

Pekoe Trail: Stages 8, 9, and 10

Posted on

From the hills to the valleys and the forests



Once again, the Pekoe Trail travels through Sri Lanka's lush hill country, weaving across scenic tea plantations, verdant valleys, and secluded wilderness. Stages eight, nine, and ten immerse hikers in unique landscapes and history, from the bustling town of Norwood through the tranquil Bogawantala Valley, remote Dayagama, to the challenging ascent toward Horton Plains. This adventure highlights the island's storied tea heritage, rich wildlife, and remote, breathtaking views, offering both adventure and tranquility. With every step, hikers witness the island's diverse ecosystems, from verdant tea estates to misty cloud forests, making the Pekoe Trail an unforgettable experience.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

Stage Eight of the Pekoe Trail begins in Norwood Town and goes to Bogawantala, marked by a signpost that leads travelers past Norwood Tamil National School and out of the town's gentle bustle. This stage opens the gateway to the breathtaking Bogawantala Valley—a sprawling, forty-kilometer stretch of lush greenery from east to west. The beauty of the valley, with the Castlereigh Reservoir glinting in its depths, offers a serene contrast to the intensity of the trail. Each stage of the Pekoe Trail tells a story of the island's natural wonder, and Stage Eight is no exception, delivering an immersion into nature's boundless landscapes.

The trek spans 15.3 kilometers, with much of it a challenging ascent that rewards climbers with sweeping vistas of tea-covered hillsides. Pekoe Trail reveals the elements that make Ceylon Tea so unique: the elevation, the climate, and nature harmonize so well that the trail is a visual treat, and it is this appeal that provides the backdrop to a beautiful generational story woven around Ceylon Tea. When hikers cross Norwood-Upcot Road at the 1.2-kilometer mark, they've already

encountered rows of tea plants and narrow, rocky paths weaving through tea gardens. Morning hikers may be greeted by friendly tea pickers, adding a layer of local warmth to the journey. The trail then shifts toward the upper division of the Norwood Estate, passing through a quaint trellised muster shed, a thoughtful enterprise with a creative mind and jungle-rich patches that offer the chance to see native wildlife. The trepidation of walking and working in such an intense background calls for divine intervention, and the little tree kovil suits the requirements.

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The beautiful Castlereigh Reservoir.



The estate community being predominantly Hindu, shrines and temples are frequent sites along the Pekoe Trail.

Soon, the path merges with the ridge—a vital section of the journey as it offers a panorama of the Bogawantalawa and Maskeliya Valleys, with Adam's Peak rising in majestic relief. Of course, there's no way that one can dissuade the clouds from the sacred mountain's peak as if the immaculate veil was wiping the peak to make it pristine from a distance. The ridge is an integral part of stage eight. The Peak Ridge Forest Corridor provides a vital lifeline for leopards and other wildlife, forming an essential habitat corridor between the Castlereagh and Maussakelle Reservoirs. A collaboration between Wilderness and Wildlife Conservation Trust (WWCT) and leading plantation management companies, conservation efforts are active here, and cameras on the trees indicate ongoing studies to protect the charismatic

leopard. As one crosses the ridge, hikers are reminded to remain vigilant, as this area is home to around eight to twelve resident leopards who patrol the hills. Miguel Cunat, the Pekoe Trail mapper and exponent, advises hikers to be responsible on the ridge. Choose wisely and leave early, he said, doing so between eight in the morning and four in the evening without causing any disturbance and best traveled with a guide. He advises quick passage for safety, making it a thrilling, humbling encounter with Sri Lanka's wild cat.

At 7.5 kilometers, the elevation peaks unveil expansive views that give way to rock formations and sweeping grasslands. The trail then begins its descent, eventually leading into the welcoming embrace of the Kew Estate with its Hindu shrine, tea factory, and the distinctive, dark blue Christian church, signaling the presence of a community nearby. The charm of Bogawantalawa unfolds with the elegance of its grand bungalow, and as the road enters Bogawantalawa town, it's a familiar relief to feel the path broaden once more.

For history enthusiasts, a detour past Saint Mary's Church will bring Julia Margaret Cameron into the picture. This pioneering 19th-century photographer settled in Ceylon in 1875 with her husband, capturing early scenes of tea estate life. The Camerons lived on the plantation, cultivating tea while Margaret indulged in her favorite pastime. She is regarded as a pioneer who took some of the earliest pictures of native life on the plantations. She was also a celebrity photographer of her time, who captured portraits of Charles Darwin, Lord Tennyson, and many famous faces in England. Her gravestone rests outside Saint Mary's Church, a testament to the creative spirit that infused these landscapes long ago. The nearby Bogawantalawa Planters' Club is also worth visiting as a final tribute to this rich tea heritage. Stage Eight of the Pekoe Trail weaves an intricate tapestry of scenic beauty, cultural history, and the vitality of life on Ceylon's storied slopes.

The sixteen-kilometer journey of Stage Nine, stretching from Bogawantalawa to Dayagama, begins in the lively Bogawantalawa town, bustling with vendors and locals—a great spot to stock up on essentials before embarking on the trek. The Pekoe Trail sign stands prominently, leading travelers northwest through the town, past Saint Mary's Primary School, and towards the towering Haritha Mountain, with Bogawantalawa Valley unfolding in the backdrop. Only a kilometer into the trail, one encounters a small community that leads to the Bogawana tea factory and plantation, where the verdant tea slopes meet the pristine ridges of Haritha Mountain.

Stage Ten of the Pekoe Trail from Dayagama to Horton Plains spans a challenging fourteen kilometers, almost entirely uphill, making it one of the most demanding segments of the trail.



Bogawantalawa lake and Castlereigh Reservoir.



A tea factory in the distance.

As the trail winds through the Lynsted Division of Bogawana Estate, it passes the Superintendent's bungalow and crosses a small stream under a concrete bridge, all en route to the impressive mountain pass known as Jacob's Ladder. Named aptly, this narrow, zigzagging ascent up a sheer rock face, angled at nearly 80°, offers both a test of endurance and thrilling views of the valley below. The climb is demanding yet rewarding, with the panorama of the Upper Kotiyagala Estate and Bogawantalawa town gradually shrinking as one ascends, withdrawn from the perpetual sight of tea trees and framed by tranquil grasslands in the hidden valley of Bopaththalawa.

Reaching the summit of Jacob's Ladder, hikers are welcomed by the serene vastness of Haritha Mountain, where two camping sites offer a peaceful wilderness retreat, a sojourn in the wilderness where one leaves behind nothing but footprints and takes every piece of material and memories with them. From here, the trail merges onto the Manikpalama Farm road, winding through the NLDB farm with vast, open grasslands where cows graze, evoking the pastoral beauty of New Zealand's dairy landscapes. Sheds dot the farm road alongside charming houses surrounded by vegetable patches and flower beds. Leaving the farm, the path enters a tranquil, green corridor lined with eucalyptus trees, their towering forms supplying nearby tea factories with fuel.

The path continues, passing a stone bungalow, the Bopaththalawa micro hydropower station, and a simple plank bridge that crosses a rushing stream. At 12 kilometers, the trail enters an isolated two-kilometer stretch of eucalyptus forest,

where clapping, singing, or chatting is recommended to dispel the forest's eerie stillness. The towering trees mute sounds, making footsteps seem louder, and even a bird's call echoes hauntingly in the silence.

Emerging from the eucalyptus forest, the path leads to a quiet village that marks the beginning of the secluded Agarapatana Valley, one of the most remote regions in tea country. The last three kilometers of the trail wind north toward Dayagama, concluding a stage that marries the dramatic beauty of tea plantations, grasslands, and untouched wilderness—a journey through landscapes that feel both timeless and alive.

Stage Ten of the Pekoe Trail from Dayagama to Horton Plains spans a challenging fourteen kilometers, almost entirely uphill, making it one of the most demanding segments of the trail. This steady ascent leads hikers to Far-Inn, a former main lodge now serving as the Horton Plains Park Office. While arduous, the journey rewards travelers with breathtaking views and a glimpse into unique ecosystems. For many, this stage is an exciting adventure, reestablishing an existing route to the Horton Plains National Park from Dayagama that has only recently been reopened, allowing visitors to cross from one ecosystem to another in a single day.

Unlike other stages, stage Ten passes through no villages or communities, emphasizing the importance of bringing ample water and provisions for the journey. Hikers are encouraged to remain disciplined and respect the rules in this protected cloud forest sanctuary, where wildlife encounters are possible but must not be disturbed. The journey into Horton Plains starts at the Dayagama entrance, where a park ticket grants access to the trail and its surreal vistas.

At an elevation of 2,000 meters, Horton Plains offers a dreamlike landscape of rolling hills, dense greenery, savannah grasslands, streams, and waterfalls—a true escape into the untouched wilderness.



The alluring mountainscapes are surreal vistas.



The savannah grasslands of Horton Plains.

The initial nine kilometers of stage ten traverse classic tea country, marked by sprawling estates and a somewhat kitschy teapot sculpture that humorously signals the Diyagama West Estate's first division. If recent rains have graced the path, a mini-stream may appear across the trail, adding an unexpected element to the walk. The Dayagama West and East tea factories are visible in the distance, while wildflowers, an eagle flying low, mountains and occasional wildlife sightings add natural beauty to this rugged terrain. While the trek through the tea plantations may feel endless, eventually, a sign marks the path to Horton Plains, leading to a gated entrance equipped with clean facilities for one last break before entering the Park.

Crossing into Horton Plains National Park is a humbling experience as the immense responsibility of protecting this delicate ecosystem becomes apparent.

At an elevation of 2,000 meters, Horton Plains offers a dreamlike landscape of rolling hills, dense greenery, savannah grasslands, streams, and waterfalls—a true escape into the untouched wilderness. The Park is home to an incredible array of wildlife, with 24 mammal species like leopards, deer, elk, wild boar, monkeys, porcupines, and giant squirrels, and early morning hikers have the best chance of sightings. Here, respecting nature is sacred, and it's essential to take only memories—and to leave no trace, not even that left by previous visitors. And abandon any idea of picking flowers and plants for memory or even going hoo-ha when you stumble upon an animal. Make sure to give them their space and move out.

The final five kilometers within the Park are a slow, zigzagging ascent, reaching one of the highest points on Stage Ten. The altitude drop makes the air cooler, and sudden rains are common, so warm, waterproof clothing is crucial. Emerging onto the Horton Plains main road, known as the Ohiya-Pattipola Road, the last 500 meters lead through open plains to the car park, where a Pekoe Trail sign marks the end of this grueling yet awe-inspiring journey through one of Sri Lanka's most unique terrains.