

Kumarakanda Vihara

A temple with Dutch influence



—Text & Pix by—
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The attention of any visitor to the Southern Province is immediately drawn to the city of Galle and its maritime heritage of Galle Fort. Being a maritime province, it has lived through 350 years of colonial rule by first, the Portuguese, then the Dutch and finally, the British.

Inevitably, contemporary artistic and architectural styles were influenced by European standards and values, which are mirrored in the buildings, especially, in Buddhist temples in this maritime region of the 18th to the last quarter of the 19th centuries.

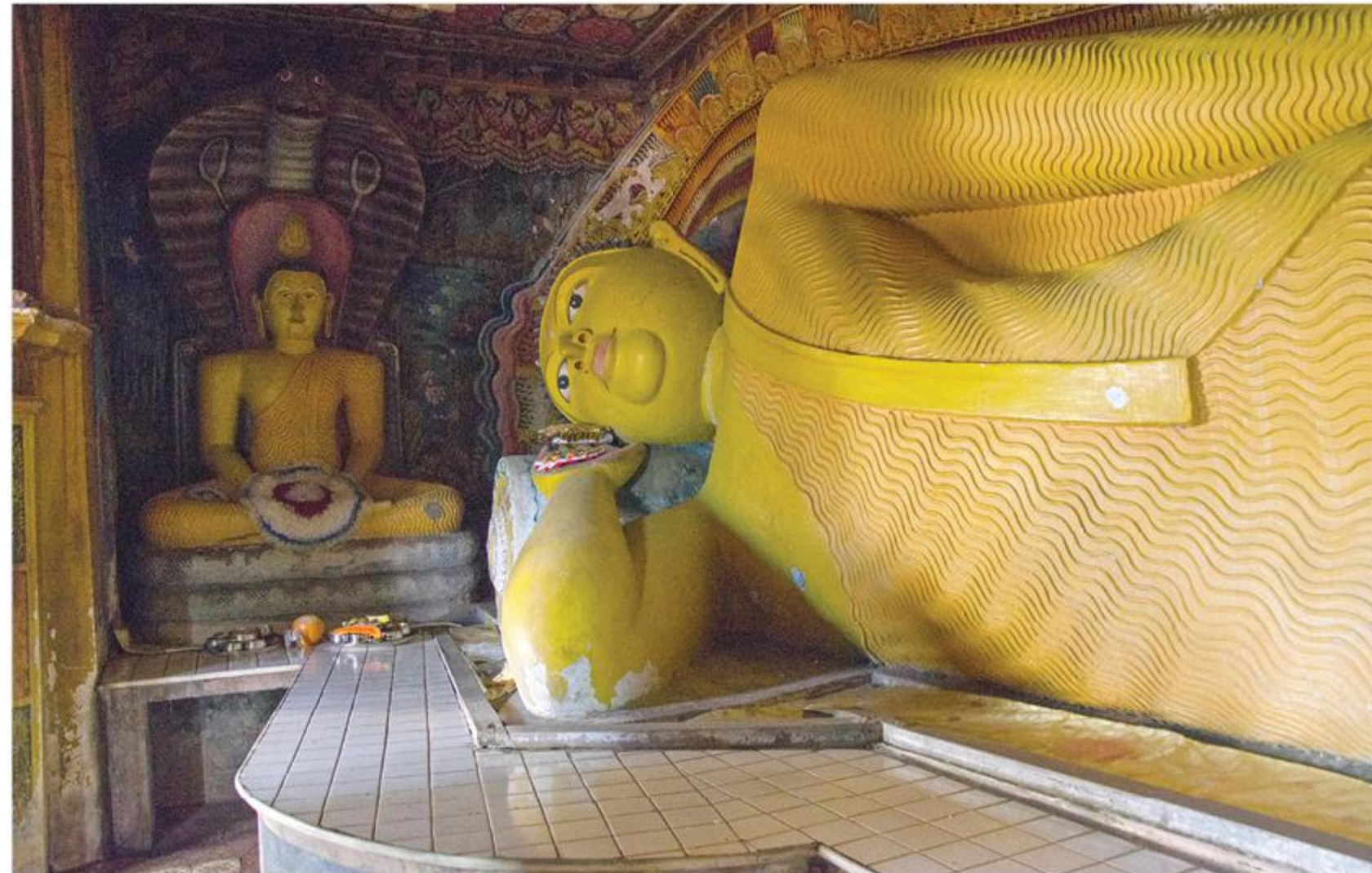
Among these buildings, the most awe-inspiring and intrinsic Buddhist architectural finds are in the small hill-lock, widely known as, Kumarakanda, a couple of kilometres past Hikkaduwa on the land side of the Colombo-Galle highway at Dodanduwa, a picturesque tourist sea resort area close to the southern capital of Galle.

Having parked the vehicle in the car park at the foothill, we trekked through the flight of steps under the scorching sun to visit the temple.

Hill of the Prince

As the name of the temple indicates, 'Kumarakanda' denotes a hill, meaning Hill of the Prince. The temple is nestled on a rocky hillock with a flight of steps. The outer protective walls have a Dutch flavour. These structures give the temple the look of a Dutch Fort.

The Dutch look is evident no sooner one gets a first glimpse of the temple. Being on the summit of the hill, it could be seen from a distance. The



The reclining Buddha statue of the image house

magnificent white washed arched-entrance at the top of a steep flight of steps is impressive. Two animals, a lion and a horse are depicted on the upper part of the arch, reminding one of the coat-of-arms at the entrance of a Dutch Fort. The flight of steps divided into two parts and ornate half walls virtually serve as a protective railing for devotees who make the steep climb.

According to historical notes, this temple dates back to 1765 AD, but scholars believe, the original temple

was demolished by the European invaders who occupied the South Western coastal line in the 16th Century. After consolidating their rule, the second invaders, the Dutch, introduced Protestant Christianity and showed more hostility to their predecessor's Roman Catholicism, than to Buddhism.

Having been influenced by the European architecture, and being on friendly terms with the Dutch, Buddhist devotees rebuilt the Kumarakanda temple in mid-18th Century. Lying a few feet away from the entrance is an image house where architecture is reminiscent of the European church style with its arches.

Three chambers

There are three chambers in the image house and at the time of our visit, only one image house was kept open. The blue painted wooden doors leading to the inner chambers are typically Dutch style doors, and are all double panelled.

The door panels are narrow and one of the panels in the second inner chamber which is somewhat bigger, is divided into two with the upper part serving more like a window. In this window like panel, a horoscope chart like design has been created. All the door frames and panels are painted in blue.

After gazing at the splendor of the image house, we learnt that it is believed to date back to 1784. In the left corner of the image chamber is a statue of a reclining Buddha. Most ancient murals have been destroyed and a new set of paintings done on the surface of the earlier ones. But, a square feet of the oldest remnants of a mural has been left, to show visitors how the walls looked originally.

Since it was kept closed when we visited, we learnt that two marble statues donated by the King of Myanmar are exhibited with two other statues in the middle chamber. The walls carry the modern paintings of Buddha's life and 16 prominent Buddhist places of worship in Sri Lanka. The third chamber displays statues of 24 Buddhas and the walls are embellished with murals depicting the Vessanthara Jathaka story. A few yards away from the image house, we came to the open courtyard where another glistening arch-entrance, resembling Dutchstyle stood, along with a temple belfry (Gantara Kuluna) and glistening Dagaba.

Belfry

The belfry in the centre of the courtyard was also typically Dutch, with intricately carved floral designs and motifs. This belfry has a unique look compared to other belfries in temples. In the early days, the ringing of the temple bell was a call to the villagers to gather at the temple. It could be an emergency when the bhikkhu needed some assistance. Today, the bell is rung during the temple rituals and offerings.

The old tile thatched building with the arched-entrance is said to be a well-equipped library, which had earlier been housed in a Dutch style building. These buildings have been reconstructed from time to time and the roof tiles have been changed a couple of times. A priceless collection of books, manuscripts and other documents written by scholarly bhikkhus and laymen during the Buddhist revival in the late 19th century had been placed in the library.

We next came to the lower terrace



The arched entrance with a flight of steps to the top

after climbing down a short flight of steps to the preaching hall where the devotees gather to listen to sermons by the bhikkhus.

The wooden pillars which stand from the middle of the wall have three rounded wooden pillars up to the roof, decorated with carvings of a group of rings and painted in orange. The remnants of a Dutch style podium where the bhikkhus sat and preached sermons are in a corner. This building is also used as a classroom for the Dhamma School.

The Kumarakanda temple and other Buddhist temples scattered in the Southern Province, which boast a unique art and architectural style with strong European influence must be protected.



The second chamber of the image house with old and recent murals



The second image house