



# Sri Lanka — Ayobowan (welcome)

A teardrop in the ocean, Sri Lanka is known for many things, like its tea, and for us South East Asians, its cricket. However, one of the last things to be expected is the amazing diversity of its people.

The mix of ethnicities and different types of faces encountered, speaks of a country that was colonised by the Portuguese, the Dutch a.k.a. the Burghers, (those that look like Jackeline Fernandez!), the British, people from neighbouring South India, the Memons from Sindh in Pakistan, and the Moors who had travelled from Morocco/Spain, via Kerala!

I chose Polonnaruwa and Sigiriya, two UNESCO World Heritage Sites as my chance to travel outside Colombo and experience Sri Lanka's archaeological heritage. The two cities are under the Cultural Triangle of Dambulla, Polonnaruwa, and Anuradhapura.

Polonnaruwa was the second most important city of ancient Ceylon (Sri Lanka's old, pre-colonised name) while Anuradhapura was the first capital.

I caught my 5:30AM train to Katunayake at the Colombo Fort train station, from where I was supposed to catch a bus to Dambulla.

Sri Lankan railways have changed little from the times of the British colonial era and the basic interiors were the perfect setting to enjoy the supremely lush exteriors we whizzed past. I joined two other Germans who were equally lost for a ride to Dambulla, but we could not have managed without the help of the locals who helped us navigate through the craziness of the bus stations, amidst the heavy October downpour.

From the main town centre of Dambulla, Polonnaruwa is about an hour's bus drive and the museum complex is a great place to get an idea of what to see in the archaeological site, and also buy your tickets.



Make sure to get the cheaper SAARC tickets, but if you forget to bring your passport, then be prepared to pay double on a foreign ticket! These can be as high as LKR 5000!

On the way out of the museum, watch out for the taxi driver's syndicate trying to swindle you into paying an exorbitant amount to take you around, but in any case, you can hire bicycles there, or a tuktuk from the main road, as walking around the sites might take too long.

The city of Polonnaruwa served as the



capital from 11th to 13th century (CE), and contained a citadel (inner city) and an outer city. The citadel had the king's palace as well as administration buildings. The outer city contains religious shrines, with the main shrine being the Sacred Quadrangle.

The Parakramabahu Palace is thought

to have been seven stories high, but today, you can see the large holes in the walls, which probably held large wooden beams. The sacred quadrangle, with its four temples, requires a dress code of covered legs and arms and taking your shoes off, as it is considered very offensive to turn and walk off from a Buddha statue, since one should never show their backside to the Buddha.

I walked around, soaking in the artwork of the carved stones, cradling my shoes



and ignoring my burning soles as the stone slabs were scorching hot under the sun. At the entrance of each enclosure in the sacred zone, the moonstone, with its two guard stones, depicts the entrance where this exquisitely carved stone semi-circle, acts like a welcome mat. The best feature is that no two animals engraved resemble each other...

The next morning, I woke up at 4AM and after a 45 minute motorbike ride that left me teary eyed and nursing a head-cold, I was shocked at the prospect of having to climb the most wet and slippery, super high and dark set of stairs. They were also built for people twice my size, and just as my asthma was about to surface with a full-blown attack, we reached the summit, and all was forgiven, for there lay a statue of the incumbent Buddha, with an absolutely

spectacular view of the valley beneath.

The rock formations jutting out from the carpets of green, and the resting Buddha leant an instant peace to my weary mind. This was Pidurangala Royal Cave, built by Kashyapa in 5 CE.

I gently picked my way back down and headed off to one of Sri Lanka's most famous archaeological sites, the Sigiriya Lion Fortress. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, this 1400-year-old fortress with a moat and a palace, that had the head of a lion at the top of its 200-metre-high rocky summit, has steep stairs that are definitely not recommended for people with vertigo!

The site was once a palace with gardens and the rock, a part of the natural environment, was simply carved to resemble a lion's head (which has since been missing) and gigantic paws or claws.

The winding stairs up were also a tourist site as far back as 7 CE. A large set of stairs snake their way to the top, as the Toque Macaque monkeys line the path, keeping an eye on visitors. The other inmate to be wary of are the wasps, of which, signboards at intervals warn visitors.

The site has a wall, which was made using materials like honey and calcium-carbonate, so it shone brightly, offering a reflection of the king as he walked past it. Today, although it does not reflect anymore, it still carries graffiti from visitors of 7 CE — tourists have definitely not changed over the centuries!

Another spectacular feature of the site is a section with frescoes of Apsaras or celestial maidens on the rocky surface, an area where taking pictures is prohibited. The archaeological department officials stationed there encouraged me to spot the mistakes in the frescoes, which had been corrected by the ancient artists as the paint dries quickly; I found at least one!