

The Fairy Bridge of Bogoda

On her travels in the Hill Country Florence Ratwatte discovers...



A drive down a sleepy country road bordered by terraced rice fields, pineapple plots and tobacco plantations leads to an enchanting discovery: the 'fairy' bridge of Bogoda.

It's off the tourist circuit and looks more remote and secretive than it really is. Although it is well hidden from view, it is easily accessible, as long as you are in the hill country between Bandarawela and Badulla.

To get to the bridge, you begin by following the steep path to the ancient Buddhist rock temple, the Bogoda Raja Maha Vihara (a royal-patronage temple). Suddenly you come upon an exquisite roofed ridge poised over a turbulent mountain stream. The stream is the Gallanda Oya, a tributary of the Uma Oya, one of the main rivers that wash the Uva Basin.

The bridge has a dream-like quality about it, an air of an Oriental Camelot. Nothing in the

quiet, rustic environment has changed since the bridge was constructed. It is more recent, though, than the rock temple which has inscriptions dating to the 12th century. The bridge is probably 300 years old, judging from its strong Kandyan period (16th to 19th century) style.

Whatever the vintage, the bridge is a beautiful creation, wrought not by mere builders but by artists and craftsmen who made even the business of crossing rivers an aesthetic experience. The proportions have perfect symmetry; the span between two huge rocks on either bank is slung high over the torrent and seems suspended with a delicate aerial grace.

The bridge is not a long one, being about 15m in length and two metres across. The base-work consists of three exceptionally long tree trunks laid across the chasm, linking the two rocks to ford the stream. This is supported in mid-stream by a massive upright of two enormous tree trunks carrying a crossbar.

After bridging the river with a stout and solid span, the builder lavished their creation with splendid artistry. The bridge is enclosed by an outer railing of carved and rounded banister. On the inner side of this railing, 11 pairs of carved wooden pillar support an elegant gabled shingle roof.

Traces remain of lacquer work in brilliant vermillion, ochre and turquoise; this is natural lacquer, a forest product that was a cottage craft in the Kandyan provinces. The bridge is constructed entirely of local hardwoods such as milla (*Vitex altissima*) and na (*Mesua ferrea*) without the use of metal nails. That it has survived the rainstorms and violent flood that sweep down the valley vouches for a sturdy construction that belies its faery form.

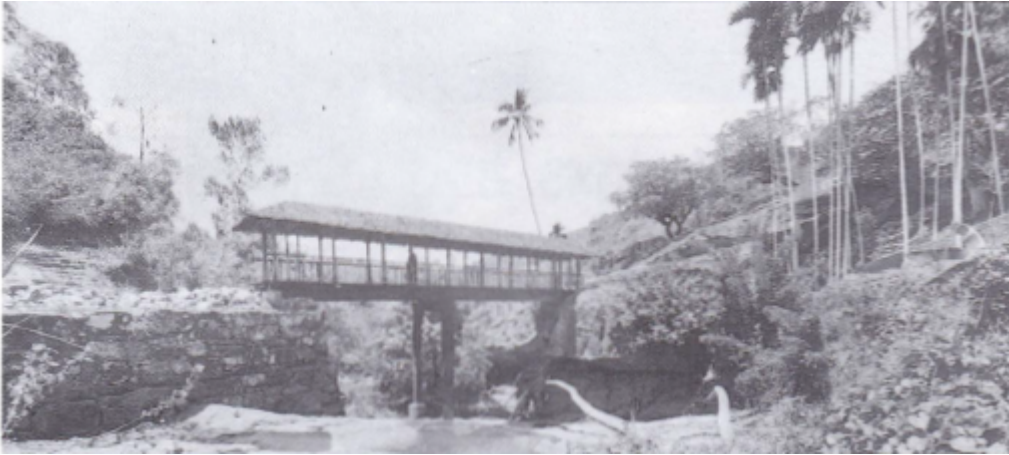
You cannot imagine anything heavier than a golden royal palanquin with twinkling silver bells crossing this entrancing bridge. A pilgrim path leading from it and planted for five kilometres with sacred Bo trees, was the old road to the sacred city of Mahiyangana.

(Mahiyangana, sanctified by a visit from the Buddha in the days of legend, is picturesquely sited on the banks of the Mahaweli river. It is one of Sri Lanka's most revered pilgrim centres and enshrines a hair relic of the Buddha. The legend goes that God Saman, one of the great guardian deities of Sri Lanka, beseeched the Buddha when he prepared to leave Mahiyangana for a personal keep-ake to venerate. The Buddha touched his forehead and presented the god with a strand of hair over which the great dagaba was originally built).

From Mahiyangana, an incredible cork-er-road of hairpin bends climbs uphill to the former royal city of Kandy. This was the medieval road on which the king of Kandy and his

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train travelled, crossing streams on graceful bridges just like the one at Bogoda.



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