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Ancient Cities of Sri Lanka

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Ancient Cities of Sri Lanka

by Ian Packham

An island nation at the north end of the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka is best known for its Buddhist ruins and beach resorts. I began my exploration at the southern end of the island, leaving the attentions of the staff at the sumptuous Galle Face Hotel in Colombo to enter a sublime world of sights, sounds, and smells that stretch back hundreds of years in the ancient cities at Sri Lanka's heart.

Ancient Kandy

Kandy lies at the geographic heart of the island, connected to the capital by a two hundred-year-old rail line. As the train leaves sea-level and the flat cultivated areas of paddy fields around Colombo, its gently rising gradient is far less noticeable than the steady drop in temperature that occurs as it heads for the cooler climes of Sri Lanka's Uplands. It's no surprise that Kandy's name derives from the local Sinhalese word *kanda*, meaning mountain. Rubber and banana plants stand within touching distance of the single-track line, and lilies and orchids grow as prolifically as weeds.



Busy street in Colombo

In Kandy's station building, the destinations and departure times of the day's trains are still displayed in gilt lettering on interchangeable and carefully varnished hardwood boards, as if the last hundred years hasn't happened and it's still the age of steam locomotion rather than the era of the diesel engine. However, this is not a heritage railway but an important connection between Sri Lanka's two most important cities.

The line still boasts three classes of carriage, with wildly varying levels of comfort. Seeking an authentic Sri Lankan adventure I opt for third class, where the carriages are furnished with hard wooden benches and are as busy as New York or London at the height of the morning rush hour. Even the seats specially reserved for orange-robed Buddhist monks are occupied, full-length umbrellas hanging over their arms like those of British bankers, thick-rimmed spectacles framing many of their shaved heads.

The huge mass of people starts to leave the train before it has even come to a complete halt at Kandy, and the constant flow of bodies doesn't let up for some minutes. A former kingdom, Kandy was established at some time in the latter half of the fourteenth century. It is protected on three sides by a "U" in the course of the Mahaweli Ganga, the country's longest river, and protected still further by one of Buddhism's holiest relics. The UNESCO World Heritage Site Temple of the Tooth was first built around 1600, when the Kandyan kingdom was the most powerful on the island. So powerful was it that its warriors managed to fend off not only the Portuguese and Dutch, but also the growing British Empire before finally succumbing to the inevitable in 1815. Today's temple was constructed in the eighteenth century, inspired by the structures of the former capital, Anuradhapura. A gleaming white parapet from the nineteenth century protects it and the old royal palace of the Kandyan kings behind.

On the banks of a small, picturesque man-made lake that is home to turtles, monitor lizards, and thousands of roosting fruit bats in its trees, the Temple of the Tooth boasts one of Buddhism's most treasured relics, a tooth said to have come from the mouth of Buddha himself. Surrounded by swirling and unstoppable traffic, I'm told the secret to crossing the street is not looking, which sounds utterly insane, but works. Hidden from view behind a spectacular array of bejeweled caskets, the tooth is served day and night



Interior of Temple of the Tooth

by the temple monks and a retinue worthy of the kings of old, who perform impressive dances at least twice daily accompanied by traditional music and drums. A multitude of pilgrims meander slowly into the complex like a sluggish river, to present flower garland offerings before the glinting caskets.

Once a year however, the innermost caskets are mounted upon a richly costumed elephant known as a royal tusker and paraded through the streets during the Esala Perahera festival. A smorgasbord of famed Kandyan dancer-acrobats, drummers, and torch bearers, the annual summer festival sees the city's hotels – such as the elegant Mountbatten Bungalow and Santani Resort – fill up fast. Hotels oriented to more adventurous travelers run up the roads from the lakeside opposite the temple complex (many barely bothering with a name), and some of the city's best food is found at the often packed Sri Ramya restaurant. Short eats (in other words, snacks) such as flavor-filled samosas, can be found on every street corner.

Ancient Anuradhapura

Though trains form an important link, it is now the roads that bear the brunt of the country's transport needs. Clamber up the steep steps of one of the British-era buses to travel further north to Anuradhapura, the oldest of the country's ancient cities, located on the steamy Sri Lankan plains. Hindi tunes blare from the retro-fitted speakers while hawkers wander up and down the narrow central aisle, peddling short eats, peanuts in paper cones, matches, and mousetraps. It's a marketplace as much as a means of transport, and an idea to take to transportation chiefs back home.

Two thousand years ago, Anuradhapura's main processional avenue ran for 16 miles and some of its bell-shaped dagoba constructions rose for nine stories, making them perhaps the first skyscrapers the world ever saw. It can be a little difficult to imagine the original city's full majesty today amid its ruins, and it's well worth lingering in the city for a couple of days while enjoying the indulgent delights of the Ulagalla Resort Hotel and its restaurants. The 32 foot jungle-covered mound at its center, stupas up to 235 feet high and 300 feet wide, and the huge artificial reservoirs that can be found around the site give a taste of how this city once appeared. The exhibits displayed in the Jetavanarama Museum also demonstrate just how powerful this city once was, being the island's foremost city and seat of more than 250 kings over 1400 years.



Buddha statue in Sri Lanka

Anuradhapura's trading connections stretched as far afield as China and India, and would bring about its eventual downfall, with Tamil forces from southern India sacking the city in the eleventh century. Never regaining its former glory, the Sinhalese capital shifted south to Polonnaruwa.

Ancient Polonnaruwa

Easily reached whatever your mode of locomotion, Polonnaruwa only remained the capital for two hundred years or so. Nevertheless, it is one of the best planned ancient city sites to visit, with some spectacular ruins dotted about a pleasant modern town with several highly-rated hotels, restaurants (the best being perhaps Priyamali Gedara), and shops. I spend my days here at a homestay quickly organized by a tuktuk driver at the bus station, giving me the chance to interact with a local family and their young children.

The ruins take on a particularly magical and eerie feel in the light that comes as the crowds diminish towards sunset, while the city's troops of toque macaques are an added entertainment for visitors, if not for the local stall and restaurant owners. I'm introduced here to dal, and have sought it out ever since, the spices of the simple lentil dish dancing elegantly on my tongue. The sweet milky tea I drink with it only seems to enhance the flavors.

The ancient city is also renowned for its staggering feats of irrigation. Situated in Sri Lanka's dry north, Polonnaruwa can go months without seeing rain, so retaining that rain when it does fall has always been of vital importance to the city's ultimate survival. The ancient solution was the creation of a series of man-made reservoirs dotted throughout the north.

Polonnaruwa is home to perhaps the greatest of them, the Parakrama Samudraya, or Sea of Parakrama, which encircles the city much like the Mahaweli Ganga flows around Kandy. The EKHO Lake House Hotel overlooks its gently rippling surface, a body of water still used not only for the everyday needs of the modern population in the city and its visitors but also for rice cultivation, even during the baking heat of the dry season. It's a wonderfully relaxing place to spend an afternoon, but all too quickly I have to move on again, three days in each city whizzing past as quickly as some of the scooters. A shop owner ignites a coconut fiber offering on a brazier in the early morning half-light on my way to the bus station, the narrow ribbon of gray smoke spiraling to the heavens like the road that winds towards Sigiriya.



The fortress city of Sigiriya



Ancient Sigiriya

The most awe-inspiring and breath-taking of any of Sri Lanka's ancient cities is the fortress city of Sigiriya. It seems incongruous to arrive with the electronic whir of a tuktuk richly decorated with the colorful deities of southern India. Rising 660 feet on a column of rock, traditional records report the site was picked by King Kasyapa for his capital around 500 CE, but abandoned after his death in battle. The path to the citadel of sheer-sided rock begins at Lion Gate (Sigiriya means Lion Rock), where the remains of a great leonine statue flanks the entrance to the zigzagging stairway. At the top of the stairway you'll discover the upper palace, complete with its own rock-cut water cisterns and views over the surrounding plains which are truly magnificent.

Close to the Lion Gate you'll find another staircase, leading to stunning frescoes and a 'mirrored wall.' Up to 500 women may once have covered the entire 450 x 130 square foot area of the citadel's western face. The 'mirrored wall,' by contrast, is a highly polished area of white plaster that enabled the king to examine his reflection and has acted as an unofficial message board for visitors to Sigiriya for centuries. The earliest is said to date back to the eighth century, and experts have counted 685 lines dating from a period of just two hundred years. Needless to say, I'm not allowed to add my own thoughts to the mirrored wall however much I want to.

With the upper palace on the summit, a lower palace sits below, hidden among extravagant gardens, as well as the moats and ramparts built to protect the ultimate citadel above. The western side of the site comprises a park reserved for the use of the royal family, which forms one of the first landscaped gardens in the world, and a reflective place to end a tour around Sri Lanka's ancient cities. Feeling very much at home in Sri Lanka, my only wish is that I had been able to see them in their heyday.

To discover more about the ancient cities of Sri Lanka, visit www.srilanka.travel. ■