Horowpathana: The Legendary City of the Seven Sluices

Posted on
Banda Pokuna, one of the largest ponds in Anuradhapura

Little remains of the ancient city of Horowpathana, deep in the heart of Anuradhapura district, but if the ruins of the Kiralagala archaeological site and the Madagama Kanda Temple are anything to go by, it was a pretty extraordinary place in its day

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Nearly three decades of civil unrest has left many villages of the North Central Province almost untouched by both tourism and modern life. Surrounded by thick jungle, countless wewu reservoirs and paddy fields, Horowpathana is just such a place. There's very little written evidence of Horowpathana's fascinating past, but oral folklore abounds, and the locals are more than happy to recount these stories of days gone by.

We reached Horowpathana – whose name comes from the Sinhala words for 'sluice' and 'seven', referencing the area's ancient irrigation system – after passing through the cities of Anuradhapura, Mihintale and Kahatagasdigiliya. Off the right hand side of the road, we could see Kokabe hill in the distance, surrounded by an ecologically rich patch of forest that is still home to large mammals like elephants, leopards and sloths.

Warm smiles greeted our arrival in the village, where we found locals spreading kurakkan, or finger millet, out to dry in the sun on their front porches. We watched them for a while, until suddenly a Beddome's striped skink appeared to distract us. The villagers, of course, just continued in their task – this endangered species may be rare and exciting to us, but it's actually pretty common in these parts.

Continuing on our journey, we soon came to Kiralagala, an archaeological site dating back as far as the 4th or 5th century BC. There used to be a Buddhist monastery here, home to a community of monks who chose to spend their lives meditating deep in the jungle, far away from the distractions of the secular world.

The ruins of the complex, which archaeologists believe was at its peak around 500-600 AD, during the Anuradhapura era, include a stupa, the intricately carved pillars of a former hospital, and janthaagara, specially built pools for warm water bathing (thought by the bhikkhus to prevent excessive weight gain).

Peacock calls could be heard from beyond the perimeter of the site and we spotted the birds' footprints on the sandy trails crossing it too. So well maintained are the ruins that it was easy to imagine monks engaged in deep 'walking meditation' around the monastery all those centuries ago.

The lilac blooms of the korakaha, or ironwood tree, added to the splendour of the trail that lead us furtherinto the ruins. At one end of this path is the massive granite Banda Pokuna, one of the largest artificial ponds of the district (second only to the Eth Pokuna).Completely dry at the time of our visit, its majesty lay in its symmetry and size. In the other direction we found the monastery's ancient brick stupa, an inscription carved into the rock beside it.

Our next stop was the ancient temple Madagama Kanda Rahath Len Aranya, just a short drive from Kiralagala. Set deep in the forest, it's a remarkably peaceful place, undisturbed save for the occasional arrival of a villager offering alms. We admired the monks' kuti, cave dwellings made habitable by carving a drip ledge into the ceiling to stop water coming in, before trekking to the top of the hill to take in the view.

The 20-minute climb took us past the naturally occurring water holes once used by the monks as ponds, at least six metres deep and fed by rainfall seeping down through the mountain.A small circular carving at the edge of each one indicates the spot where the bhikkus drew their water. Excavation of the ponds has revealed further treasures: elaborately carved tile-like bricks that demonstrate the level of artistic accomplishment of people of the time.

The views from the top stretched far away into the distance, beyond the thick forest cover surrounding the temple and over paddy fields, wideopen grasslands and partially dry wewas. As the sun began to set, a troop of purple-faced leaf monkeys made their way towards the jungle, hopping from one branch to the next. Gradually, more and more villagers arrived to take a dip in the Horowpathana wewa, a soothing end to a good day's work and a soothing sight to end a good day's sightseeing.

