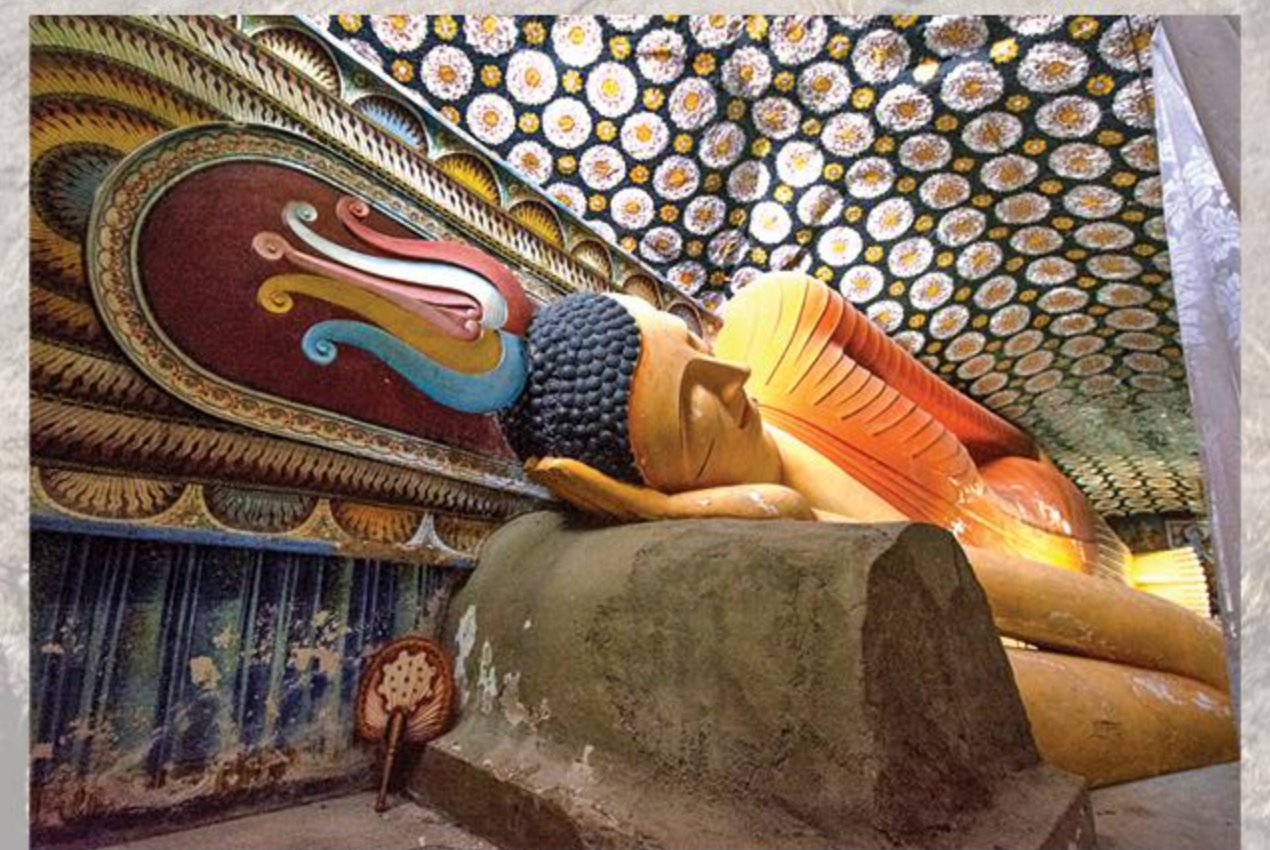


Serenity of Kukuluwawa rock cave temple

THE KUKULUWA CAVE TEMPLE WAS FOUNDED BY A GROUP OF VILLAGERS IN 1892. THE CAVE, NOT MORE THAN 45 FEET IN HEIGHT LIES UNDER A ROCKY BOULDER AND HAD BEEN THE DWELLING SPOT FOR WILD ANIMALS FOR A LONG TIME



The Dagaba occupies the highest place in the rock boulder



The reclining Buddha statue in the cave



Pilgrims negotiate the rugged footpath to the temple



The ancient stone belfry alongside the Dagaba



The front view of the entrance to the rock cave shrine

We set off in the wee hours of the morning to explore the not-so-well-known Kukuluwawa rock cave temple on isolated forest patches on a hill at an elevation of over 2,000 feet. This peak wilderness forest has its own charm and serenity lying in the Western lowland of the Sinharaja range near Kalawana in the Pimbura village in the Ratnapura district.

The site receives hundreds of pilgrims on Vesak and Poson Poya days. The rest of the year, the temple is deserted and the bhikkhus who dwell in the temple come down and live in temples near Ratnapura. The pilgrims trek the leech-infested uphill climb, which is tourist friendly and adventurous due to its ruggedness.

The foot of the Pimbura village welcomes its visitors but gives them no indication of the hard climb ahead. Do not overestimate your fitness. It's always wise to choose a day when the sun is not too harsh to start your ascent of what is practically a vertical cliff. The attraction at the end of the ascent is a cave atop a hill which has a rock cave shrine with the statue of the Buddha dating back to the King Walagambahu period.

Going back in time

The moment we crossed the village and began climbing the rocky footpath, we realised it was not an easy climb. The path uphill is dotted with massive trees, interspersed with other shady trees. After a seemingly long climb, we saw two men coming downhill and hopefully asked them how far away the shrine was. They simply smiled and shrugged, and walked on, leaving us to wonder how much longer

the trek would be. But, with each step it seemed we were going back in time, delving into the past, to another era.

The Kukuluwawa cave temple is one of the few vestiges of ancient places which was a pilgrim centre for Buddhists in Sagaragama in the days of yore.

In his book *Saparagama Dharshana* published in 1967 by an erudite bhikkhu, Ven. Kirielle Ghanavimala Thera, describes vividly the discovery of the Kukuluwawa cave temple and the Kukuluwawa Korale.

According to the bhikkhu, in ancient times, Kukuluwawa Korale (province) was the longest province in Sagaragama, bordering the South-Western part of Kuruwita-Atakalan and Kolonna korales, known as Dikgampal Korale.

Legend has it that King Rajasingha II, known as a sporty person, amused himself making it his pastime, placing elephants, bulls and roosters in games. Villagers from all over the provinces were allowed to take part in the games in the palace.

Surprisingly, one day, a person from Paragala in the same province had placed a rooster for a game in the palace and eventually it was crowned winner of the game and the owner of the rooster awarded a cluster of villages in the province.

He was also bestowed the title, *Paragala Wijayasundara Kukuluwawa Korala*. Subsequently, the village he was given, namely, Kukuluwawa Gama and the Dikgampal Province became Kukuluwawa Korale.

The Kukuluwawa cave temple was founded by a group of villagers in 1892. The cave, not more than 45 feet in height lies under a rocky boulder and had been the dwelling spot for wild animals for a long time.

—Text & Pix by—
Mahil Wijesinghe



Inside a large cave on the left of the rock is an ancient reclining Buddha statue concealed in clay.

This may have been done by the 'Ganinnanse' who had hidden in the cave during the reign of King Rajasingha II to protect the treasure hunters. Eventually, the statue had been vandalised and the valuables taken away by treasure hunters in 1897. The entrance to the rock cave was always moist due to water seeping from the upper portion of the rocky boulder.

Water springs originated from the rock even during the dry season. The water seeping through the rock ceiling into the Budu ge (shrine room) are collected for the Buddha pooja (offering to the Buddha).

After the cave temple was founded, the first renovation had been carried out in 1899 with the guidance of Ven. Delivala Saddhatissa Thera under the patronage of Delwala Rate Mahattaya.

The second renovation had been in 1934 with the guidance of Ven. Ratnapura Saddharma Thera under the patronage of the Government Agent of Kiriella.

Facelift

Today, its chief incumbent is Ven. Ratnapura Sivalee Thera, who works hard to develop the site and give it a facelift in keeping with ancient structures.

Almost an hour later, we reached the top of the craggy hill. Its name,

Kukuluwawa, indicates that the hill has been in the Kukuluwawa Korale. However, before being known as Kukuluwawa Korale, the cave temple was known as Kanaththe cave temple.

Cave shrine

We explored the natural cave shrine atop the hillock that made Kukuluwawa famous. What caught our attention on the hilltop was a huge rock boulder resting on the steep slope of the hill forming a narrow opening revealing a charming landscape on the other side.

Today, we see the renovated statue of the reclining Buddha, with beautiful floral motifs adorning the rock ceiling in the main cave shrine.

However, what sets this cave apart are the paintings on the walls which tell the story of Buddha's life. At the far corner of the main cave is the mouth of a tunnel the end of which is believed to appear in the Pothgul cave temple near Ratnapura. Paintings of the Sun and the Moon with two figures of women are found on either side of the entrance to the cave shrine. On the Right is another small cave which housed a devala with statues of deities.

Around the rock cave shrine, to the West of the over-hanging rock are a rock-cut flight of steps, nearly 60 steps with iron railing leading up to the rocky boulder where a glistening Dagaba and unique belfry stand majestically reminding one of colonial structures. At this spot, visitors could catch a glimpse of the panoramic view of the hills.

Kukuluwawa Vihara is a tranquil spot – a confluence of history and religion. The serenity you experience at the cave is really worth the arduous uphill climb.