

Beauty in the stillness

Posted on

Words and Photography: Arrenga H Nadaraja.



Sigiriya Rock Fortress

At dawn, when the air was still crisp and the moon shone down, we drove to Sigiriya at 5:15am to climb the magnificent rock fortress after over a decade.

My parents and I were staying in Habarana, and our travel time was approximately 20 to 25 minutes on a long, winding road, with shops and houses on the wayside that shone with the moonlight.

Once my father and I arrived and had two tickets in hand, along with our camera gear and backpacks, we spotted numerous guides wearing light blue t-shirts. One guide stopped by, thinking we were tourists as we had cameras, which was amusing.

It felt like we were the only locals to walk in on that day, as tourists were pouring in from all directions in vans, buses, and on tours from different countries.

My father and I finally walked through the secured gates and saw the rock in the distance through the glimpses of light peeking through the sky. Built in the fifth century BC by King Kashyapa, it is said that he seized the kingdom from his father, building it on a rock for protection, establishing a new capital, and fearing his brothers' return to reclaim the kingdom. Sigiriya is also known for its advanced urban planning, hydraulic, and architectural innovations.

As my father and I walked closer, we saw the Mirror Wall located below the famous frescos of maidens on the western side of the rock. Its name is given because the wall was said to have been highly polished, reflecting the King and his entourage when they walked by. The Mirror Wall is also known to have had visitors' poems,

thoughts, and anecdotes written on it. To this day, you can still find a few if you look closer.

As my father and I walked down the long path towards the rock, we discovered small ponds built deep into the ground on both sides, alongside canopies of trees where ruins lay below, now home to weeds and grass that had been excavated from the once lively kingdom.

The staircase leading to the frescoes of the noble women of the time (Apsaras), said to have been vivid with wall paintings of the maidens dressed in luxurious attire, was another part of Sigiriya we were impatient to see.



Pond leading to the fortress.



View of the Mirror Wall from below.



Lion's Paw.



King's Throne

The main rock staircase that visitors used, the same one my family and I had climbed about ten years ago, had been closed for renovations. What wasn't anticipated next was having to climb a long, black iron staircase, which was nerve-racking all the way through.

Halfway up, it was time to take a breath, take photographs, and remember not to interact with the macaque monkeys who occupied that area, and were known to

grab titbits, possibly injuring you if things got violent, or even follow you up the stairs, which did happen that day. Tourists and locals were advised to ignore them completely by avoiding eye contact, as this would discourage them from misbehaving.

In this area, you see two enormous Lion's paws carved in stone, positioned on the left and right corners of what is now an iron stairway built over what would have been the actual rock staircase, leading to where the palace would have once stood.

We also had the opportunity to gaze in awe at an aerial view of the gardens below and the lush greenery surrounding the fortress, which is approximately 200 meters (660 feet) high, adding so much beauty to what was yet another fascinating view.

The staircase leading to the frescoes of the noble women of the time (Apsaras), said to have been vivid with wall paintings of the maidens dressed in luxurious attire, was another part of Sigiriya we were impatient to see. The frescos had been painted with natural pigments, depicting the artistic brilliance, and are considered masterpieces of ancient Sri Lankan art. The frescos gave me an idea of what the women of the time would have looked like and what they carried, i.e, flowers. You are not allowed to take any photographs of them now, but you could when I last visited.



Bathing pond with a view.



Bathing Pond.



View of the gardens below.

In some of the discovered art, women wore attire in colours of orange and red, and this particular depiction, which we all got to see, was the only one that hadn't

disappeared, as it is drawn in a sheltered area of the rock. There were women as we walked in who were holding flowers, and some appeared to be in deep conversation, looking happy.

As you walk up, the rock staircase is divided into two with a rope indicating the way. Then halfway along the journey to the top, you climb more iron steps. The steps spiral upward until you finally end up on flat ground. If you are afraid of heights, this is your heads up.

When you take that nerve-racking walk to the top, there is an area marked off that shows you where the king's throne would have been, perched at a height that requires climbing a step up to reach, barricaded with a rope for safety.

Below the throne, built deep into the rock, are two bathing pools divided by a wall. Neither tourists nor locals are allowed to bathe, as per the archaeological department, but that would have been nice for us, considering the weather called for it.

When we reached the top, it welcomed us with stunning views of the mountains and a blue sky against the scorching hot sun. It was crowded with tourists coming up and going down the other way, stopping every so often to get the occasional selfie or take a million photographs of the view.

At this spot, it is a good opportunity to rest your legs while you can before exploring everything else Sigiriya has to offer, the gardens, hidden trees, and ruins below.

After King Kashyapa's death, Sigiriya was converted into a Buddhist monastery to preserve its cultural and historical significance. When in Habarana, you can also explore other places like Minneriya or Kaudulla National Parks and Polonnaruwa.

Take an adventure with your parents or family and see what other wildlife you can spot tucked away on our beautiful island.