

Pekoe Trail Stages 3, 4, and 5



The Pekoe Trail is all about nature and adventure. Advancing into stages three, four, and five is a hike into more adventures. Nature continues to offer the same glorious vistas from near and far, and the walk gets more exciting and daring as the trail passes through wildernesses and leopard territory. The recurring landscape of nature's lushness coheres with a conspicuously spiritual territory.

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If one were to have an aerial view of stages three, four, and five, it would show it traversing between two districts, Kandy and Nuwara Eliya. Now, isn't that a fantastic window to the immensity of Ceylon Tea and how carefully its pioneers set up to facilitate its work? Stage two ends, and stage three starts at the Lookkandura estate, the fiefdom of Ceylon Tea's tsar, James Taylor, at a small bridge over the Ma Oya (waterway) on the Deltota-Galaha road.

Stages three, four, and five reflect the Pekoe Trail team's challenge in connecting the tea plantations, trying as much to avoid main roads in favor of paths along tea plantations and off the beaten track. These three stages have some challenging and exciting paths and many bridge crossings. As stage three begins at a higher elevation of Lookkandura, a narrow path to the right winds upward. On the way, a

slight deviation leads to a summer hut upon a pond, although an adjoining building claiming to be the James Taylor Museum remains shut.

On the road again, there is always the sight of a shrine, beyond which the road gets rugged and challenging, the sun beating down. Still, with elevation, it gets windy and misty simultaneously, producing a quaint scenery in the distance. Hidden treasures of nature are everywhere along the trail, and rock pools are an early treat in stage three, nearly a kilometer from the trail to the right. Since it's too early for a dip, anyone doing the hike in reverse order, from Tawalantenne to Lookkandura, can break the journey at the rock pools for a dip or picnic stop. If you look carefully, mountains bordering the Piduruthalagala Conservation Forest are visible at a distance. There's a prominent rock face constantly coming into view on the trail.

The road begins to zigzag two kilometers into stage three. It looks denser, and the land a little deserted, but the scenery is breathtaking. Right before you, nature spins its magic; fleeting mist and sudden cloud gatherings are usual. What is most pronounced are the sounds of nature; the wind billows, birds and insects band in unison to produce a chorus; one just has to stop and listen. There's always a birdcall in the background. Flowers common to the region are another sight along the way. The Perattassi Mountain and Chariot Path can be made in the distance. The end of Lookkandura is in sight.



A beautiful stretch from stage three that has hawk nests a little further up.



A sign to the Stellenberg estate.

The Bridge Kovil is a well-known landmark accessed after two bridge crossings. The bridges are strikingly austere and rudimentary at best, one made of logs and wasted metal sheets and the other of concrete, unmistakable landmarks over rock-laden water tributaries. The Bridge Kovil's stoicism does not mute nature's beauty; in fact, there is a lovely bonding of the mystic with nature. There is much to admire here; the mountainous forests span majestically on one side, and a curtain of green is stroked by passing spells of mist. The more one gains elevation, the more the environment changes. Looking towards the bridge, one sees a plain curtain of trees, with quite a distance left behind. After more than three kilometers into the trail, the road leads to an important intersection, a path of one and a half kilometers connecting Lookandura and Stellenberg estate.

Every arduous trek leads to something beautiful that belies description unless witnessed in person.

The route connecting the two estates has been named the Stellenberg Pass by the creators of the Pekoe Trail. The Stellenberg Pass is also the Piduruthalagala Conservation Forest, where a nineteenth-century road was discovered. Miguel Cunat, the Pekoe Trail pioneer and champion, and his team became trail archeologists while mapping the routes. They explored the terrain and found a forgotten colonial infrastructure, an old road network connecting the tea gardens. The road was meant for bullock carts and horses to transport tea leaves to Kandy. This critical infrastructure is identified as the Old Dimbula Road and was hiding in plain sight for a century until the team mapping the Pekoe Trail realized that there was a perfectly engineered road that served the needs of the day and today a perfect path for hiking. Thus, the Stellenberg Pass was born in stage three. It's fascinating that the Pekoe Trail has been instrumental in unearthing tea history lost to the vagaries of time. It allows so much more fascinating exploration into the island's tea history.

Eighteen kilometers of stage three from Lookandura to Tawalantenne is the most grueling of the three stages, partly because of the Stellenberg Pass, a sheer jungle. There is a lot to see in stage three. Every arduous trek leads to something beautiful that belies description unless witnessed in person. Stellenberg Pass is the most challenging stretch, giving a great sense of satisfaction once conquered. It's a narrow path inside a dense forest. It is a leopard corridor. On and off along the narrow path surrounded by thick forest, one will find vestiges of the Old Dimbula Road, rough rock-hewn tarred surfaces emerging from beneath as a testament to its past.

This stretch is for the strong-hearted, an endurance test akin to an Indiana Jones adventure through the jungle, sometimes hardly a view of what's in front and demanding careful course-plotting from razor-sharp grasses amid a thick undergrowth. The highest point of the trail is inside the Stellenberg Pass. Even in the denseness of the forest and the arduousness of walking through cutting grass and jutting plants, the landscape is inescapable, with the mountains leaning across the sky. The Stellenberg Pass certainly heightens the nostalgia after having savored tea history in the precincts of Lookandura. The discovery of the new route was critical to mapping the Pekoe Trail. According to Miguel, the Pekoe Trail would have taken another path without this road, but this once-forgotten road amplifies the tea experience that the Pekoe Trail aims to provide.



The Mahaweli Maha Seya peers through a mountain.



The view from top is breathtaking.

The rest of the trail winds through the Stellenberg estate. Out of the Stellenberg Pass takes one to the upper division of the estate. The road along the Stellenberg estate changes from smooth to rock-hewn paths. There are panoramic views to enjoy, more of tea estates against mountains as the descent towards the Glenloch estate begins, especially at the Helboda viewpoint located at the edge of a cliff from where the Kotmale reservoir comes into view; with a guide you might even spot the Sri Pada holy mountain in the distance, especially when it's a clear day, while the Ramboda-Tawalanteene area, villages, line houses and the Peacock Hill could be identified. A guide may even spot the silhouette of the Horton Plains. If one lands against a one-hundred-eighty-degree view, the landscape would be extensive, covering the prominent mountains in the region. The streams that flow through Stellenberg are from the Piduruthalagala forest. The show stopper in all three stages is the Kotmale reservoir, which changes its posture against the backdrop, sometimes glistening in the sunlight against clear mountains while at others, a smudged background of dull mist looks like a page out of a picture book. The Glenloch tea center is ideal for a tea break, while the trail ends at Tawalantenne town.

Peeking through the mountains is a stupa - the Mahaweli Maha Seya, built to honor the Buddhist temples lost to the Kotmale Hydropower Project.

In stage four, one sees the beauty of the Kotamale Reservoir more through the route. Miguel calls it the mulberry stage. There are many mulberry plants along this route, and if looked in the right places, many could be foraged.

Stage four begins five kilometers along the busy Tawalantenne-Talawakele Road, through the Kotmale New Town, which has several institutions named after the Late Gamini Dissanayake, who was instrumental in spearheading the Kotamale Hydro Power Project, which is central to these stages. Stage four is where tea meets rice. Stages one, two, and three symbolize the ethos of the Pekoe Trail, but stages four and five take the trekker through a different landscape. Stages four and five are about tea, rice, and other commercial crops such as areca nut, pepper, cardamoms, and cloves.

Over the Ramboda Oya Bridge and onwards, still on the main Tawalantenne-Talawakele Road, leads to the Choicy Village Middle Road. This concrete road is a less challenging route along the fourteen-kilometer stretch, although plenty of seesawing experiences are expected in the mountain country. Kotmale signifies mountains, and the valley's history makes the trail more attractive, a region where the island's kings sought refuge in the jungles of the land of mountains. Before reaching Choicy estate, the path also travels through privately owned estates. There are incredible viewpoints, a trail revealing Ramboda Hill and the waterfall, the Chariot Path, the Perattassi Mountain, and the Piduruthalaga Conservation Forest. A guide will certainly locate these places for you. Peeking through the mountains is a stupa - the Mahaweli Maha Seya, built to honor the Buddhist temples lost to the Kotmale Hydropower Project.

Tree Kovils are a regular sight along the Pekoe Trail, and one landmark along stage four after nearly six kilometers is the Hindu Tree Kovil. A shrine with a bell set under a large tree, chambers with images and cloth-wrapped gods placed on a natural rock platform are just enough to evoke the aura of a holy place; the sounds of the wild and the serenity of the sacred ground bond so well that it bears upon the mind. It's absolutely serene and mystical. The road upwards from the Tree Kovil is narrow, with a slope on one side and a jungle on the other. This semi-forest path climbs to expose the skeleton of a tea factory, a seven-kilometer

landmark on the trail, adding to the tea archaeology of the land, a recent piece of ruin. One can't say the same of the road, which is a perfectly carpeted road to nowhere. The factory remnant is at a summit, an ideal viewpoint further up the road. The lone derelict structure beside a secluded highway adds to the atmosphere of the trail. The road was built to facilitate an underground powerhouse nearly five hundred meters downhill.



A Tree Kovil in stage four with a waterfall at the backdrop.



View of Kotmale Reservoir in stage four.



A waterplant in stage four is located near a stream.

Before heading towards Pundaluoya, two hundred meters off the trail, one can reach the Karnagala View Point, an open, one-hundred-and-eighty-degree view of the reservoir and the mountains. It's a point of discovery and an uninterrupted view of the hills and waterfalls seen along the way. This stop is ideal for resting and enjoying roti with coconut relish and ginger tea.

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Back on the trail, the well-paved road leads to the underground power station, secured by a locked gate but can be accessed from the side. The grill-covered tunnel's exterior bars any view of the interior, but in that secluded environment, one can stop for a break before the road ends. The trail falls back into its signature narrow and steep upward footpath; one could call it a forest path, not so wild as the Stellenberg Pass, but still, there's considerable undergrowth, could be very slippery in the rain and, of course, infested with leeches; otherwise it is a

sunny terrain with plenty of bird choruses. There are views of the Kabaragala Mountain, the Dolosbage mountain range, and the Mahaweli Maha Seya. A shrine and a stream flowing over rocks is a must-stop to refresh, although not to drink. It's a challenging path and a steep climb along rugged terrain, mainly aided by broken steps. One reaches the highest elevation on stage four at the ninth kilometer near the Choicy Tamil School and onto a tarred road, once again revealing the mountains and gigantic rock faces. Another Tree Kovil on the way means one is close to the trail's end. One also passes the bridge over Pundaluoya, a popular bathing spot. The Sri Muthumariamman Kovil leads to the Choicy tea factory and ends near the Pundaluoya bridge, which has some activity and a motorable road. The Pundaluoya runs below the bridge.



A hiker navigates through stage five on a wet day as birds fly against a sky about to rage into a tempest.

Stage five's fourteen-kilometer journey from Pundaluoya to Watagoda reflects the

history of Kotmale. For the first time along the Pekoe Trail, one encounters Sinhala villages. They are not recent settlers; they are people whose ancestors have lived on the land for centuries. It was in one of the villages in the Kotmale valley that King Dutugemunu had lived as a herdsman for twelve years before his war triumphs. After insulting his father for failing to go to war with the Dravidian invaders in Anuradhapura, the young prince took refuge from his father, the sovereign in the South. So stage five has a history of thousands of years, such as the spring used by the young prince and the gate known as Kada Dora from which he entered the land of mountains or Malaya Rata where he had supposedly hid his royal sword (in the ancients there had been four gates to enter Malaya Rata, only Kada Dora remains), while old Sinhala villages and their inhabitants continue to grow rice in an area known for tea, changing the scenery in stage five, terraced paddy fields are sometimes like infinity pools, against mountainous backdrops, these immaculate paddy fields look like emerald staircases to nowhere. One has to see to believe. That is the uniqueness of the Pekoe Trail, traversing through diverse geographies, revealing the lifestyles and livelihoods of communities associated with the tea industry as well as communities who have grown rice for centuries, which, in fact, was the island's staple crop from the days of the monarchs. The islanders ate rice before they learned to drink tea, and the villages along stage five represent that history.

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Stage five begins at the Pundaluoya Bridge, passing the police station to the right and a school, principally crossing through Sinhala villages where the road and the extensive built environment, including residences, represent a more prosperous community engaged in agriculture. From the lowest point in stage five, the road gradually gains elevation as it passes through villages, Madakumbura being a significant one. Stage five reaches its best spots after six kilometers, where the village's terraced paddy fields come into view, with the Madakumbura temple overlooking them. The Madakumbura temple is a landmark in the Pekoe Trail, where otherwise Hindu shrines and kovils are predominant. The uniqueness of stage five is that unlike the previous stages that end with a descent, it ends at an elevation at the Watagoda train station, the first time a stage in the Pekoe Trail

ends at a train station. The Pekoe Trail creators speak a great deal about a 'wall' in stage five, and upon investigation, one discovers the wall to be the Dimbula Hill. It looms like a leviathan across the route, at least most of the route, primarily through the tea estates, and at other times hangs over the paddy fields. What is distinct about the villages in stage five is that they are mainly Sinhala Buddhists and farmers who grow a mix of crops, from tea to other commercial crops, which are evident while on the trail. Stage five has mild gradients, often not-so-obvious ascents, although that changes once the path crosses through tea gardens, increasing elevation. The best tea gardens typical of the Pekoe Trail are at higher elevations. The Madakumbura tea factory against the Great Western Mountain is where the trail digresses towards the lower division, passing a placid lake set beautifully against a forested backdrop. Beyond this point, the road gets rugged, giving way to several hairpin bends, again giving an elevated view of the beautiful lake.

Dimbula Hill is a beautiful formation like a sentinel overlooking Madakumbura village and estate. The Pekoe Trail creators call it a 'wall' because it virtually accompanies you for a long time, dwarfing the trekker while menacingly looming large in the background and never ceasing to exist. While mapping this path, Miguel used local knowledge to discover more about the rocky wall. He used local men to examine the existence of a path along the mountain wall to the summit and beyond, and like so many new roads of old discovered by the trail, there is a pathway up the wall which the inhabitants may have used to cross over to the other side. The Pundaluoya valley sits beyond the 'wall,' meaning stage five has come full circle around it. It was a fantastic discovery to think that people could have created an upward path along a mountain wall that, with time, had been buried but still remains. Even more fascinating is that atop that wall sits a tea plantation. From a distance, it's easy to conclude that many mountains we admire are inaccessible, but thanks to the Pekoe Trail, some of them are conquerable.



A stream surrounded by ample greenery in stage five.



Meddacombra estate is surrounded by Sinhala villages.