



Daily News

T/NG

To re-ignite the passions of town & country folk

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Village life demarcated by coconuts



Simply green. Great to rise along paths and find shade



Peacocks - one of the 97 birds on site



Moonstone decoration

Anuradhapura's wild wonders

JULIET COOMBE

Moving around historic sites is much more fun by bike as you can take as long as you like at each place and also keep cool as you cycle from one ruin to the next. The best time to start exploring is at sunrise, when the heat of the day has not set in and you can also take a break in the middle of the day when the temperatures go sky high, making even bike riding sticky and unpleasant. Also take a comfy backpack to carry water, provisions and binoculars to spot wildlife. I also take a camera in a waterproof bag in case it rains, or the water bottle leaks, a good map of the historic points of interest, hand sanitiser and spare face masks.

At dusk head home to your hotel and find a nice spot to look up at stars twinkling over head. Anuradhapura is a city you really appreciate. It is an auspicious place to visit during the nocturnal hours. It is a great time to contemplate how people lived as monks in ancient times.

Anuradhapura I am told is not only Sri Lanka's first Kingdom, but also the first proper thought out city and it is where you will find the sacred tree Jaya Sri Maha Bodhiya and the auspicious Bo leaves they believe have special healing powers. Over 2200 years ago Sanghamitra Thera brought a branch of the sacred Bodhi tree under which Buddha attained enlightenment to Anuradhapura in a long journey from India. The tree was planted by the then reigning monarch, King Devanampiyatissa and is the oldest recorded tree in the world. Fold a Bo leaf in half and you will see how nature inspired the architectural design of the areas magnificent temple stupors that tower over you like the pyramids do in Egypt. Thousands of years on from when they were built you will find religious activity every where as they are a magnet for pious pilgrims, who come from far and wide to see the temple and its sacred Bodhi tree.

The knowledgeable temple priests says: "All Sri Lankan Buddhists believe in the Sri Maha Bodhi. The tree has many special qualities like the way that only one leaf falls at a time from the south branch, but from the other branches three leaves fall simultaneously." You can hire national guides or a local one as they add so much more depth to your visit and it is nice to be able to ask questions and see the place through historically knowledgeable eyes. In 337 BC the city was made the capital of the country by King Paundukabhaya, who started the irrigation works and tanks that have made the area so inhabitable, and are still great places to cool off. At one time, the city was ranked alongside Nineveh and Babylon for its colossal proportions, with avenues that artists occupied and areas where important foreign merchants had their houses. Most impressive is

the enormous Lovamahapaya, situated on the processional way that leads to the tree, an extraordinary ruin with countless rows of tightly packed granite columns, originally seven storeys high and housing more than 3,000 monks. It demonstrates the enormous talent of early architects and the ability to build multiple storeys.

The three or six hour amazing guided bicycle tours are the best way to explore these ancient ruins and if you are into peaceful cycling then hire a bike from one of the locals. The guides are also happy to provide delicious picnics, which you can take in one of the 44 ruined sites, which are so much more accessible by bike and of course much better for the sustainability of the area as it avoids car pollution.

After a busy time seeing the sites, it is great to unwind and have a lunch break in the shade of the unspoilt jungle, where you can truly go back to nature and learn about Sri Lanka's many traditional medicinal plants and even a few that have been used for not such good purposes.

After exploring the shady jungle find yourself a higher point as the views are amazing along with listening to the eerie prehistoric caterwaul mating call of the peacocks when in season and the orchestra of birds. The area has recorded bird songs of more than 97 different types, which have been spotted around the area, lake and ancient water tank built by King Mahasena in the 5th Century. Each setting provides great wildlife experiences, so bring those binoculars to fully enjoy this tweeters paradise as well as the historic ones. Best time to see birds is 6.00 a.m. and being on a bike means you can stop in the villages for snacks and get a wonderful insight into village life. Anuradhapura is a place full of fascinating artefacts such as the first letter written by mankind, which was discovered a few years ago.

Staying in the jungles near Anuradhapura means having a greater chance of seeing a giant squirrel and two types of monkeys the grey langur and the more scary red face macaques, noisy peacocks, lizards, different varieties of butterflies and dragonflies. Biking along the jungle paths each day is different as nature is a ever changing kaleidoscope of activity. Paths shrouded by trees envelope you into the jungle's ancient mysteries, and at each twist and turn you weave around it feels like a spider moving from one side of the forest to the other.

However the chants of monks, walking barefoot in the ruins and making offerings in the ancient temple complex will remain the most mesmerising experience from any visit long or short to this beautiful ancient spot. A place that will remain in your heart long after you have returned home. It is so rich in hidden historic treasures and real life religious fervour.



The sacred Bo leaf folded is the architectural inspiration



Leave your shoes outside



Natures wonder - giant squirrels