Rama’s Journey from Ayodhya to Lanka
--Geographical Locations along the way

न ते वागन्तूता काठ्ये काचिदनां भविष्यति
कुरु रामकथयं पुण्यां श्रीकब्बद्दल मनोरामाम् 1.2.35 (VAlmIki Ramayananam BALaKANDaM)
Meaning: “In this poetical work, not even one of your words will ever prove to be untrue. Compose this sacred, pleasing story of Rama, set in the form of shloka(s).”

यावत्स्थास्यन्ति गिरियस्सरित्ष महीतले
तात्दात्रायणकथा लोकेषु प्रचरिष्यति 1.2.36
Meaning: “As long as the mountains and rivers exist on this earth, so long will the story of Ramayana prevail and spread among the people.”

Lord Brahma was supposed to have appeared before sage Valmiki and uttered the verses quoted above to encourage Valmiki to narrate the story of Rama (as heard from sage Narada) in verse form. Thus Valmiki sang the story of Ramayana in 24000 couplets, through divine inspiration, which is considered a primordial epic (Adhi kavyam) in the whole world. The Sanskrit phrase RAmasya ayaNam iti RAmAyaNam, means “RAmAYANam is Rama’s adventure or journey”.

Ramayanam in a nutshell: The celestials were bothered by demons and especially by Ravana who ruled Lanka. They appealed to Lord Vishnu who agreed to take a human incarnation to annihilate Ravana (via an intelligent design) since the latter obtained boons not to be slain by celestials, gods, animals, or other demons. Lord Vishnu was born as the first son of king Dasharatha. In due course he married Sita (daughter of king Janaka) in the city of Mithila and returned to Ayodhya. When Dasharatha decided to appoint Rama as Prince Regent, Kaikeyi (his second wife) prevailed upon the king, invoking the two boons she got from him earlier, to get her son Bharatha appointed as Prince Regent and Rama be exiled to the forest for 14 years. While Dasharatha was heartbroken because of this, Rama decided to fulfill the promise of his father to Kaikeyi and departed for the forest with his wife Sita and brother Lakshmana. They spent almost 12 years in the forest peacefully but towards the end of the exile Ravana abducted Sita to Lanka. Rama and Lakshmana wandered around in search of Sita for quite a while and later took the assistance of Sugreeva and his monkey brigade to span the shallow waters, reached Lanka, fought with Ravana and his clan, killed Ravana, and brought back Sita to Ayodhya. He then ascended the throne of Ayodhya at the end of 14 years of exile thus keeping his father’s promise to Kaikeyi. It is said he ruled from Ayodhya for several thousand years in all righteousness and splendor --- the so-called Ramarajyam.

Let us attempt to travel (mentally) the same path that Rama supposedly took from Ayodhya to Lanka and describe some of the features of the places he traveled through. The map given below (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panchavati) traces the putative path taken by Rama. The route appears to be a little circuitous. There is also a different view regarding the location of pancyavati near Nasik in Maharashtra. We will discuss this a
little later. When Rama decided to go to the forest alone, Sita and Lakshmana prevailed upon him to take them with him. Accordingly the three departed together from Ayodhya.

1. **Ayodhya**: Ayodhya is on the southern banks of the river Sarayu (currently known as GhAgra river), where Rama was born. It is now situated in the Lucknow-VArAnasi rail route. When Rama decided to go to the forest according to the demands of Kaikeyi, Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana were driven by Sumantra (the prime minister of Dasharatha) in a chariot down south to the banks of the river Ganga. Sumantra was persuaded by Rama to return to Ayodhya and attend to the king. The northern bank of Ganga was the southern border of Kosala kingdom. Guha was the ruler of the NishAdha kingdom. He ferried the three to the southern bank of Ganga, at Rama’s request, in his boat.

2. **PrayAg**: After crossing the river Ganga, the trio reached (by foot) the holy confluence of Ganga and Yamuna at PrayAg (also known as *trivEni sangamam*). They arrived at the hermitage of sage BharadwAj, who counseled them to seek the area near the mountain of ChitrakUTa, about 10 leagues (1 league = 3 miles) from PrayAg, for a peaceful stay. They crossed the river Yamuna on a raft and walked for 2 days to reach ChitrakUTa.

3. **ChitrakUTa**: River MAlyavathi flows at the foothills of the mountain ChitrakUTa. Lakshmana built a modest hermitage on the banks of the river for them to reside. Life in the sylvan setting was peaceful. It is here that Bharata came from Ayodhya after learning
of the circumstances surrounding Rama’s life in exile. After failing to exhort Rama to return to Ayodhya he got Rama’s footwear to be placed on the throne while he would run a caretaker government for the next 14 years. The demons had an outpost at Janasthana, not far from Chitrakuta and they caused problems for the sages. The sages decided to leave that area and that decision encouraged Rama too to seek another place for his exile.

4. DaNDakAraNyA: This is a vast swath of territory covering the region south of the Vindhyaa mountain range (covering portions of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh). Its geographical limits were Vindhyaa Mountains to the north, Krishna River in the south, and the mouth of Godavari River in the east. It was named for a son of Iksvaku (ancestor of Rama) named DaNDA, who was banished there. The trio started moving deep into the forest and visited the hermitage of Atri and sought his blessings. The wife of Atri, Anasuya gave a gift of jewelry to Sita. It was this collection of jewelry that Sita used to drop in Kishkindha, on the way to Lanka, while Ravana carried her in the aerial car. There were many sages living in various parts of the forest. The trio kept moving from place to place, spending a month, a season, or a year at each hermitage. A period of 10 years rolled by peacefully during such transit. After visiting the sages Sarabhanga and Suteekshna, they went to visit sage Agasthya who directed them to spend the rest of the exile in a place called panchavati, two yOjanAs down south (1 yOjana = 9 miles) on the northern banks of the river Godavari.

5. PanchavaTi: PanchavaTi means five (pancha) banyan (vaTa) trees. This is the place where Lakshmana built a bamboo cottage in a tranquil area for Rama and Sita to reside. At this site Surpanaka (Ravana’s sister) came to entice Rama failing which she got disfigured by Lakshmana. Her brothers, Kara and Dhushana, who came to her defense along with a bunch of other demons were defeated and killed by Rama and Lakshmana. The aftermath of this brought Ravana into the scene with a wicked plan to abduct Sita. The plan was for Ravana’s uncle Mareecha to assume the form of a golden deer to entice Sita, lure Rama in pursuit of it, and draw Lakshmana too away from the scene at which time Ravana would swoop in to carry Sita away.

It is instructive, at this point, to consider the geography of the area in some detail. The river Godavari originates in the Western Ghats at a place called ThriyambakEswaram
close to the current day Nasik in Maharashtra state and runs eastward for 900 miles before emptying into the Bay of Bengal. The tentative route that Rama traveled to reach Panchavati as given in the map (vide supra) is southwesterly. Is Panchavati really located near Nasik causing Rama to travel westward or is it located close to the mouth of the Godavari River which would have involved a southerly travel? The place currently celebrated as Panchavati near Nasik has all the trimmings of association with Rama. However, as noted below there is a tenuous claim that Panchavati is located near Badrachalam on the banks of Godavari River close to the Bay of Bengal. Both places fit very well with the botanical description of the landscape as found in Valmiki Ramayanam. The references given below point to the alternative site.

“...Bhadrachalam...According to Itihasas, the significance of this shrine dates back to the Ramayana Era. This coherent hill place existed in "Dandakaranya" Of Ramayana period where Rama with his consort Sita and brother Laxmana had spent their vanavasa- and Parnashaala (the place connected to the famous Golden Deer and the place from where Sita was abducted by Ravana.) is also in the vicinity of this temple site.”
(Source: http://www.bhadrachalarama.org/temple-history.htm)

“According to mythological story, an ardent devotee, Sabari, gave shelter to Sri Sita Rama Laxmanulu while they were on the way in Dhandakaranya during Vanavaasa period and offered fruits to Rama after tasting them out of affection towards Rama. Bhakta Sabari who had spent her old age by chanting Rama nama in Dhandakaranya attained salvation after having Darshan of Rama whom she loved fervently and later dissolved as a rivulet which merged into the holy river Godavari near Kunavaram”.
(Source: http://www.bhadrachalarama.org/nature.htm)

Regardless of its exact location, Panchavati is the place that witnessed the precipitous event of the abduction of Sita and thus marks the turning point in the epic leading to the war in Lanka and eventual destruction of Lanka and the annihilation of Ravana.

6. Kishkindha: After Sita was carried away by Ravana, Rama and Lakshmana wandered all over and reached Kishkindha, a mountain range in the Tungabhadra river valley. The Vijayanagar Empire of the 14th-16th centuries covered this region. VaLi, the older brother of Sugreeva, ruled this region when Rama and Lakshmana arrived there. Sugreeva, shunned by VaLi as a result of a misunderstanding, took refuge in the mountain called Rishyamuka parvatham. This is said to be located near the PampA Lake in the Tungabhadra river valley. It is here that Rama was served by the pious lady Sabari who attained salvation (mOksham) after waiting for 12 years for Rama’s arrival and serving him delicious fruits when he came. This is also where Rama and Lakshmana struck friendship with Sugreeva and Hanuman who would aid them (after Rama killed Vali and anointed Sugreeva in the throne) with their monkey brigade to fight Ravana.

7. Rameswaram and DhanushkODi: After Hanuman located Sita in Lanka, Rama and Lakshmana, arrived at the southeastern tip of the land and Rama marked the place with his bow (dhanush) from where they would launch the expedition to Lanka by building a bridge (Rama sEtU) with rocks and trees, uprooted by the monkeys, to the northern tip of Lanka.

DhanushkODi was washed out in a tidal wave in 1964 and is now under the sea but Rameswaram is still a viable place where a huge temple for Lord Shiva stands.
8. **Rama sEtu**: The bridge to Lanka known as *Rama sEtu* was supposedly constructed by the monkey brigade from DhanushkODi to the northern tip of Lanka over a region of shallow waters interrupted by sandy elevations known as shoals in the narrow straits between India and Sri Lanka. This stretch of limestone shoals between Rameswaram and the Mannar island in Sri Lanka was called Adam’s Bridge by the British. That name probably came from an Islamic legend which described the travel of Adam through that pathway to reach Sri Lanka to do penance on a peak now called Adam’s Peak. It is not difficult to visualize that such a makeshift bridge (much along the lines of the modern pontoon bridge) spanning a distance of 20 miles could be constructed with rocks and trees if the waters were shallow in that area. To add credence to such a structure NASA spacecraft Gemini-11 took some photographs from space of the said region which indicated the extensive stretch of sandy spots separated by water between the two lands. It is important to note that NASA did not conclude nor deny that it is a non-natural bridge. The satellite map only indicated the extended stretch of shoals. In addition, thousands of years ago (when Rama was supposed to have lived) the water gap between India and Lanka could have been a more sandy and a shorter span than it is now, facilitating the bridge work with the help of monkeys using rocks and trees. Marco Polo, the 13th century Venetian traveler described this area in his diaries as *setabund-Rameswara* (bridge constructed at Rameswaram).
9. Lanka: Once Rama and Lakshmana crossed into Lanka with the monkey brigade, then a peace overture was initiated by Rama which failed. Thereupon war was declared. The actual duration of the war is not known but estimated to have lasted just 13 days from the start. The beautiful city of Lanka (supposedly built by Kubera) was destroyed. (It is likely that the old fortified city of Lanka was near the northern tip of the current island nation of Srilanka). Ravana and his associates (except for Vibhishana) were killed. At the end of the war Rama offered the throne of Lanka to Vibhishana and returned to Ayodhya in the aerial car of Ravana in time to take over the reign of the Kosala kingdom at the end of his 14-year exile.

To read more about the Rama sEtu please visit: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rama%27s_Bridge

For various locations mentioned, please see the maps shown below and in the Appendix

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Appendix: Physical Map of Ancient India showing locations in Rama’s path to Lanka

Start: Ayodhya.
Major Stops: ChitrakUTa, DaNDakAraNya hermitages, and PanchavaTi. Kishkindha is just south of the solid enclosed line.
Straight line: ChitrakUTa to PanchavaTi via Ashrams in DaNDakAraNya
Dashed line: Supposed travel path towards Lanka
Solid enclosed region: DaNDakAraNya
End: Lanka