

Between Waterways and Sacred Rocks

Posted on



The peaceful road running beside the Gini Petti Palama.

A spontaneous weekend trip to Muruthawela turned into a journey filled with playing in water, endless paddy fields, and breathtaking sunsets. From the peaceful waters of the famous Gini Petti Palama to the ancient rock temple of Mulkirigala Raja Maha

Viharaya, this story captures the beauty of spontaneous travel, rural Sri Lanka, and the quiet joy of exploration.

Words and Photography: Sharmini Shadagopan.

We had been craving a small escape from Colombo, so two friends and I decided on a weekend bus trip to Muruthawela in the Hambantota District. Somewhere between random travel videos and half-asleep conversations, we heard about the Muruthawela Gini Petti Palama, the “Matchbox Bridge” , tucked away near Mulkirigala Raja Maha Viharaya. That was enough for us to pack our bags and leave before sunrise.



Sunlight above, flowing water below, and the Gini Petti Palama beneath our feet.

We caught an early morning highway bus to Tangalle, then switched between two local buses through Walasmulla and Julampitiya. The journey stretched beyond two hours, dusty and tiring, but filled with the kind of excitement that only comes with traveling somewhere unfamiliar.



On the bus to Julampitiya.

Getting down at the Gini Petti Palama junction felt like arriving at a forgotten little corner of the island. There was only a small thatched hut and a faded board pointing toward the bridge. No restaurants, no cafés, but a small shop nearby. When we asked around about lunch, a nearby shop owner told us that if we had informed them earlier, someone from the village would have cooked for us. We decided to push on, but we could not find a place for lunch. However, we saw a local

selling rotis from a small truck parked nearby. We made a note.



Local dinner – String hoppers, spicy pol sambol, ala kiri hodi and perfectly fried lake fish.

As we walked down the narrow road, we could hear laughter before we even saw the water. Locals were bathing in the canal; children diving fearlessly, families splashing around together, boys jumping in from one side and surfacing further down the stream. Walking along the Gini Petti Palama itself was strangely surreal.



A chilled wood apple juice at the temple entrance.

At first, we were confused; was it a bridge or a waterway? Eventually, we realized it was both. It's essentially a narrow concrete water channel carrying water from the Muruthawela Wewa Reservoir into nearby villages for farming and daily life. The name comes from its compact box-like shape, which resembles a matchbox. The bridge cuts through endless paddy fields and small waterways, with the reservoir resting calmly in the distance, surrounded by low hills. The contrast between the

still reservoir and the green plains made the whole area feel peaceful in a way cities never can. The real highlight, though, was the bathing spot near the canal. The water flowed clean and cool from the reservoir, and despite the afternoon heat, stepping into it felt like stepping into another world.



Ancient paintings whispering stories across the walls of the Mulkirigala Raja Maha Viharaya.



Before getting into the water, we stopped by the lady selling hot rotis with spicy katta sambol. We sat there eating with our hands while sweat dripped down our faces from the spice and heat. She even let us change behind her house and patiently explained the safest places to swim. By noon, we were in the water with everyone else. Floating there under the burning sun, surrounded by greenery and laughter, felt incredibly freeing. It was probably the most refreshing bath I've had in years! After spending hours there, we took another bus to the small place we had booked near the Udukiriwela lake. The moment we saw the lake, we jumped into the water again without even thinking twice. That evening ended with one of those dramatic sunsets you only ever describe in school essays - orange skies melting into the lake while everything around us turned gold. We had dinner at the hotel, exhausted and happy, and slept like children after a long day outdoors.



Makara Thoranas at the Temple leading to a reclining Buddha statue inside.

The next morning, we took a local bus from Buddiyagama Junction to Weeraketiya, then a tuk-tuk to Mulkirigala Raja Maha Viharaya. The moment we arrived, vendors

surrounded us with flowers, spices, and little handmade souvenirs. The temple itself rises dramatically from a massive rock over 200 meters above sea level. And once you begin climbing, it honestly feels like the steps will never end. There are 533 stone steps leading to the summit, winding through caves, terraces, and ancient pathways cut directly into the rock.

According to legend, King Saddhatissa founded the monastery in the second century BC after a Vedda showed him this rock while he was hunting nearby. The king is said to have named it “Mu Kivu Gala” - “the rock mentioned by him”- which later became Mulkirigala. The temple is spread across several terraces: the Lower Terrace, Bodhi Terrace, Raja Maha Vihara Terrace, Upper Bodhi Terrace, and finally the Chetiya Terrace at the summit. Each level felt quieter than the last. Cave temples held reclining, seated, and standing Buddha statues alongside faded paintings of Jataka stories and deities. The deeper we climbed, the more the outside world seemed to disappear.



The climb to the Upper Bodhi Terrace tested our legs and silenced our minds.

At the Upper Bodhi Terrace stands a sacred Bo tree believed to be linked to one of the original saplings of the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi in Anuradhapura. And at the very

top sits the dagoba, said to enshrine relics of the Buddha himself. From the summit, the entire landscape stretched endlessly below us - forests, tanks, villages, distant hills, all glowing under the afternoon light. After the steep climb and the caves' silence, standing there felt strangely emotional. Like the island was unfolding quietly beneath your feet. Mulkirigala also carries a remarkable historical significance.



Hasini Perera (left) Madavi Narampanawa (top) and Sharmini Shadagopan.

It was here that British civil servant George Turnover discovered important manuscripts connected to the Mahavamsa chronicle in the 19th century. Those discoveries later helped translate and preserve some of Sri Lanka's most important historical and Buddhist texts, opening them to the wider world. By the time we climbed back down, our legs were shaking, and we were completely drained. We stopped for a cold wood apple juice near the entrance and sat there quietly for a

while, not wanting the trip to end just yet. And then, with tired bodies and full hearts, we began our journey back to Colombo.