

The Road to Ritigala



First view of the Ritigala Ridge when approaching from Anuradhapura

With every journey an adventure in itself in Sri Lanka, there's a huge amount to see and do just getting to your destination.

Words and Photographs David Blacker

Ritigala lies roughly 220km northeast of Colombo – depending on which road you take – close to the historical cities of Anuradhapura and Dambulla. It's steeped in legend, believed to be the Aristha of the Ramayana, the mountain from which Hanuman leapt back to India after discovering Sita's hiding place.

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Its densely wooded foothills were once the military training grounds of King Pandukabhaya, who reigned in Anuradhapura from 437-367 BC. Ritigala was also famous for the ancient Sri Lankan martial art of angampora, and the tradition has seen a modern day renaissance after its suppression by the British during their rule.

Today, the mountain is part of the Ritigala Strict Nature Reserve, one of three such sanctuaries in Sri Lanka into which entry is forbidden. The only portion of the reserve that admits visitors is in the southeastern foothills of Ritigala, where a complex of elegant ruins, built between the 4th century BC and the 9th century AD, climb through the jungle. The ruins of Ritigala were my destination.

Leaving Colombo, I had several choices. If I stuck to the highways, I was assured a smooth but longer drive and, equally importantly, I wouldn't get lost. The most straightforward route was to drive north from Colombo, straight up the western coast road to the Puttalam Lagoon, and then head inland to Anuradhapura, and on to Ritigala. Alternately, I could take the more interesting route northeast through Kurunegala, Dambulla, past the rock fortress of Sigiriya to Habarana, then turn northwest for the short leg to Ritigala.

From recent experience, I knew that the Kurunegala-Dambulla road was under construction and I preferred to avoid that. Google Maps, however, promised a more scenic trip via a network of B roads that stretched northwest from Wariyapola and would deposit me close to Ritigala. How to choose...

Eventually, I decided I would take the well-beaten highway through Puttalam on the outward journey and save the adventure for the drive back. Good choice, but more on that later.

I headed out of Colombo at 5am and took the E03 expressway north. For the traveller, this is an uneventful sprint with nothing remarkable to see in the predawn darkness. Crack on through Negombo and Waikkal, towards Chillaw, and look out for the little roadside stalls close to Madampe, selling king coconut, fruit and the ubiquitous corn on the cob. This is a good spot to grab a bite or just a cup of coffee and watch the sun rise over the fields and marshland stretching away on both sides of the road. Several nearby temples give travellers the opportunity to make an offering for blessings on their journey - anyone who has travelled on Sri Lanka's roads will know that some divine intervention is essential.

The road past Chillaw, to Puttalam, runs arrow straight through dry, flat country, and, with the sun now well above the horizon, it was time for me to turn inland. The Anuradhapura Road skirts the southern edge of the Wilpattu National Park, and is one of the best driving roads in the country. Although I was now in the Dry Zone, the land on both sides of the A12 highway looked anything but dry. In fact, at times it looked like I was driving over water. The road was often a dark streak spearing across vast wetlands that irrigated lush green fields of tall harvest-ready paddy. Fish eagles circled over the water, and storks and egrets waded through the shallows.

Lots of little eateries line the road, and signboards ranging from garish neon to hand-written chalkboards beckon the hungry traveller. If you're in the mood for a hearty breakfast of stringhoppers and freshwater fish, these are a good option. Still fortified from the corn and tea I'd had at the coast, I pressed on to Anuradhapura.

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This city is of course an ideal place for a longer break. Founded by King Pandukabhaya in the 4th century BC, it served as Sri Lanka's capital for over a thousand years. Its sprawling ruins, tanks, and stupas are classed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

It was now past midday, and I turned southeast onto the Habarana Road, which would take me past Ritigala. Heading through Maradankadawala, hometown of the legendary local folk hero, Yakadaya or 'Iron Man', I was cruising through long sweeping bends that soon revealed rocky outcrops rising from the plain to the east. The largest of these eventually took the shape of the Ritigala ridgeline, the highest ground in northern Sri Lanka.

Deciding that the climb to the ruins of Ritigala would be better assaulted in the morning, I continued to Habarana, where I planned to stay the night. If you have the time, Habarana itself is a good place for a spot of elephant watching, and a jeep safari is easily organised.

Early the next morning, with a magnificent breakfast of stringhoppers and a gallon of sweet tea wolfed down at the Habarana rest house, I hit the road for Ritigala. I had wanted to leave at first light, but this was elephant country, and worries about coming nose-to-trunk with Jumbo on a narrow jungle road had held me back. That, and those stringhoppers.

Turning off the main road, I followed a narrow tarred strip through dense scrub jungle that crowded in close. I took the bends cautiously, eyes open for any sign of elephants, but luckily none were on the road. If they were nearby, I couldn't see them. The jungle could easily hide a full battalion of elephants. All I spotted were a pair of jackals hunting a hare through the long grass. Turning onto a red dirt road, I arrived at the base of Ritigala. Beyond the clearing that serves as a car park was the narrow gorge leading up to the ruins.

They say it's not about the destination; it's the journey. This destination, however, was well worth the journey; but that's a story for another day.

A postscript to this story, though, is my journey back to Colombo via the B roads suggested by Google Maps. While the road takes you past places like Avukana, with its impressive standing Buddha, and the ancient city of Dambadeniya, it often deteriorates to a track worthy of the Camel Trophy. In short, unless you're taking a 4x4 jeep, don't do it. My car still isn't speaking to me.

