The Mystery of Ritigala

Posted on
The jungle creeps in close around the final approach to the mountain

I walked briskly up the road to Ritigala, watching the gloom beneath the trees crowding up to its muddy surface, watching for movement.

Words and Photographs David Blacker

The narrow strip of sky between the treetops was dark and lowering, the rainclouds speeding the approach of darkness. The beings in the trees were big, dangerous, and able to outrun me on the best surface.On the muddy track, I wouldn’t stand a chance. Not unless I saw them first, and as long as there was light, that was my best bet.

I glanced again over my shoulder. The trishaw I had taken from the Anuradhapura-Habarana road was still stalled at the bend, the driver kneeling at the open engine compartment, trying to repair the fuel line that had come loose two kilometres short of the base of the ridge. I had left him there, deep in the Ritigala Reserve, 220km northeast of Colombo, and continued on foot.

The driver had promised he would wait for me below the Ritigala Ridge once he had repaired his three-wheeler. An hour to climb the mountain, half that time to descend, and I should be back before 5pm, while there was still light. As long as the rain gods were kind. The rains that had lashed the country and flooded even parts of Colombo were over, but there had been some local rain the past week, centred around Ritigala and its unusual mini-ecosystem that often kept the peak misty and damp while the surrounding plains were bone dry.

The 600m high Ritigala Ridge was the highest point in northern Sri Lanka; in fact, from the Central Highlands to southern India, there was no higher feature, and one of the myths was that Hanuman, the monkey god, used it as a launching pad to spring back to India after his successful reconnaissance mission to find Sita on behalf of her enraged husband, Rama. The ridge was also the centre of the Ritigala Strict Nature Reserve, an area into which entry is forbidden without special permission. The only part of the reserve open to the public was a complex of ruins sprawled up the mountain. The road ended at the base of a gorge that led up to the

Ritigala Ruins. There was nowhere else to go.

One of the origins of the name Ritigala is Arittha Pabbata, the Dreadful Mountain, and the official at the Archaeology Department office adviced me to stay on the path and return before darkness. Soon I had reached the first of the ruins, the Banda Pokuna, an octagonal pond, 366m in circumference, and dating back to the 4th century BC, when it was built by King Pandukabhaya, the founder of Anuradhapura; the son of Ummadacitta (also referred to Unmada Chithra), the princess whose beauty could drive men mad with desire. Beyond the pond, I waded the stream that fed it. If it rained while I was on the mountain, the stream might well be a torrent on my return.

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From the stream, steps rose in flights into the dark jungle from several points until they met an elegant walkway, beautifully crafted with interlocking paving stones of different sizes that fitted together like a puzzle.

The jungle was dense and close again, and I could see little more than a few feet to either side. Ahead, the walkway disappeared into the gloom, and I followed it upwards. Pandukabhaya had trained his army in these jungles for his war against his uncles, and the battles in which he defeated them had raged across the lower slopes of Ritigala. I peered into the foliage, wondering what it would have been like to fight in there. I wondered how many of his soldiers were still here.

The walkway meandered across the side of the mountain, crossing shallow gullies on narrow stone bridges. At other times, the path would straighten and run like a grey measuring tape for hundreds of metres, broken by short flights of steps. Several circular resting areas were recessed into the walkway, almost like roundabouts, their curved sides wide enough to encompass half a dozen seated climbers.



Periodically, the jungle falls back to reveal clearings with raised platforms.

After a particularly steep section of the walkway, the jungle opened to reveal a broad clearing with two large ruined platforms. As I stepped into the clearing, something drab and orange flitted amongst the stark tree trunks on the far side. Before my eyes had caught it, however, it was gone. In the 9th century AD, King Sena built a monastery here for a particularly ascetic order of Buddhist monks, the Pansukulikas, or “rag robes”, who fashioned their garb from the shrouds of the dead, rescued from cemeteries.

The ruins of this monastery are spread through the forested slopes of Ritigala, in a series of similar clearings of varying size, each one consisting of two platforms, aligned east to west, one with columns, indicating a now missing roof, or perhaps even an upper story, and the other, bare. What these buildings were, is unknown. There is no indication that they were dwellings for the monks. But if the monks didn’t live in them, where had they lived? In caves, in huts? No one could say.

Ritigala had been abandoned after the 10th and 11th century after Chola invasions.

In accordance with the ascetic Buddhist practice of Dhutanga, the ruins are austere and unadorned, in contrast to the usual intricate carvings and colourful paintings associated with Buddhist sites throughout Sri Lanka. There are no statues; no shrines of any sort.

I continued my climb through the interlinked clearings, until finally I reached the highest of the twin-platforms. Thunder rumbled overhead as I crossed it and stared into the wall of jungle beyond. The slope continued on through densely standing trees to the summit, where I had heard a lookout post gave views of the valley below. But the light was fading, and any further progress was forbidden. As if at the snap of giant fingers, perhaps those of the Yakka, Soma, killed at Ritigala by Jayasena, the rain arrived in sheets that smeared the green jungle into dark streaks. Nodding my understanding, I turned back.

The stone walkway was now a precarious route, slick with rainwater, and often I had to detour through the forest to keep my footing. I rushed through the ruins of a hospital that had served the monastery, its ayurvedic oil baths filling with rain, down and down, off the Dreadful Mountain, hoping my trishaw would be waiting.A walk through the forests at dusk was not something to be fancied. The guardians of Ritigala were unforgiving.

While the jungle is always a colourful place, Ritigala, especially in the rainy season, seems to suck the hues out of nature; its often dark history leaving the visitor with monochromatic memories. This perspective has been conveyed by photographing the mountain purely in black and white.

