

Ratnapura A treasure trove of Adventures



The midst of vibrant Ratnapura

Leaving behind the hectic hustle and bustle of Colombo we leisurely inched towards Ratnapura or the City of Gems. Cruising along the Panadura-Horana-Ratnapura Highway, by and by the buildings gave way to rubber plantations and beautiful green vistas. We marvelled at the sudden change in the climate and the cool clime that so easily engulfed us - a mere two hours or so away from the commercial capital of Colombo.

Words Krishani Peiris **Photographs** Indika De Silva

Sabaragamuwa or Saparagamuwa? I stared at a plaque and let my mind ravel

through this intriguing puzzle. And apparently the correct terminology of the Province is deemed by many experts to be Sapparagamuwa, which may have been influenced by tourists visiting the country in the first century AD. As saplar, sappar and similar names were used to identify gems that were quite abundant in Sapparagamuwa, historians believe that the name Sapparagrama could have been derived through the ages as Sapparagamu, Sapparagomu and finally Sabaragamuwa during the Kotte Kingdom for convenience in pronunciation. However, the story that unravels here is not about the Province but about Ratnapura, the main city in Sabaragamuwa – the treasure or rather the gem-trove of Sri Lanka.

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Sapparagamu Maha Saman Dewalaya

Ratnapura is famous for mainly three things. They are gems, the Sri Pada (Adam's Peak) and the Sapparagamu Maha Saman Dewalaya. Ancient tales and volumes chronicling Lord Buddha's visits to Sri Lanka tells of Sumana, a provincial ruler of the Deva clan, who was a devout follower of Lord Buddha and His teachings. It is said that after Lord Sumana's demise he was elevated to the prominence of a god and is considered to be the guardian deity of Sri Pada and the Sabaragamuwa Province.

Built during the Dambadeniya Kingdom (1220-1354), the Dewalaya has an extensive history that is riddled with wonders and chaos at times. The origination of the Dewalaya is attributed to a monk by the name of Seelavansha Himi, who has brought a statue of Saman Deviyo from Sri Pada to be placed in the then Sapparagrama Vihara or Temple. Since that time many Kings of Sri Lanka has held the Dewalaya in much eminence, constructing and adding their own touches to show their devotions and belief in the temple. The Dewalaya has also been a place where the Tooth Relic of Lord Buddha was kept and where the Dalada Perahera was conducted for 11 years.

The structure present now is believed to have been built by King Keerthi Sri Rajasinghe after the Portuguese and Dutch destroyed the Dewalaya to build their own strongholds. Therefore the influence of the Kandyan Kingdom architecture and art could be seen throughout the sacred grounds. Before stepping into the Dewalaya a quick tour in the newly built museum where parts of the olden temple

and other historical findings were displayed accompanied by an overview of the countless exciting tales spun around the temple aided us to understand the history of the Dewalaya better.

We zig zagged our way around the people who thronged the Dewala grounds seeking the blessings of Sumana Deviyo. Lotuses and other variant flowers in hand, first they would stop at the Shrine room to worship Lord Buddha before carrying pooja baskets to the Shrine of Sumana Deviyo. Heads bent in reverence, like one, all listened to the chants read by the priest and the periphery filled with a silence that was only broken by the low murmurs from outside.

Pothgul Viharaya

A long flight of stairs, 469 steps to be exact, awaited us as we set out to the Pothgul Viharaya in Karangoda situated atop a rock. In the distance we could make out a white building as we concentrated on putting one step over the other to reach the summit. However, when we reached the top the breathtaking panorama that could be witnessed made us forget the weary climb and rejuvenated us to explore this fascinating Temple with vigor.

The Temple was built by King Valagamba of Anuradhapura, under the guidance of Kushikkala Tissa Thero in 2nd Century BC. When the Tripitaka - the Dhamma - was written in Aluvihare, Matale, under the sponsorship of King Valagamba, palmyrah trees that were abundant in the area were used. One of the Temple caves was used to store the books bound by the ola leaves, obtained by the palmyrah trees, till they were carried to their destination and the cave was named the Pothgala (Poth for books and gala for rock), which later became Pothgul once the Temple was built.

Stepping into the Main shrine room, our gaze was at once drawn to the reclining Buddha statue, built by King Valagamba, that is about 18 cubits long. A small waterhole in front also caught our attention as it is said that if a lotus is placed in the water, it emerges in a pond located at the Samana Dewalaya. The cave roof was adorned with motifs that were painted in the ancient times. Though faded we were still able to see the exquisite artistry that were possessed by the people of old.

Going through a passageway that led behind the Buddha statue, we observed a

doorway that framed the entrance of a tunnel. It is believed that King Valagamba and his army have used this tunnel as a hideaway and an escape route in turbulent times. The engulfing darkness and urban lore about disappearances hindered us from venturing inside. Treading the passageway farther, we stopped by two old statues of gods Vishnu and Saman before retracing our steps.

Outside of this shrine room were more structures and most of these were thought to have been built by King Keerthi Sri Rajasinghe and show telltale signs of the Kandyan Kingdom artistry.

Chasing Waterfalls

Ratnapura with many mountainous terrains is renowned for the captivating waterfalls such as Bopath Ella, Alupola Ella, Dehena Ella and more. After learning that Dehena Ella is the seventh widest waterfall in Sri Lanka, we went in search of its beauty, first treading the historic Ratnapura-Palabaddala road to Adam's Peak before diverting towards Alupolla.

Sprawling tea estates and green foliage flagged the sides of the narrow road and rain was our constant companion along the winding climb. Reaching the Dehena Ella we were entranced by its splendour, pouring forth readily sprinkling its cooling droplets in all directions. As we watched the water seemed to swell and the width of the fall seemed to expand with the rainfall and it was clear that during rainy weather venturing into the waters for a cool dip would be unwise.

Even then, just enjoying the beauty that flowed through was enough to make the trail up to the falls a worthwhile journey.

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Ratnapura District is filled with many interesting things to explore. Sneak-a-peek into a gem mine to experience gem mining up close and step into a gem museum to discover the wonders of the gem world. For those who are interested in trekking, Ratnapura offers alluring as well as exciting nature trails while Sinharaja is also located in close proximity for nature lovers. Whitewater rafting in the Kelani River, safaris to the Udawalawe sanctuary and much more could further be easily accessed for the thrill seekers to get that extra bit of adrenaline pumping.

To top it all, the Ehelepola Walawwa, a residence of the Ehelepola Nilame of the Kandyan Kingdom now turned into a museum, will without a doubt fascinate those who wonder in, by the past artifacts unearthed from the area.

Ratnaloka Tour Inns

Located adjacent to tea estates and covered by lush greenery all around, the Ratnaloka Tour Inns stands resplendent in the enchanting nature that surrounds it. Built nearly 40 years ago, the hotel boasts of a vast experience in hospitality and encompasses an area of about 50 acres with flourishing tea estates.

Sri Lankan culture, values and artwork have taken the centre stage as the furniture, the art and the decorations reflect the cultural aspects of the Island. The foyer of the hotel is arranged as a lobby area where guests could enjoy a refreshing cup of tea or coffee overlooking the lush fields during the day or revel in the cooling breeze at night. The pool area, lined with cardamon trees depicts an excellent area for a dip or to relax enjoying the warming rays of the sun.

Equipped with 53 rooms, where 11 are deluxe rooms, the hotel presents much comfort and tranquillity for guests who are in quest for respite. The rooms are arrayed with a variant of amenities such as mini bar facilities, wifi and much more. Decked in soothing colours such as orange and white with dark hues thrown in for contrast, the rooms pose an ideal area to relax while seated in the balcony or even stretched out in bed.

The main restaurant of Ratnaloka Tour Inns situated in the first floor could accommodate an ample amount of guests and serve western, eastern and local cuisines to make certain that guests are spoilt for choice when selecting through each mouthwatering dish. The Orchid Restaurant, air conditioned, paves the way for a cooling get together if one is trying to escape the heat during the dry seasons. Further, the cozy little bar area arranged with comfy sofas and stools sets the perfect ambience for a drink or a cocktail from the extensive selection at hand.

Excursions are arranged by the hotel and include gem mining, treks to the Sinharaja Tropical Rain Forest, Adam's Peak and safaris to the Udawalawa National Park to name a few. A gem museum is housed within the hotel complex and without travelling far, guests could get to know the marvels of gems right within the comfort of the Hotel.

For those who seek adventure, leisure time or sightseeing, steeped in history with many ancient temples and places scattered around the District, Ratnapura holds a myriad of activities that would take days and days to tire of.

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