

The Living Temples of Anuradhapura

Posted on

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The Ruwanveliseya, largest dagaba in the world, was built in the shape of a water bubble in the 2nd century B. C. Photo courtesy: Ceylon Tourist Board.

The saffron-robed young boy who walks by the edge of the road with his head bent a little low could be as playful as any boy his age, 13, within the precincts of his temple. There are many such boys, learning the first steps of the Brother hood of the Buddhist Order the Sangha – and there are many temples that train them in the Sangha discipline in Anuradhapura. Here at Anuradhapura, young boys have been molded in to learned monks for over 2000 years. Anuradhapura is both Buddhism's holiest city, and the most ancient one as well. It is also the pride of Sri Lanka's history and its people who more than two millennia ago turned parched soil into fertile land and who developed a unique civilization tempered by the tolerances of Buddhism. Anuradhapura is the city of the Dagaba and reservoir, the twin symbols of Sri Lanka's Buddhist civilization.

Anuradhapura today is not a place of abandoned ancient monuments. It is not a place which people built and then abandoned due to the vagaries of history. Anuradhapura is history itself, yesterday and today. In the days of its glory, which extended over a thousand years from circa 380 B.C. till the 10th century A.D., the kings of Anuradhapura exchanged ambassadors with the Courts of Rome and Peking. Ancient chroniclers record the existence of special streets to house Greek travellers ("Yonas" – Ionians). It was a thriving center of civilization when Alexander the Great was moving eastward in conquest, and remained a center of Asian learning when the Romans were invading Britain.

The Mahamega Gardens, in and around Anuradhapura's most famous shrines and historical places, was among the oldest sanctuaries in the world. It was gifted to the Buddhist Order by King Devenampiyatissa in 247B.C. when Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka. The King's edict was that the huge parkland be for the Order's exclusive use, and that nothing living within its perimeter – both fauna and

flora should be harmed. The tradition continues to this day. Visit Anuradhapura any day, and you will mingle with Buddhists carrying trays of fresh flowers, walking to one of the many ancient shrines to place them at the feet of the Buddha, thereby seeking release from the coils of “Samsara” and the escape from rebirth.

There will be devotees at the Sri Maha Bodhi, a tree grown from the branch of the very Bodhi tree (*Ficus Religiosa*) under which the Buddha attained enlightenment in Bodhi Gaya, India, 2531 years ago. The sapling from which the Sri Maha Bodhi has grown was brought to Anuradhapura in the 3rd century B.C., and is today the oldest historically documented tree in the world. Kings and commoners have venerated it through the centuries, as seen from the many protective walls built around it and the entrance arches to the sacred premises. The beautiful gilded fence, the “Ran Veta,” which is closest to the Bodhi was built by Buddhist devotees in the 1950s to mark 2500 years of Buddhism.

Nearby are the ruins of the Brazen Palace – the Lovamahapaya built during the 2nd century B.C. What is now left of this grand edifice are 1600 monolithic granite pillars that once supported a Buddhist monastery with more than 1000 rooms occupying nine storeys. It had a roof of beaten copper, from which comes its name. To the Sri Lankans Buddhists of today, the Ruvanveliseya, the mighty dagaba – largest such building in the world-is almost synonymous with Anuradhapura. (A dagaba is a repository of relics). It is the classic among dagabas. Built in the 2nd century B.C. in the shape of a water bubble, the magnificent white dome rises to a height of 77 meters with a base 53 meters wide. Modern engineers who undertook the restoration in the early 1940s, found it necessary to flatten the shoulder of the dome, thus sacrificing the perfection of the the original shape, and falling short of the original height. It, as two other dagabas in Anuradhapura, rivals the ancient pyramids of Egypt in size.



Dalada Maligawa, the Tooth Relic Chamber at Anuradhapura. Photo courtesy: Ceylon Tourist Board.

The Ruvanveliseya, or Dagaba of the Golden Sands, is surrounded by a wall depicting elephants standing shoulder to shoulder, symbolic of the protection afforded and the venerable burden they bear. On the wide platform at the giant

dagaba's giant base there will always be Buddhist pilgrims in meditation. There are small groups of devotees usually clad in white listening to a lesson on the Buddha's teachings as explained by a monk. Joss sticks (incense) burn in sand troughs, while fresh floral offerings will be piled on the altars facing the compass four cardinal points.

As dusk gathers, the battle with darkness will be taken on by the flickering lights of hundreds of tiny clay lamps burning coconut oil. In Buddhism, the symbol of light represents truth dispelling the darkness of ignorance. The scent of burning camphor will waft in the cool night air. The Abhayagiri, another gigantic dagaba which remains unrestored with green vegetation growing on its sides all the way up to the pinnacle, was built in the 1st century B.C. It is believed to have been built over a rock which had the footprint of the Buddha. A center of Buddhist heresy at one time, the Abhayagiri was surrounded by a huge monastic complex extending in radius more than 20 yards. Details of this complex are now revealed in excavations being carried out under the UNESCO sponsored scheme to preserve Sri Lanka's Cultural Triangle. The Abhayagiri, at its height was more than 136 meters tall.

Rivalling the Abhayagiri both in size and present appearance is the Jetawanaramaya. The original height of this 3rd century B.C. shrine was 106 meters. The doorposts of the image house which still stands in place proves its original grandeur. They are 11 meters high, counting the nine feet now buried. If temples and dagabas speak of the great architecture of ancient engineers, the statuary in the sacred city is proof of the skill and artistry of ancient sculptors.

The finest example here is the statue of the Samadhi Buddha, a 4th century A.D. image of the Buddha seated in the pose of Samadhi or meditation. Situated close to the mighty Abhayagiri Dagaba, the Samadhi statue is acknowledged as one of the most beautiful pieces of Buddhist sculpture in the world: an example of serenity carved in granite. It is still in situ as was originally placed for veneration under a Bodhi tree. A walk of less than 10 minutes from the Samadhi statue brings one to the "Moonstone", a rare piece of sculpture in a tradition and style found only in Sri Lanka. The Moonstone, so-called because of its halfmoon shape is a carved stepping stone at the entrance to a temple. It depicts in beautiful rows of fine relief sculpture panels of stylized flames, animals -lions, elephants, horses, bulls; a row of floral creepers, another of swans, and half of a lotus in full bloom, all rich in the symbolism of Buddhism. The moonstone reached perfection in Anuradhapura.

Ancient Anuradhapura covered an area of 650 square kilometers, making it one of

the largest cities of its time. While religious edifices took pride of place, there were secular structures of magnificence as well. The best known are the great feats of hydraulic engineering, the reservoirs, popularly called tanks. Today's city of Anuradhapura is watered by three such tanks -the Nuwara wewa (with an area of 1212 hectares), the Tissawewa(187 h.a.) and Basawakkulama (107 h.a.). These reservoirs are typical of the ancient Sinhalese's engineering feats, expansive projects that helped convert a dry land into what was once described as the "granary of the east."

The reservoirs of Anuradhapura which have survived the ravages of time from the 1st and 2nd century B. C. now have their water supply augmented by the waters of the Maha weli River, diverted by modern engineers to link up with the ancient irrigation system. They continue to water paddy tracts of the region, providing water for a very thirsty staple crop, rice. Beside the Tissawewa bund, less than two kilometers away from the main shrines are the famous ruins of a Pleasure Garden, complete with swimming pool and hidden rock covers. Nearby is the Isurumuniya Rock Temple, one of the most beautiful of Buddhist worship places, and a repository of the region's loveliest and famed sculpture, "The Lovers". It is a fluent piece of work depicting a Hindu deity and his consort in amorous embrace; an unusual piece for a Buddhist temple, it possibly came from the pleasure garden nearby.

Little known to the average visitor, Isurumuniya has other beautiful carvings as well. Over the dark rock pool near the temple's entrance is the image of a seated horseman, with the head of a horse behind him; a subtle piece of sculpture almost blending with the rock massif on which it is etched. Below, near the water line of the pool, are sculptures of elephants bathing and gambolling in light relief. Many pieces of sculpture found at Isurumuniya, including that of the Lovers, are now on display at a special temple museum. Anuradhapura is clearly no whistle stop halt for the visitor. Although there is plenty to discover even in the shortest of visits, the serious visitor will require two weeks, and no one could take it all in with less than three days. There are the ruins of royal palaces set in parkland; the Twin Ponds – two massive swimming pools, rivalling any modern pool, paved with superbly rendered granite which was dedicated by a king for the monks of the Abhayagiri monastery. Of little known places, one is the Stone Bridge, still in situ, part of the old Anuradhapura highway.

A visit to Anuradhapura will hardly be complete without the necessary drive to Mihintale (11 km north), the cradle of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. It was here that Mahinda, son of the Emperor Ashoka of India, preached the first Buddhist sermon to

King Devanampiyatissa in 247 B.C. that led to the conversion of king and people to the new teaching of tolerance and love. It was the beginning of a new civilization in Sri Lanka. At Mihintale, which was once a deer park, are several ancient dagabas: the Amnastale Dagaba Kanthaka Chetiya and wonderful pieces of sculpture scattered among green woods and dark pools of water. Climb the Rock of Mahinda for a panoramic view of all Anuradhapura with its majestic pinnacles. The best time for photography is early evening, when long shadows highlight the vertical relief. The Museum at Anuradhapura is a veritable treasure trove of the past. Here you'll discover items -pottery, copper, brassware, coinery - that tell of the ancient Sinhalese lifestyles: advances reached in Ayurveda, the traditional art of healing; the system of drainage; fragments of frescoes from dagabas' inner relic repositories; several of the more recent discoveries were made here at new excavations. Today a town offers places to stay for the visitor to Anuradhapura. Several hotels, the Rajarata Hotel, Miridiya Hotel, Ashok Hotel, all overlooking the Nuwarawewa tank provide fine tourist accommodations and services, as do the government-run Nuwarawewa and Tissawewa Resthouses. They all serve western and eastern fare. For those especially sensitive to mosquitos, bed nets can be arranged.

Walking about Anuradhapura can be hot; a wide brimmed straw hat is recommended. Wear light clothes, but don't be scantily clad, for many of the places you'll visit are places of worship. Be sure to remove hats and footwear when entering a temple, for that is the custom. There are no restrictions on photography, but it is best to obtain a permit from the Department of Archaeology at Colombo or Anuradhapura. Don't pose in front of Buddhist statues: such behavior is not considered reverential in Sri Lanka.

Take plenty of film with you, as the photo opportunities are many. It is possible to wander unaccompanied throughout Anuradhapura, but far better to be escorted by a knowledgeable guide. Most travel agencies can provide a chauffeur who is also a very good guide. There are competent Guide Lecturers who are registered with the Tourist Board. If your travel agency hires a special guide for you, make sure he or she is such a registered person. The people in Anuradhapura, like those in all of Sri Lanka, are very friendly and hospitable. You will be surprised at the number of smiles you'll receive and by the readiness with which they will answer your questions. It will not be difficult to find a person conversant in English. Reading up on Anuradhapura will help to make your visit more satisfying and enjoyable. The brochure on Ancient Cities produced by the Ceylon Tourist Board should give you

the basic information. Other recommended reading are: The Apa Insight Guide to Sri Lanka, and Handbook for the Ceylon Traveller, both available in most bookshops that sell literature for tourists.



The Ruvanveliseya, largest dagaba in the world, was built in the shape of a water bubble in the 2nd century B. C. Photo courtesy: Ceylon Tourist Board.



Detail of a guards tone at Thuparamaya. Photo courtesy: Ceylon Tourist Board.



Mihintale, where India's Emperor Asoka preached the first Buddhist sermon in 247 E.G. Photo courtesy: Ceylon Tourist Board.



The Abhayagiri dagaba, unrestored, was built over a rock bearing the Buddha's footprint. Photo courtesy: Ceylon Tourist Board.



Elephants stand shoulder to shoulder around the base of Ruvanveliseya dagaba. Photo courtesy Ceylon Tourist Board.