

Retreats in the Sacred City



The Sanctuary at Tissawewa

As the first ancient kingdom of Sri Lanka, Anuradhapura offers a magical blend of culture, history and Buddhism. It is the city that speaks of our beginnings. Located minutes away from the Atamasthana, or eight great places of veneration, are The Sanctuary and The Lakeside, two hotels offering pilgrims and hikers alike a moment of respite.

Words Keshini de Silva | **Photographs** Isuru Upeksha

Birds' were chirping melodiously as we drove up the wet driveway of The Sanctuary at Tissawewa. Flanked by ancient towering trees on an expansive lawn, it's just around the corner from the Ruwanwelisaya stupa. In the distance, we spot a striking white edifice of British colonial architecture, a traditional Sri Lankan bullock cart in pride of place in its porch. After pulling up, we were greeted with a sip of tropical mango and a taste of chocolate that refreshed our travel-worn spirits. Then it was off to explore.

Complementing the historic architecture, antique-style furnishings adorn rooms that once hosted British colonial rulers, as well the likes of Jawaharlal Nehru and Queen Elizabeth II in more modern times. Lunch was just being served as we arrived - a select menu offering Western and Sri Lankan cuisine, plus an à la carte menu.

Having climbed the gleaming wooden stairs, we reached a long balcony giving onto the hotel's triple room, deluxe rooms and an indoor lounge with reclining chairs that leads, in turn, onto a veranda. The triple room is an impressive replica of an affluent colonial chamber, with an antique-style dresser, writing desk, large double bed and additional single bed. A doorway leads to the en suite bathroom. The cosy deluxe double rooms next door tick all the boxes for comfort.

On the ground floor are the semi-deluxe rooms, each furnished with two twin four-poster beds. The porch that connect them is also lined with wooden reclining chairs, and is a great place to breath in the freshness of nature, washed clean by a recent burst of monsoon rain.



A traditional Sri Lankan bullock cart in the porch at The Sanctuary

A peafowl's call could be heard from afar, the sound mingling with the screeching of parrots perched in the branches of nearby trees. We caught sight of the nest of a white-bellied sea eagle in the distance.

Established during British colonial times, the 11-acre garden of the hotel is home to ancient mahogany, teak, satinwood, willow and nuga trees, as well as at least 74 species of birds. Guests might even spot the endemic grey hornbill, if they're lucky. Set on sacred land, where the hum of temple drums can be heard in the distance, the hotel does not serve alcohol, but the team encourages guests to be innovative with their requests, eating on the balcony or in the garden.

A ten minute drive from The Sanctuary and we've arrived at The Lakeside Hotel. This spot, known as the Old Anuradhapura bus stop, is an important landmark in the city, and is just five minutes from the Isurumuniya temple.

The interior of the hotel is decorated in a charmingly simple fashion, with paintings of ancient sites adorning the walls and a light fragrance of jasmine lingering in the air. As we entered we were served a bubbly welcome drink of soursop juice. The affable staff bustled about, tending to famished guests at the lunch buffet. Known for its wholesome cuisine, which is also available à la carte, the hotel is a popular stop for sightseers wanting to grab a bite of lunch.

A dining area, kissed by the soft breeze off the lake, overlooks a serene view of the pool and garden. Guests can borrow bicycles from the hotel for a ride along the sandy path encircling the water.

The suite on the ground floor is spacious and comfortable, with a view of the garden and reservoir. Its snug en suite bathroom boasts an inviting bathtub. The private balconies of the deluxe rooms on the second floor overlook the surrounding forest and garden, and while the songs of the avian visitors are not as varied as at The Sanctuary, they're loud enough to drown out the sounds of the city nearby.

This 70-room hotel offers all the comforts necessary for an enjoyable stay, and even provides tour assistance if required. For those embarking on long tours, the hotel is ready to pack up breakfast or lunch. However, sightseers trudge back to the hotel for short breaks to rest their aching feet or grab a bite of scrumptious sustenance, before heading back out to squeeze in as many historic sites as possible during their visit to this fascinating part of the Island.

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