

Great Lakes



The deep waters of Minneriya Lake

The air shimmered with the gathering heat and after many days of rain, the sun was a welcome sight. Stepping onto the gravel road amidst these scorching rays, I gazed at the lake while the ripples playfully lapped at the bund. Here we were in Polonnaruwa in the midst of a journey to find three of the greatest tanks in the District...

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It was a race against time at first as we were trying to capture the flood-gates of the tanks in action. However, soon entranced by the beauty of the lakes that sparkled in the morning sun we stopped for some time to admire the vast water bodies that were part of the lives of the people in Polonnaruwa.

Here the lakes were a way of life as many depended on these waters for agriculture, fishing and even for day to day activities such as bathing or washing clothes...

Parakrama Samudraya (Sea of Parakrama)

Built by King Parakramabahu I (1153-1186 AD) and translated as the Sea of Parakrama, the Parakrama Samudraya is considered as one of the largest and most ancient reservoirs in Sri Lanka. It was built by combining three reservoirs by the name of Topa Wewa, Eramudu Wewa and Dumbutula Wewa. Encompassing an area of about 75 square kilometers, it perfectly portrays the irrigation feats achieved by great kings of ancient Sri Lanka.

The water of the tank is mainly controlled by the amount of rainfall and during periods of heavy rain, the flood-gates are opened to release water in order to regulate the level of water in the catchment. Therefore, as we neared the Lake we were not able to contain our excitement as we hoped to view the floodgates of the Lake in action after the past few days of pouring rain.

However, when we arrived at the Lake, the flood-gates were already closed. But we were able to view the brimming lake that was bustling with activity. Several canoes were already adrift at the Lake while birds were swooping low hoping to catch a fish or two. Steps made out of cement were situated at certain points so that people could access the water. Near some of these steps, a few people were already immersed in washing clothes or bathing. Off to the distance, the forest reserve bordering the Lake stood silent and dark, in contrast to the sunny ambiance that surrounded the area.

Kaudulla Wewa

Located 30 to 40 kilometres from the city of Polonnaruwa, Kaudulla Wewa is situated in the Kaudulla National Park, considered to be a prime spot for bird enthusiasts. Eighty nine square kilometers large, the origination of the Lake is shrouded in some mystery, though many believe that it was built by King Mahasena (275-301 AD). However, some legends say that the Lake was constructed by Princess Bisobandara, sister of King Mahasena. Furthermore, historical records show that the Kaudulla Lake was rehabilitated by King Vijayabahu (1055-1110) and King Parakramabahu I and the name of the Lake is depicted as 'Thissawaddamana Vapi' or 'Ranthisa Wewa'. Two natural water reservoirs known as Gal Oya and Aluth Oya are part of the Kaudulla Wewa and the Lake utilises the trans-basin irrigation system - man made water ways that transfer water from one river basin to another where water could be better employed - coupled with a cascade concept.

Descending down a flight of steps we watched as water gushed out from under the gates leaving swirling white foam in its wake

On our way to the Lake we observed the canal ways lining the sides of the road. One side carried a surge of water while the other remained calm with only small waterways spilling dribbling amounts of water to the still canal way. When we approached the tank, the flood gates known as the Dora Dolaha (twelve doors) were half way open. Descending down a flight of steps we watched as water gushed out from under the gates leaving swirling white foam in its wake.

Looking at the sunlit surroundings of the Lake, at first it was hard for us to believe that just yesterday this area was engulfed in rain. However, the rushing waters pouring out of the floodgates below attested to the heavy rains that beat down on the area during the past couple of days.

While the currents churned on one side, at the other side, the calming surface of the waters provided a scenic backdrop to the beauty of the Kaudulla Wewa and its habitat.

Minneriya Wewa

Minneriya Wewa, created by building a dam across the Minneriya River, has many intricate tales woven around it. Built by King Mahasena it is chronicled in the Pujavaliya that the King received help from the Yaksha clan to complete the Lake's construction.

Centuries have passed since its completion and King Mahasena is still venerated as Minneri Deviyo (god of Minneriya) signifying the importance that the Lake holds for the villagers. A shrine dedicated towards Minneri Deviyo stands near the Lake bund and it is believed to convey much blessings for those who seek the Deviyo's protection. According to legend, a tamarind tree surrounded by statues of King Mahasena and his Queen has stood where the shrine is situated now.

However, after the tree fell in the 20th Century, the shrine was built to house the statues of the King and the Queen. The statues are only taken out during the month of October which marks the biggest festival of the temple.

The Lake receives water from the Mahaweli River through the Elahera Giant Canal and the catchment area of the Minneriya tank is about 237 square kilometres. The Minneriya National Park borders the reservoir on one side and

during the dry season herds of elephants are known to frequent the banks.

The flood gates of the Minneriya tank are situated under the main road leading towards Polonnaruwa (Maradankadawala-Habrana Highway). Located beneath a bridge on the main road, the flood gates were half open during the time we visited and the water that swamped many trees displayed the risen water levels of the Lake. Water swelled out of the gates on one side while on the other we observed small eddies being created on the left hand side of each gate as water was drawn out making a draining noise. On the other side we also saw the remnants of an old dam standing amidst the gushes of water as water was released from the catchment.

At the end of our journey, we were much awed by the immense magnitude of the lakes and how people of Sri Lanka were able to accomplish such intimidating feats hundreds of years ago. When gazing into the lakes it is no wonder that our knowledge and abilities pertaining to irrigation were hailed as one of the most sophisticated and intricate systems in the ancient world. It is nothing but admiration that we felt when reflecting on the in-depth knowledge and commitment that the Kings of yore had towards attaining such marvels.

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