



The climb that reaches the peak of the stupa

I am wedged in a narrow and winding stairway high in the sky. The pinnacle of a stupa is visible at the tilt of my head, however, not much else... looking around I may as well be staring at a blank wall as a thick mist sweeps everything out of sight. Perched atop of this curious structure that is likened to a stupa, I am but blindly aware of the precipitous drop and the panorama of landscapes that stretches below.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara Photographs Menaka Aravinda

The Ambuluwawa mountain in Gampola is well known amongst locals, and its unmistakable presence marks a familiar landmark characterising the region. Wherever you may go in the bustling town, Ambuluwawa looms in the distance. It is almost a symbolic part of the daily lives of the people, so much so that the expression, “you are having a serving of rice the size of Ambuluwawa!” has been in use to remark on voracious appetites. Gampola is also a region entrenched in history which rose to become a kingdom and capital of the country under the rule of King Buwanekabahu IV in the 13th Century AD.

Since the recent past, Ambuluwawa mountain has received a new phase of existence to complement its many attributes. Today its peak bears an unusual structure, that takes a spiralling white and peculiar form. Veiled in mist, it is a picture of surrealism. The ‘stupa’ is one of the many features that can be witnessed at this plateau. Endowed with a rich biodiversity and rising to a height of approximately 1,065 feet from the town it additionally acquires great depths of views that can be enjoyed along its ascent. With much to appreciate, it has now been transformed to a miscellany of activities with built sites, to make the most of the rare experience it has to offer.

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From the energetic Gampola town, dominated by its railway station, the route to Ambuluwawa falls along Nidahas Mawatha, accessed by the Station Road. Gradually the ascent begins and each turn offers a varied perspective of the town, the Mahaweli River and the hilly surroundings, while the rich fauna shelters a journey that gradually unfolds. The

first point of interest arrives with the “Kuttam Pokuna” or the twin ponds that are reminiscent of the original ancient ponds of Anuradhapura. A short distance ahead a seated Buddha statue that is about ten feet tall, marks a distinctly different landscape. Well manicured lawns, and ornate structures compel a stop to get a closer look. Aside from the Buddha statue, another graceful brass icon of the Buddha, a row of ten wooden shrines for the deities, hoisted on posts and a *pirith mandapaya* (housing to chant pirith) furnish the quiet landscape, forming a spiritual medley. Inscriptions reveal that while the Buddha statue was unveiled in 2007, the Ambuluwawa complex was opened in the year 2009.

Moving along, the path curves and interrupts a mountain as it cuts through. This large doorway frames a glimpse of what at a glance vaguely inspires images of stonehenge. The “Stone Park”, comprising of piled pillars of boulders is one of the many curious attractions to come by. From here the ascent continues right to the top, where a large gate only allows visitors to continue on foot. The familiar smell of incense, the sounds of a *poosari*’s blessing and the bell of a *kovil* infuse the air. Aside from the *pooja* that has commenced, all else is still and traces of the mist lace the atmosphere.

The first signboard to the premises describes what it names as the Biodiversity complex and Religions Centre; and symbols of all four religions upon the entrance gateway implies a spiritual diversity as well. Within, the towering structure of the stupa rising from the midst of an open auditorium, dominates the complex. However, the garden that lies opposite is home to a mosque, *kovil*, chapel and Buddhist image house and Bo Tree. I could not help but notice that the maze of hedged paths lead from religious edifice to another, interconnecting each almost symbolically. The Bo Tree that stands at the far end has incidentally been grown from a sapling of the sacred Sri Maha Bodhi of Anuradhapura. As with the stupa the *Budu medura* (image house) is unlike any other. Constructed in two levels, the standing Buddha statue rises high at the top level, while below houses a pavilion with descending steps.

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With a generous portion of *pongal* given at the conclusion of the *pooja* I made my way to explore further – a race against the gaining mist. At the other end of the complex stood an observation building that allowed generous views of the surroundings all around. It is apparent that this section of the complex is intended for just that purpose, with a second stairway structure of another unconventional star shaped design. A third structure shelters at its top, what appears to be a tribute to the Sri Pada climb or the Adam’s Peak, with the mark of the large sacred footprint within a glass display. However, it is the stupa that is a

climb waiting to be conquered. A design described as a derivation of the traditional *vee bissa* or granary, the spiral stairway extends up and along the exterior of the stupa. The climb begins from within the building and rises up gradually. Along each level, doorways open out to small viewing decks until the stairs emerge outward. At this stage of the climb, I find myself literally suspended over a stupendous view. The sights encountered at the beginnings of the journey simply lay diminutively and the Gampola town was but a faint echo in the distance.

Here, I watched the world unfold below me until the white cloak crept surreptitiously all around, leaving me in complete oblivion.

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