# Pekoe Trail: Stages Six and Seven

Posted on



The Pekoe Trail is synonymous with Ceylon Tea, but it is also a journey across territories that offer new discoveries and spurts of history. Stages six and seven are trails through the rails, a grand view of the country’s railways that began serving the tea industry. The upcountry railway line in Sri Lanka is considered an odyssey in traveling through some of the most beautiful landscapes in the country, and to imagine that one can actually cross this iconic upcountry railway line in stages six and seven is mind-blowing; it was once so integral to the burgeoning tea industry. Today, it stands for providing a memorable journey through the estates.

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Since the island's tea industry boasts of colonial heritage, pepping it with some fairy dust of nostalgia and magic, the tea factories of Saint Claire and Holyrood add to that landscape of antiquated infrastructure, and that's what makes the Pekoe Trail so interesting, continuously fused with its core – tea and everything else along the trail is so critical to the project. After all, the gigantic tea industry is about a country's transition into commercial agriculture and how thousands of hands and feet elevated that industry into a global brand called Ceylon Tea.

Stage six starts from the Watagoda railway station and spans fifteen kilometers through Thalawakele to Kotagala. Not the typical bustling train station, the Watagoda station is undramatic. What is dramatic, as always, are the backgrounding mountains, splendid in its old world charm sort of architecture from colonial times, which means it looks quaint and laidback where one definitely feels relaxed, punctuated with flowering plants along the railway lines and the typical country feel perpetuated by the mist-filled environment.

Like lakes and bridges, Kovils and random images of deities are expected along the trail. Heading towards the Watagoda estate from the railway station, inevitably, there's a bridge. The path leads to a Hindu Kovil set on the banks of the lake, a placid setting indeed. The Watagoda tea estate itself is foregrounded by the Great Western Mountain, this time a little closer and a recurring feature along the sunny trail of stage six. With an estate community at the beginning, a tree kovil, and a bridge over a stream, the journey continues inside the Watagoda estate, another immaculately maintained tea garden.

The highest elevation in stage six is reached a little after the one-kilometer mark, a forked road opening to the Great Western Mountain again. It is a landmark to the highest elevation point in stage six, a desolate hut with an upper deck. It is a great place to break the journey and view the mountains before taking the four- kilometer descent towards Watagoda. While on the descent through the estate, one should look out for the Duke's Nose, a mountain whose name aptly describes an outcrop in the shape of a nose in the distance, whether its name givers thought its sharp

contours displayed a degree of high-class flair is only to be imagined. Yet, it’s interesting how much the Pekoe Trail adds to the experience, encounters, and knowledge.



A train travels through the soda bottle curve.



A tree kovil where the people find the divine residing.

The second railway line is met at 1.7 kilometers into stage six, and if you’re lucky, it’s a treat to watch a passing train closely. It’s no ordinary railway line; it’s the only one in the country with a formation known as a soda bottle curve or the Watagoda

Great Railway Loop of about a kilometer. The soda bottle curve is where the railway line loops around a small hill bringing the two lines going on either side as close as 300m. Crossing the railway line, the trek goes downhill for two hundred meters to enter the Holyrood estate. The bonus is walking on the railway line, which is not part of the marked trail. There is an excellent viewpoint of Dell Mountain, Duke's Nose, Elbedde mountain range, and the Sacred Sri Pada Mountain, although the best view of the latter is in stage seven.

Back on track inside Holyrood estate, one end of the soda bottle curve is in view, and it's essential to stop to witness this spectacle, which is unique and exclusive. The belly of the soda bottle curve could be observed from an elevation. In this sunny trail through open tea gardens, one comes across some shady redress, and where there are gigantic trees, a tree kovil is a sure encounter. In this instance, the Little Forest Tree Kovil, at 2.6 kilometers, is nothing more than an enormous tree of twisted barks with arms of branches spreading over the vicinity to create that mood marking all such places, a catacomb at the tree's base and dwarfed images completing the shrine, the tree in itself rising like the ornate towers that adorn the entrance to a Hindu Kovil.

The trail continues over a small bridge, a route that leads to a viewpoint of the bottle curve at three kilometers. A muster shed is a busy place of feminine voices, which is also the viewpoint of the beautiful upcountry railway line's bottle curve. The trail continues through the beautiful sun-filled Holyrood estate. After the Holyrood tea factory, the trail digresses into the Pundaluoya-Talawakele main road, nearly two hundred meters along a street art wall, before re-entering Holyrood estate to meet the fourth railway crossing at five kilometers.



Inside stages six and seven the trail crisscrosses the amazing upcountry railway line.

The railway line leads to another main road where one walks on a bridge over the Kotmale oya or the Kotmale reservoir (Kotmale Reservoir is the main one seen in stages 4 and 5 in Kotmale) and a walk along the Talawakele railway station platform to a steep stairway leading to the Talawakele estate. One can choose to walk along the railway line after the train platform, but with caution, yet it would be a fantastic ending to a trail filled with the experiences of the upcountry rail odyssey.

Incidentally, the Talawakele station marks the minimum elevation in stage six,

eventually gaining elevation with the steep upward climb towards the Hatton-Nuwara Eliya main road for three hundred meters before entering the Talawakele estate, the path beginning with the Superintendent’s bungalow, which if one is lucky will be strewn with cherry blossoms, making a pink carpet to walk on. One can break the journey under the shade of the cherry blossom tree and feel the caress of the falling flowers. There is a sense of calm in the lake encountered on the way, so still that one stares into the water, mirroring the surroundings perfectly. The journey henceforth is pure tea country, where one meets a carpet of perfectly manicured plantings, which will be a treat in a long walk under the sun’s glare. Adding a challenging aspect to stage six is a short downward path digressing from the tea-lined lanes that eventually merge with the estate road. It’s narrow, steep, and uneven, but that’s worth a departure along an exciting railway-packed trail.

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One reaches an eight-kilometer vantage point on stage six with a view of Saint Claire’s tea factory. With the Great Western Mountain in the backdrop, the Saint Claire tea factory, whose rundown look gives it an antiquated look as old as the colonial era, continues its legacy with a railway platform exclusively for the factory, bearing witness to its reputation of yore, when trains stopped at this platform to collect tea leaves, which remains as a testament to the industry’s past. Hikers are welcome to the Saint Clair tea factory. An uphill left turn from the factory takes one back after fifty meters to an estate road with a sign indicating the presence of a community, a call for stewardship as one passes them. What is most exciting here is witnessing the beautiful sight of the Saint Claire waterfall, with the upcountry railway line and the A7 road winding parallel to the trail at the Saint Claire Tea Estate.

A tree kovil close to a bridge over a stream is a landmark leading to St Andrew’s bungalow, owned by a private company. From then on, it’s a trek towards Kotagala to complete the fifteen-kilometer stage six. On the way, one passes through a forest path of a hundred meters, again typically leopard territory with frequent sightings of wild boar and barking deer. Coming out of the forest, one is again exposed to a panoramic view of gliding tea gardens, immaculate and silent in an ever-changing

environment that shines brightly at one point, and then hanging overhead are dark clouds threatening to open the skies to heavy showers.

The Derryclare tea estate road is made of concrete and leads to the end of the trail towards Kotagala. A large playground below will witness the island's favorite pastime – cricket, which youngsters in the area heartily undertake to play at any time of the day. Still, the show stopper is not the lads at play but the railway line encircling a hill just beyond the playground, where the cherry on the cake would be to watch a passing train. There are more estate communities as one walks towards the end of stage six, which forays into a forest of eucalyptus trees, a path that crosses close to the Kotagala tunnel, a significant landmark where the railway line travels above the tunnel, and the A7 road goes through the tunnel.

Stage seven begins, and stage six ends at Kotagala town on the Nuwara Eliya – Hatton A7 main road, ending at sixteen kilometers in Norwood. One of the landmarks of Kotagala town is the yellow Hindu Kovil – the Rosita Town Kovil. Community houses lead to the gates of Drayton Tea Estate, a walk along a well-paved road, passing a tree kovil, and the tea factory to reach a four-way junction where the Kotagala town comes into view. The uniformity of the cascading tea trees is always one of the most beautiful sights on the Pekoe Trail, primarily when the gardens are immaculately maintained. It is right to say that the scenery of endless extending tea plantings is never really enough, and even if it stretches for miles, they are still graceful; there's a fluidity to their formation and their silence against an oscillating landscape of bright to misty to gloomy doesn't in any way dim their beauty.

Stage seven is a tea country that is so densely populated that it is active with women plucking tea; hence, human encounters are not scarce. In a shifting landscape of interesting happenstances, community houses built on the edge of mountains look pretty and precarious simultaneously. In a predominantly tea- hewn stage, the occasional tree situations are transformed into spiritual dwellings, with cloths tied around barks, the only sign that people indeed feel the presence of a force that they reckon to be spiritual. For some unknown reason, residents choose some of the most enormous trees to shelter their gods. Another tree, kovil, is set up as a gigantically spreading tree colossus as if the gods would take refuge in the enormity of those trees whose branches spread far and wide, twisted and irregular. There is majesty in their appearance and awe in the atmosphere.

> In stage seven are two churches surrounded by Christian communities, which, according to Miguel Cunat of the Pekoe Trail team, are among some of the best stops on this trail mainly because of the friendly locals who are hospitable, ready to share food and offer tea and even open the churches for viewing.

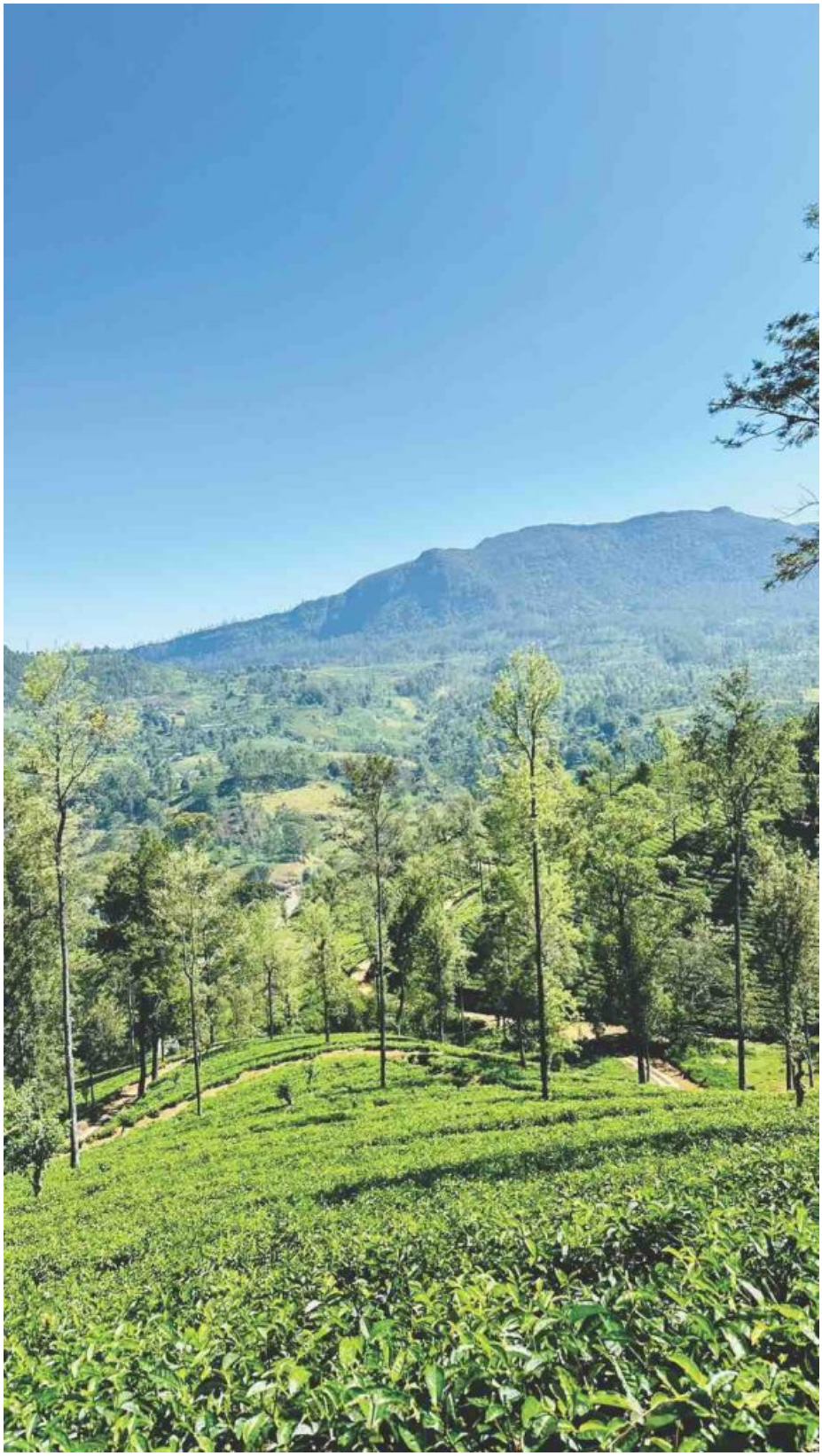
Drayton Estate leads to the Chrysler Farm Estate, its factory a little after two kilometers into stage seven, resembling the archetype colonial-style tea factory that looks rundown but is actually buzzing with action. The Kotagala Mountain remains prominently in the background of the factory. The trail continues through the Chrysler Farm Estate, over a bridge that carries the waters from a stream originating from the Kotagala Mountain, known as the Pathana Oya, one of the headwaters of Devon waterfall. The trail winds through the Chrysler's Farm Tamil School at three kilometers, a significant stage as one heads towards the stage's railway crossing, leading to an ascent to the Singamalai mountain range. The path through Chrysler Farm Tea Estate is sunny and busy, with a more prominent presence of communities closer to the trail. Before crossing the railway line, one can deviate for a break at the now non-functioning Galkanda Watta train platform. The railway line falls to the left parallel to the trail once it's crossed, and the trail gains elevation on the Singamalai Mountain leading to the Singamalai tunnel, which is located over the railway line. At four kilometers, one reaches the Kotagala end of the Singamalai tunnel. The Singamalai tunnel marks the point of highest elevation in stage seven, the tunnel itself being a significant one, the second largest railway tunnel in the country. The Singamalai Mountain route gets a bit dense at some points, as one would expect, which also means that leeches are likely lying in wait during the less dry periods. The best viewpoint of Kotagala Mountain is on the way to a forked junction. Tea country continues across the Singamalai Mountain, meeting women picking tea in the Hatton Estate. The crowning moment in stage seven is at the pool bank division of the Hatton Estate, at a point where the Sri Pada Mountain comes into view; the mighty peak towering above the rest calls for a moment of silence as if beckoning the hiker to stop and reflect on its munificence.

A guide will identify more mountains from this point, although Hatton town needs

no introduction with its crowded landscape of buildings. There is a choice to walk towards the Singamalai tunnel or follow the arrows along an updated path, the old path offers a view of the Singamalai reservoir. Back on the new path, one passes the Tea Tree Forest in Darrawella in the Dickoya Estate Darrawella Division. It is a shady pine forest, a breather from the sunniness of the trail, leading to a gorge-like area surrounded by hilly tea plantings, which, in fact, is a playground for football, the locals here preferring soccer over cricket. At nine kilometers, one can see the Batalgalla tea factory, and to the right, at a lower point, on the foothills of Darrawella Estate, stands the historic Dickoya- Maskeliya Cricket Club or the Darrawella Club, which was founded in 1868 in the pioneering days of the nineteenth-century plantations.

Considered one of the finest and largest planters' clubs of the era, the Darrawella Club once boasted a golf course, grounds for cricket and rugby, a tennis court, an indoor badminton court, and a billiard and snooker room. The club and its interior, a library, and a bar, although today stand still, bear testament to an era when life on the plantations was plucked away from the normal, planters' dull evenings filled with entertainment around the billiard table and the bar, a bustling hub of conversations and socializing, which remains closed most of the time, but can be visited as part of the trail provided that prior notice is given. The Darrawella Club will undoubtedly make a great stopover and a nostalgic journey through the island's plantation history over a cup of tea, what with its extensive collection of sporting memorabilia as a testament to its level of energy in the past, if it would be restored to its former glory.

The trail continues close to the club grounds, returning to the usual track, first crossing the Dickoya River at 9.8 kilometers. Back on the plantation trail, one sees many mountains of repute, the best view at one point affording three renowned names: Dell Mountain, Preston Hill, and the Elbedde Mountain Range. In stage seven are two churches surrounded by Christian communities, which, according to Miguel Cunat of the Pekoe Trail team, are among some of the best stops on this trail mainly because of the friendly locals who are hospitable, ready to share food and offer tea and even open the churches for viewing. The local communities are reaping the economic benefits of the Pekoe Trail along these routes as they provide spots for resting and food like biscuits, bananas, and tea. The descent towards Norwood affords breathtaking views of the Castlereigh reservoir; the Norwood town, incidentally at the trail end, doesn't have a railway station.



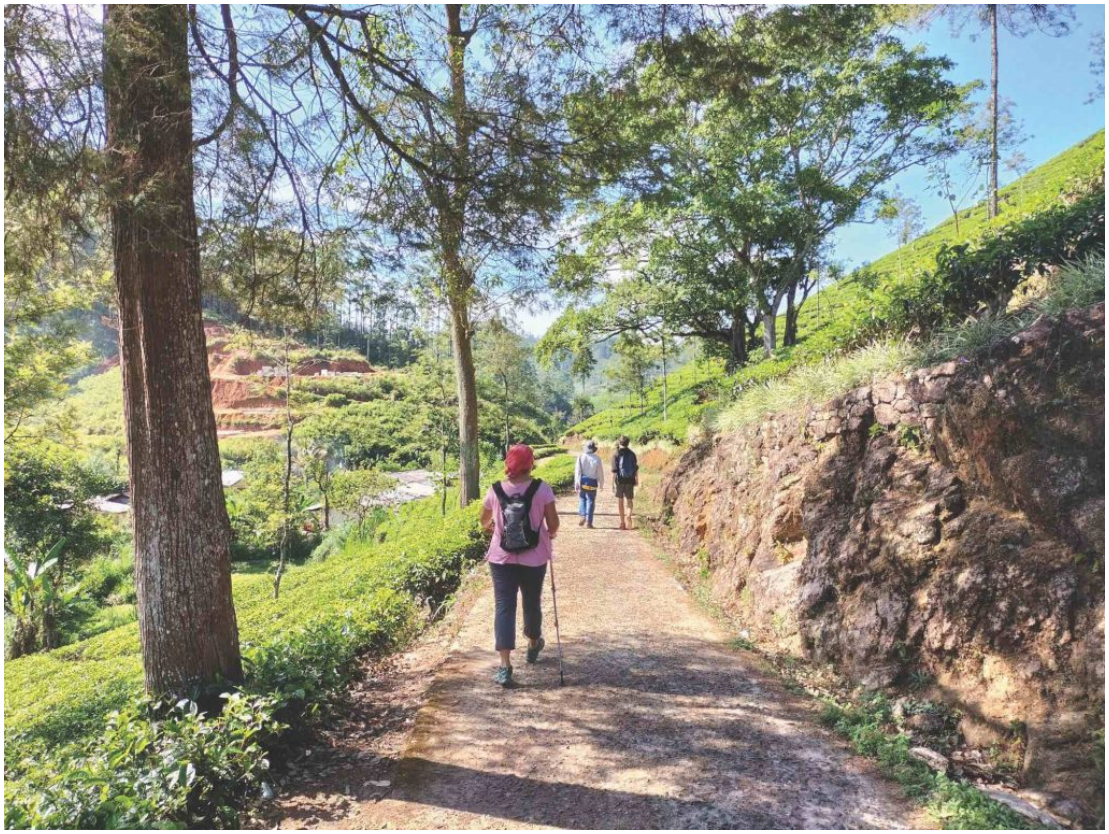
The Great Western Mountain constantly appears in stage six.



Thiruvallular Church in Darawala.



One is often at the mercy of the sun while walking through extensive tea gardens.



Stages six and seven are pure tea country.



Darrawella Club.