

Along the trails of King Dutugemunu

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Inner Stupa of the Mahaweli Maha Seya in its final phase of construction

It was an arduous journey, but a really exciting and adventurous one at that. Along the trails of the triumphant King Dutugemunu we made our way to explore the remnants of a history lost amidst the wilderness.

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King Dutugemunu, the hero of Mahawamsa (the great chronicle of Ceylon) is one of the most well known kings in the history of Sri Lanka, and even today, is much loved by the country's populace for having united the country of yore. How Kotmale is related to the legendary King Dutugemunu's life is an interesting tale.

Taking a right turn from the Thalawathenna junction, we found ourselves on the Ulapane-Pussellawa road, which fell through a beautiful tea estate. Our search for the great king's trails in Kotmale began with our journey to Kotagapitiya—a small village, which is believed to be the place where Prince Dutugemunu stayed in hiding after fleeing to Kotmale following his disagreement with his father. This angered his father, who out of fury called him Dushta Gamini (wicked Gamini). Henceforth, Prince Gemunu was named Dutugemunu, which is said to have derived from Dutta-Gamini. After the demise of King Kavantissa, Prince Dutugemunu had returned to the Ruhuna Kingdom as the rightful heir to the throne and was enthroned as King Dutugemunu.

A green carpet of paddy fields laid onto layers of land running as far as our sight could fathom, offered a spectacular view as we journeyed through Masswela.

As we traversed along, the pinnacle cast of a pagoda emerged through the treetops and a little while later, we were before the grand edifice of the Mahaweli Maha Seya. The dagoba in its final phase of construction consists of a hollow stupa cover resting on 32 pillars, encompassing a solid stupa, and portraying the ancient Vata Dagoba concept. The pinnacle cast is constructed in brass with the traditional Chuda Manikya (gemstone) on its top most point. The construction of the Mahaweli Maha Seya was set forth to replace the religious monuments inundated by the new Mahaweli reservoirs and as tribute to King Dutugemunu. Overlooking the majestic Mahaweli reservoir, one could observe the breathtaking landscape from a complete bird's-eye view.

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On the way to Kotagapitiya is Kadadora, which is believed to be one of the four entrances—Kadadora, Watadora, Niyangandora and Galdora—from Ruhuna Kingdom to the Maya Kingdom. As such, the historical records state that Prince Dutugemunu entered the Maya Kingdom from Kadadora, which is also called Dehadukadulla. Another historical narrative states that this also is the place where Prince Dutugemunu hid his royal sword upon entering Kotmale. Today, an entrance made layering stones on either side of its walls—which prelude a stone staircase upward Kotagapitiya—are the only remains of Kadadora.

Rhythmic tunes made by tree leaves as they danced to the refreshing breeze that blew across the greenery tranquilised us as we made our way towards the Kotagapitiya village.

The road that fell through the lush greenery hadn't been repaired in a long time, thus the journey was more like an off-road adventure ride.

En route to Kotagapitiya, one is beguiled by the panoramic views of the serene rural landscape. Paddy fields that run as far as you can see and the shade of the thick forest canopy protects you from the burning sun of April. During the years spent in Kotagapitiya, it is said that Prince Dutugemunu engaged in farming in Masswela and folklore also say that he had a love affair with a village maiden named Ranmenika.

We were on our way to an ambalama—a place used by people to rest while travelling—which according to history is believed to have been built by Prince Dutugemunu. Along the narrow pathways of Kotagapitiya, we travelled towards the ambalama only to stop near a small temple as the road ended. From that point, we had to walk for about half a kilometre through the woods to the ambalama, which is a small hut-like structure made out of stone pillars. The area surrounding the ambalama had been cleared while the route and the periphery beyond were covered in a thick layer of jungle.

Bidding adieu to the prince's abode, we set off towards Kotmale. And for the first time in my life I was on a suspension bridge, making what seemed to be an impossible attempt to conquer my fear of heights! The bridge, named Samurdiya (prosperity) had been the route of travel from Nugawela to Harangala and is still used today by the villagers. With blissful thoughts in my heart—of having explored the life of a triumphant king and of conquering my fear of heights—we bid farewell to Kotmale and its glory. It was—to me—an adventure indeed.

