Views From An Ancient Citadel

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From the summit of the Sigiriya Rock Fortress, the terraced architecture and a view of Kandalama mountains in the horizon

Atop Sigiriya Rock Fortress at over 600 feet, you have a manmade wonder beneath your feet and astonishing views as far as the eye can see. After all, it once was a kingly way of life.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara **Photographs** Damith Wickramasinghe

The Sigiriya Rock Fortress is no doubt one of the most awe-inspiring historical and archaeological sites of Sri Lanka. Attributed to King Kasyapa in the 5th Century, who shifted the capital Anudradhapura to the stronghold at Sigiriya, the sculpted rock is famed for its gardens, frescoes and its baffling hydraulic system. Much has been

written, studied and surmised about its history and legend. However we were about to make the ascent to the summit for another novelty it offered—views of the Island’s landscape.

A considerable walk along the terraced gardens that stretch to greet the first stairway, one is struck by the symmetry around—a striking feature of Sigiriya. We take to the marble steps to make the long ascent and see the Island’s expanse unfold as seen by the many visitors, and so many centuries ago through the eyes of a king. A few flights of steps up, one of the first sights that greet us is already quite breathtaking. Amidst a carpet of velveteen greenery, the tall white Buddha statue of the Sigiriya temple stands a pinprick of white. Just below the garden that we had just walked across standout clearly, much like a live blueprint a tidy arrangement of lawns, pathways and pools.

The further we climb the view widens in degrees. Armed with a 500mm lens we set our sights to capture closer views of distant terrain aside from panoramic vistas. A light mist blurs the horizon rendering shadowy mountains. Enderegala, one of the first mountain outcrops that rises into view during our ascent, appears closest. The surrounding views complement the journey of discovering the magnificence and architectural wonder of Sigiriya. One of the first attractions of the Rock Fortress at the early stage of the climb is the mirror wall passage, so named for its highly polished surface where graffiti of olden day visitors are engraved. The predominantly green view to the north west of the Island remains along the way. A signature feature of Sigiriya, the frescoes are reached next via the spiral stairway. The spiral stairway deviates from the main course of the climb and we return back from the cave paintings to resume our scale up the rock.

The first plateau that we alight upon is where another distinguishing feature of Sigiriya rests—the mammoth Lion’s paws and from here the view moves towards the North. At this landing site, the Pidurangala mountain, home to the ancient forest monastery, appears just a stone’s throw away. We could just make out the Ritigala mountains as well, a strict nature reserve that marks the highest point of the north-central plains. However our line of view is hindered by a less than clear sky. While many a visitor stopped at this level, grateful for some respite, we ventured on our way this time the viewspan gradually shifting towards the east. As the final ascent to the summit arrives we gladly note the lack of winds that usually buffet across the rock surface. Although a climb that easily renders one breathless, reaching the summit is well worth every drop of sweat. The rock summit unfolds in a terraced formation both manmade and natural and we are instantly dwarfed within an

expanse that is numbered at 1.5 ha. The highest point is at the centre of the summit where the Royal palace once stood. A little below the peak, a Royal Seat is placed facing east sheltered within the outcrop. This spot affords a view of an undulating range of mountains identified as Nuwaragala.

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Aside from a wealth of archaeological treasures that lie preserved, the unhindered 360 panorama of the surroundings undoubtedly calls for attention. We stroll along the perimeter of the Royal Palace absorbing the many sights. At this height, engulfed in an overwhelming view, we pause to ponder as to how such a distinct rock outcrop came majestically into being.

From the summit there are many distinct regions that can be placed, although the wide expanse of the summit and the surroundings combined leave us a little disoriented. In the far distance to the north-east lies the Minneriya Tank. The surrounding regions of Habarana and Kaudulla can roughly be identified by direction. On a very clear day we are informed that the sparkling white of the Ruwanweliseya stupa in Anuradhapura also comes into view in the direction of the north-west. Towards the south lay the Kandalama tank and the mountainous terrain beyond. Contours of paddy fields are visible here and there like carefully placed pieces of a puzzle adding to the charm of the vast greenery. You could wonder how the terrain might have evolved over the centuries, and how the view contrasts today from the time of King Kashyapa.

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From up here every inch of the region could be mapped out in a simple rotation about the summit, and it is no wonder King Kashyapa chose this as his strategic location, aside from the obvious beauty and sense of majesty it offered. From leisure gardens, boulders, waterways, and terraces that sprawled immediately below to the farthest edge of the horizon, there is much to stir your curiousity and awe. Sights fit for royalty indeed.

