

Sri Pada: The Sacred Mountain of Sri Lanka



Devotees from all faiths embark on a pilgrimage to the top of the sacred mountain.

The sky and earth are split by a golden line. Sunrays color a panorama of hilltops. As the sun rises, the triangular silhouette of Sri Pada casts itself on the green landscape. In the background, a bell rings out, as each devotee sounds out the number of times they have made the pilgrimage to the mount.

Words Keshini de Silva.

Photographs BT Images.

Sri Pada, Samanalakanda or Adam's Peak, there are many names to the 2,243-metre-tall mountain. The Sri Pada pilgrimage season begins from Unduvap Poya in December to Vesak Poya in May. During this period, people from different faiths and all walks of life make the arduous trek with great devotion to the

summit.

The sacred mountain is visited by thousands of pilgrims to pay homage to the large footprint at the summit. Buddhists believe it is the footprint of the Buddha. While the Hindus consider it the footprint of Shiva, and, Muslims and Christians believe it is the footprint of Adam, the first man.

The footprint is said to have been discovered by King Walagambahu in 1,000BC, who deemed it to have been imprinted on the Buddha's third visit to Sri Lanka. Over the centuries, King Vijayabahu and King Parakramabahu II built shelters, cleared jungle and built paths. The Ratnapura Route, Kuruwita Route and Hatton Route, are some of the main trails to the top. For those hoping to see the iconic sunrise, the journey begins at night. Hikers pack for a cool night and chilly winds. The path is one that celebrates nature. It is a journey where pilgrims fortify their spirits through rhyme and song. Most importantly, there is no discussions on the distance, as it is important to think only of reaching the summit. Along the way are shops that offer refreshment and respite. As the pilgrims ascend with fervor to reach the top, an important stop along the way is Seetha Gangula. The icy waters of this stream refresh those making the trek to the top. Pilgrims stop here to recite pansil, five precepts of Buddhism and make a Pandura (offering) for protection to Saman Deviyo, the guardian deity of Sri Pada and one of the four guardian gods of Sri Lanka.

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Next those encounter a large weave of white thread. It is called Indikatupana, and marks the place where the Buddha is believed to have stopped to mend a tear in his robe. The white web has been created by pilgrims who observe the tradition of unravelling white thread and placing the needle at Indikatupana. From this point onwards the intensity of the journey increases both spiritually and physically.

Mahagiridamba, the final stretch to the summit, is a path set on rock. Today, iron rails support the pilgrims on the journey under the stars. Near the top of the mount is the Bhagava Cave, once the only refuge from rain or place of respite for pilgrims making the journey. There are three epigraphs at the site, two of which were authored by King Nissankamalla and the third by Ibn Battuta.

The rock plateau upon which the footprint has been imprinted is surrounded by a parapet wall. Once at the top, an ornate shrine comes into view. Here, the footprint has been enshrined. Today, one cannot see the original footprint as it has been covered by a stone slab.

During the pilgrimage season, the shrine is open for public viewing, and people flock to the door to catch a glimpse of the sacred footprint and observe their worship. As dawn breaks, eyes turn towards the visual of the rising sun and the shadow of the mount on the verdant plain. Many linger at the summit for sometime to catch their breath and meditate amidst this serenity.

After breathing in the crisp air and view of the Peak Wilderness Sanctuary and the Horton Plains National Park, the decent begins. Whether you make a hike or pilgrimage to Sri Pada, and no matter which path you choose, summiting this sacred mountain is a must do for many Sri Lankans and a remarkable experience for all.



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