

# The Southern Sweep

## Cycling from Mountains to Coast

by Ethan Gelber

Cyclists like hills for the vantages over broad sweeps of nature and for the sport. Although many two-wheel tourers crave a challenging climb, most really prefer a prolonged cycle downhill, especially – perhaps with some guilt – one that doesn't have to be earned. Cyclists also love exhilarating to identify a multi-day bike route that answers to all of a pedaller's pleasures: hills, scenery, panoramas, variable landscapes, and, of course, an abundance of distraction.

In a small country like Sri Lanka, where, within small distances, mountains abut a diverse range of plains that angle gently down to the coast, such an itinerary is refreshingly easy to map. One of the best includes many of the natural and cultural highlights of the south.

The following circuit covers 270km over five days of riding. It begins in the temperate tea plantation-draped hill country of **Uva Province**, drops to the steamy flatlands of the **Sabaragamuwa and Southern provinces** and finishes at the ocean-licked southern fringe of the island. Two national parks famous for their wildlife and one of Sri Lanka's most important religious centres are just three of the major attractions en route. *Tip: Ship your bike by train from Colombo to Haputale for the start of the ride, and from Matara back to Colombo at the end.*

### Haputale to Ella (29km)

From **Haputale**, head north (slightly uphill, the train tracks to your left) on route A16. Except for a few, short, gentle rises, the road dips about 200m in elevation over 10km through tea estates and past overlooks the town of **Bandarawela**, a good place for food supplies.

*If lazing on the beach is too indolent for you, and you happen to be an enthusiastic cyclist, why not put a bike and yourself on a train to the mountains, and then cycle all the way down to the coast? Well, that's what our two-wheeled specialist did. He not only survived the hairpins and hairy driving, but has provided a detailed route for those who wish to follow in his tyre tracks.*

Continue on the A16 downhill toward **Badulla**, slipping into a lush green valley. Just beyond the 23km post (6km from Bandarawela), take the right fork to visit the **Dowa Temple** and **Sacred Valley**, a third-century BC Buddhist retreat.

Soon after the 25km post, in the village of **Kambalwela**, turn right across the bridge on route A23 to Ella (3.3km). A 2.5km ascent traverses the

Kinellan tea estates to the **Ella** town limits. The village, its famous **Ella Gap view** and many guesthouses are less than 1km ahead.

### Ella to Kataragama (83km)

Depart early. Today is a long day of riding on rough roads, straight into the heat of the plains. In **Ella**,

stock up on water and emergency snacks, and then face your front wheel downhill on the A23. Go with gravity through the Ella Gap, 27km to **Wellawaya**. A couple of kilometres from Ella, down a path off to the right, are the **Rawana Temple** and **caves** of legend. Six kilometres from Ella (just before the 21km post), the impressive **Rawana Ella Falls** flow beneath the roadway. Approximately 13km later, the route levels out for the remaining 8km to Wellawaya. If you don't already have water and food supplies, stop and sleep.

At the crossroads, turn left on route A4 toward **Moneragala**. This is a relatively busy road on rolling terrain. Little will distract you for 16km to the 234km post and the town of **Buttala**, your best bet for a sit-down lunch.

In **Buttala**, turn right through an imposing archway, following signs for **Kataragama**. Ahead on route B35 lie 100km of gorgeous and changing countryside. Hills and wily outcroppings flank the early stretches but give way to lowland flats. After the 35km post, signs mark the frontier of **Yala National Park**. Half a kilometre after

the 43km post, you pass a park warden station and an elephant skull warning that the road ahead traverses an edge of this protected nature reserve. Stay alert for wildlife, especially elephants.

The village of **Sella Kataragama** is your return to human habitation. Once across the bridge (after the 55km post), you enter a corridor shaded by tamarind trees. Bypass all the early guesthouses for those 5km ahead in the town of **Kataragama**. If time and energy permit, witness the fire-lit evening puja at the nearby holy grounds, site of important pilgrimage centres for all of Sri Lanka's religions.

### Kataragama to Tissamaharama (18km)

If you didn't visit the shrine grounds in the night, go for the mid-morning puja. Then bike south on the wide, good quality, tree-shaded road over rolling hills and past frequent fruit/vegetable vendors to **Tissamaharama**, 18km distant.

On the outskirts of Tissamaharama, fork left when you see safari jeeps parked by the lake to your right. Just ahead >>

Elephants bathing at Udawalawe National Park



Photos by Luxshmanan Nadaraja

(with the dagoba visible in the near distance), turn right (around a bend is the entrance to the temple grounds). The major crossroads beyond is the heart of Tissamaharama and within easy reach of many guesthouses.

With most of the day left, arrange a late-afternoon safari trip to **Yala National Park**.

## Tissamaharama to Walawe/ Embilipitiya (60/70km)

Plan to leave just after dawn. There's a lot of ground to cover, most of it exposed to a fierce sun. Leave town by attentively following signs for **Wellawaya**. After several kilometres, beyond the edge of urban development and at a crossroads, turn right on route A2 (toward Wellawaya, 54km away). Stay on A2 for 20km. You will pass junctions for two bird sanctuaries: **Bundala** (to the right after the 271km post) and **Wirawila** (to the right after the 282km post).

After the 284km post, in **Tanamalwila**, turn left on route B427 toward **Udawalawe** (40km). Tanamalwila is a good place for a snack, but there are also stores on the Udawalawe road (at the 37km and 25km posts) and many fruit/vegetable stalls. Otherwise, the road is undeveloped and often very exposed.

Just past the 21km post, a left turn leads directly to **Embilipitiya** (17km) and guesthouses from which you can organize a safari to **Udawalawe National Park**. Alternatively, if you continue straight, you pass the park entrance (between the 11km and 12km post), where jeep hire may be cheaper. If you choose the latter, 8km further down the same road is the village of **Walawe** (not noted on most maps) and a couple of guesthouses. Or, if time permits, Embilipitiya is 10km beyond: 2km after Walawe turn left on route A18 for the 8km straight shot to town.

## Walawe/ Embilipitiya to Matara (80/70km)

One last early departure will spare you the afternoon toil and boil. If you are in Walawe, go to **Embilipitiya** to buy water and snacks. From Embilipitiya,

turn right on a numberless B road toward **Modarawana** and **Middeniya**. This backcountry lane wanders through villages and thick forest for 14km. Just past the 14km post, at a junction, turn right again on another unnumbered B road for the 2km stretch to the centre of Middeniya, a busy market town.

Turn left at Middeniya's central roundabout (note the small sign on the central pole) to **Weerakatiya** (12.8km). At the roundabout in Weerakatiya, the fourth left off the circle is route B450, an 8km pedal from **Walasmulla**. (The first left leads to Tangalla and the busy coastal road to Matara.)

At the Walasmulla junction (with the temple directly ahead), turn left on route B54. One kilometre later, fork to the right on route B142 headed to **Hakmana** (12km). Outside Hakmana is your only real hill of the day (a 2km ascent) before the rolling and then flat ride for 23km through small villages and past paddies into the heart of the coastal city of **Matara**. ✨

*Tissamaharama Dagoba*

