

Kandy to Badulla

Trundle along clutching a cup of hot chai through Sri Lanka's tea plantations and misty mountains on the island nation's most scenic train ride.

FROM KANDY TO BADULLA, SRI LANKA

7.5 HOURS

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Portuguese and Dutch colonial forces repeatedly tried and failed to conquer the ancient Sri Lankan kingdom of Kandy. The British only succeeded in 1818 by backing a coup. Visiting the mountain city today, it is easy to see why it remained an impenetrable fortress for so long: tucked into a meander in the Mahaweli River, it is protected by a circle of mountains. At first glance, it seems implausible that a train could wind through the green slopes without tumbling over the edge, but not only is it possible to travel down to Colombo on the coast, lines also run even higher across Sri Lanka's hilly heart. In fact, the whole purpose of building the railroad was to transport tea from the mountains down to Colombo. The train to Badulla is rickety rather than regal, but there is no questioning its authenticity, nor the sublime views offered across old Ceylon's tea country. Up here, it rains heavily and often, the smell of wet soil and leaves hanging in the air as the train shudders and clanks past waterfalls so abundant that the mountains seem to be perspiring. The British had originally wanted to use Sri Lanka to grow coffee, and initially, they were successful, but after disease devastated the crops in the late nineteenth century, botanists proposed a switch to tea. The effects of that decision are still visible today as the train passes above a sea of tea bushes, perfectly trimmed, with tea-pickers dotted in between. Even though the station in Kandy opened in 1867, it took until 1924 for the line to reach all the way to Badulla, a city defined by its still-booming tea industry. ♦

