

HABARANA

CENTRE FOR THE EXPLORATION OF SIGIRIYA, PIDURANGALA, AND RITIGALA

Dhatusena, a 5th-century AD king, had two sons: Kasyapa, born of a wife of unequal rank, and Mogallana, born of the queen. Kasyapa conducted a coup d'etat and assumed the throne, while Mogallana escaped to India. Kasyapa built a palace and initiation centre atop the rock of Sigiriya, and, when Mogallana returned, committed suicide on losing the ensuing battle on the plains below. . .

SIGIRIYA

Imagine the startling spectacle. You are a simple farmer. You emerge from a thick, vocal jungle into the silence of a sun-scorched clearing. Nearby throbs a lone towering rock, one side of which seems alive, as if red-orange stone-skin has been stretched taut over the maw and forequarter muscles of a gargantuan crouching petrified lion. The mighty mammal's head perches magnificently on its front paws, its body embedded within the rest of the rock as if hidden in a cave.

But that was 1,500 years ago, when Sigiriya was in its heyday, seen as its architects intended. Today, only the paws of the lion remain, leaving to the imagination just how imposing Sigiriya once was. But there's plenty of other archaeological evidence, so it's little wonder that Sigiriya became Sri Lanka's seven UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1982.

The entire site is a marvel of urban planning. The avenue from the western entrance bisects the **Royal Gardens**. First are the symmetrical **Water Gardens**, a quartet of interconnected, L-shaped



Lachmanan Madanaga

baths. Adjoining these are **fountains** that still function during the rainy season. Further along are **moated islands**, the largest of which were the sites of dry-season pavilions, and the **Octagonal Pond**. Incidentally, the paved walkways were designed to be carpeted by flowing water.

At the base of the rock you enter the **Boulder Garden**. A path snakes through a labyrinth of rocks, reminders of the brick-and-timber buildings for which they were foundations. These rocks give way to more **terraced gardens** and then stone steps. On the trip back down, at the southern end of the terraces, the walkway leads by the **Cobra Hood Cave**.

A short climb, followed by a metal spiral staircase, brings you to a gallery of **frescoes**. The paintings of 22 bejewelled women – the damsels of Sigiriya, nymph goddesses called **apsaras**, or personifications of natural phenomena – are all that remains of a vast mural of 500 figures that covered the western face of the rock.

Below the frescoes, beneath an overhang of the cliff, is the **Mirror Wall**, whose smooth surface has inspired graffiti since the 6th century AD: "Hail! It is certain that those who go to Sigiriya, remembering it, will go there again. Even though other things should be forgotten, wherefore should this not be remembered?"

The two, colossal, clawed appendages of the famous **Lion's Paw** plateau flank a staircase that once led through its throat or mouth to the head of the beast. Now, a sturdy handrail clings to steps cut into the rock face for the short but precipitous push to the summit.

From the zenith of the rock, the breathtaking **views** are everyone's first focus – north to the rock outcrop called Pidurangala just two kilometres away, east at the jungle carpeting the unexcavated Inner City precinct, south to the Sigiri Wewa (water tank) and west to the gardens just visited. Only then do the ruined remains – mostly foundations – of the **Royal Palace** come to the fore. **E.G.** >>



Dominic Sansoni/ThreeSixtyMen

PIDURANGALA

Arriving at Sigiriya via one of the back roads you confront the equally imposing monolithic mass of Pidurangala. Comparable in height to nearby Sigiriya, its striking feature is the sloping western flank, devoid of growth and angled like the surface of a peaked, wedge-shaped lectern. Regrettably, most visitors to Sigiriya never get to see Pidurangala, an equally ancient site with a remarkable climb to its summit.

When Kasyapa built Sigiriya, the lower elevations of Pidurangala were reserved for the royal monastery. Today, Pidurangala is still a religious enclave. The main temple, Pidurangala Raja Maha Viharaya – from where the path to the top begins – is situated at the eastern base of the rock. The path is not always clearly marked or easily trekked. Don't let the steps at the bottom lull you into thinking otherwise. The higher you climb, the rougher it gets. But it's not a long ordeal; at a leisurely pace the climb should only take 30 minutes.

After a series of steps, the trail becomes more obvious, winding through the foliage on the eastern and southern slopes of the rock. Sometimes it consists of rock steps, sometimes a way cleared through a tumble of natural debris. Pause to appreciate the shade and the calm, such a contrast to barren Sigiriya to the south.

These contrasts are inevitable on reaching a narrow terrace fronting a shallow cave. The view to the left provides a most dramatic vision of Sigiriya. Seen from this angle – a side view highlighting the impregnable and isolation of the rock – it is clear why Kasyapa chose it. Staring directly at the Lion's Paw plateau you also get a better sense of just how dramatic the complete lion sculpture must have been.

Back on Pidurangala, the cave on the right was resided in by monks long ago, who chose to be near the brick-and-plaster reclining 10th century Buddha that peers sublimely out at Sigiriya. Please consider removing your shoes for the short traverse of the area in front of this Buddha image.

After this, the path becomes more and more challenging. The way through a series of large rocks becomes less and less obvious. At the most confusing and difficult point, below an overhanging boulder, it is best to go beneath it or around to the left. Beyond is the treeless expanse of the summit, far less steep than it looks from below, but from which the 360-degree vista of the surrounding plains is superb. **E.G.**

Michelle Ruth Gombourd



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RITIGALA

Sri Lanka is blessed with so many archaeological sites of historical and cultural importance that the visitor is spoilt for choice. While the expansive ruins of the ancient cities have a grandeur difficult to surpass, there are lesser-known sites that have an ambience all of their own. This frequently stems from the fact that they lie off the beaten track, are on a smaller scale, and are encircled and even encroached upon by jungle.

One such site is the monastic complex on the lower slopes of *Ritigala-kande* – the Ritigala Mountain – 21km north of Habarana on the Anuradhapura road. These ruins are some of the most distinctive the island has to offer. The Buddhist *dagobas* and statuary of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa are absent. Instead, the monastery consists of meditation platforms and walkways in perfect harmony with the huge boulders, noble trees, and burbling streams of the environment. That these unadorned yet inspiring ruins are situated at Ritigala, a mountain steeped in legend and mystery, adds to their attraction.

The most notable legend stems from the great Indian epic poem, the *Ramayana*. It tells how Hanuman, the warrior monkey-god, came to Lanka in search of Lord Rama's wife, Sita, who had been abducted by Ravana, the king of demons. After Hanuman had tracked down Ravana to his stronghold, he used the Ritigala Mountain to take a great leap to South India in order to convey the news to Lord Rama.

The path leading to the monastic complex proper displays extraordinary craftsmanship, being laid with interlocking ashlar (irregular slabs of hewn stone) in patterns of two, three and four. In addition, it is edged with proportionate kerbstones. There are three places that incorporate a circular platform circumscribed by curvilinear slabs of stone. These remarkable features were probably resting-places.

At the end of the path are the ruins of monastic facilities scattered about the forested slope such as a small hospital with stone beds and basin-like stone oil baths. Also, there is an impressive



Dhanurika Heenpella - ImageBurg

meditation walk some 36 paces long, terminated at each end by two perpendicular shields of stone.

The remains of extraordinary buildings known as double-platforms, which are characteristic of forest monasteries, are evident too. A stone bridge connects two raised platforms, created by building retaining walls on the slope. One platform is rectangular and appears to have been open to the elements, while the other is square and was quite likely roofed and divided into eight or nine rooms.

R.B. ✱

ADMISSION

Sigiriya: Open 7am–5pm. Overseas visitors: adults - US\$20, children (6-12 years) - US\$10. Sri Lankans: adults - Rs20, children under 6 - Rs10.

Pidurangala: Anytime. Overseas visitors: Rs500. Sri Lankans: Rs300

Ritigala: Anytime. No admission fee

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