

Wawurukannala: An 'Ambalama' To A Temple



The largest Buddha statue in Asia

Situated in the quaint little town of Dikwella in Matara is a temple that hides beneath it, tales of rich history and cultural heritage. Named Wawurukannala, the temple has its own interesting story to tell. And here we were on one sunny afternoon, on a journey to discover the 'hidden tales'.

Words Hansani Bandara **Photographs** Indika De Silva

The tale of how Wawurukannala Temple obtained its name is a fascinating one. Legend has it that long ago there was a lake where the current temple stands, and there had been an ambalama—a wayside rest hall—that provided shelter for travellers. Around this time, King Rajadhi Rajasinghe decides to ordain his son and send him to Matara with Andare (a popular figure in Sri Lankan folklore, Andare was the court jester in King Rajadhi Rajasinghe's royal court). It is said that upon their arrival in Dikwella, they stayed in the ambalama by the lake and later the ambalama had been turned into a temple. 'wewa-iwuru-kon-hala', which roughly translates to the hall situated in the corner of the riverbank, has later become Wawurukannala.

The prince, ordained as Ven Kirinde Siri Seelarathana was also part of the group of seven monks who were sent to Burma to get higher ordained. And upon his return, he established a temple in this place named as Sudassanananda Viharaya and served as its first Chief Incumbent. At first, the temple only consisted of a shrine room (which is today over 360 years old), built where the ambalama stood.

The Main Shrine Room, Though 150 Years Old, Is Unique In Its Design, Which Is Influenced By Dutch Architecture...This Is Known As 'Sujanakantha Patimalaya'

The scorching sun could not beat our curiosity to explore the temple. Wawurukannala is also known to have the largest Buddha statue in Asia, 150

feet in height. Historical records about the temple state that the statue, which commenced constructions in 1966, was completed in less than three years' time. Behind the massive image is a structure—'Ahas Vehera'—with ten stories. At each level of this, are chambers decorated with temple paintings depicting various instances of the life of the Buddha and jathaka stories. On the top most level is a shrine room, which houses relics of the Buddha. This level also has a balcony from where one can enjoy amazing vistas of the paddy fields and the towns beyond, running as far as your sight could fathom. Inside the statue's head is a treasure chamber—12 feet in height and eight feet wide—in which the entire Thripitaka (known as the 84,000 dharmaskanda) written on bronze plates in Sinhala and Pali, are placed with the objective of preserving the teachings of Buddha for the future.

The main shrine room, though 150 years old, is unique in its design, which is influenced by Dutch architecture and is 85 feet in length. This, known as 'Sujanakantha Patimalaya', was built in 1914, and is beautified with carvings. Quite unusual from the normal designs and patterns seen in temples, the main pandol at the entrance of the shrine room depicts four lions and angels. Furthermore, if you are to go around the main shrine room, there are life size or even bigger statues illustrating various events of the life of Lord Buddha.

Life Size Or Even Bigger Statues Illustrate Various Events Of The Life Of Lord Buddha

There is a museum, which houses Sri Lanka's largest and oldest clock—made by W Elaris De Silva in 1926, collections of ola leaf manuscripts, antique porcelain and old projectors and slides, which depict the earliest ages of cinematography. Located on the first floor of the library chambers, it is entirely constructed using wood. Boasting of intricate wooden carvings that emphasise attention to detail, a predominant feature in old architectural designs, the museum in itself is an artifact. The 'umang viharaya' (a tunnel, which runs below the terrace of the Vihara), depicts figurines and paintings of how hell is defined according to Buddhism.

The temple is also the birthplace of Sri Lanka's first Sinhala newspaper, 'Lakminipahana', which has a history of 150 years since its first issue in 1862. It is printed monthly to this date, creating awareness on Buddhist culture and

traditions.

Though some of the older buildings and temple paintings have begun to gradually deplete, giving into the evident impermanent nature of all worldly things, one can't help but be amazed at how this temple has withstood all tests of time.

