Girihandu Seya: Rising Above The Eastern Skies

Posted on



If there was a path to paradise, I would assume that this was it, higher and higher we climbed until we reached the landing… surrounded by the eastern sky and the panoramic view, stood Girihandu Seya as a testimony of time, spreading its protective embrace across the land.

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Situated in the Thiriyaya region of the Trincomalee District, Girihandu Seya (Stupa) is located atop a 212ft rock near the Yan Oya estuary. According to the annals of history, on the 50th day of enlightenment of Lord Buddha, Thappassu and Balluka

offered bees-honey as alms and listened to the Dhamma upon which they became the first devotees of the Buddha. In order to perform their prayers a lock of Lord Buddha’s hair was given to them. As traders, they journeyed far and wide crossing oceans to reach distant lands. It is on such a journey that they landed on the eastern coast of Sri Lanka and placed the revered lock of hair in a stupa atop the Girikanda rock, which came to be known as Girihandu Seya. Thus, it is said that Girihandu Seya is the first stupa in Sri Lanka.



Up and up we climbed, the steps leading to Girihandu Seya

More than 2,500 years later Girihandu Seya remains surrounded by the jungle – a haven for both man and animal. Though a roadway has been cleared for easy access the natural environment still remains. And, if you wish to avoid large crowds the best time to visit is during late afternoon when the sun starts to go down casting a reddish hue that is pleasant to the eye. If you are lucky you may be able to see some wild friends who come out during the evening.

As you walk towards the rock, you would come across an ancient stone bridge. The surfaces of the stones are smooth and have been placed upon each other like Lego, fitting perfectly. Walking along the shaded path towards the rock, the jungle clears and there are two large ponds on either side of the path giving a sense of tranquillity and anticipation of what will come next. We were told that elephants are

frequently seen at these ponds.

The steps loomed ahead, daunting at first, however as we climbed higher and higher the magnificent views took precedence and the steep climb was not difficult at all. We soon reached the point where the famed ‘Thiriyaya stone inscriptions’ were located. We had to deviate from the main path and walk through the jungle. The sounds of the wild heightened my senses as we cautiously walked over large roots and avoided branches. I was expecting to see a smooth stone slab as is usually the case, but I was pleasantly surprised to see the script inscribed on to the face of the rock. It is said that this inscription states that Thapussu and Balluka, the two traders from North India, built the stupa.



Girihandu Seya – the first stupa in Sri Lanka


The stone bridge

Back on the main path we continued our climb, each step taking us closer to the summit. As we neared, a small sign drew my attention, ‘Lanka Pokuna’ was written on it, this literally means Lanka Pond. Curious, I climbed over the ledge and walked towards the pond. I soon realised why the pond was given this particular name, it was because the shape of the pond resembled Sri Lanka.

A few more steps… and I had reached the top. Words cannot express the serenity and the beauty of the place. Girihandu Seya stood at the centre enclosed with what remains of the vatadage. I clasped my hands and bowed my head in worship. Open to nature without any modern construction, the environment calms one’s senses, and even if you may not be the spiritual kind, the environment is such that you cannot help but wonder. From the summit you can see as far as Pulmoddai and the eastern seas. If I could travel back in time, Girihandu Seya would be one place that I would visit to see how it was at the time when two traders built a stupa little knowing that their names would be etched in the history of Sri Lanka.


The magnificent view from the summit

On to the right side of the vatadage, there is a Buddhu gey or image house. Though what remains of the Buddhu gey is only the basic ground structure, stone pillars and bricks, you could still make out the shape of a reclining Buddha statue. Towards the left there is another flight of steps, which takes you down to a mezzanine level. Ruins of various buildings belonging to the temple complex were visible and the Lanka Pokuna could be reached from this end too. Another flight of steps leading to the ground level was running through the jungle and we were cautioned that elephants would soon be coming out. Hoping to come back on another day I climbed back to where the Girihandu Seya stood.

I stood in the middle of the landing drinking in the evening beauty, I could see far and wide…. Does the path lead to paradise? Yes, it definitely does…



The stone wall of the vatadage, each brick fitting perfectly together



Thiriyaya stone inscription