



Mesmerising and wild, Panama beach in the morning

Wandering through the untamed landscape of the wild and rustic southeastern coast of Sri Lanka, we stumbled upon remnants of the remarkable historic legacy of the bygone Ruhuna Kingdom, waiting to be unearthed.

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We had spent the late morning exploring Panama, soaking our feet in the curdling waves off the Panama beach and traversing amidst the golden sand dunes of Panama. Our eyes tingled at the sight of the bright palette of nature dancing in the rays of the sun. Travelling further inwards, we came across the Panama Wewa, where cattle grazed on its green pastures. It was from here that we unexpectedly found ourselves on the road to Panama Wawevehera Raja Maha Viharaya.

The foliage sheathed path leading to the temple exuded a sense of calm and serenity, before clearing a little to make way for the cave temple. Painted in modern colours, it dearly held on to the secrets of the past with an inscription along its drip-ledge. Yet, this was not the true marvel of this ancient site. Pushing past the dense shrubbery – thorns clinging to our clothes, and guided by a rough path, we wandered deep into a tangled web of green. This enchanting and mysterious woodland belongs to the Panama-Kudumbigala Sanctuary. We first came across stone slabs with inscriptions, the belief being that these belong to the first century BC.

We trudged on, hopping above rocks where we discovered remnants of the Ruhunu Kingdom fiercely entwined by the jungle. Around a dagoba were stone slabs bearing a trace of the Sri Pathula, several moonstones of which the most elaborate had been turned over

and a trace of the monastic wall bearing resemblance to the 'Walakulu Bamma'. A few steps more and we came across a 'Mal Asanaya', in the middle of a forest clearing, its position a mystery. The location of this site has led many to believe that this had an important connection to the ancient Kudumbigala Monastery. Here there was an entire ancient complex waiting to be discovered.



Neelagiri Maha Seya is being restored back to its bygone splendour

Our next encounter with the mystical archaeology of the area was as we journeyed along the Pottuvil road through Lahugala. We were pointed towards the Neelagiri Maha Seya, a towering dagoba with an aura of magnificence. It stood deep within the Lahugala National Park, though currently taking the form of a mountain, it was being restored back to its bygone splendour. As we strolled around the dagoba we witnessed the archaeological restoration process in progress. For centuries the area had been guarded by the forest and thus much of this ancient complex lay underground.

Excavations conducted thus far have revealed that this was built by King Kavantissa, a fact confirmed by the stone inscriptions of the Magul Maha Viharaya. For archaeologists, this is further proof that the brave princess Viharamaha Devi (205 BC - 161 BC) in fact landed in Pottuvil near the Muhudu Maha Viharaya, rather than the legendary belief that she came ashore at Kirinde. The Magul Maha Viharaya, also within the Lahugala sanctuary, is famed for the 'Magul Maduwa', the altar upon which the princess married King Kavantissa, thus becoming Queen Viharamaha Devi of Ruhuna. Records further indicate that many other monarchs and their queens have renovated the stupa over the centuries.



A moonstone guarded by the Panama-Kudumbigala Sanctuary

The circumference of Neelagiri stupa, which takes the water bubble shape (bubulakara) is approximately 600 feet. The three pesa walalu (basal rings) are currently being restored with clay bricks from the ruins being chipped and moulded back into shape. Artefacts and sacred relics unearthed from the stupa have been placed at Buddhist temples across the island including at the Mahamewuna Monastery and the Gangaramaya Temple in Colombo. The area under excavation is a mere tip of the iceberg as there is much left to uncover. By

observing the strong, barely uncovered walls that surround, one can almost imagine the massive extent that belongs to the stupa. Stumbling through the uneven terrain frequented by elephants, we were guided through the entire complex, which included a pond meticulously carved with steps. One can imagine how eons ago, within the blissful seclusion of the wild, monks immersed in the serenity of the area.

Leaving the aura of bygone magnificence, we were back on the road again. We had merely glimpsed the historical wonder of the southeastern coast. A great many remnants, legends and mysteries remain hidden and protected by the untouched land, waiting to be unearthed.

