On the A15: Kalkudah to Trincomalee

Posted on

The road from Kalkudah to Trincomalee: turn left and you are heading in the correct direction

It was early in the morning and we were yet again on an adventure on the A15, specifically from Kalkudah heading towards Trincomalee. This road, which previously had ferry points to travel across the numerous waterways, now had new bridges and roads that provided greater

connectivity. We were thrilled to be able to explore the many exciting sites along the way.

Words Udeshi Amarasinghe **Photographs** Indika De Silva and Damith Wickramasinghe

BRIDGES AND KOVILS

We crossed the Valachchenai bridge as the sun was gradually rising in the eastern skies.

Passing the vast landscape we headed towards Vakarai. The road stretched out in the distance like a grey ribbon. We soon came to a fork in the road, which had a central direction sign that guided us in the right way. We were soon upon the Kayankerni New Bridge, then Panichchankerny Bridge, which ran a length of 133m across the river paving the way for us to easily get through.

The monotony of the journey was broken by a splash of colours, the road was beautifully decorated with blue, yellow, green and red. Palm fronds were part of the decorations. We were at a kovil dedicated to Lord Murugan and the people were getting ready to celebrate the festival. The soothing sounds of devotional songs flowed towards us. Everyone was busy with preparations. A young boy selling a flavoursome breakfast of string hoppers and ‘pol’ sambol came our way, calling out as he walked. We peered into his small bucket and there were only a few string hoppers left. It seemed that business was good.

We proceeded on our journey and soon crossed the Verugal Aru over the Verugal New Bridge into Trincomalee district from Batticaloa. The gopuram of a large kovil was visible from the bridge and we slowly walked towards it. It was apparent that this site was extremely sacred as devotees took off their slippers at the edge of the kovil land. The Verugalampathy Sri Siththira Velayutha Swamy Devasthanam in Verugal, Mavadichenai is said to be a place where one of the three arrows of Lord Murugan had landed. The gopuram itself was still in its cement form. We entered through the large doorway and was amazed at the simplicity of the temple premises. It was extremely quiet, except for the sound of the morning pooja. The courtyard had been swept clean and there was no leaves on the ground. We walked around the temple absorbing its beauty and spirituality, before heading back on the road towards our destination.

LANKA PATUNA

We had aimed to reach Lanka Patuna early in the morning. However, having been distracted by the various sites on the way, we arrived at our destination, ‘not so’ early morning. There were already a few buses that had brought pilgrims from around the country. Some had been travelling for over ten days visiting the many religious places in the North and East. It is called a ‘Nadey’, where families get together and travel to religious sites.

The bridge at Lanka Patuna, which had been damaged during the tsunami had been removed completely so that a new bridge could be built. Till then devotees had to get across using the free boat service. This proved to be a test for our patience, as there were many people waiting to go to the temple. Apparently during low tide it was possible to walk across, but not today. We got into the boat and headed towards the temple.

Known as the Samudragiri Viharaya (the temple on the rock by the sea), the temple holds a significant place in the annals of history of Sri Lanka. It is here that Prince Dantha and Princess Hemamala set foot in Sri Lanka, carrying the sacred tooth relic of Lord Buddha. Buddhist kingdoms in India were faced with great threats during that time, hence King Guhasiva of Kalinga, sent the sacred tooth relic with his son and daughter-in-law to King Siri Meghavanna of Sri Lanka for protection. The royal duo brought their sacred package amidst great difficulty and secrecy and landed in Lankapatuna where they stayed the night before proceeding to Anuradhapura.

We scrambled out of the boat and began our ascent. Though there were many pilgrims, once we were on top, it was only us. The white stupa shone like a glistening beacon. The surrounding was very quiet and tranquil. A golden statue of Lord Buddha stood serenely, overlooking the blue ocean. The view from this point was breathtaking, while we had reached Lankapatuna from Passekudah side, there was another road from Thoppur side, which could be seen from the top of the rock.

Having worshipped at the small Budhu Gey, and admired the wall sculpture of Prince Dantha and Princess Hemamala, which was still in progress, we descended the rock to wait for the boat to take us across the azure waters.

We were soon back on the road and we reached a point where the signboard displayed that if we turned right we would reach Seruvila and if we turned left, Somawathiya. We first turned right…

SERUVILA (ALSO KNOWN AS SERUVAVILA)

The sun was blazing by the time we reached Seruvila, though it was still morning. It is said that the name Seruvila or Seruvavila had resulted from the fact that a large number of arahats had visited a pond (villa) and thus the area was name sivuru-ah-villa meaning the the pond where the saffron robes visited.

However, Seruvila is considered to be one of the most revered sites as it is linked to Lord Buddha's eighth visit to Sri Lanka. Furthermore, it is said that the relics of the three Buddhas prior to Gautama Buddha; Kukusada, Konagama and Kashyapa too had been enshrined in this region. Following the parinibbana or passing of Gautama Buddha, the Lalata Dathu or the forehead bone relic was enshrined in the stupa at Seruvila, according to his wishes.

The significance of Seruvila Raaja Maha Viharaya has not diminished with time. Even today, the temple is crowded with devotees, who brave the hot sun to pray reflect in the spirituality of this site. The white stupa with its four ancient doorways was the focal point for me. Devotees were seated under an ancient tree worshiping, while others placed flowers at the altar. Farther away was a newly built Budhu Gey with a large seated Buddha statue. The interior was not yet complete while artists concentrated on completing the temple art that was to adorn the walls. Heading back towards the Stupa, we stopped at a massive pond, which had stone slabs placed perfectly on top of each other to form a step-like design. As the area had not seen rain in months, the pond was completely empty. It is said that this pond provided water for the monks of the monastery. The remaining structure of the ancient Bodhigaraya that once protected the sacred Bo tree, still protectively shaded a Bo sapling slowly but surely growing taller each day.

SOMAWATHIYA

Coming back to the A15 from Seruvila we headed towards Somawathiya. The 45 km carpeted road soon became a dusty gravel road. We journeyed for a few hours. Somawathiya Temple is located within the Somawathiya wildlife sanctuary. Built by King Abhaya for his wife, Queen Somawathie to worship, it is said that the Stupa was located on the banks of the Mahaweli. Here the King met Arahat Mahinda Thero (Mihindu Thero) and 60 other Arahats residing in the forest on his search for a suitable location for worship and reverence.

The Stupa, which is in the shape of a droplet, is said to enshrine the right tooth relic

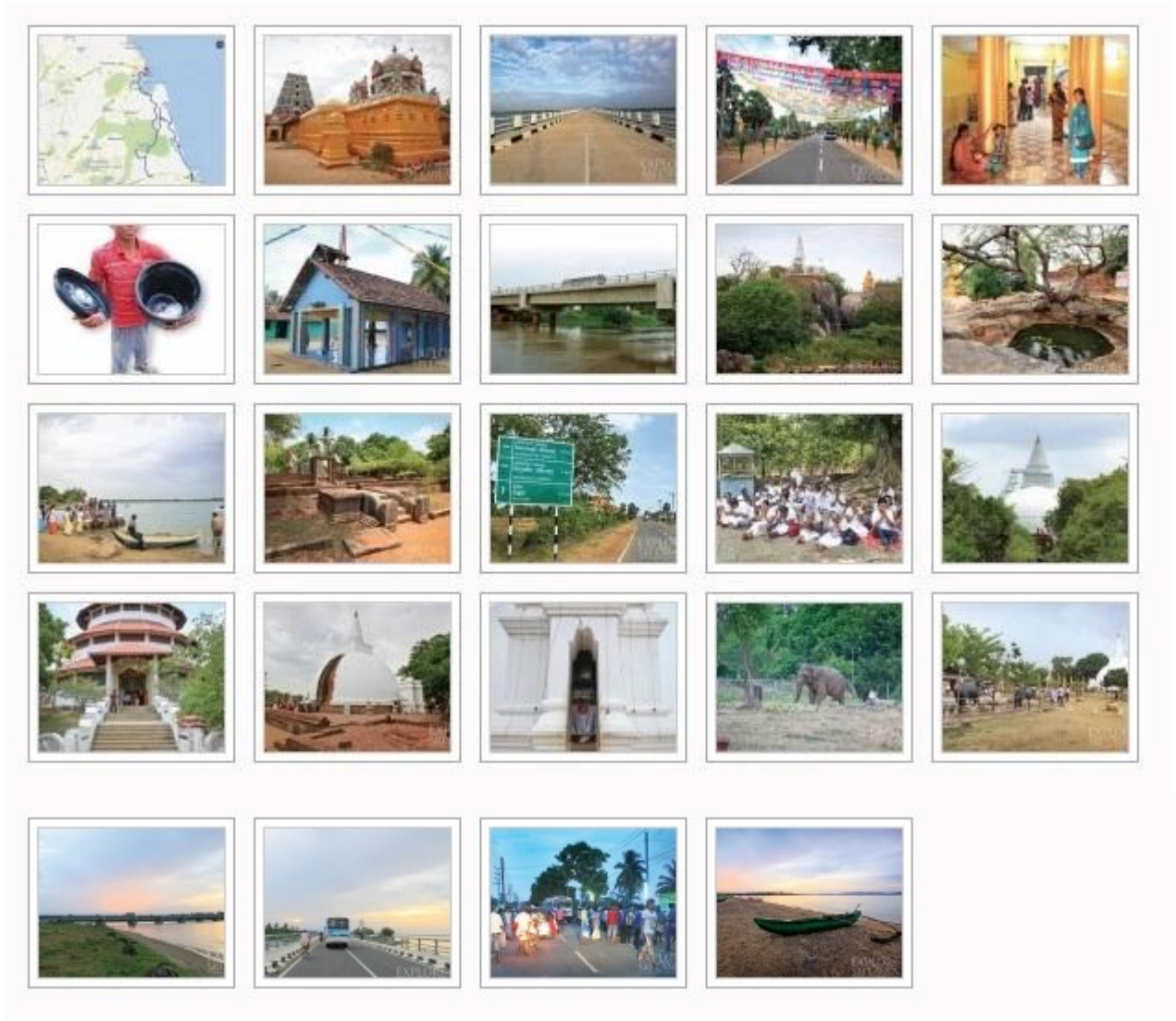
of Lord Buddha. A deep cleft has been left visible in the Stupa to expose the ancient brick of the original stupa as it has been renovated over time. What is also unique about the Somawathiya Stupa is that the altars are within the stupa itself. Here devotees have to climb the steps in single file into small enclosures that accommodate about four people.

Today the Somawathie Temple is located to the west of the Mahaweli river, which is within the Polonnaruwa district. It's position is very different from what is described in the Mahavamsa, which says that the Stupa is on the east embankment of the river. However, this change in location is thought to be a result of the river changing its path over time. During the rainy season, it is very well known that the area around Somawathiya goes under water. It is also apparent that the current road too lies on the river bed of the ancient Mahaweli river.

It is true that Somawathie Raaja Maha Viharaya is within the wilderness, one can feel it when they enter the premises. As if reading my mind, a lone wild elephant entered the compound, to soon run back into the jungle due to the crowd that day. It is said that at times, herds of elephant come to Somawathiya Temple. Its remoteness has created a safe haven amidst the wilderness for both man and animal.

On our quest to explore the stretch from Kalkudah to Trincomalee we had unintentionally visited three of the most sacred sites in Buddhism. I felt deeply humbled.

MUTTUR AND KINNIYA BRIDGE

We journeyed on, covering greater distance as the sun started to recede in the West. We cut across Muttur, a little township and proceeded farther, over the Gangai New Bridge to finally reach Kinniya Bridge (the longest bridge of the country), as the sun finally bid adieu to the day creating a panaroma of colour in the eastern skies.

Having finally arrived in Trincomalee town, we had come to the end of our journey. We had travelled about 403 km in ten hours. I would say that we had spent our day very well!