

Lion's Paw Terrace, Sigiriya.

A Gem in the Ocean

(Part I)

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We were ecstatic. Just the mention of Bangladesh had the ticket officer slash our entry fee by half. How awesome is it to belong to a SAARC country and gain discounted admission to one of UNESCO's listed World Heritage Sites?

We were at the foot of Sigiriya, an ancient palace near Dambulla in Sri Lanka. Remains of a palace and administrative center built by King Kassapa (473-491AD), son of King Dhatusena by a non-royal consort, lay sprawled atop a 660 feet high chunk of rock. Climbing this precipice proved to be more difficult than we expected. Flights of stairs weaved their way through a generously spread out Water Garden, Boulder Garden and Terraced Garden. A precarious climb up a column of stairs led to a cave with frescoes of women believed to be *apsaras* resembling the king's wives and concubines. We made it up to the Lion's Gate, halfway to the apex.

Our enthusiasm from early morning had worn thin. The drive from Bandaranaike International Airport to Kassapa Lion's Rock Resort the previous day took approximately four hours. The overnight stay at the beautiful resort was refreshing indeed but we had to start early for Sigiriya for the long climb. Moreover, the climb till the Lion's Gate challenged us up rickety stairs with howling wind threatening to blow us off. How six year old Chinese kids raced each other in between the legs of tall Asians and even taller Europeans was a mystery to an acrophobic myself. Moreover our guide wisely informed us of a wasp attack incident the day before. Swarms flew out from the several dozen hives that hung innocently from trees near the Sigiriya Rock and attacked tourists tackling the stairs hugging the steep slope. We decided not to proceed but spend a good hour catching our breath and gawking up at the colossal rock that served as the kingdom amidst clouds of god-king Kassapa. He created this illusion of paradise for himself after shifting his capital away from Anuradhapura after usurping his father.

Once well rested, we made our way back down the stairways and back to our car. Next destination was