

A Unique Seat Of Learning



The magnificent doorway leading to the palace of Emperor Ashoka

The vastness of the land and the immensity of the architectural display greet visitors at the Manelwatta temple in Biyagama, Kelaniya. The grandeur of this Buddhist temple is an impressive edifice fitting royalty. A small lake, profusion of greenery and a show of artistry complete the landscape.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardena **Photographs** Indika De Silva

Situated nearly 21 kilometres from Colombo, the Manelwatta temple is an extensive complex on 41 acres of land. The Manelwatta temple was until 2011, limited to a simple Stupa and a Bodhi tree. The land had belonged to former President of Sri Lanka, Junius Richard Jayewardane. He had donated his ancestral property to the Temple of the Tooth Relic with a vision to make it an outstanding seat of religious learning.

And so began the making of the beautiful Manelwatta Temple of the modern day. The sight from the elevated entrance with its very broad ramparts, adorned by the

Lion Capital of Ashoka and a replica of the Ashoka Pillar is extraordinary. The long path from the imposing entrance, guides the visitor along a downward slope only to ascend along a long flight of steps to a magnificent building. Along the way is a gigantic statue of the Laughing Buddha, a pleasing sight, although a departure from the serene Buddha image that Sri Lankans are so familiar with.

Another imposing entrance with a high doorway, arresting walls and an enormous gate lead to a striking tribute. Quite uncharacteristic of Buddhist temple architecture in Sri Lanka, the structure has everything to do with the life of its noble teacher. It is, in fact a replica of the Palace of Prince Siddhartha, designed according to the supposed original structure visualised by archaeologists. The interior of this structure, which houses the main place of worship, is highlighted by the three tiered roof. The emphasis on open spaces derives a sense of freedom and peace that resonates through the architecture. The uplifting quietness contained within, is perfect for prayer and meditation. The earthen-coloured roof fuses perfectly with the placid environment. The tranquillity of this simple structure is pleasantly interrupted by a multitude of red Chinese paper lanterns hung outside along the three tiers of the roof.

The fusion of many traditions of Buddhist interior and exterior imagery and design at the Manelwatta temple is remarkable. It extols the influence of local cultures in creating a vibrant and dynamic religion. The many symbols and figures at the temple are unknown to the Buddhist tradition of Sri Lanka. The statue of the Laughing Buddha, for instance is an auspicious symbol of wealth and good fortune in the far East. There are many beautifully carved statues of the Bodhisattva from China, elevated on platforms in small pavilions. They are overtly different in character and adornment. The dwarf statues of smiling novice monks, depicting them occupied in a variety of daily tasks and stone lanterns placed tastefully at intervals in the landscaped garden is intended to showcase foreign temple art to locals whomay never have the opportunity to experience them otherwise. A variety of Buddha images from Theravada, Mahayana and Tibetan Buddhism and also the many manifestations of the Buddha in different cultures placed at the shrine is once again intended to demonstrate the multiplicity of Buddhist symbolism. Another unique feature of the Manelwatta Temple complex is the Buddhist Ayurveda Teaching Hospital that practices the noble act of healing by adhering to the Dhamma. It is a righteous effort to revive traditional medicine in Sri Lanka, which was nourished by the ethos of Buddhist wisdom.

The Manelwatta temple is set for greater things in the future. Led by its Chief Prelate, Venerable Dr Bodagama Chandima, plans are afoot to establish a university in this extensive property. The Sri Nagananda Buddhist University will be the nucleus of religious studies, where all religions and local and foreign languages will be taught irrespective of status and beliefs. The university—hopfully—will also be the centre for the study of ancient Ayurveda practices of Sri Lanka and the preservation of ancient texts for posterity and for academic research.

The remnants of Sri Lanka's grandiose monarchic rule behold the markings of the power of soft diplomacy. That was many millennia ago when travel was lengthy and communication in today's standards was elementary. Yet, the vibrancy of cross-border interaction was so intense, that the impact of foreign cultural elements infected architecture and art, food and clothing, song and dance and rights and rituals in Sri Lanka. They testify to multifarious contact across the sea. These foreign elements flaunt an added lustre and adornment through a mastery of artistic fusion. Many millennia later and after four centuries of European colonisation, the quest for cross-border integration continues at the Manelwatta Buddhist temple in the suburbs of Colombo.

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