

The Silver Shrine: Ridee Viharaya



The meditating Arahants first lived in the Main Shrine of Ridee Viharaya.

In Kurunegala is a series of caves that have been evolved into a temple over the years, portraying thousands of years of architecture and murals.

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Photographs Menaka Aravinda and Anuradha Perera.

The name 'Ridee Viharaya' - Silver Shrine is derived from the origin of the temple, a compelling story in the Mahavamsa. The story dates back to the time of King Dutugemunu, during the Anuradhapura period. He aspired to complete the work of the sacred Ruwanveliseya before his health deteriorated, but he was troubled because resources were running out. In a miraculous answer to his prayers, an enormous silver ore was discovered at the premises of Ridee Vihara, thus giving it the name 'Silver Shrine.'

Ridee Viharaya consists of several shrines built into the hollows of caves, or erected out of stone and daub. Maha Viharaya, the main shrine, is a stone structure under the hood of an overhanging rock. It had been a shelter for meditating arahants, and had been secured with walls to make it safer and more comfortable. It is during the Kandyan era that the cave is said to have been converted into a shrine. The most fascinating element in the Maha Viharaya is the set of tiles that have Biblical themes. There are over a hundred tiles making up the main flower altar, many of them placed upside down. No historical record verifies how and where these tiles that depict the life of Jesus came from, but the belief is that a Dutch Governor donated them to the temple.

Waraka Welandu Viharaya has an interesting story behind it. As history retells, a traveling merchant had stopped to rest at the site where the Viharaya is built, and has discovered meditating arahants. He had offered Waraka - ripe jak fruit - to them. The arahants then had directed him to the cave where the silver ore was found. Where the merchant first offered food to the arahants is today the site of Waraka Welandu Viharaya, meaning 'shrine where jak fruit was consumed.' The shrine has transformed over the years; once a cave shrine, a hall that resembles 13th century Hindu temple architecture has been built in front of it during the Polonnaruwa period.

An intricate ivory work adorns a doorway, with the complex 'Pancha Naari Getaya' sculpture and two carvings of lions on either side. Ivory has long since been considered privilege, and therefore it is assumed that Ridee Viharaya has been patronized by kings.

At the highest point of the temple premises, upon a rocky outcrop is the oldest stupa of the Vihara: 'Serasumgala Chaitya.' Beyond, a pathway through the trees takes the visitor to Pahangala. Its summit overlooks rolling hills and mile upon mile of verdant greenery, creating a pleasing view.

Ridee Viharaya offers a Pilgrim's Rest as well. Kurunegala, being a center that leads to all the ancient Kingdoms of Sri Lanka and to many more heritage and natural places of interest, is ideal place to explore while traveling. Ridee Viharaya is worth the visit, with its beautiful combination of architecture from many eras.

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