

M I D - E A S T E R N B A C K P A C K E R E X P E D I T I O N S

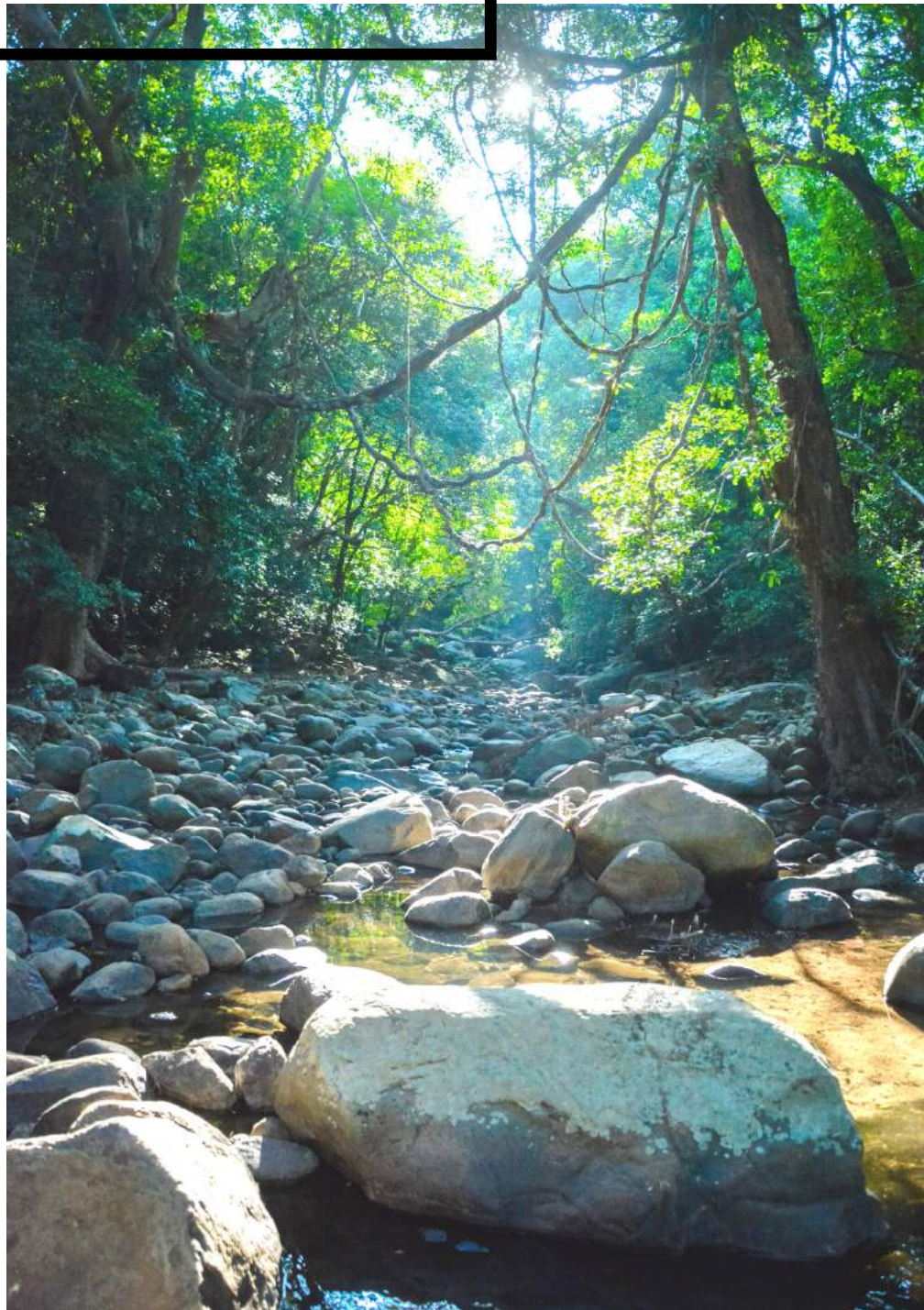
Expedition by
"The Lankan Trail Troop"

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The world around us is constantly changing - and our lifestyles with it. Whereas times change, and evolve, so do our needs, our tastes, and our perceptions. With the effects of the pandemic, we needed a challenge to keep ourselves inspired and optimistic. Perhaps a reminder that travel is all about adapting, making recollections, self-healing, learning and sharing knowledge from the individuals and places we visit.

Beyond the reach of our familiar comforts, it's become even more imperative to embrace the ever-evolving future thus keeping our interests and motives alive. A week away from the busy metropolitan to go exploring the unknown was just the right antidote we've been looking for.

Needless to say, the thought of backpacking across the mid-eastern parts of Sri Lanka was never before intended and although the adventure felt a little unfamiliar, the thought of us getting back on the road again after being cooped up for so long due to the pandemic certainly overruled any other underlying emotion. Travelling without a plan was the perfect recipe for our offhand trip!



"He who would travel happily must travel light," as the saying goes, we couldn't agree more! We only used public transportation because we had enough essentials crammed in our backpacks. Tuk-tuks and private jeep hires came in handy when we couldn't rely on public transport but that's what builds character. There were also times when we couldn't find a suitable mode of transportation and had to rely on hitchhiking to get to our next destination. Without a doubt, the experience taught us about resilience, hope, humility, and emotion. The perfect ingredients for what makes us whole as individuals.

The majority of this small island has been explored numerous times over the course of the country's rich and vibrant history. From 993 AD, when the armies of the Chola Kingdom arrived in Sri Lanka, to the present day, with the boom in local and international tourism, almost every nook and cranny of the island has been visited by both local and foreign travellers.

Day 01

In order to leave Polonnaruwa early on the morning of the 01st day, we decided to leave Colombo at 7:00 pm the evening before and board the night train that will arrive at Polonnaruwa around 1:30 am. At around 6:30 pm, we met at Colombo Fort Station, an old iconic station built under British Ceylon in 1877, similar to Manchester Victoria Station.

The train left at 7 p.m. as planned and began its journey to the North Central Province, passing through bustling towns and suburbs. The train was packed to capacity with locals on their way to the East coast for weekend getaways, while others were visiting friends and family. We showed up at the Polonnaruwa Railway Station around 2 a.m., 20 minutes later than planned. We later discovered that the delay was caused by a passenger who had gotten off the train a few stops sooner and had accidentally left their bag on the train.

Our overnight accommodation was a 10-minute walk from the Polonnaruwa Railway Station. We continued walking down the street, a little tired from the long journey, we were greeted with an uplifting welcome from a friendly pack of stray dogs in the area, unfortunately waking up the entire neighbourhood at 2.30 am. This was the signal for our guesthouse owner to greet us at the door. When he heard the dogs bark, he knew we were reaching the guest house!!!

After a quick round of introductions, we proceeded to our respective rooms to quickly freshen up and rest for a couple of hours before heading out.

Day 2

We left at 6.30 a.m. after only 3 hours of sleep – day one of our adventure. Luxman, our host, was generous and welcoming, greeting us with a strong cup of "black" tea and a weary smile. Raja, a long-time local friend, picked us up from our guesthouse at 7.30 a.m., and after a short ride on the back of his truck, we arrived at the banks of the picturesque "Parakrama Samudraya" manmade lake by the most respected King Parakrambahu.

From dreamy rice fields to sprawling lush plantations, rural villages to nature preserves teeming with wildlife, the range of Sri Lanka's geographical and cultural treasures is truly remarkable and there's no better way to see it all than on two wheels. We continued on the trail, passing the reservoir and travelling along rural roads lined with lush green farmlands, grasslands, and waterways that flowed from the Parakrama Samudraya. The scenery was breathtaking, and there was always a gentle breeze to keep our bodies cool and energized. Breakfast was served beside the lush paddy fields, with local favourites such as bread, dhal curry, Coconut Sambol, and 'Lawariya,' a local sweetmeat made of flour, coconut, and treacle.

We hopped back on our bikes and rode through a beautiful road that runs between the borders of two national parks (Wasgamuwa and Angamadilla). The wonderful smiles of the village children who didn't miss waving at every single one of us as we passed through the quaint local villages were one of the most memorable things we experienced as we passed through the quaint local villages. Making sure that we are greeted with their kindness at every step of the way. We arrived at the end of our journey by bidding farewell to our friend and new friend Wasantha, who accompanied us on a bicycle to ensure that we were safe and hydrated.

Our next stop in Wasgamuwa was a couple of crowded public bus rides through the sleepy village of Hettipola – for most of us living in the capital, taking local buses is not a common option. However, this is the only cost-effective alternative to other modes of transportation. Despite Sri Lanka's hot climate, buses don't get too hot because the windows let in enough air to keep their passengers comfortable – this way you won't have to pay extra for air conditioning!!

It was clear by this point that the villagers were not used to seeing so many tourists in this area. As a result, we drew a lot of attention. Many of the villagers offered us vacant seats to sit on, with hearty smiles and curious eye-fuls. The bus conductor was also extremely helpful and welcoming, offering to hold the bus for us for a few minutes while we inquired about the return bus schedules (so that we could plan out our next day). The bus driver was gracious enough to drop us off right in front of the access road to our overnight lodging.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Sri Lanka, despite being smaller compared to other countries, is equipped with a multitude of wonderful qualities. The islanders, in particular, are armed with a naturally warm and friendly demeanour, mirrored through their faces. A quality is more evident outside the big cities. Villagers are known to be extremely welcoming and friendly, and they will even invite a complete stranger to their homes for a hot cup of tea or a meal. Regardless of how modest our way of life is, this is a quality that all Sri Lankans take great pride in.

We arrived at our guesthouse for the night and quickly dropped our bags before strolling down to a nearby shallow river for a refreshing dip in the cool waters to retrieve from our travels. We were joined at the stream by none other than our last bus driver and bus conductor, who are locals and wasted no time in plucking a fresh 'Wela Waraka' (a ripe version of Jack Fruit found in rural areas) for us to taste. Needless to say, the fruit was delicious and fresh. We were joined by two children from the village who regularly come for a dip every day after school. Dipping in the cool waters engulfed in laughs and playful water fights, we all had a merry time before returning to the guesthouse for a simple but wholesome rice and curry lunch.

After a pleasant afternoon, we were scheduled to go on a game drive. We were approached by our safari jeep driver, who drove us to the Wasgamuwa National Park's entrance. Because this National Park is less toured by travellers than the other parks in the area, it is home to oodles of wild Elephants, some of which are known to be territorial and abrasive since they're not accustomed to many visitors. Though we didn't see much during the first half of the safari, as the evening approached, we spotted our first Elephant, which immediately turned into multiple sightings of herds and the occasional Serpent Eagle. At first, the elephants did not appear to be any dissimilar from those we had seen in other parks, but we could soon detect a more protective and territorial behavior from them as we heard a few trumpets – something that some of us had never heard before. Our jeep driver then drove us to the banks of the Mahaweli River, the country's longest, where we could enjoy uninterrupted river views. Unfortunately, we arrived at the park about an hour later than recommended. This was somewhat disappointing given that the park is known for having good animal sightings in the late afternoon. Perhaps on another time!

When we returned to the guest house, we noticed that the sleeping arrangements for the night were quite amusingly laid out. We knew it would be a rustic yet authentic experience with beds arranged in an open area without walls, laid out in the dormitory-style, and individual mosquito nets hanging overhead. In the evening, we were served a delicious string hopper' dinner with green chilli & coconut sambol and spicy chicken curry – a meal not to be forgotten.

Just as we were ready to call it a night, a phone call from the trekking guide who was supposed to lead us on our hike the next day distracted us. We needed to start our trek around 7.30 am in order to complete everything we had planned for the next day. Our trekking guide, however, warned us against it because he had heard reports of wild Elephants near the trekking path in the early hours of the morning. As a result, he asked if we could start at 10 a.m. instead, which would push our arrival at the next guesthouse back by at least 2.5 hours, to around 9.30 p.m. We had no choice but to reluctantly confirm to the trekking guide that we will start at 10.00 am, and head to bed.

Day 3

A late start to our day, we set off again after packing up and eating a nice 'Pol Roti' (a local flat bread made with coconut) breakfast, realizing that this would be a long day.

We reached the place where we were set to meet with our trekking guide by around 9.30am, 30 minutes ahead of schedule. On the other hand, this was one of the most anticipated treks of the whole trip and we were all really looking forward to it. Though we had agreed to meet at 10.00am, we thought of calling the trekking guide's home, just to check that he had left home and to our dismay he hasn't even left his house. Since we had no time to delay our plans, a decision was quickly made to go with a new guide, one who's ready to go!

We were near a local tea shack, which was frequented by a few locals. We asked the tea-maker if he knew of any locals on this side of the trekking path who would be willing to guide travelers to Meemure along the river path. He put us in touch with two tuk-tuk drivers from a nearby village who offered to take us to the village and find a local willing to take us over to the other side. We agreed to accompany them because it was our best chance to complete this trek at the time. We arrived at the village, which also happens to be the starting point of the trek, after a 10-minute tuk-tuk ride through winding hills and rocky roads.

The tuk tuk drivers began looking for a villager to accompany us on the trek. Since we were in a small close-knit village, everyone knew each other. We found a young villager who said he had no other plans for the day after nearly 20 minutes of searching. He'd been on the river path before, but said he wouldn't be able to go alone because he'd have to walk back to this side of the path in the evening after dropping us off at the other end. In a few minutes, the tuk-tuk drivers spotted a villager sitting outside a nearby house, and despite having never been on the river path before, he was gracious enough to agree to guide us around.

'Meemure' is a small village in the country's Central Province with a population of about 400 people. Meemure was the film location for a very popular Sri Lankan movie in 2004, which featured some of the beautiful mountain ranges, rivers, and waterfalls located around the village, and it has since become a very popular holiday attraction for locals from all over the country. However, the route we were taking is still very rarely used, as it is a very small walking path winding along the river that runs through the village flowing East, and is only used by villagers who walk across on occasion. We could hear the stream even though we couldn't always see it as we walked along the path, occasionally meeting it at openings that were breathtaking to see.

As we progressed along the path and began to converse with each other, our new trekking guides quickly became our new friends. Ranjith, the younger of the two, is 24 and works as a laborer in Colombo. Ranjith could not find work after the country went into lockdown a few months ago due to the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, so he decided to return to his village until things returned to normal. He now works odd jobs and farms alongside the other villagers. Lal, the older of the two, is a father of two and a farmer. The more we talked, the happier we became that our original trekking guide had not shown up, because now we could meet Lal and Ranjith and learn about the real-life situations that rural villagers face, and support them. Ranjith and Lal were extremely helpful to all of us along the way, even helping to carry some of our bags when things got difficult. We ran out of drinking water as we got closer to the end, so we had to drink from the stream, which thankfully has safe drinking water. Lal even ran down to the stream with our empty water bottles and refilled them for us, demonstrating how welcoming the Sri Lankan villagers can be.



We arrived at the end of our 5.5-hour trek around 4.30 p.m. Arriving at the banks of the stream at the bottom of the village of Meemure, we said our goodbyes to Lal and Ranjith, who had made us promise to return, and enjoyed a well-earned cup of tea along with some hot Pol Roti at a nearby tea shop. After tea, we boarded a truck that we had arranged to take us to the main road, as there are no public buses from Meemure. After about 1.5 hours of driving, we arrived at the main road where we could catch the bus to our next destination. Despite the fact that we waited, no bus arrived, playing our anxiety with each passing minute. Finally, a bus arrived, but it wasn't the one we needed to get to our guesthouse, but rather one that would take us halfway there. We decided to take this bus and then look for another bus from the halfway point. More bad news awaited us at the halfway point, as all those who inquired informed us that there are no other buses, which meant we would have to wait an hour longer and take the last bus from Kandy, which would arrive at our destination around 12.15am. Finally, the bus arrived, and we arrived at our overnight guesthouse around 12.20 a.m.

'Indi,' our host at the guesthouse, had a hot rice and curry dinner waiting for us. We apologized for being late and for him having to interrupt his sleep, but Indi simply waved it away with a warm smile and said he was glad to see us. Indi, it turned out, would become one of our most memorable hosts from the entire trip, and she is a wealth of knowledge as well as an excellent host. While enjoying a sumptuous home-cooked dinner, we told him about our day's travels and mentioned that two of us had broken our shoes while trekking. He offered to repair our shoes right away, and he took them and began glueing them together. While mending our shoes, he gave us advice for the next day's adventure and shared his own trek experiences. Indi noticed how tired we were and insisted on us getting some rest and that he would have our shoes ready for us in the morning, so we bid him goodnight and retired to our cosy rooms. As we lay down for the night, we couldn't help but reflect on the day's events, even if they hadn't gone exactly as planned. When faced with uncertainty, we decided to take a chance and venture into the unknown, and we were rewarded by meeting amazing people such as the tuk tuk drivers in the village, Lal and Ranjith, as well as a beautiful and memorable trek to Meemure.



Day 4 & 5

We awakened refreshed and ready for two days of true adventure in the unknown – climbing what we affectionately refer to as "the Lonely Cave." We were most looking forward to these two days, but they were also the days we knew the least about because it wasn't something many travellers had done before.

The Lonely Cave was rumoured to be the site of a rock fortress planned by King Saddhathissa, brother of King Dutugemunu, one of Sri Lanka's most famous ancient kings. The exact history of King Saddhathissa is not well known nor presented with specifics by historical sources, but some locals believe he used this rock as a hideout from his brother. Some locals, on the other hand, believe King Saddhathissa first came to this area as directed by his brother, to cultivate it for agriculture. According to some theories, King Saddhathissa's son and successor, Lanjathissa, built the entire structure.



The rock is said to have been the intended site for a palace similar to what we see in Sigiriya, while some speculate that the name they gave it in Sinhalese literally translates to Capital Rock, implying that it was the capital city of the Kingdom, built on the rock alongside the palace. Unfortunately, the construction was never finished, possibly due to the death of King Saddhathissa or his successor. However, ruins of the foundation of construction are still intact. Pathways paved by rocks can still be seen beginning at the bottom of the rock, with evidence of drains cut into the rock itself visible in places, as well as a large pond at the top of the rock and a large cave near the top of the rock that had been drip-ledged and used as the King's chamber.

This was the cave where we hoped to spend the night, and yes, it was what we were most excited about. It would not be an easy journey, however, because the rock is now in 'Elephant country,' which means that wild Elephants are known to roam the neighbourhood on a regular basis – not only around the rock but all the way up to the top of the rock itself. We also had to consider potable water, food, and other supplies for our overnight stay in the cave. We had 'The Chief Aththo', the leader of a small 'Veddha' community in this area, the indigenous group of people in Sri Lanka, to guide us through this adventure and help us navigate the paths, to help us navigate the paths. There are still a few clans of the Veddha community in Sri Lanka, the majority of which are scattered around this general area. Following his father's death a few months ago, Chief Aththo has assumed leadership of the clan.

We left Indi's guesthouse after breakfast and went to the nearby town center to get all of the supplies we needed for the climb. Chief Aththo said that we could cook in the cave over a woodfire if we wanted, but we wanted to keep the cooking to a minimum, so we brought dry food for meals. We received additional drinking water, bread and sprat dry curry for dinner, crackers and cheese wedges for breakfast, and additional drinking water. Because there are no public buses that go to Veddha village, where the trek begins, we hired a truck to take us there.

We arrived at Chief Aththo's house 15 minutes later, where the Veddha chief was waiting for us outside. He greeted each of us with his hands joined together in a prayer-like gesture, as is the traditional Sri Lankan greeting, and handed each of us a bowl of home-cooked rice and curry lunch pack that we were to eat halfway through our climb. We set off on the 9Km trek to the top of the rock, prepared with our backpacks and water bottles, and Chief Aththo with his own sack containing his own bottle of water and supplies, a pouch of betel firmly secured around his waist, and an axe over his shoulder. The trek is divided into two sections: 5Km-6Km of mostly flat land, through cattle fields and Teak plantations, to the base of the Rock. The climb begins here, winding around the rock and reaching the summit, where we would find the cave and pond.

The flat terrain is stunning, but it's also exhausting, vexing, and challenging in places, especially since we started later than ideal, around 11 a.m., which meant we were under the blazing sun. We were grateful to our host Indi from the guesthouse, who insisted on us requiring shoes and repaired the broken ones we had. The thickets also made it difficult for us to see an impending Elephant, but Chief Aththo was one step ahead, calling ahead with loud shouts and banging his axe on broken tree trunks to ensure any Elephants or other wildlife nearby were aware of our presence and steered clear. We finally got our first glimpse of the Lonely Cave after nearly three hours of trekking, which was cleverly hidden behind a few other hills and rocky mountains in this area. We could see why King Saddhathissa chose this location for his rock fortress. It was well guarded by nature, which did a good job of concealing it, and the surrounding hills and mountains made a large force launch a surprise attack impossible.

Chief Aththo led us to a typical pitstop location, where we ate our home-cooked lunch packs and rested our shoulders from carrying our backpacks. He was eager to reach the summit as soon as possible because elephants tend to walk around these areas in the late afternoon. So, after a quick lunch, we were back on the path, beginning the final leg of the journey, the ascent to the summit. Despite the fact that the climb accounts for only one-third of the total distance, we quickly discovered that it was the most difficult part of the journey. The slope is steep, the rocks are uneven, and the grass is even taller, making it difficult to keep track of the walking path unless someone is directly in front of you. It was getting tougher and tougher, but the views were getting more and more spectacular as we saw the hills, countryside, and lakes that were steadily sinking lower and lower beneath our feet. We also came across elephant droppings almost as frequently as the number of rocks around here, some of them quite fresh, a friendly reminder that we may not be alone up here.

We finally made it to the summit, where we were rewarded with breathtaking views of the surrounding mountains, forests, and lakes. We walked across the summit, led by Chief Aththo to a small path that descends slightly to the side of the rock where the cave is located, almost completely hidden from view when looking up from the ground below. The drip-ledged cave is now empty and bare, but legend has it that it once had brick partitioning, plastered walls, and wall paintings. Today, it's mostly deserted, save for a small pool of water in the far left corner. We were finally able to catch our breath after removing our backpacks from our shoulders. We'd done it! And it was around 5.00 pm, which was a good time to arrive because it was not too hot, and thus the ideal time to see the famous pool, which is said to have been carved into the rock, with only the wide-open skies above it. This thought was interrupted when Chief Aththo exclaimed, "There's an Elephant down in the fields below us!" He tried to direct our attention to what he could see, but no matter what we tried, we couldn't find it. As we began to suspect that Chief Aththo was simply tired, some of us took out our cameras and zoomed in to try to spot the Elephant, and were astonished to see the Elephant, just as the Chief had predicted! We couldn't believe the Chief could see the Elephant from so far away, but we could see why we hadn't – it was only the size of an ant from this height, and our minds were expecting something bigger. Soon after, Chief Aththo noticed two, three, and four more moving together and feeding on the plains far below.

We soon made our way up to the summit, where we would find the pool. The pool is roughly 70 feet x 50 feet in size, hewed into the rock itself, and somehow keeps the water from drying despite being completely exposed to the sun for the majority of the year. We had not intended to take a bath up here, but the surprising coolness of the water, combined with how tired we were, compelled us to do so. The cool water instantly energized us, and we could feel the tiredness in our shoulders and legs fade into the background.

Chief Veddha showed us the markings around the back of the pool, proving that there was still more widening to be done in the pool, but it was unfinished. If it had been completed, it would have been a sight to behold. Even now, hundreds of years after it was abandoned, the sight is breathtaking, so far above the ground below, overlooking the countryside all around and almost perfectly mirroring the sky above it. Chief Veddha continued his ascent to the summit's center, where the palace's foundation stones could be seen. As we approached the foundation stones, the Chief abruptly came to a halt, exclaiming that he could see an Elephant on the very rock we were standing on, just over 200 meters away! We've been up close and personal with wild elephants before, but never on foot. This made our experience even more thrilling, not to mention terrifying. Chief Veddha was calm, probably because he had been in similar situations before. He called out to the Elephant, "Raja! we mean you no harm, go on your way..." in Sinhalese, and the Elephant walked away, down along a path to the other side of the summit, as if he understood perfectly. In that moment, we realized how much closer the indigenous communities are to animals and nature.

Following in the footsteps of the Elephant, we returned to the cave and settled in for the evening, selecting the best spots to spread out our blankets and use our own bags as makeshift pillows. We had also collected water from a smaller pool on the summit and brought it to a boil over a wood fire that Chief Veddha had set up. He made us some tea, and after a while, we ate bread with the dry sprats curry while learning more about the Chief Veddha and the Veddha community. Animism, the belief that objects, places, and creatures such as animals, plants, rocks, rivers, and weather systems all have their own distinct spiritual essence and are alive, is the belief held by the majority of Veddhas. Some Veddhas also adhere to Buddhist beliefs, while others adhere to Hindu beliefs. As he began chanting some Veddha folklore, Chief Veddha's beliefs appeared to be a synthesis of all of these. He told us about his life and the lives of his forefathers. As we settled into our improvised bedding for the night, the wind grew stronger, and we found ourselves wearing trousers and socks to stay warm, as well as using our towels as makeshift blankets. Chief Veddha, who was also starting to feel emotions, made a few more chants, pleading with the skies for favourable winds. We drifted off into well-deserved sleep with a stunning view of the surrounding valley illuminated and the lakes glittering beneath a full moon.

The next morning, we woke up early enough to see the beautiful sunrise from our cave. Chief Veddha sat on the cave's ledge, surveying the terrain below and plotting the course for our return journey. We took one last sweeping look at the stunning view before making our way back down the rock with a hot cup of tea and our breakfast of Crackers & cheese. Veddha Chief soon spotted more Elephants far below us, but this time they were in the path we had taken the day before to reach the base of the rock. As a result, we decided to take a different path from the rock's base. It was a little longer, but the plains were more open, allowing us to see if there were any Elephants nearby. This path was also very beautiful, with lovely green landscapes and hills around every corner. Our descent was much quicker, and we arrived at the village and main road in just over 3.5 hours. Our last reserves of water had run dry, so we were overjoyed when some villagers welcomed us into their garden and offered us some water to drink. They assumed we were returning from climbing the rock because they had seen the lights turn on in the cave the night before. We finally arrived at the home of the Veddha Chief after profusely thanking them for the water. While we waited for our truck, he invited us into his home and showed us pictures of his father, son, and other family members. We had planned two other quick stops before arriving at our guesthouse: a nearby famous reservoir and the ruins of ancient granite canals built by King Saddhathissa himself at the same time as the Lonely Cave. Veddha Chief offered to accompany us and tell us more about the history, so we set off in our truck from his home.

The Reservoir is a newer structure, but it provides spectacular views of the surrounding area. We were particularly interested in seeing it because it was one of the reservoirs visible from the top of the rock. Despite the fact that the structure is new, it was built near an old embankment that was used in ancient times. The water from the old embankment was told to be moved through the ancient granite canals, so we went there next. Many rows of ancient granite stones, cut perfectly and almost interlocking, lay out on the ground, seemingly unfinished, just as the Lonely Cave was left unfinished by the same king. Even though it wasn't finished, we couldn't help but admire the level of technology used so long ago, both to cut the rock and to lay it down perfectly, using the interlocking cuts made into the rock. We could only visualize how many workers, including large animals, would have been required to complete this task. The reason for the works' incompleteness is unknown, but it adds to the story's intrigue because we can only use our imagination to fill in the gaps of history.

We personally thanked the Veddha Chief for guiding and safeguarding us as if we were his own, and then returned to our guesthouse to find another delectable home-cooked rice and curry lunch waiting for us, courteous of our wonderful host. We sat down with our host after a well-deserved lunch and told him about our adventures at the Lonely Cave. It had not been easy, but it had been well worth every minute of it, and it would be a cherished memory for a lifetime.

Day 6

The next morning, we said our goodbyes to our host Indi and boarded a bus that would take us to our next destination, Sri Lanka's first and currently only dedicated Ayurveda Museum.

"Ayurveda' is a 5,000-year-old system of natural healing that originated in India and Sri Lanka's Vedic culture." Despite being suppressed for years by foreign occupation, Ayurveda is experiencing a major resurgence in both its native lands and around the world. Tibetan medicine and Traditional Chinese Medicine both have Ayurvedic roots, and early Greek medicine embraced many concepts first described in thousands of years of classical Ayurvedic medical texts. Experts regard Ayurveda as a science of life, rather than just a method of illness treatment – 'Ayur' translates to 'life,' while 'Veda' translates to 'knowledge or wisdom in Sanskrit. According to experts, Ayurveda provides a body of wisdom designed to help people stay vital while realizing their full human potential. Ayurveda reminds us that health is the balanced and dynamic integration of our environment, body, mind, and spirit by providing guidelines on ideal daily and seasonal routines, diet, behaviour, and the proper use of the human senses." This is the philosophy of the Museum's founder, 'Dr. Witha,' whose mission is to share the wonders of Ayurveda with the rest of the world.

When we arrived at the Museum, we were greeted by Dr. Witha himself, who guided us through the complex and educated us on the history and benefits of incorporating Ayurveda into our daily lives. We learned about the various types of treatments available for ailments such as certain types of cancer, diabetes, and high cholesterol, as well as treatments for stress, depression, and gastritis, which are becoming increasingly common in today's society. There are also many artifacts, most of which are ancient instruments used by Ayurvedic doctors in the past. Doctors use bowls and knives to collect the necessary plants and herbs, as well as walking sticks shaped like serpents to distract and move snakes without having to hurt them in defense when picking plants and herbs. Dr. Witha discussed his own history with Ayurveda over a hot cup of tea, and how he plans to introduce Ayurveda treatments and products for daily use to not only Sri Lankans, but to the entire world, so that everyone can benefit from Ayurveda's wonders.



We thanked Dr. Witha for his time and the very informative tour of the Museum before saying our goodbyes and continuing on to our next destination, Badulla, the starting point of the famous 'Tea Train,' which winds through the picturesque hill country to Kandy, home of the famous Temple of the Tooth, and continues down to Colombo. We stopped 15 minutes before Badulla town to see the Dunhinda Falls. Dunhinda Falls is one of Sri Lanka's most beautiful waterfalls, and it is popular with both locals and tourists. The waterfall is located at the edge of a valley, so it is about a 15-minute walk down and around the valley's edge from the main road. Along the path, there are numerous small shacks selling fresh juices, fruits, sweet drinks, and snacks, all run by locals trying to make a living. However, most of the shops were already closed and the others were packing up for the day when we were walking down, which was unfortunate because it would have been nice to have a fresh juice along the way. We arrived at the viewing point overlooking the waterfall and were surprised to find that we were the only ones there! The waterfall is stunning, standing 64 meters tall, and gets its name from the smoky dewdrop spray ('Dun' in Sinhalese means mist or smoke) that surrounds the area at the waterfall's base. Some refer to it as the 'bridal falls,' because the shape of the falling water resembles a bridal veil. The air around the falls is fresh and cool, and it felt as if we had just taken a dip in the falls' waters.

We walked up to the main road and caught the next bus to Badulla, where we ate 'Kotthu Roti' (a Sri Lankan street food dish made from roti mixed with vegetables, egg, and/or meat, and spices in a style similar to fried rice) and made our way to our guesthouse for the night. Lasa, our host for the night, is a construction equipment instructor by day and a gracious and accommodating homestay owner by night. After a sumptuous dinner, it was time to retire for the night and rest up for the day's adventures.

Day 7 & 8

Our Guesthouse was about a 10-minute walk from the Badulla Railway Station. We left our guesthouse at 7.30 a.m. and headed to the railway station. On the way, we stopped at a small bakery where a local family was selling freshly baked goods. We bought a few items to eat for breakfast on the train while we were there. We arrived at the station, bought our tickets, and proceeded to our seats.

The train journey through Sri Lanka's Tea country is known as one of the most scenic in the country and is a must-see for any tourist visiting the country. The most popular parts of this journey are primarily between Ella and Hatton, where the track winds around tea-covered hills, through tunnels and between hills, passing waterfalls and providing stunning views of the surrounding hill country due to the hills' high altitude. The 'Nine Arch Bridge,' which many tourists and locals visit and stand by the tracks, is another popular photo stop on the train journey. We chose to travel in the Second Class carriage because we wanted to meet more locals who also use the train on a daily basis. As we drove by, the tea-covered hills were lush and green, and the sky was a bright blue, making all of our photos look like they were taken from a postcard. We now understand why this is regarded as one of the most beautiful train journeys.

We arrived in Hatton, our final destination on our backpacking trip, after about 4.5 hours. Hatton is one of the largest towns in the hill country and one of Sri Lanka's tea production capitals. Almost half of the town's population is employed in the surrounding tea estates. Everywhere you go in town, there is a lot of noise and colour. Everything was twice as loud and almost three times as colourful as usual, from the shops on either side of the street to the fruit and vegetable markets, street vendors, and bus station. Each shop had its own sound system that broadcasted everything from music to the day's news in Sinhalese, Tamil, and Hindi. Each shop's entrance is surrounded by bright lights, electric signboards, or colourful banners. More colours await you as you walk towards the markets, where you will find a wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, shoes, clothes, accessories, and a variety of other items. In comparison to other towns in the hill country, where grey skies are sometimes reflected in the city below, Hatton town shines like a beacon in the darkness and is a must-see if you are in the area.

We ate lunch at a local restaurant, which had loud music playing at the entrance but a gracious and welcoming staff behind the counter. To cap off this delicious meal, we tucked into a plate of Roti and Egg Roti with delicious curries and a cup of hot tea. Afterwards, we went to a local salon near the markets and tried out a famous local head massage. The massage was wonderful, with the exception of a split second of surprise when the masseuse unexpectedly and without warning 'cracked the neck.' It doesn't hurt and it does relax you, but because we weren't expecting it, we were concerned for a split second. Isn't it all part of the experience?

We also discovered a small makeshift stall where a couple of locals repaired everything from shoes to handbags to umbrellas. We were delighted when he offered to fix glue and stitch each pair of shoes in just 10 minutes, as our shoes were really suffering from all the trekking! If you ever break your shoes in the middle of your journey, this is a good place to stop. After getting our shoes almost as good as new, we boarded a bus bound for Dickoya, a small town about 20 minutes away. Our trip's final guesthouse awaited us here, overlooking the lovely Castlereagh Reservoir and surrounded by tea-covered hills. We arrived at the guesthouse near the end of the day, exhausted from our travels and looking forward to the next day.

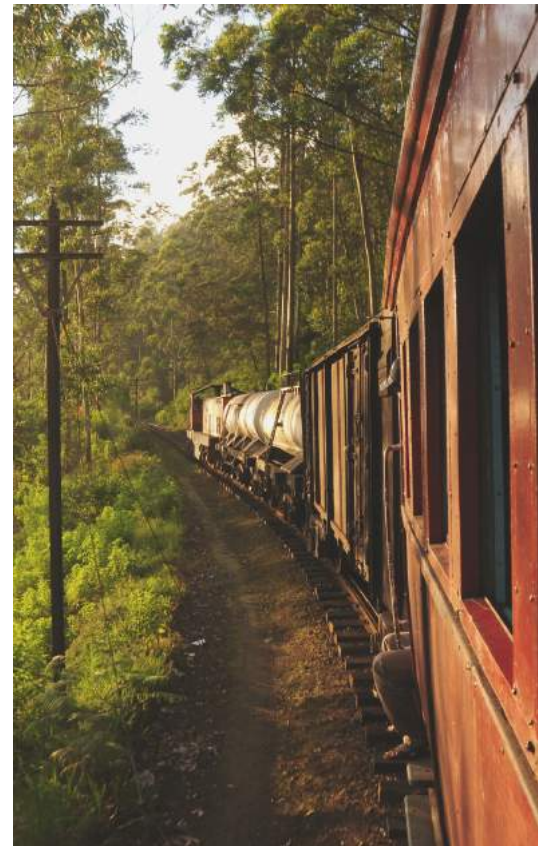
We awoke for our final day of exploration and met at the guesthouse for breakfast, a delicious meal of Coconut Roti and String Hoppers, a local favourite. We left soon after, heading to Maskeliya, a nearby Tea country town known for its many waterfalls and streams. We went to the Saman Temple, which is a shrine dedicated to the deity Saman, who is the presiding deity of Adam's Peak Mountain. Traditionally, all pilgrims visiting Adam's Peak for the first time will first stop at the Saman Temple to receive a blessing and make a vow by tying a blessing thread around a monument there. We continued on to a nearby Tea Estate, from which we had a view of the Maskeliya Reservoir and two beautiful waterfalls that flowed into the reservoir itself. We walked up the estate roads and eventually through the tea fields before boarding tuk-tuks to get to the viewpoint. When we arrived at the viewpoint, we discovered that the entire view of the reservoir and waterfall was shrouded in mist. As the minutes passed, the mist dissipated, revealing a stunning view of the reservoir and one of the beautiful waterfalls flowing into it. The view was especially enjoyable because the entire area appeared to be untouched by other travellers, and it was simply amazing to watch, all while we were surrounded by lush tea-covered hills.

We returned to our guesthouse in the late afternoon and waited for the last bus of the day to take us to our Dickoya guesthouse. Though we waited for quite some time, there was no sign of an approaching bus. Fortunately, a van passed by, and when we asked if we could hitchhike with him up to Dickoya, he was gracious enough to agree to take us there.

It was fitting that our final activity of the trip was to experience true Sri Lankan hospitality as we chatted with the driver of the van, an estate worker in the area who was heading back to his home after a long day's work. We were soon back at our guesthouse, and that was the end of our adventure for the day. After another delicious dinner, we talked about the highlights of our last week, each of us describing our favourite moments and the wonderful people we had met along the way.

Day 9

Our final breakfast in Hatton was delicious yet again, but we were a little down today as we sat together, reminiscing about our week of travels and realizing that it was suddenly all over, feeling like the last week had just flown by. We were back on the road after breakfast, heading back to Hatton, where our happy group of travellers would part ways. Akitha and Nuran were returning to Colombo by train with Suranga, who had joined them on the train up to Kandy, where he would return home. Ushani and Donovan would take a bus from Hatton to the suburbs of Colombo, which were close to their homes.



We found the bus stop in Hatton town where the bus to Hatton was waiting, and this is where we said our goodbyes. We would see each other again at the office in a few days, but it felt like a sort of farewell for all of us. We'd had a truly memorable and action-packed week together, and now it was finally over. If this trip had taught us anything, it was that one can never stop learning as long as one does not stop travelling. It also taught us that there is still so much more to discover and learn about Sri Lanka, so our journey is never truly complete; we are simply taking a break. Until next time, everyone!

MID-EASTERN BACKPACKING EXPEDITIONS

WRITTEN BY
THE LANKAN TRAIL TROOP