



The conspicuous white structure perched on a hill is visible from a distance

As the crowd rushed towards the object of their veneration, you'd be forgiven for thinking that it was a celebrity they were so desperate to get close to. This was no superstar, but an icon hewed from granite, a statue of the revered warrior Hanuman, standing tall at the Wavendon Hills temple that bears his name.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane | **Photographs** Vishwathan Tharmakulasingam

Scenic Ramboda in the Central Province is a sight to behold. Winding roads through tea gardens, endless vistas of abundant greenery, and the striking spectacle of the Ramboda Pass are just a few of the pleasures you'll find here. Then there's the Shri Bhakta Hanuman Temple, a sanctuary offering the weary traveller a taste of serenity and bliss amid the the natural beauty of this divine landscape.

Situated in Wavendon Hills, the temple was built in 2001 by India's Chinmaya Mission, a Hindu spiritual organisation propagating the Vedanta, the science of the self, as expounded in the Vedas and other important Hindu scriptures including *TheBhagavadGita*.

The site where the temple stands is no ordinary ground. Legend has it that it was here that Hanuman first landed in Sri Lanka to begin his battle against Ravana. In addition, the temple is situated just an hour away from the world famous Sita Amman Temple in Nuwara Eliya, where Ravana allegedly held Sita captive.

Overlooking the serene grandeur of the Kotmale Reservoir, the temple is a place of peace and silence. Constructed over several levels, it's surrounded by beautiful flowering trees and emerald lawns. Pristine in pastel, the shrine itself is approached via a long flight of stairs, its ornate tower simpler than most other examples of its kind.

Standing beneath a porch are a pair of 6-metre tall carved wooden doors, works of art in themselves each boasting 33 panels with carvings of flowers similar to those found in Sri Lankan Buddhist temples. From the centre of each flower springs a brass bell, and the doors are edged with lotus petals, adding a touch of style to this imposing architectural feature.

Overlooking the serene grandeur of the Kotmale Reservoir, the temple is a place of peace and silence

Inside the main shrine is an inner sanctum protected by elaborately carved outer walls bearing flowers and pilasters, and an equally grand wooden door. It is home to an imposing 5-metre statue of Hanuman, adorned with princely regalia and protected by an ornamental arch painted in gold. It is the holy of holies, regarded with extreme deference - entry, indeed, is restricted, with priests holding poojas on behalf of devotees, who waited on either side of the statue, gazing prayerfully at an image that they faithfully believed would deliver them from their sorrows and fulfil their wishes. Two mini-shrines facing the main altar are dedicated to Shiva and Vishnu, two deities linked to Rama's beloved assistant.

Religious music continuously filled the air, as devotees, some in groups, others in pairs walked in with great reverence and expectation on their faces. Even the animated chatter of the sparrows that make their home in nooks and crannies in the temple hardly disturbed the passionate outpouring of devotion. A flight of stairs leads down to the meditation room, a quiet retreat for a moment of profound reflection and concentration.

A building with an auditorium and residential facilities for various programmes was equally orderly amidst the sublimity of the temple, and a vegetarian restaurant that serves only fresh food is a favourite with locals and foreigners. The bookstore, meanwhile, is a treasure trove of reading material on Hinduism and the objectives of the Chinmaya Mission, with

books and CDs for all ages.

The silent precincts of the Hanuman temple come alive with incantations every full moon day as thousands of devotees congregate in prayerful devotion to their deity. The Hanuman Jayanti, which commemorates the god's birth, is just one of the many festivals celebrated at the temple annually. It falls on April 22 this year.

Everything about the Hanuman temple is impressive, the statue of the god himself in particular. And it's clear why: in a world where people are seeking respite for untold misfortunes and woes, the larger and loftier the deity the better when it comes to finding solutions to those troubles.

