



A STAR SPECIAL



Scenery in Yala National Park

The Fabulous Shri Lanka

Photographs by AMBASSADOR HENRICUS GAJENTAAN

Text by NANCY WONG

Everytime one thinks of Shri Lanka, the thoughts are about the insurgency, the separatist movement in the north, the mindless violence and senseless killing. But there is another — perhaps a more real — Shri Lanka whose peace and stability continue to attract visitors, admirers of the island's culture and of its multi-dimensional ancient civilisation. The insurgency now largely confined to parts of the northern provinces, this Shri Lanka has consistently registered a higher economic growth than Bangladesh in the decade of the eighties — it continues to show an upward trend — and holds an impressive position in the quality of life index and confidence in its future.

When Henricus Gajentaan, accompanied by his wife Martine, recently visited the island, the couple looked at other sides of Shri Lanka. A suave diplomat, the Ambassador of the Netherlands to Bangladesh is also an expert photographer, especially of art and culture. Here, *The Daily Star* is pleased to publish a set of examples of the Ambassador's work with the camera in the fabulous South Asian island, used exclusively for this publication.

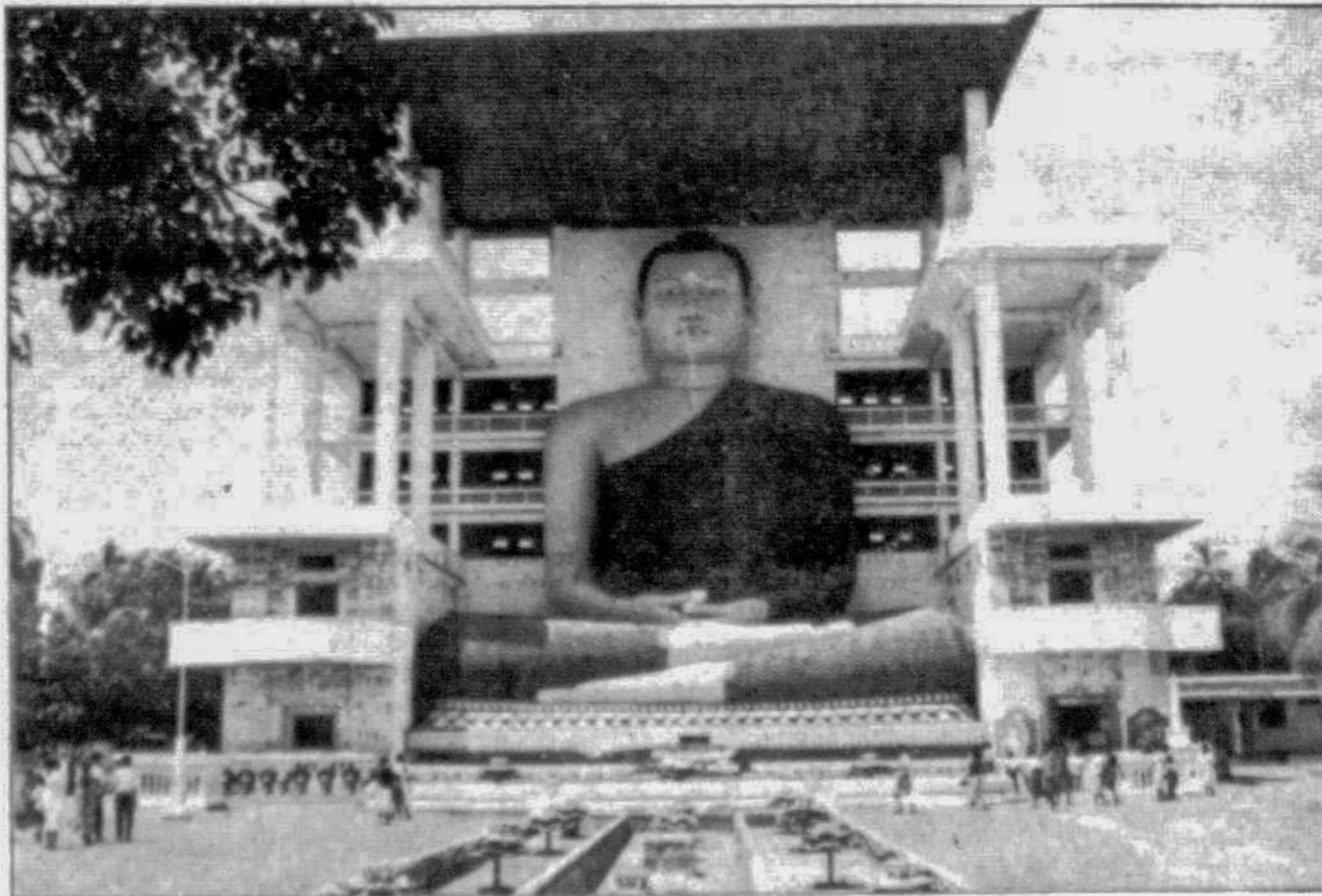
SHRI Lanka's dazzling natural beauty moves the traveller to ecstasy the moment he catches a glimpse of the island shaped like a pendant, from the air as he leaves the coast of South India and the plane crosses over the narrow straits separating the two countries.

One spots the lovely outline in the middle of the ocean alternating between emerald green interspersed with patches of clear turquoise blue of shimmering waters. Although much smaller than other islands such as Taiwan or Sumatra, within this compact area, there are many varied kinds of scenery and climatic changes ranging from the sunny sandy beaches of the coast to the high plateaus and mountains of the interior with its low temperatures and bracing air.

Having played host, from the 16th to the 19th century, to a variety of colonial "guests" such as the Portuguese, Dutch and British, Shri Lanka has a rich cultural heritage which is manifested in its cuisine, dances, songs, rituals, festivals and monuments. Its history however, goes far beyond these recent invasions for it was known way back in time to the Romans as "Taprobane" and to the Arab traders who once plied the Indian Ocean, as "Serendip" — a highly evocative name signifying the presence of treasures and memorable pleasures. Legend has it that Rama, the hero of the epic Ramayana, with his army of militant monkeys, invaded the island in hot pursuit of the king of Lanka who had abducted his beloved wife, Sita. Spurred on by righteous anger, Rama conquered most of the island.

Historical fact has it that a Sinhalese kingdom which had its seat in Anuradhapura, had existed for 200 years when a son of the Buddhist Emperor, Asok, visited this part of Shri Lanka in 247 BC. From thenceforward, Buddhism (the Theravada branch) took firm root and eventually flourished to become the most widely practised religion in the country; subsequently sending waves of monks to proselytise in South East Asia. Probably its reverence for all forms of life and distaste of the caste system appealed to the gentle and egalitarian nature of its inhabitants who are among the most outgoing and hospitable found anywhere on earth.

Anuradhapura has long since been abandoned as a royal residence but its magnificent ruins of ancient Buddhist

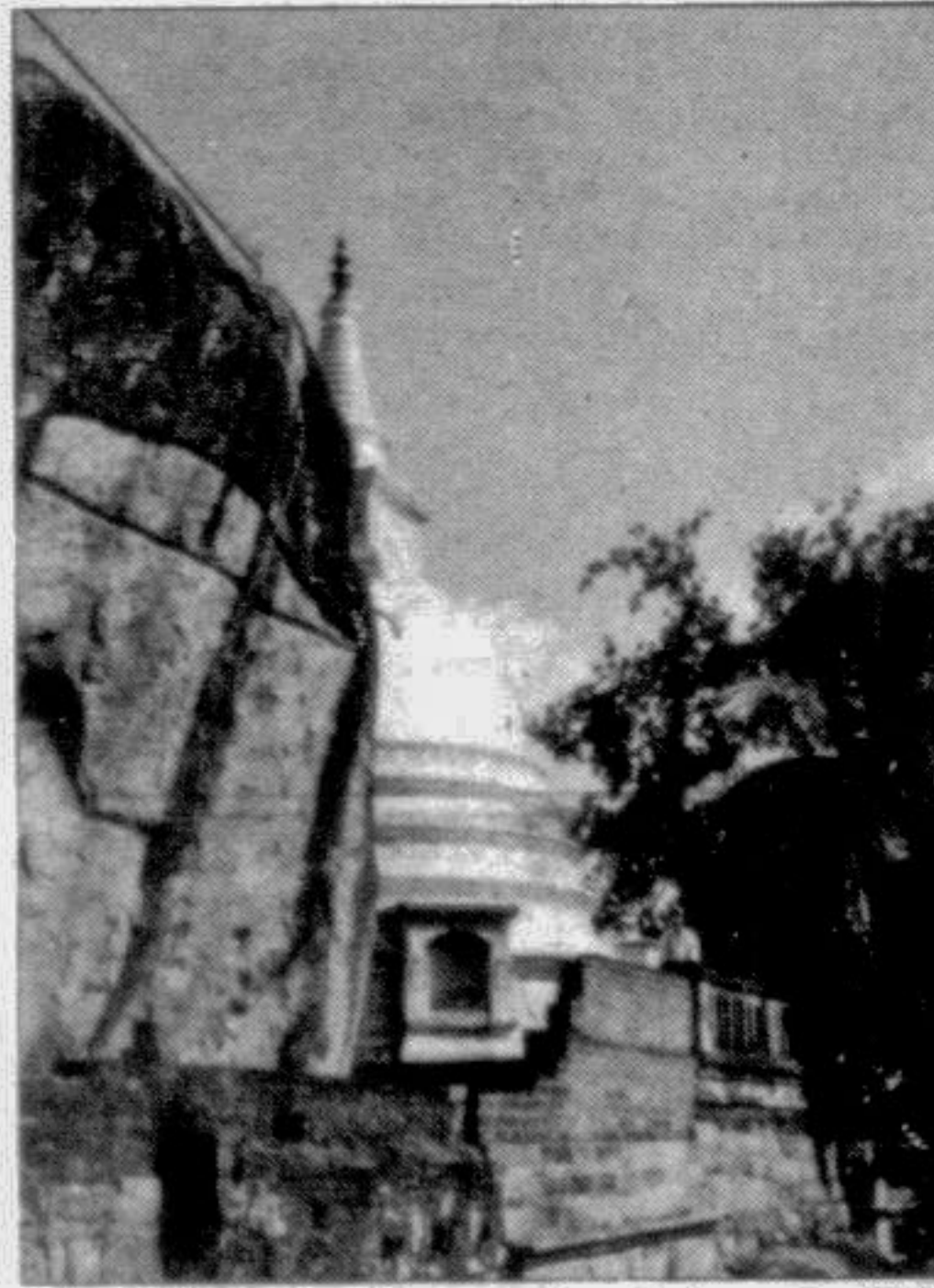


Weurakkanna Vihara, site of the largest Buddha statue in Shri Lanka, 50 meters high, constructed in 1970.

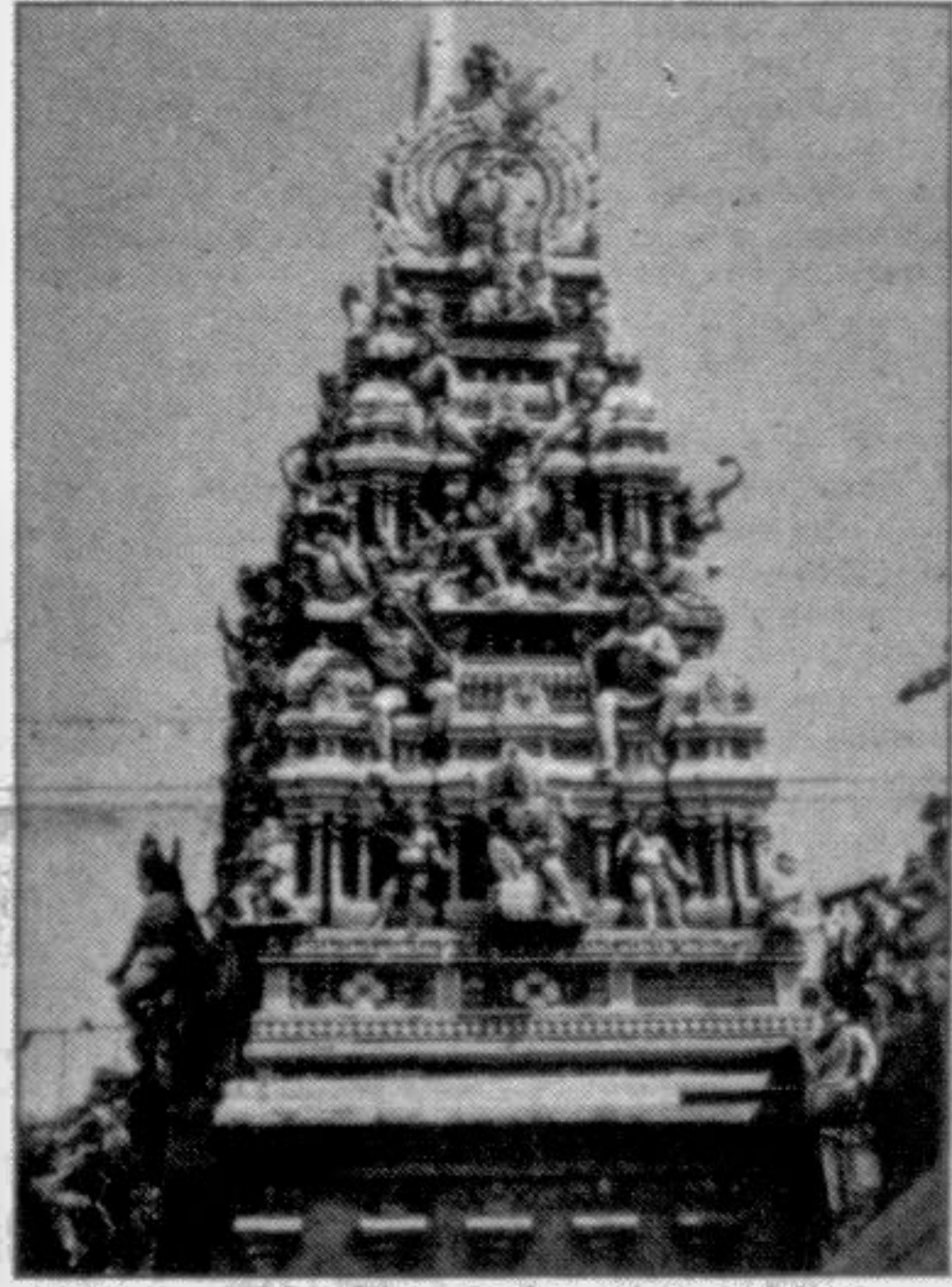
temples and the Brazen Palace still attract tourists from far and wide. Situated amidst huge trees of timeless origin, among the most awe-inspiring are four mighty stupas built to harbour relics of the Buddha. The most majestic among them, the Ruwanveliseya, which has been restored, has a dome 300 ft. in diameter and 338 ft. in height. Close by stand the ruins of the once grand Brazen Palace — considered an amazing "high rise" in its day — of nine storeys supported by 1,600 pillars in 40 rows of 40. This much visited area has a sacred Bo tree, believed to be transplanted from a branch of the very same tree under which the Buddha at-



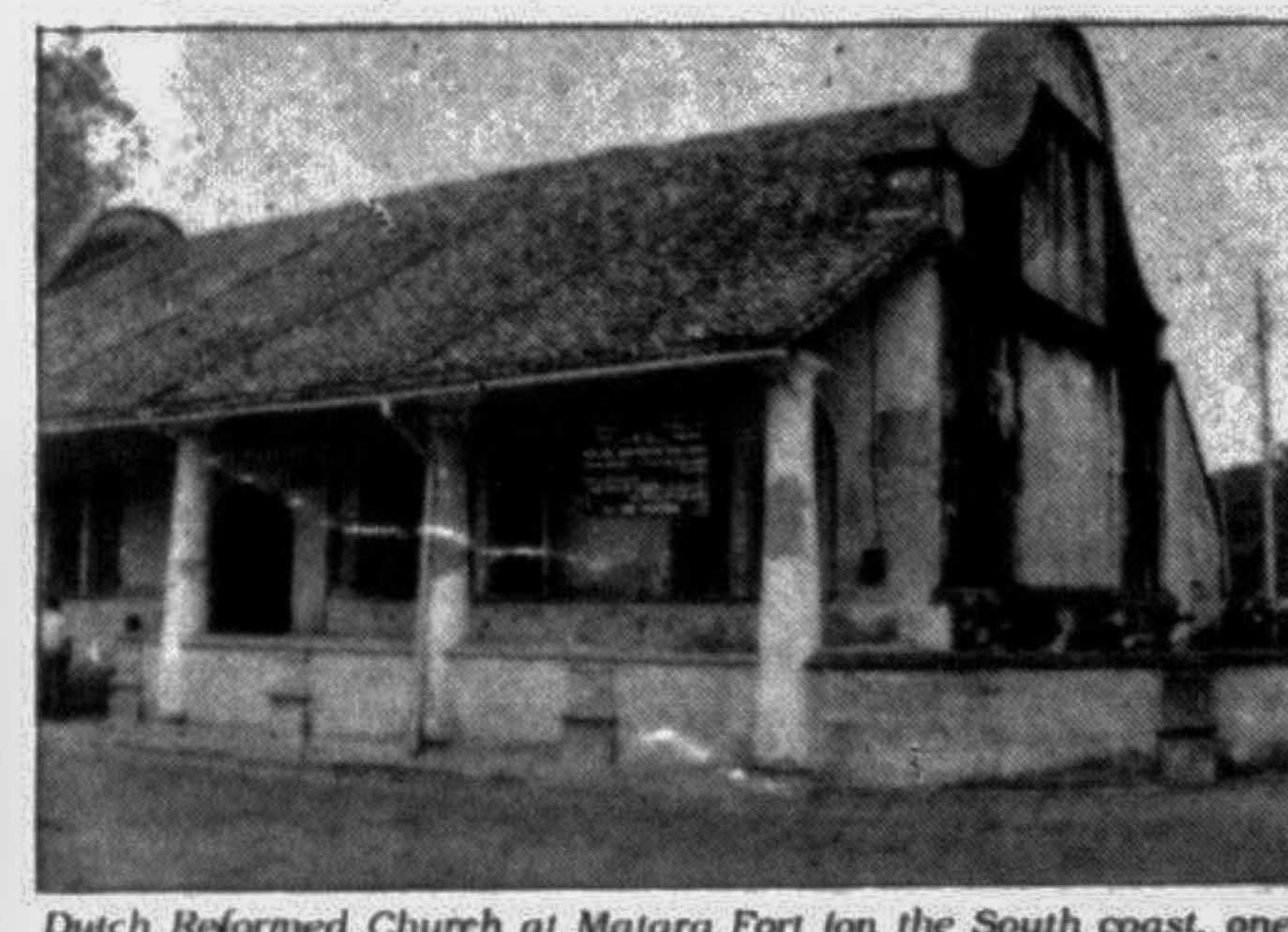
The sacred bo tree, Sri Maha Bodhi in Anuradhapura. Reportedly the oldest — more than two thousand years — historically documented tree on earth. It was carried to Shri Lanka as a sapling of the ficus religiosa beneath which Buddha attained enlightenment.



The Rock temple of Isurumuniya, built in the third century B C in Anuradhapura.



Hindu temple near Mawanela, a town of spice gardens.



Dutch Reformed Church at Matara Fort (on the South coast, one hundred miles from Colombo) built by the Dutch in 1769 and still in use.

tained enlightenment. Just 128 miles from Colombo, Anuradhapura, is easily accessible by road and rail.

Reminders of the religion which found such a hospitable home and receptive devotees are omnipresent throughout this central region of Shri Lanka. Polonnaruwa, 134 miles from Colombo, is best known as the seat of Prakramabahu whose reign was said to be the Golden Age of Lanka. Here, travellers view with admiration the Lankatilake, the largest shrine of the country and in its prime, rated as one of the most beautiful monuments of Buddhism in the region. In the same vicinity, just 40 miles away, Sigiri boasts of a rock 600 ft. high, which was used as a fortress in the

last century. The reward after an arduous climb of the massive stone is the sight of some fabulous wall paintings of beautiful women. Despite the ravages of time — some 1000 years old — these women have worn their looks well and is said to be close rivals of their sister of the famed Ajantha caves of South India.

A multi-religious society, Shri Lankans are not known for their fanaticism in this field. What is tearing their country apart is due to ethnicity problems rather than anything else. Relics of the past in the form of churches and mosques dot the landscape throughout the country.

Besides exploration into the rich, diverse historical past, visitors will their stay further enhanced by savouring the beauties offered by nature. Sun lovers and bathers have afield day relaxing on the golden beaches fringed by swaying palm trees which abound south of Colombo. Best known among them are Beruwala, 36 miles from the capital where the reef at one point forms a natural shallow pool for kids to wade in. Only two miles away is the resort complex of Bentota, famous for its gorgeous rainbow-hued coral reefs. Most of the popular beaches are served by good hotels which offer a variety of sea sports and equipment for rental.

Galle, a small seaside town to the south of Colombo, is said to date back to Biblical times. It is in this part of the island that remnants of the Dutch period in history is found.

If you have had enough of the sun and sand, and long for the cool refreshing air of higher ground, head for the hill stations, the most popular being Kandy, only 72 miles from Colombo. This town was the last stronghold of the Kandyan kings and is home of the traditional arts and crafts such as lacquerwork, silver and brass inlay and mat weaving. It is also famous for its annual ten-day festival, a joyous pageant, held in July-August during which a colourful procession of elephants, dancers, drummers and Kandyan chiefs decked in their vibrant costumes, weave their way through the streets much to the delight of onlookers. The object of this fanfare is a replica of the Buddha's tooth, borne in grand style by a gaily clad elephant. Environmentalists and nature lovers will enjoy strolling through the 160 acres of Royal Botanic Gardens which houses a teeming array of tropical flora and fauna.

Shri Lanka must be a paradise to the world's family of

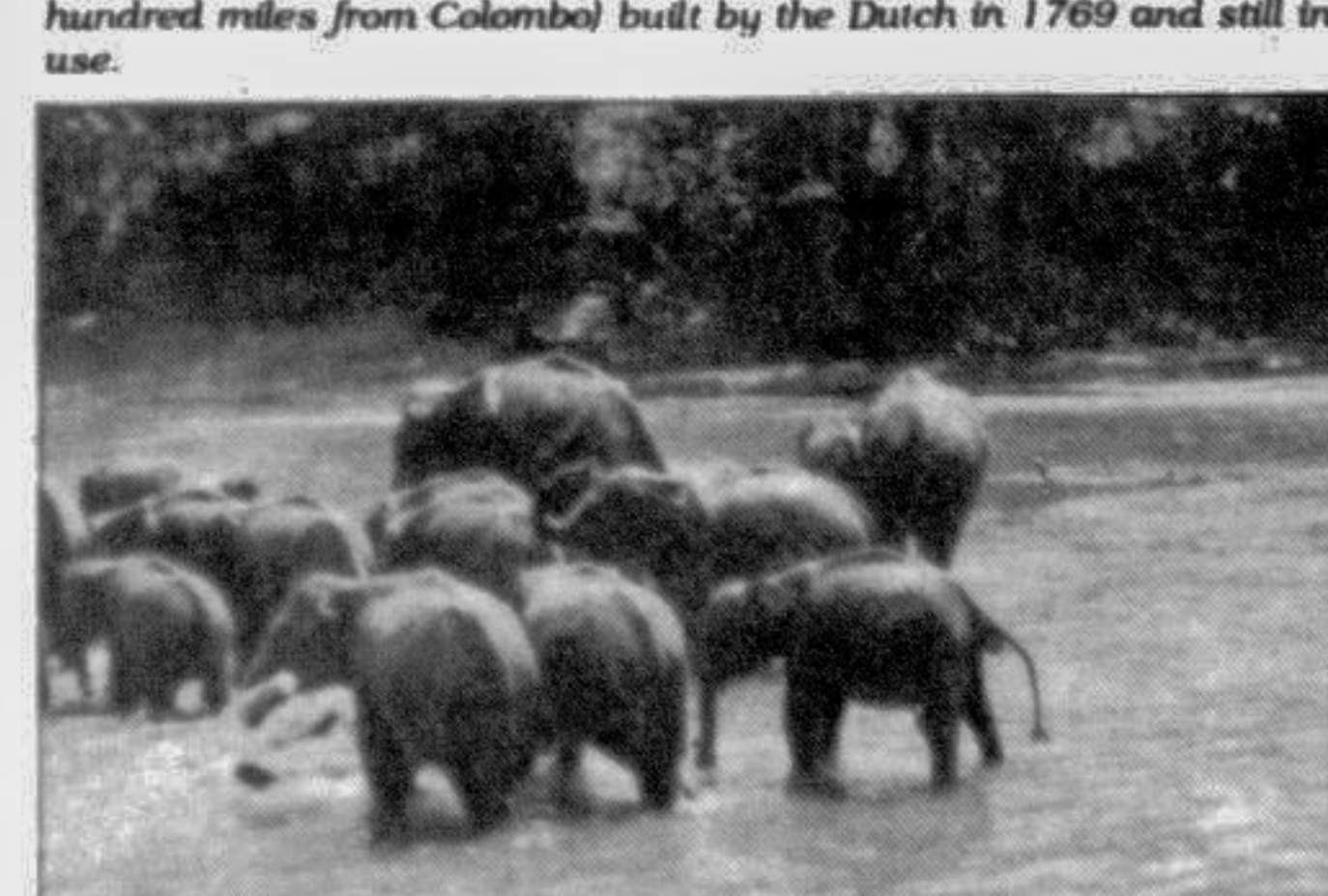
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Gal Vihara: Detail of reclining Buddha shown at the moment of entry into parinibbana. Buddha's physical death and transcendence to nibbana (the state of 'neither existence nor non-existence' for which every Buddhist strives); notice one foot larger than the other.



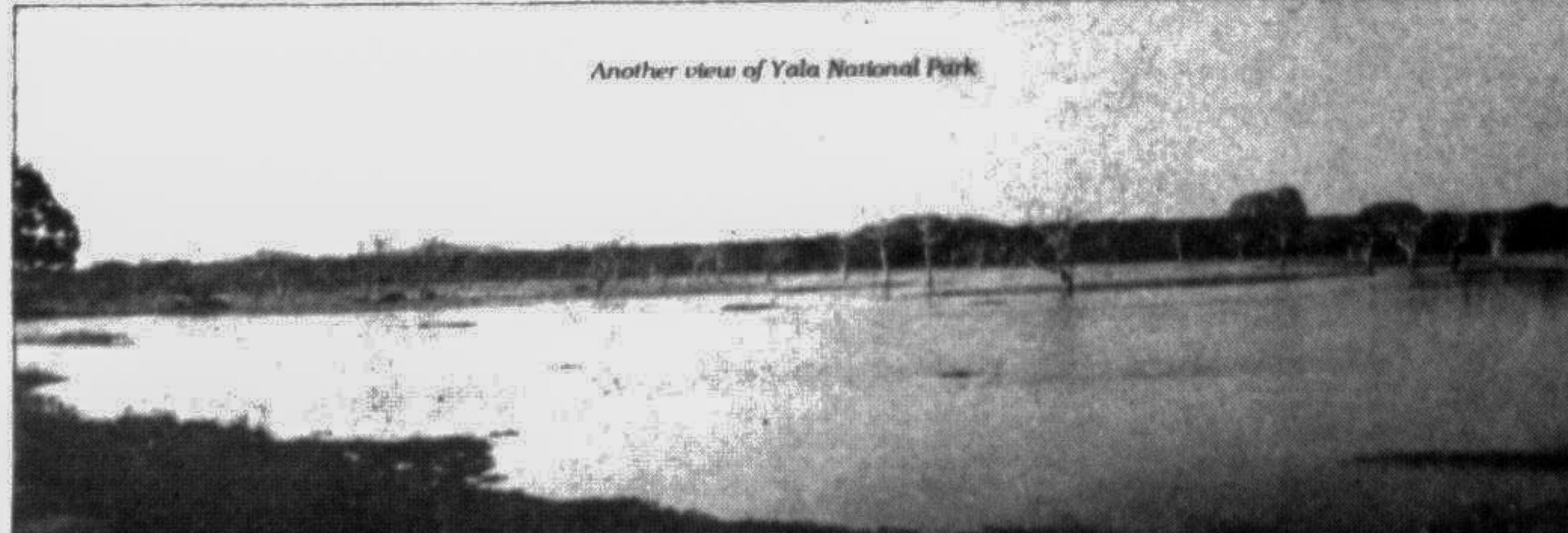
The sacred bo tree, Sri Maha Bodhi in Anuradhapura. Reportedly the oldest — more than two thousand years — historically documented tree on earth. It was carried to Shri Lanka as a sapling of the ficus religiosa beneath which Buddha attained enlightenment.



Phawella: Orphaned elephants on their way to the daily bath.



Stone carving at Anuradhapura



Another view of Yala National Park



View over Kandy.