

Temple of War: The Road to Andaulpotha and the Other Nagadeepa

Posted on



Late afternoon over the Victoria Reservoir, with the golf course in the foreground and the dam in the distance

An ancient temple hidden in the jungle on the far side of the Central Highlands, its origins unknown and unexplored, and home to a dark force with the power to grant victory in war.

Words and Photographs David Blacker



A devotee prays as he circles the Nagadeepa stupa

It is also rumoured to have been visited by the Buddha, over 2,500 years ago; if true, that would make it a 17th *solosmasthanaya*, an unrecorded rival to the other 16 places the Buddha is said to have visited in Sri Lanka. The perfect formula to get me on the road east.

The Nagadeepa Viharaya sits on the shores of a tank at the far end of the Badulla District in the flatlands close to Mahiyanganaya, quite a few hours by road from Colombo. I decided that Digana, east of the hill capital of Kandy, would be the ideal base from which to launch my road trip. From there, two legendary driving roads wind down to the plains, both intersecting at the small town of Andaulpotha - the Spring of Eels - close to the Nagadeepa Tank.

Leaving Colombo on a Saturday morning, I was in Digana in time for an amazing lunch overlooking the golf course nearby. After an evening swim and a good night's rest, I downed a couple of cups of coffee and was ready to go by 7am. I opted for the shorter 77 km run down the A26 Kandy-Mahiyangana-Padiyathalawa Highway, which climbs up through Bombrawa before dropping 600 m in altitude to the flatlands.

I would save the longer 100 km route on the B492 Mahaweli Raja Mawatha for my return journey. While this road isn't as well surfaced as the A26, it is just as fun, with fast switchback bends up past the Loggal Oya, and through the dense highland jungles of the Victoria Randenigala Rantambe Sanctuary. The massive hydro-catchment projects of Rantambe, Randenigala and Victoria, linked by this road, are engineering feats by the modern rulers of Sri Lanka that rival those of the ancient kings of Sivhela.

Barely out of Digana, however, my stomach declared that it needed more than coffee, and I stopped for breakfast at a little-known place offering very basic rooms and homely local fare. Fresh string hoppers, *parippu* (dhal) curry, egg *kiri hodhi* (coconut milk gravy), and pol sambol were swiftly dished up for me in an empty restaurant overlooking the Victoria Dam. Piping hot Ceylon tea infused with ginger washed everything down, and I was soon back on the road.

A kilometre later I turned left onto the narrow Nagadeepa Road, and soon arrived at the sluice gates of the beautiful Nagadeepa Maha Wewa, built in 1968 by damming the Hepola Oya.

The A26 was as advertised: brilliant for driving, with the towering Knuckles mountain range on one side and steep valleys on the other, culminating in the gut-churning Daha Ata Wanguwa, or Eighteen Bends, which dropped me 400 m vertically in as much horizontal distance, in a series of spectacular hairpins over the Hasalaka River. A good workout for both brakes and gearbox, but if you're lucky enough to be in a rear-wheel-drive car, you'll be soon accelerating into the uphill bends like Sebastien Loeb. I raced through the town of Hasalaka, home to the national hero Gamini Kularatne, and across the green paddy fields now spreading away from the road. Soon I was at the Mahaweli, Sri Lanka's greatest river, and I crossed it into Mahiyanganaya. It was time for some sightseeing.

Mahiyanganaya is a popular pilgrimage site for Buddhists, both local and foreign. It is said to be the first place on the Island visited by the Buddha in 528 BC, and the Miyuguna Seya, Sri Lanka's first stupa, was built there shortly afterwards to enshrine several hairs from his

head. Next to it is a devalaya to Sumana Saman, who built the stupa, portions of which are over two millennia old. Mahiyanganaya has a palpable sense of peace about it. Seeking a change of mood I headed off in search of the temple of war.

Taking the B57 Bibile Road southeast out of Mahiyanganaya, I passed the Mapakada tank on my right, and was in Andaulpotha before I knew it – a small collection of shops and houses clustered around a clock tower. A kilometre later I turned left onto the narrow Nagadeepa Road, and soon arrived at the sluice gates of the beautiful Nagadeepa Maha Wewa, built in 1968 by damming the Hepola Oya.

The temple should have been almost exactly opposite my position atop the sluice gates, a kilometre and a half across the water, but I could see no sign of it; the jungle was too thick on the far side. The road circled the tank, and I decided it would make a pleasant drive, so I pressed on. The road lay arrow straight for two kilometres along the top of the bund that divided the waters from the green paddy fields they irrigated, but beyond this it disintegrated into a rocky track. Five km later my long-suffering steed and I reached the temple.

A small *dagoba* of crumbling dark brick dominates the premises and, on the day, was brightly garlanded with flowers. A few devotees encircled it, hands clasped and eyes closed in prayer. One of the stories associated with the temple is that King Dutugemunu travelled here in the 2nd century BC, before his war against the Chola king, Elara, to seek divine support. His wish for victory was granted, and it is possible that the smaller stupa was constructed in thanks. A massive ruined *dagoba* lies beyond – much older, its builder is unknown. An obviously new shrine to the Buddha stands on one side, added by President Rajapaksa in gratitude for the divine help he too implored – and perhaps received – in 2009, to win his war against terrorism. Clearly, Nagadeepa is a special place.

On the subject of a visit by the Buddha, no one could help, and all the talk amongst those present was of dark forces in the dark trees along the shores of the tank; forces that had driven away every monk that had attempted to take up residence at Nagadeepa. My questions unanswered, I left. Some old things do not care for the questions of the young.

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