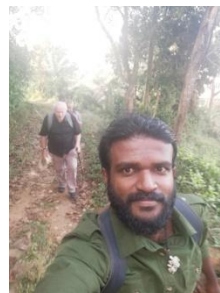


# The Jungle Tide Slow Guide to Stage One of the Pekoe Trail



## Introduction

The Pekoe Trail is Sri Lanka's long-distance hiking route through the tea estates and mountains of the hill country. It begins at the Ceylon Tea Museum near Kandy, and the first stage of 12km to Galaha runs close to Jungle Tide. We decided to produce this guide because our foreign guests tend to be either families or older, but still active, people and a lot of the publicity for the trail seemed to us to focus on 'heroic walkers' – people who want to beat others' or their own personal bests, either in distances walked in a day or time taken to complete the route. We have nothing against such people, of course, but we, and many of our guests, prefer to take things at a slower pace, look around and learn about the buildings, the communities, the history, the landmarks and the nature we pass along the way. So, with the help of our trekking guide and naturalist, Sanath Herath, we walked Stage One at a leisurely pace one January day in 2024, taking lots of notes and photos. (From left: Waymark sign; Pekoe Trail signboard; Sanath, our guide and naturalist).



## Overview of Stage One

Unlike some parts of the trail, Stage One presents no great difficulties for walkers. Essentially, it's a steady climb for the first half, and a steady descent to Galaha for the second half. Most of the trail is on either concreted tea estate roads, or unsurfaced ones. Although we walked on a sunny day, there had been very heavy rain for a period ending only two days before, but we found no problems with mud or flooding. The route is generally very well waymarked, though there were a couple of points where turns were not obvious, so unless you have a guide or can use the downloaded *Wikiloc* or *AllTrails* maps easily, you could take a wrong turn at these points. We explain where they are later on.

For the first two thirds of the trail you are mainly in open tea fields with few houses, though there are various other interesting buildings which we'll describe. The final third, from Kithulmulla down to Galaha, is more populated and you will meet many people, and even passing tuk-tuks, on this stretch.

*Disclaimer – this is not a measured and accurate walking guide – we have simply tried to give a feel for the route and used approximate terms such as “a short distance” rather than, say, “200 metres”.*



## The start: Ceylon Tea Museum to Sadagiri Temple

The Tea Museum is on the Kandy-Galaha road about 4km out of the city centre and deserves to be much better known. For Rs1,000/- (about \$3 – 2024 prices) you get a large and beautifully maintained and curated museum, with intriguing machinery including a working model of a tea factory, and a professional guide who speaks fluent English. The museum occupies the whole of a large tea factory which closed in 1986. And, if you want, you can end with a choice cup of tea and buy tea-related products on the top of the four floors of the factory. But unlike, say, the spice gardens, no-one hassles you to buy things. If you can, please make the time before your walk to spend an hour at the museum. For more information [www.ceylonteamuseum.com](http://www.ceylonteamuseum.com)

To begin the walk, head past the sign for the Hantana Bird Park but immediately strike off right up a stony path. The trail, for some reason, is not waymarked at its starting point. This section is almost the only stretch not on a tea estate or village road. Also not waymarked is a point where you take a higher, almost parallel path on the left – though our guess is that if you were to carry straight on you would still end up at the road crossing point near the Sadagiri Temple. Around here, stop and take a look around. Behind you, close to the Tea Museum, is a row of 'lines houses' built by the British to house tea estate workers. You will pass others at various points on your walk. They were not desirable homes when they were built, and they are worse – and more crowded – now. Tea pickers generally earn only around \$3 a day. So, if you see any working nearby and want to take photos of their smiling faces, please be sure to give them some money, whatever you think you can afford. Same applies to other local people you may want photos of. They are usually very happy to pose, but most are very poor.



To your right is the first of the seven peaks of the Hanthana range, topped with an array of phone and telecommunications masts. Ahead and slightly left you may glimpse the huge white dome (dagoba or stupa) of the Sadagiri Temple among the trees on top of a hill. The path widens into an unsurfaced and level road, largely shaded by trees, and brings you to



the point where you cross the Kandy-Galaha road close to the temple. Here there is an outdoor cafe and a couple of roadside kade (pronounced 'caday') shops – though you are unlikely to be in need of refreshment so soon after the start of the walk. There is also a road leading back uphill to the temple and, especially if you are walking at a weekend or public holiday, a large number of buses, and crowds of pilgrims dressed in white.



The Sadagiri Temple is recently built, so it is of no historical significance. So why the crowds? Apparently partly because of its position, with great views – people come to picnic as well as to pay their respects. But also because, unlike older temples, the stupa is not solid but open and people can go inside to leave offerings.

## **Sadagiri Temple to the Viewpoint**

Cross the Kandy-Galaha road and head up a concrete road, at the start of which is a collection of signs, including one for the Pekoe Trail which gives some background to the project. Quite why this sign is placed here rather than at the start of the trail is a bit of a mystery. There are also signs for the W15 hotel, a sports shooting club, a tea industry training centre and – intriguingly – the Sugar Cane Quarantine Station. We'll come to these.

Soon after leaving the main road crossing point, you come to a small Hindu shrine on the right, where you can sit down if in need of a rest – not on the shrine, though! The climb from here up to the summit viewpoint is not steep but it is relentless. From time to time there are stones, stone steps or low walls where you can sit, though you may be a bit uncomfortable or you may have your feet in the vegetation, in which case check for leeches. They're unpleasant, but completely harmless. Sometimes you won't find anywhere to sit down for half a kilometre or more.

For a long way this is mainly a concrete road, with short unsurfaced stretches. As with all recently concreted roads, there are plenty of footprints made while the material was setting. Mostly dogs and a few humans, but look out for two stretches of larger footprints made by a leopard. There is a sizeable population of leopards in the Hanthana range, which is a conservation area, though you won't come across one, assuming you're walking in the daylight.



Leopard footprints in concrete



There are often useful rocks to sit on!

Just after the leopard footprints a road leads off on the left to the very up-market W15 Hotel. You may encounter their baby-blue jeep full of tourists at some point on the walk. And a little further on you come to the Hill Country Sports Shooting Club on your right. If you're walking at a weekend or public holiday, you'll hear it long before you see it. The noise of gunfire can be deafening. Then you come to the Sugarcane Quarantine Station on the right. Sugarcane is not grown at these high levels, but imported plants are quarantined here for up to eight years before being planted out in farms at lower elevations. Quite why this level of bio-security is needed for sugarcane is something we have yet to find out.

The last of the motley collection of institutions on this stretch of the walk is the Tea Training Centre, a set of buildings on the left, with areas of black netting covering the ground on your right. This is a tea plant nursery. The netting protects young tea plants from the hot sun, and perhaps also from pests. The centre provides training for smallholders in how to grow and

manage tea. Much of the tea grown in Sri Lanka now is produced by smallholders, not by big companies.



The concrete ends around here and you are on a stony estate road, with occasional wayside rocks to sit on. Look to your right at the huge escarpment and see if you can spot what looks like a monkey's face on the rocks. To your left the big views of the Knuckles Range begin to open up. The pointed mountain on the left is Hunasgiriya (which also dominates the view from Jungle Tide) and the five-peaked Knuckles itself,

looking like a clenched fist, is in the centre.

By now you have been climbing steadily for maybe three kilometres and you're probably feeling a bit hot and tired. So you will welcome the bathing spot you soon come to on the right – water pours from two pipes and you can stand under them and cool right down. A



little further on you pass a Muster Shed on the right. This is where the tea pickers bring their picked leaves to be weighed. You'll see a couple more later in the walk.



You're approaching the summit of the walk now. To your right you'll see a brightly coloured Buddhist temple – soon after, the road turns sharp right up to the temple which is only a short walk away if you want to visit. The Pekoe Trail goes straight ahead. This is the ancient Sangaraja rock temple, around a thousand years old. It is one of Sri Lanka's many cave temples and legend has it that a tunnel once ran from here right down to the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy – believe that if you will!



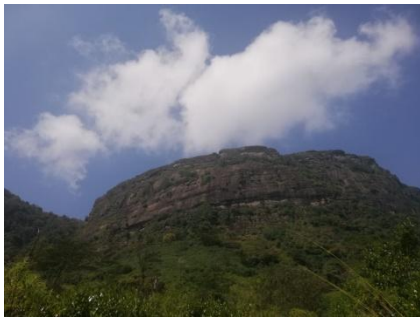
Soon after, you reach the summit Viewpoint where there are several good sitting rocks, though it would be nice to have a proper bench here. Nearby there is an interpretation board telling you the names of the places you can see in a wide panorama. But when we walked the route we failed to spot it as it isn't actually on the trail.

## Viewpoint to Kithulmulla

Somewhere close to the viewpoint there used to be a side path leading to the location for the village scenes in the Steven Spielberg film *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, including the prominent rock you see in the film. Sadly, the path is no longer maintained and is not signed. Again, we hope that this might be addressed in the future as it is of great interest to a lot of people. And speaking of old movies, if you travelled to the Tea Museum from Jungle Tide you will have passed the (now closed) Oodewella Tea Factory which features in an

early Elizabeth Taylor film *Elephant Walk*, also set in the Hanthana area – not one of her best, admittedly.

The twin peaks which have appeared on your right are Urugala (on the left) and Katusu Konda (Lizard Back) on the right. The trail turns right (waymarked) to pass in front of these two dramatic cliff faces. This level section is a stony path among high vegetation but after about half a kilometre you emerge into more open country with the village of Kithulmulla ahead of you. Soon after, you will see the tarmac of the Kandy-Galaha road below and to your left, and just before you reach Kithulmulla a sharp left would take you quickly down to this road. If for any reason you want or need to end your walk early, you can take this road, turn left on the main road and walk back down to Jungle Tide. Otherwise, continue more or less ahead into the village, passing another muster shed on the right, then a large Hindu temple among the village houses. There is a Pekoe Trail sign with information about the village, explaining that it was built for tea workers but now has a more economically diverse population of around 200. There are still lines houses in the village, as well as more recent and better-quality dwellings and, notably, an avocado farm along the trail. The name of the village comes from the kithul palm, which is used to make kithul treacle and its solid near relative jaggery. 'Mulla' just means 'corner'.



Katusu Konda (Lizard Back)



Hindu temple, Kithulmulla

## Kithulmulla to Galaha

Continue down the concrete road out of the village then turn right (not waymarked) onto an unsurfaced road. Soon after, you can see the small town of Galaha on the hillside ahead of you. Look across the valley to the left; the white buildings with red roofs belong to the TEA Project, a charity which Jungle Tide has supported for several years [www.theteaproject.org](http://www.theteaproject.org). The project does valuable educational and childcare work with the families of tea pickers and other tea estate workers. We can arrange a visit to the project if you are interested.

On this long, sometimes rocky, downhill stretch the views ahead and to the left are wonderful, though there is little of interest that you pass. Compared to the trail before Kithulmulla this is a more populated area, with houses, occasional shops (including a small clothes shop, even) and other more significant buildings. These include the Dunali Mountain Bungalow, the Suriya Agro Bungalow, a very pretty small wayside shrine by a stream, and a closed down public building which used to be a Christian Sunday school and village meeting hall. Pedestrians, motorcycles, tuk-tuks and sometimes larger vehicles will pass you frequently, though this is still very much rural Sri Lanka.





Lines houses in Kithulmulla



A village water tank



Wayside shrine

Away to your left you can see the local version of the Hollywood sign on a hill; this one reads BELLWOOD, the name of the tea estate on which it is situated. Continue on until you come to a tarmac road next to a river. We haven't been able to find the name of the river, but it flows into the Nillambe Oya which in turn is a tributary of the Mahaweli Ganga. Turn left, cross the bridge and walk uphill on the main road for a short distance until you come to a junction with a couple of kade shops, just short of Galaha town. This is the end point of Stage 1.

A lay-by on the junction usually holds a couple of tuk-tuks, which will be happy to take you back to Jungle Tide. But do check whether they know the Mount Royal Hotel next to Jungle Tide (they're unlikely to have heard of Jungle Tide itself) or, if they don't, they can show you they have found Jungle Tide on Google. Otherwise they will probably get you lost. And, of course, agree the price. In 2024 a reasonable price is Rs2,000/-.

Have a good walk!



The end of Stage One - Galaha