A footprint for all seasons!

Posted on



Sunrise from the top of Sri Pada

Shortly after I arrived in Sri Lanka, my daughter and I were having our morning coffee on the balcony of her high rise apartment in Rajagiriya,a suburb of Colombo. It was an extremely clear day and she pointed to the string of visible inland mountains and said, "Dad look, there's Sri Pada." "Sri Pada?" I asked. "You've probably heard of it as Adam's Peak," she replied. And sure enough, about 200 kilometres away, I could clearly see Sri Lanka's second highest peak soaring 2,234 metres (7,360 ft.) into the sky.

Words and Photographs Kurt Rolfes

I learned later that history and various religious beliefs have bestowed upon Sri Pada a worldwide spiritual and sacred aura that is unique to this "magic" mountain.

For at the very top, embedded in the rock, is the impression of a footprint. The large footprint, approximately five feet long by two feet wide, was first discovered around 100 BC by King Valagambahu, an early Buddhist Ruler who, as legend has it, was led to the top of the peak by a deity in the form of a large mysterious stag.

He immediately dubbed it the footprint of the Lord Buddha, who he determined had left the footprint on the peak on his third visit to Sri Lanka.

Over the next thousand or so years, most of the other major religions have also laid claim to the footprint.

Muslims believe it to be the footprint of Adam, who after being expelled from Paradise, along with Eve, made the impression when he landed on earth. Christians believe it to be that of St Thomas and Hindu's believe that Shiva, one of their prominent Gods, made the impression.

As such pilgrims of all faiths have been regularly making the climb to the summit for well over a thousand years.

King Vijayabahu (1065–1119 AD) built shelters along its route and work was continued by Parakaramabahu, The Second (1250–1284 AD) who cleared jungle and built a road and bridges to the mountain.

According to historical records many famous people have made the trek up Sri Pada. These include Sinbad the Sailor, Alexander the Great, Marco Polo, St Thomas, the famous Chinese pilgrim Fa Hien and the Chinese eunuch admiral Ch'ing-ho, just to name a few.

One observation that deserves mentioning was written in 1819 by the first Englishman to make the ascent, Dr Henry Marshall. "The area of the summit of the peak is 72 feet long and 54 broad, and is enclosed by a parapet wall five feet high… in the middle of this area is a large rock of iron-stone upon which is the mark of Adam's left foot, called Sri Pada by the Singhalese. This sacred footprint is covered over with a small building formed of the most durable wood 12 feet long, 9 broad and 4 to the tiles with which it is surmounted. Upon the inside it is enclosed by a frame of copper fitted to its shape, and ornamented with numerous jewels set in four rows. Sound lungs and hard feet are indispensable to the performance of such a trip, for in many places we had climbed barefoot over the iron-stone."

Almost two hundred years after Dr Marshall made his trek up Adam’s Peak, much of what he observed has remained the same.

According to one of the caretaker Buddhist Monks on Sri Pada, its assent is “a pilgrimage and not a joyride”. It’s not an easy trip for someone out of shape, overweight or having weak knees as you have to climb almost 6,000, mostly vertical, concrete and rough stone steps totalling over three kilometres to get to the top.

You’ll also need some warm clothing and perhaps even a sleeping bag if you plan to hike to the top at night and have a rest while waiting for the sunrise to illuminate the spectacular vistas surrounding the peak at around six in the morning.

There are however many refreshment and food stalls located along the staircase, a first aid station about half way up and three police posts along the route.

As you near the top, the path becomes much steeper and the stairs have fixed handrails on either side. From here the path is also divided into two lanes, one for pilgrims and tourists climbing up and one for those going down.

The pilgrimage season runs from Unduwap Poya in December to Vesak Poya Festival in May during which time the path is lit by electric lights from top to bottom. It’s still possible to make the trip year round, but you’ll need a torch light (flashlight) as they turn off the lights after the festival ends in May. It’s also the rainy season and Sri Pada is obscured by clouds much of the time.

I did the pilgrimage to the top recently. It had rained heavily the day before, but fortunately stopped just before I started the trek, accompanied by two friends from Colombo.

We had driven up from Colombo through Hatton and from Hatton through the Peak wilderness area to the small commercial enclave of Nallathanniya which provides parking for busses and cars and is the starting point for the “Hatton” trail to the top.

We started our leisurely climb after dark at around 11 PM. As I climbed the stairs around midnight, I noticed white threads along one of the concrete banisters. Upon feeling them, I thought they consisted of fishing line, but discovered on the way down that they were streams of substantial white thread attached to needles, which were interwoven in the stream. My Sri Lankan friend said to be careful as there

were many needles mixed in with the thread. At the beginning of the web of thread, which ascended for at least 300 metres, there were small plastic bags attached, filled with what appeared to be small seeds, about the size of sesame seeds. According to one of the pilgrims, these were offered as a means to achieve merit when reaching the top.

As I climbed the steps, I could hear Buddhist pilgrims chanting a mantra in unison as they slowly paced their way down the steps. I was told that this is a traditional chant with which one gains merit and blessings as well as relieving the tedium of descending almost 6,000 steps. It was also a very friendly crowd who all replied to my “Hi” with the same greeting or wished me well on my journey to the top.

We arrived just before sunrise at 5:30 AM. And what a Sunrise!!! The rain the day before had cleared the air and we could see most of south western Sri Lanka stretched out before us. Undulating ridges of forest covered hills with morning fog blanketing their valleys, lakes on either side from which the four major rivers in Sri Lanka originate and the surrounding majesty of the Peak Wilderness Sanctuary and the Horton Plains National Park.

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Unfortunately you cannot really see the “footprint”. It’s up a narrow staircase in a small room at the very top of the peak, covered with gold and red cloth embedded with gems and because of the large crowd I could only observe the room for less than 20 seconds. And no photos of the footprint are allowed!

The frequent ringing of the large silver bell located near the room, housing the footprint, denoted the number of times a pilgrim had made the ascent to the sacred footprint of Sri Pada. Because of the large holiday crowd, I was not able to get near the bell, but if I had I would have rung it only once. I heard many of the pilgrims ring it three or more times.

On the way down in daylight we saw hundreds of different birds, monkeys playing on the power lines along the trail, flocks of beautiful butterflies and small waterfalls wending their way down the peak.

My advice is to go for it. If you’re in reasonable shape and looking for a spectacular

view at the end of your hike along with many unique and religious historical legends, Sri Pada’s the place to go!

