



The white chaitya silhouetted against the fading light

We come to it as evening falls. It is that still time of the day suspended between day and night. At first sight it is unremarkable. A flat expanse of rock sloping upwards. And then a flight of steps. Nothing warns us of what is to come.

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We clamber up the roughly hewn steps. The only sound is the rustling of leaves from the Bo tree above. We reach the top and the world falls away. On one side, on an adjoining rock, the white chaitya (stupa) is silhouetted against the light. Ahead, the rock slopes down to the pond below. No crowds. No bustle. No noise. Only the rock and the sky and the glimmer of water below. To see this makes us wonder why temples were built in places of such stark beauty. With this in front of you, who would want to renounce the world?

For the first time visitor, exploring Tantirimale Raja Maha Viharaya can be both enchanting and bewildering. The temple is spread out over a sprawling rock complex. The bodhiya (bo tree) is perched high on top of the first rock and stands like a sentinel guiding the visitor. From the bodhiya we descend another rock face to reach the samadhi (seated) statue.

Carved from rock, the samadhi statue sits in a small enclosure. There are signs that worshippers have recently visited. Two sesath (ceremonial flag) have been placed behind it. An ata pirikara (offering to buddhist clergy) carefully wrapped in brown paper has been left next to the statue; the offerings make splashes of colour against the austere grey surroundings. Next to the samadhi statue, other figures of deities have been carved into the rock.

From the samadhi statue we climb back up onto the rock plateau next to the bodhiya. Looking around it is difficult to see where the rock ends, it seems like an endless expanse. The rock slopes steeply downwards and finally ends in a sandy area with a small museum. From here a narrow path leads across a pond. The late evening light is fast fading now, and casts a pale glow over the water. Trees stand on either side, their branches reflected in the still water.

On the far side of the pond, on the rock, is an ancient pothgula or library where the priests who inhabited the temple in ancient times were reputed to have stored books. Set into the rock below it is a small cave, which was used as a meditation chamber by the monks. Paths lead through the surrounding forest to another cluster of caves situated around half a mile from the temple, which are reputed to have drawings dating from prehistoric times; some of these were discovered in the early twentieth century.

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Darkness is closing in now, but there is one more thing to be seen, the sethapena (reclining) statue. Finding the statue is a challenge. Finally, I see a railing with some rough steps hewn into the rock next to it. Clinging to the railing I inch my way down and as I turn the last corner, suddenly, the massive statue is before me. From the rock above it is invisible and it is difficult to understand how something so large and imposing could be so well hidden. Forty five feet in length, the statue dominates the landscape. Dwarfed by the statue on the rock opposite, drummers prepare for a pooja (ceremonial worship) to be held later. Their figures stand out in lonely splendour and we sit and watch until the final glimmers of light disappear.

The samadhi (seated) statue sits in a small enclosure. Next to the samadhi statue, other figures of deities have been carved into the rock but left incomplete - it is believed that the monastery was

abandoned in haste due to foreign invasions.

We are not the only visitors who came to Tantirimale and found it difficult to leave. According to legend, Tantirimale was in ancient times known as Thiwakka Bamunugama since the area was under a Bamuna (hermit) named Thiwakka. When the Bo sapling was brought from India to Sri Lanka by Theri Sanghamittta in the 3rd Century BC, the delegation rested for a night at the 'village of the Bamuna Thiwakka'. It is said that an off shoot of the sacred Bo sapling was presented to the hermit as a token of appreciation and it is this that is worshipped at the temple today. Tantirimale is also linked with the legend of Saliya and Ashokamala. Saliya was the son of King Dutugemunu, who was banished for marrying a lower caste girl, Ashokamala; it is said that after leaving Anuradhapura they lived in Tantirimale. Tantirimale has been used as a Buddhist monastery since ancient times and it is believed that the statues date back to the end of the Anuradhapura period. Next to the site of the historical temple is also a new chaitya and shrine room built in the 1970s.

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There is something elusive about Tantirimale, something that is difficult to capture. Perhaps it's due to the temple's past. It is believed that the monastery was abandoned in haste, presumably due to foreign invasions at the end of the Anuradhapura period. Some of the statues were never completed. Perhaps because of this uncertain beginning, although Tantirimale is renowned for its historical significance, it has attracted less attention than neighbouring Anuradhapura.

Yet this does not detract from its beauty, it only adds to it. As we leave we look back one final time at this curious temple on the rock. The light has left the sky now. The statues will stand alone in the darkness until morning. As they have stood, beautiful and unchanging, for so many years in the past.

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