



Giant boulders and rocks provide a stark backdrop to the temple buildings

It's more than just another trek in a tropical forest. The thick jungle, hidden caves, rich history and folklore of Pilikuththuwa combine to create a mysterious ambience and promises to provide an exciting day of discovery and adventure!

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Located less than 50km from Colombo, the Pilikuththuwa forest is home to an extensive complex of 99 caves and a historic Raja Maha Viharaya (Royal Temple). Archaeological excavations on site have revealed evidence of pre-historic habitation, while the temple buildings are an eclectic mix of architectural periods in Sri Lanka, from the Kandyan to the British.

You can make your visit as brief or as arduous as you like. The faint hearted can spend time exploring the temple premises, which houses a great number of interesting sights and artefacts. The more adventurous can then move on to climbing up steep steps and rocks to explore a dozen or so of the caves, a trek of one to two hours.

Folk tales and legends say that this area was home to King Valagamba who found sanctuary during the Chola invasion. While the King lived in a palace nearby, his soldiers were housed in the extensive network of caves. One cave is said to have held the royal clothes of his Queen, and the story goes that this is how the area came to be called Pilikuththuwa (Pili means clothes in Sinhala).

But, before King Valagamba entered this forest, the area was known to be a sanctuary for meditating monks. It is said that King Āṭṭanapīyātissa dedicated this area to the Sangha (monks) during his reign, and the first cave buildings of the temple were constructed during the Kandyan period (15-19th Century).

The Pilikuththuwa Raja Maha Viharaya complex is spread out across several acres, all easily accessible by foot. A striking formation of giant rocks provides the backdrop to the cave buildings. A square pond, now standing empty but probably once filled with lotus blooms, would once have been the entrance to this complex.

The Image House, which is built into a cave, has a unique array of wall paintings, the most striking of which are the two soldiers guarding the entrance. These guards are dressed as Portuguese soldiers, and are thought to have been added during the Kotte period (15th Century). Take time to explore the wall paintings, which are very different in style to those found in other temples. Here, the artists depict nature in very life-like forms with the birds and fruit on the trees easily recognisable. The wall paintings are from Jataka stories, while the ceilings are painted with a bright array of a thousand lotus flowers and the 12 symbols of the astrological chart.

Adjoining the Image House is the open cave, which houses the Chaithya, the oldest example of a Chaithya built of clay (they are usually made of bricks). The natural rock overhang protects this Chaithya from rain even in the harshest of storms. The Bodhiya (Sacred Bo tree) facing this cave has two trees, the one on the left is called the “prince tree” and its counterpart the “princess tree”, as they are believed to have been planted by a royal prince and princess, as was the custom in ancient times.

The Dharmasala, where the monks give their sermons even today, is a beautiful Kandyan-style building with a multi-tiered roof and stone pillars within. Adjoining this is a British-era colonial-style house where the Chief priest meets visitors. The monks live and eat in buildings set into the caves, and even their bathing well is located within a cave. A beautiful, ancient wooden bridge spans an area between two caves, and is thought to have been built during the Dutch period over a stream that used to run through here.

Coming into the bright sunshine from the walk through the temple caves, you are facing thick jungle filled with the sound of chattering monkeys and birds. This pristine forest is home to 22 species of birds and 52 species of butterflies, and dozens of other wildlife. You can begin to explore some of the ancient caves adjoining the temple from this point, climbing up stone steps and boulders, parts of which have handrails for easy climbing.

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Of the 99 caves, 77 have been identified and numbered by the Department of Archaeology, which has a small office on site. We explored the more easily accessible caves in the area. As we climbed up the steep paths, we were able to see drip ledges carved into the roof of the caves. These were an indication of the caves being used for habitation. A few of the caves have Brahmi characters carved near the drip ledges, thought to date to the period between the first and third centuries BC.

Each of the caves we visited had something of interest to see, or a breathtaking vista to behold. One of the caves is called Thoppigala lena (Hat rock cave) as it has a circular hole at the back, which looks like the outline of a top hat. While excavating this cave in the mid 1990's archaeologists found coins dating back to the Dambadeniya/Yapahuwa period in the 13th Century. Another cave had revealed bones and artefacts which archaeologists believe prove this to be the earliest dwelling place of stone-age people in the Island.

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As you continue your exploration, you will come to the giant creeper, which is a famous landmark in this area. Thought to be over 500 years old, it's over 20ft tall and spreads across approximately six acres, with its trunk reaching a diameter of around six feet in some places. The treks across this mountainous terrain will also bring you to steep ledges and flat rock surfaces from where you can view the canopy of the surrounding forest and the towns and villages many miles away.

The Pilikuththuwa forest seems to still hold many enchanted secrets, and a day spent in its environs may leave you eager to discover more of its fascinating charms.

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