge connects two towering mountains and was ingeniously designed to accommodate a challenging nine-degree curve and a steep gradient. It was built with local labor under British supervision.

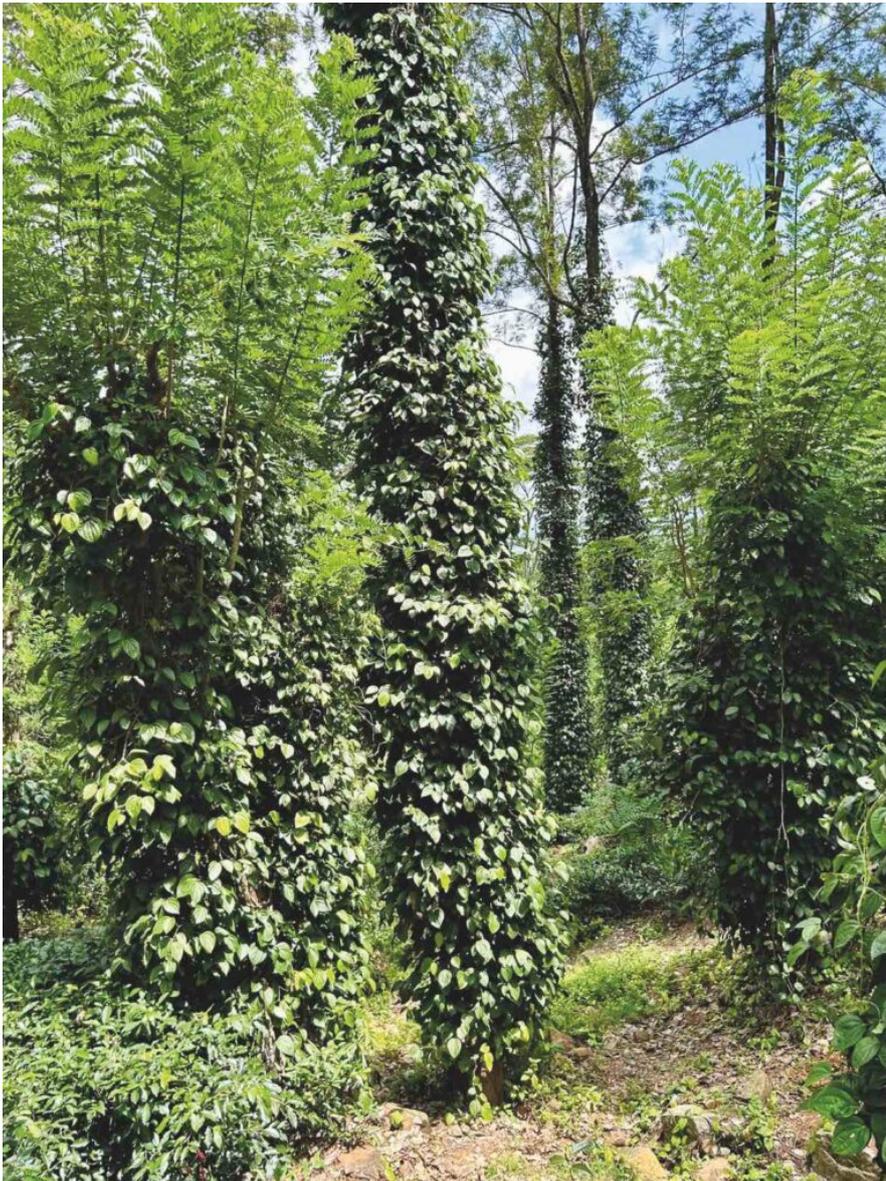
It's an ideal spot to pause and watch the trains glide by, their horns blaring as they approach, a signal for onlookers to clear the way. The experience of watching a train cross this iconic bridge is unforgettable, but perhaps even more enchanting is the opportunity to travel on one. The Calypso Train, for instance, stops on the bridge for ten minutes, allowing passengers to soak in the awe-inspiring views. Sitting aboard a train right in the heart of the "Bridge in the Sky," as the Uva hills stretch out before you, is a truly magical experience—a moment to savor the resplendent beauty of the landscape that unfolds in every direction.



Pekoe Trail hikers on their upward journey.



The Pekoe Trail is synonymous with Ceylon Tea and the tea pickers are integral to it.



Stage 17 takes you through pepper forests.

From the Nine Arches Bridge, the trail continues 500 meters along the railway track before turning right onto a stairway leading to a temple. From here, the ascent continues up to Namunukula Road. The Pekoe Trail organizers always encourage

hikers to pause and take in the view. A glance back at the Nine Arches Bridge, framed by the Ella Forest Reserve, offers a picture-perfect scene, with tiny figures still visible from a distance as they cross the bridge. The viaduct stands as a monumental marvel, nestled in the vastness of nature, yet so seamlessly integrated that it seems to harmonize with its surroundings.

The trail then turns left and winds along the Daluggala Pathana Road, a concrete stretch extending for three kilometers. Along the way, hikers pass through the villages of Yahalewela and Gotuwela. For those seeking a thrill, the Slide and Swing Ella adventure is an exhilarating option—swinging out over the mountains with a spectacular view of the Nine Arches Bridge below, giving the sensation of soaring above it. With the focus on the bridge, the dizzying precipice beneath often goes unnoticed, adding to the adventure's thrill.

The village roads here offer various accommodation options, from hotels to homestays, allowing travelers to immerse themselves in the local culture. Walking through the villages, you'll encounter fields of vegetables nourished by a nearby stream that feeds into the Gotuwela Falls, adding a refreshing touch to the landscape.

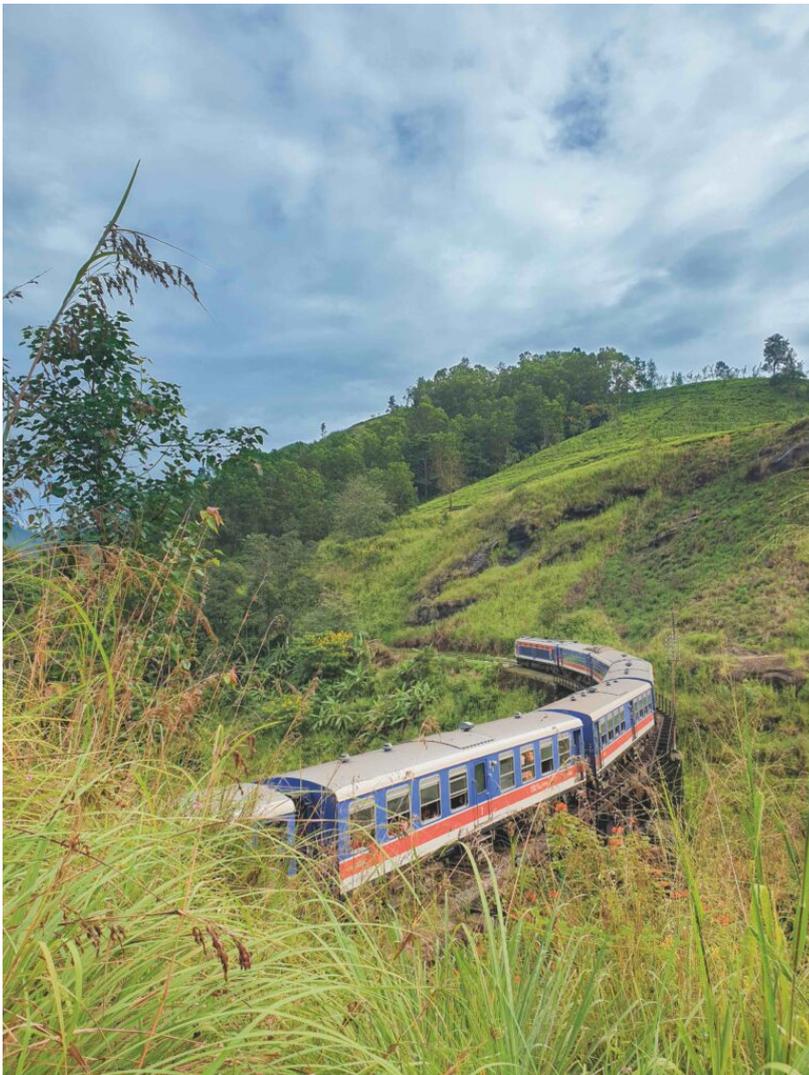
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As the trail enters the heart of Tea Country, it leads through the historic Demodara Estate. On this colonial-era plantation, the route takes on the familiar zigzagging, seesawing path that winds across the estate. Along the way, a quick glance behind offers a stunning view of the Nine Arches Bridge, two stupas, and the majestic Ella Rock in the distance. This is a perfect moment to pause and appreciate the panoramic scenery ahead and behind you. On the Pekoe Trail, every step offers an opportunity for a new encounter with nature, and its bounty is a constant companion on this remarkable hike.

The walk through the estate is ever-changing, from sun-drenched tea gardens to narrow, tree-lined paths with steep drops on one side, creating a dynamic and diverse landscape. Among the many natural wonders, the trail also offers moments of spiritual tranquility—one such moment occurs beneath the shade of a towering

tree, where a serene, godly presence rests atop a slight rise.

As you continue, the trail winds through one of the most picturesque sections of Stage 16, snaking into the tea estate with a lake visible below on the left. This stretch of the trail is charming, and a nearby tea shed provides a welcome spot to take a break. The path then descends toward Demodara, remaining both scenic and easy. The final stretch is a short but charming stairway that gently drops 30 meters to the village below. The stage concludes at the Demodara Railway Station, marking the end of a day filled with natural splendor and peaceful moments.



A train on the Black Bridge

Stage 17 of the Pekoe Trail spans 13 kilometers, beginning at the Demodara Railway Station, an engineering marvel famed for its unique loop. The Demodara Loop was constructed to navigate the steep slopes a train could not climb. To overcome this challenge, the ingenious design saw the track loop back upon itself, passing under the very section of the railway it had just traversed. This concept, inspired by the turban-tying techniques of an estate kankany (supervisor), allowed the train to complete a 360-degree loop around a mountain, traveling through a tunnel beneath the station before continuing its journey.

The picturesque Demodara Station sits directly above this tunnel and is recognized as an archaeologically protected monument. The best way to experience the wonder of this engineering feat is by taking a train ride through it, moving at a slow pace that lets passengers fully appreciate the loop and the surrounding landscape. Imagine a train line looping above itself, with one track hidden underground while the charming station rests above ground—a true testament to British and native engineering collaboration.

The trailhead at the Demodara railway station is 907 meters. The first six kilometers offer a steady ascent, gaining 300 meters in elevation. After this climb, the trail begins its descent towards the end of the stage at the Hali Ela Railway Station, completing the 13-kilometer journey. The trail crosses the railway line and continues onto Spring Valley Road. As the tarmac road veers left, a small footpath leads to the Black Bridge over the Badulu Oya stream. Surrounded by tall grasses, the path winds to the bridge carrying the railway line. As you descend towards the bridge, you'll find beautiful rock pools beneath it, adding to the spot's charm. If you're fortunate, you might glimpse the train from Badulla, bound for Bandarawela. Crossing the bridge feels like stepping into a scenic escape—one of the many highlights of the Pekoe Trail.

After the bridge, the road turns into a narrow gravel path on the right, flanked by razor-sharp grass, and eventually meets a tarmac road that marks the entrance to the Oetumbe Division of the Demodara Estate. As the road turns into gravel once again, the ascent begins. Along the way, a small community offers a perfect spot to take a break and support the locals at one of the shops.

The path soon becomes more challenging, strewn with rocks, and at 3.7 kilometers, you'll encounter a playground where young boys are often found enjoying a spirited game of cricket. Interacting with the children eager to share their love for Sri Lanka's beloved sport is a delightful opportunity. From here, the trail takes an exciting turn—a vertical climb of two meters back onto an estate road that leads into a forest path with overgrown grass on either side. Though surrounded by forest, the area remains sunny, and as you descend into a tea garden, the sun continues to shine brightly.

At 5.9 kilometers, you reach the highest elevation of Stage 17 at 1,195 meters. From this vantage point, the sweeping views of the surrounding mountains are nothing short of breathtaking. The Namunukula Mountain Range unfolds before you. This viewpoint is framed by rocky edges on one side and a precipitous drop on the other, opening up to an endless panorama of lush greenery.

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The Gotuwela stream nourishes the vegetable cultivation of the villagers.

The descent towards Hali Ela begins, leading through nearly 200 meters of the Rosette Division Forest Reserve before returning to the Unugalle Estate. The final stretch of Stage 17 takes you through a rare and enchanting sight: pepper forests. Towering trees are wrapped in thick pepper vines, creating a unique, almost magical atmosphere as you navigate somewhat rugged terrain.

Throughout the Pekoe Trail, you also get a glimpse into the social life of the British planters, who, despite living isolated lives on the estates, needed connection and camaraderie. This led to the creation of planters' clubs, established in the Uva Province in 1880 in Badulla before being relocated to the Unugalle Estate in 1986. A kilometer further along, Stage 17 ends at the Hali Ela Railway Station, offering a fitting conclusion to this remarkable journey through Sri Lanka's tea country.