

The Lost Splendour of Habessa



Freshly-planted chenas

A trek through jungles in Moneragala to the Habessa Viharaya, an ancient temple in the borders of Yala with the past sleeping under its ruins.

Words Yomal Senerath-Yapa

Photographs Menaka Aravinda and Vishwathan Tharmakulasingham

The Kumbukkan Oya flowed challengingly between us and the road leading to the Habessa Viharaya. Luckily, the tide was low. There has been no rain in the Moneragala district for nine long months. What used to be a torrent of a river was now a shallow bed of yellow-brown water. Only wide empty banks suggested the massive width and depth of the river during the rainy season. We waded through the waters easily, under the dark canopy formed by trees.

At the point where the track to Habessa began to unwind stood a massive, soaring tree. On it, the villagers had hung branches as offerings. Red cloth was wrapped around roots and an ancient blue-tinted picture of Skanda, the guardian deity of

Ruhuna country, has been nailed carefully to the trunk. The awe-inspiring tree exuded a sacredness that could be felt strongly.

The wide gravel road unwound between chenas, most of them newly burned - all charcoal black and billows of smoke. A few chenas had been already cultivated with green pumpkin leaves sprouting out.

A tractor ground to a halt by us and the farmer with a huge betel-stained smile said that we can ride with him up to his chena. He helped us onto his tractor, on to whatever spaces where we could position ourselves.

Getting down by the farmer's chena, we plodded on. Suddenly with no notice or sign, our guide stepped out of the beaten track and traced an invisible path into the wild scrubland. Under trees and hidden amongst tall dry-yellow mana grass, we passed ancient stone pillars, half fallen or lying in pieces.



A statue of the reclining Buddha inside the cave that was once the image house
We realised with surprise that, quite unannounced and abruptly, we had come to the very midst of our destination. The relics of the ancient Habessa Viharaya lay

all around us. This was the once-great 'Naka Maha Viharaya' of the Mahavamsa - a famous Buddhist shrine that enjoyed royal patronage.

The cave that sprawled far to the left of the stupa had a deeply furrowed drip ledge cut very deep. Inside the cave was a giant reclining Buddha statue, 32 feet in length.

The ancient stupa was a half-mound of red-brown brick recently cleared of the jungle growth that had covered it. The cave sprawled far to the left of the stupa and had a deeply furrowed drip ledge cut very deep. Inside the cave was a giant reclining Buddha statue, 32 feet in length. The overall shape was surprisingly intact seeing as Habessa was the home of wild animals for long centuries till it was discovered in modern times.

There had once been a very well-crafted image house around the statue. Fragmentary traces of murals still plaster the cave walls while the brick walls are topped with intricate designs whose charm is still faintly discernible even though these sculptings are now fast-crumbling. An ancient rock inscription in pre-Christian characters left on a natural rock in Habessa has faded with the passing years.

The vast vihara complex is lined with undulating contours covered with thick grass. How many undiscovered wonders must be sleeping underneath them? We hoped, as we took leave, that the fabulous secrets the place may conceal will be uncovered soon.

