

# **Ancient Buddhist Sites of Sri Lanka**

**Aluvihara,  
Ridigama,  
Arankele  
& Nalanda Gedige**

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**ALUVIHARA**

Between 104 and 77 BCE the Tripitakas (Buddhist scriptures) were written down on ola leaves in Pali by a conclave of Buddhist monks of the Aluvihara Temple. These Tripitakas originally had come down by word of mouth after being committed to memory by Buddhist monks of the time.

The entrance canopy has a prominent Pandal with an arch constructed out of concrete. From there is a steep ascent of stone steps leading to the meda midula - frontage terrace. Here looms a mass of rock boulders harbouring cave shelters.

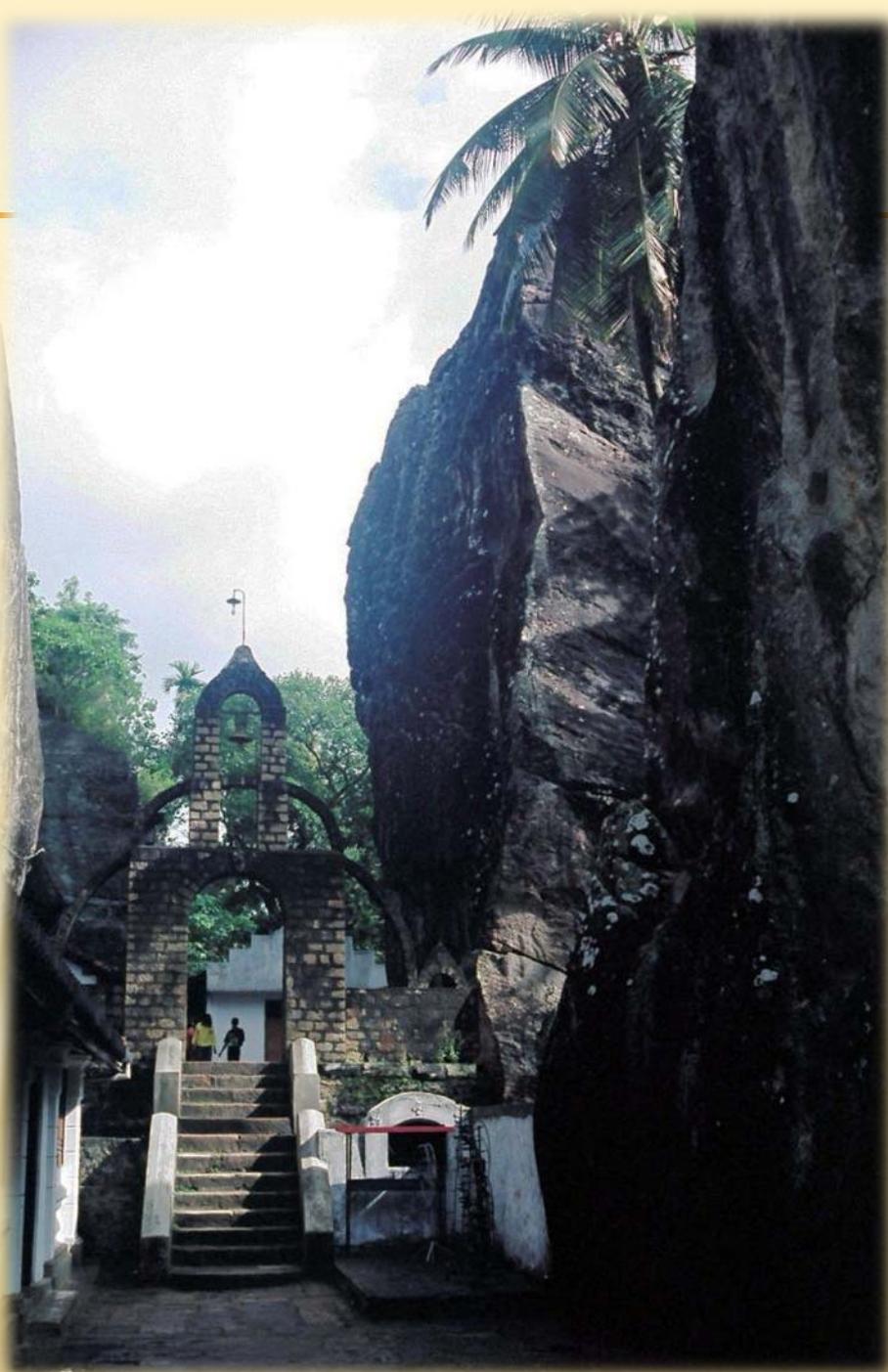
Then from there, rises round and round steps of stone giving way to the other rock caves having well chiselled drip ledges on the apex.

The library contains a gallery of antiques and Buddhist statues. There are priceless Buddha statues gifted by Siam, Cambodia, China, Japan, and Myrama (Burma), together with other archaeological artifacts pertaining to old Lanka, as well. Also displayed are Buddha statues of the Mahayana sect gifted from countries like China, Japan, Cambodia and Korea. There are well bound Tripitakas on ola leaves written in Pali displayed in a separate bookshelf. Next comes an array of heaps of talipot leaves (fresh ones processed into ola leaves on which the scriptures are written with the aid of the panhida-stile).

Aluvihara temple had in ancient times been called Aloka Vihara. The Tripitakayas were originally written on ola leaves in Pali at seven of the rock caves by an assembly of erudite Buddhist monks who were resident there. Of those seven caves, only three are remaining.

One of the rock caves harbours an Image House. Its entrance doorway is surmounted with the typical Makara Thoranay motif. There are also seated, standing and recumbent Buddha statues of terra-cota, while the murals are adorned with paintings of Jataka stories. The cave ceilings are studded with paintings of lotus flowers in full bloom - all dating back to the Kandyan period of time.

The *pandal*  
leading up to the  
main terrace.



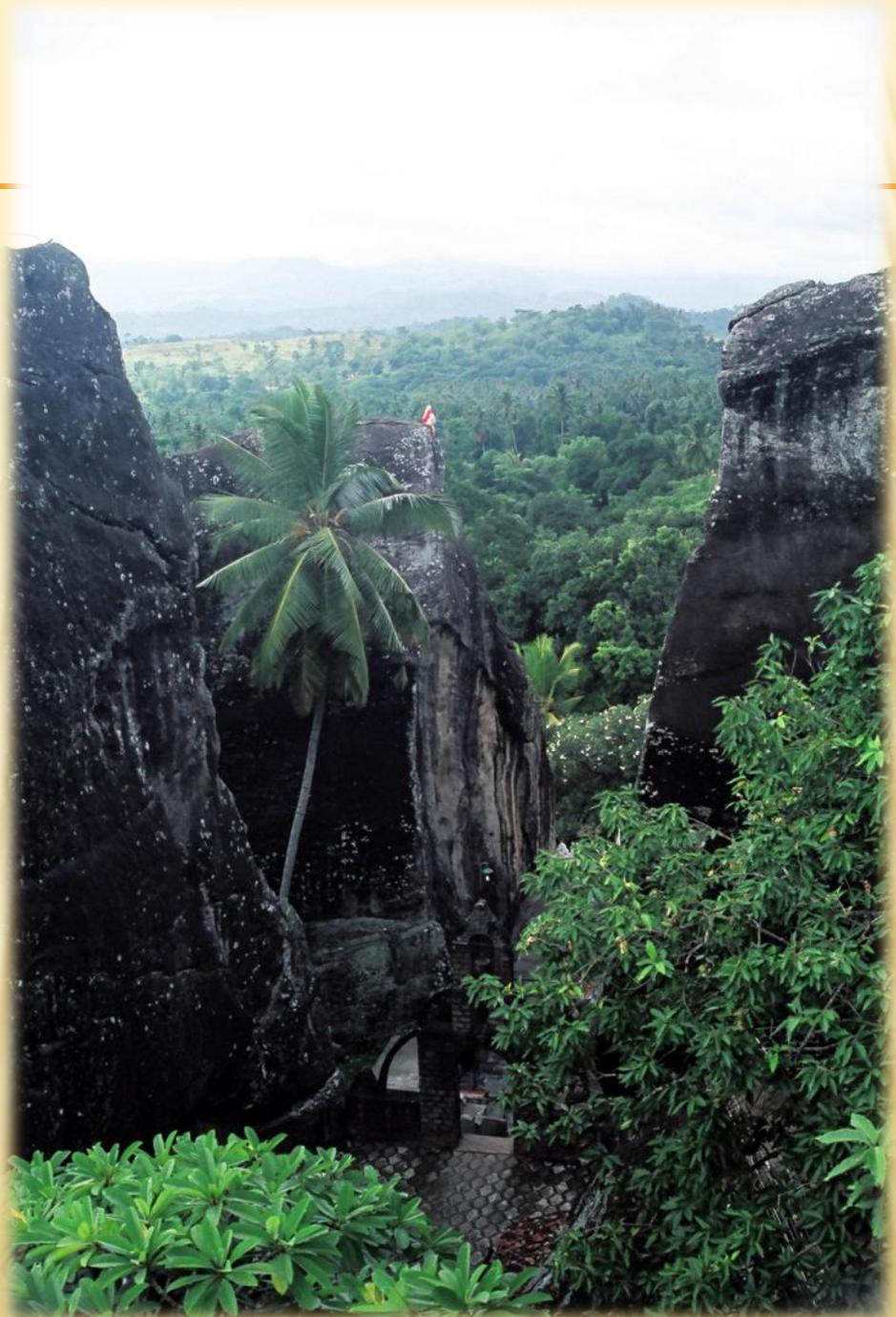


The steps in the center lead up to the first cave.



The cave where Buddhagosa is reported to have stayed for several years.

A view from about  
halfway to the summit.

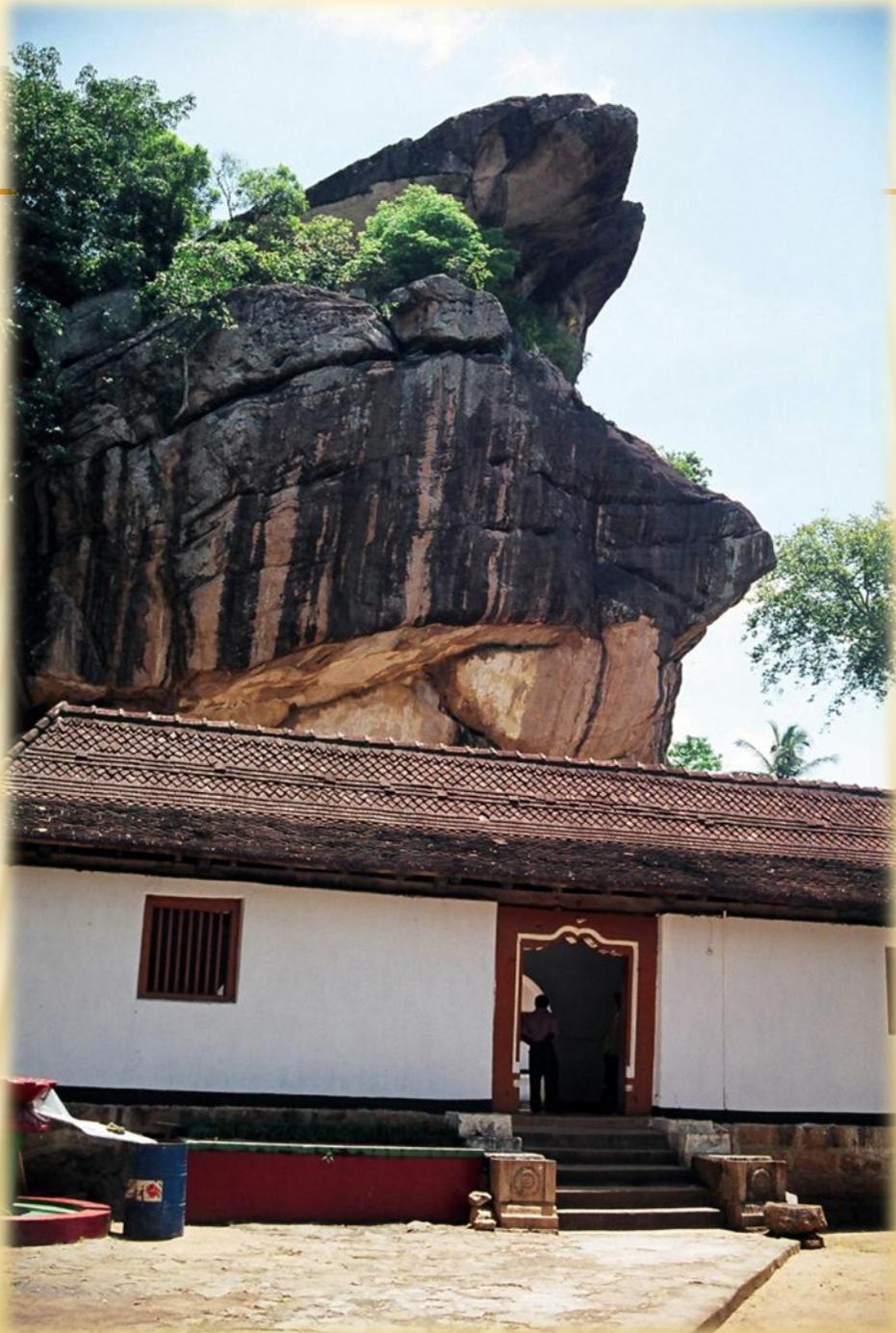




Sangavasa (Monks Residency)

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# RIDI VIHARA



In a small village at Ridigama about 13 miles from Kurunegala atop a hill, is perched the interesting cave temple of Ridi Vihara. It is a place where Sinhala, Buddhist, Tamil, Hindu and Christian art abide together. The platform upon which the main Buddha image sets has a border of Dutch tiles set into the surface. Popularly known as the “Bible tiles” it is believed that they were a gift from an European ambassador to King Kirthi Sri Rajasinghe who in turn gifted them to the temple in the days when the Dutch ruled the maritime provinces.

Ascribed to the 18th century Delft factory in Holland, these blue and white porcelain tiles depict themes from the old testament like the creation of man, the fall of man (with the serpent in the garden of Eden), the great flood and its aftermath (dove of peace with the olive branch), Moses and the burning bush, the prophets of yore and some scenes from the new testament depicting the life of Christ like the nativity, the transfiguration and the last supper. The tiles are prominently placed on the flower altar in front of a 9m Buddha image in the recumbent position. Many are of the opinion that it could have been a gesture of the spirit of tolerance that characterised Buddhism.

The cave complex is said to have been the abode of Arahat Indragupta around 2,300 years back. The silver ore discovered here in the 2nd century BC was utilised by King Dutugemunu to build the great Ruwanveliseya. The Ridi Vihara then had been built on the spot that yielded the wealth as a gesture of gratitude and in the main cave temple a gold plated Buddha statue brought from India was placed. In time it has been renovated and rebuilt by King Kirthi Sri Rajasinghe. The original gilded Buddha image is today to be seen placed safely inside a glass case.

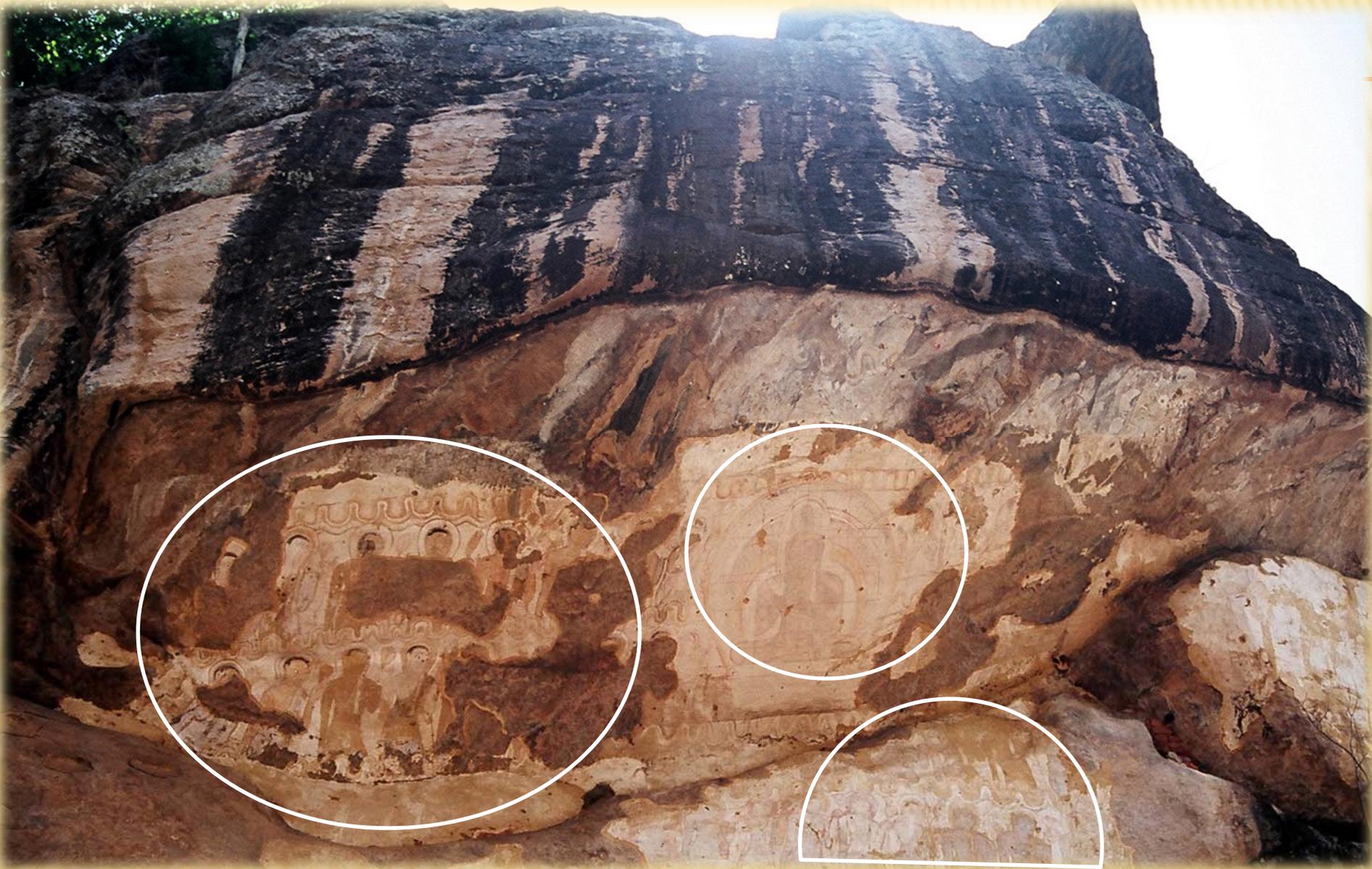
The main image house or the "Patha Viharaya" (lower temple) is tucked inside a sizable cave under a rock overhanging the cave. The rock looms skywards, a reminder of the cobra hood cave of Sigiriya. The undersurface is attractive to wild bees that build their nests upon it. It's said that those who enter the temple with impure hearts will be stung.

< Bee colony



The mantle and doorframe of one of the doors leading into this cave are decorated exquisitely in ivory. The "Pancha Nari Getaya" (figure of five women entwined in the shape of a knot) decorates the centre of this work. In keeping with the art of delusion the intricate carving depicts from far, a vase but a close look reveals the knitting of the figures of five maidens. Either side of this is the carving of two lions. This unique piece of ivory art sadly has been the subject of vandalism and the remains have been enclosed in glass.

The "Uda Viharaya" (upper temple) is said to have been built by King Kirthi Sri Rajasinghe and is likewise a cave decorated with frescos, paintings and crowded with images. It is exclusive to some rare concepts in Sinhala art. The main image is of a seated Buddha. A painting of the "Nawanari Kunjavaya" or nine maidens is found at the end of the cave outside the shrine room. The clever arrangement of nine graceful bodies of maidens delude the onlooker from far into recognizing the figure of an elephant.



Just outside the temple courtyard is a stone pillared structure more Hindu in architecture and ground plan known as the "Waraka Welandu lena". Popular belief is that Arahat Indragupta partook of a meal of ripe jak fruit at this spot. On the skilfully chiselled stone pillars forming the porch of the building can be seen some interesting carvings of figures of people. A dancing girl and a soldier are more visible. It is believed to have been a Hindu shrine.







A group of young monks and schoolboys on a field trip to Ridi Vihara



**ARANKALE**

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Arankale was purpose built as a monastery to shelter Buddhist monks in the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE. The vast forest land was scattered with patanagara or apartments designed for meditation, bathing ponds providing hot and cold water, a hall designed for walking and a two kilometre walking path designed for the monks to meditate while walking. The special characteristic of the patanagara is that each was surrounded by a water canal perhaps to keep the interior of the apartments cool. Some apartments stand alone while some are twin apartments. The twin apartments are connected together via a stone bridge.

The walking path and the walking hall was designed to provide much needed exercise to the monks who spent most of their time in meditation. The thissamahapaya was designed as a hostel for the monks and they also used it as a dharmasala, where they preached to the public who provided them with food, medicine and clothing.

The Arankale monastery was improved upon by King Jethatissa and later, King Jethatissa, King Mahasen and King Buddadasa added their touch to the monastery. It is believed that King Buddadasa, who was also a specialist in ayurveda, instructed the planting of medicinal plants around the monastery. Today none of this remains except for the ancient trees and creepers. However, the Buddhist monks still use these grounds for meditation. Eighteen bikkhus attached to the Arankale Maliyadeva Senasana continue with their meditation using the new and old meditation apartments available to them.

Situated deep in the forest far away from the attachments of today's commercialised world, the deep silence which pervades the walking path, the ruins and the meditation apartments is capable of healing the most untamed soul. Ruined staircases lead to an open spaces that were once the sites of meditation chambers.

The solitude has attracted other kinds of inhabitants. Numerous species of reptiles, amphibians, butterflies and other types of insects are a common sight to anyone who visits Arankale. One cannot miss the sight of butterflies dancing among the sunbeams at daybreak. This is also a ground for bird watching in the mornings. One can easily observe a Bird Wing Butterfly or an Ankatussa resting, among the trees of the Arankale. It has become an archaeological site, a biological reserve and a garden of medicinal plants.

Walking through the path at the end of the day one can catch a glimpse of the yellow robe of a bikkhu on his way to the pond or retreating to his meditation grounds after a walk. The sight takes you 800 years back, when Arhath Maliyadeva, the last Arhath of Sri Lanka, spent his time meditating at Arankale

A small section of the  
extensive walking  
path that has been  
restored.



A urinal stone  
and part of the  
sewer system.





The hospital complete with full size stone basins for submerging the whole body in *ayurvedic* oils.



The *thissamahapaya* or preaching hall.

A stairway  
to ....





An image chamber or shrine room.



One of the bathing ponds.



The bark of this tree was used to create the dye for monastic robes. You can see the color where the limbs have been scraped.



A walking meditation path in front of a meditation chamber.



A chamber next to the bathing pond. The granite posts would have supported a tiered roof.



More stairs probably leading to a meditation chamber.



The cave used by Arhath Maliyadeva over 800 years ago.

The covered walkway leading from the alms hall to the meditation chambers used by the current bhikkhus at Arankale Maliyadeva Senasana hermitage.



**NALANDA GEDIGE**

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Twenty kilometers south of the Dambulla Temple, about one kilometer east of the A9, is the attractive Nalanda Gedige. The unusual image house was transferred to this spot near the town of Nalanda not far from its original setting where it would have been flooded by the construction of the Bowatenne Irrigation Tank

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The small building is designed like a Hindu temple with a mandapa, an entrance hall (originally roofed), a short passage to a bare cell, and an ambulatory round the holy center. There is no sign of Hindu gods, however, and the temple is said to have been used by Buddhists. This is one of the earliest buildings of stone constructed in Ceylon

The richly decorated facade sections, laboriously reassembled in 1975, are predominantly in the South Indian style, and may have originated in the eighth to 11th centuries, but cannot be precisely dated. However, the god Kubera appears on the south side of the tympanum over the sanctuary, and this is a feature only to be found in Sri Lanka. The temple is nestled in a beautiful setting.





Looking through  
the entrance hall.



The Buddha image  
inside.



A Strangler Fig at  
work near the  
Gedige.

