

# Sri Pada: Sacred Pilgrimage Mountain of Sri Lanka

By  
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Photographs by author

*Now the island of Serendib lieth under the equinoctial line, its night and day both numbering twelve hours. It...is bounded by a lofty mountain and deep valley. The mountain is conspicuous from a distance of three days and it contains many rubies and other minerals, and spice trees of all sorts. I ascended that mountain and solaced myself with a view of its marvels which are indescribable and afterwards I returned to the King (Sixth Voyage of Sindbad the Sailor, from **The Thousand and One Arabian Nights**).*

In the spring of 2004, I climbed that same remote mountain and found it had acquired many names over the centuries: Samanala Kanda, Sumanakula, Civan-olipata, Sivanolipadam, Shiva's Peak, Pico de Adam, Adam's Peak, Adam-malai, St. Thomas's Peak, and Sri Pada. Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims all revere this high place, which helps explain all the names. This sacred summit has been ascended for thousands of years by millions of seekers, including Alexander the Great (330 B.C.E.), Chinese traveler Fa Hein (413), Marco Polo (1292), Arab geographer Ibn Battuta (14<sup>th</sup> century), and, as the story goes, Adam, Shiva, St. Thomas, and Lord Buddha himself. Some pilgrims scanned the ground for gems, while others searched the heavens or their souls for enlightenment. I came to the mountain as a geographer, with a love of climbing and a boundless enthusiasm for uncertainty.

Sri Pada did not let me down.

## Sri Lanka

The island of Sri Lanka is shaped like a teardrop, and it is a place where tears are shed both from loving kindness and genocidal rage. Life is seldom what it seems in this place Arabs once called Serendib. The word "serendipity" was born from lore



*Sri Pada rises daily above land and life like a promise or a dream.*



dating back to the time of Muslim traders beguiled by spice island fragrances drifting across the Indian Ocean.

First impressions can be like that the dream of an unspoiled, unpeopled place, an Eden where problems are swept away on a cinnamon breeze. The trouble is, land and life are never that simple. Once our heads clear, we seldom ask permission to rename places we capture. All things considered, we prefer to get down to business and etch our cultural impress into landscapes already lived in by others. That hubris is the musculature of history, the essential force that sculpts the ever-changing geography of the world.

The first people on the island were early migrants leaving Africa about 50,000 years ago. Their journey is chronicled in the National Geographic Society's Genographic Project. It reveals the genetic markers of ancient "Coastal Clan" travelers, some of which made it to Australia and became known as Aborigines. Other members of Haplogroups C and D bands stayed behind in what is now Sri Lanka; these are the Veddah people who named their homeland Ratnapura Island of Gems. A few thousand still harbor the largest share of those genes, secreted away in remote valleys foreigners cannot visit without permission.

Sinhalese people later migrated to the island from the Ganges Valley, bringing their Indo-European language with them. They were called the Hela, "the pristine people," and named the place Heladura. Tamils drifted across the Gulf of Mannar from the Indian province of Tamil Nadu, speaking a Dravidian tongue and practicing Hinduism on the north end of the island. Buddhism arrived in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century B.C.E. and was widely adopted by the dominant Sinhalese people, who set aside previous faiths. By the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Arabs brought Islam to the island. To this day, they are still called Moors. Over the centuries, Malaysians sailed in from the east and settled down to fish the coral lagoons and warm coastal waters of the Indian Ocean. A succession of Sinhalese dynasties built grand cities in the interior, secure in their prominence above all others.

But then, Europeans arrived, and new sets of cultural collisions swept across the island like ripples in a windswept pond.

The Portuguese landed in 1505 and renamed the place Ceilão. Christianity grew early roots along the west coast in cities such as Colombo and Negombo. The Dutch pushed the Portuguese out by 1655, and, in turn, the British chased off the Dutch

and achieved colonial mastery by 1802. They renamed the island Ceylon, creating vast tea, rubber, sugar, coffee, indigo, and cinnamon plantations, which eventually drew even the defiant, central-highland Kingdom of Kandy into the mercantile sphere of London. Ceylon tea — white, green, and black — became an international commodity, a prized oriental entitlement for the elites of Sussex striving to "Make the World England." They failed. In 1948, Ceylon achieved independence and in 1972 was renamed Sri Lanka, "resplendent island."

Independence came with a price. Anytime when a place is populated with people from heterogeneous ethnic as well as religious backgrounds, tension will

likely develop.

The Sinhalese Buddhist majority had been favored by the British and maintained control of the government, excluding the Tamil Hindu minority from power and economic opportunity. This process can best be called "brown colonialism." Their domination was asserted even in the northern and eastern regions of the country, a cultural homeland Hindus call Tamil Eelam (Map 1). In response, the Tamils formed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to fight for sovereignty.

In 1983, madness erupted. As always, it is difficult to say who cast the first stone. Tamils blame Sinhalese government forces for a deadly rampage in Jaffna. Sinhalese blame LTTE separatists (also known as



Map 1: Map of Sri Lanka showing its major ethnic divide.



"Tamil Tigers") for ambushing and killing their soldiers. In any case, riots shocked the capital city of Colombo and other sections of the country for two weeks. Mobs of Sinhalese civilians roamed the streets attacking Tamils and destroying their property. Between 350 and 4,000 Tamils died; no one is sure. Over 18,000 Tamil homes and 5,000 shops were burned to the ground. More than 100,000 Tamils were made homeless in Colombo alone with another 175,000 across the island. In 2001, fourteen heavily armed LTTE guerillas attacked two airports in Colombo. Tamil Tigers destroyed eight military planes, damaged ten others, and blew up six commercial jets. Seven airport security workers and all fourteen Tigers died as tourists cowered.

But those were mere skirmishes. Since 1983, this war over race, religion, money, and power has taken the lives of 65,000 people on an island once called "Serendip." One out of every 300 people in Sri Lanka has been killed in a war few of us know about in a place infused with ancient spiritual mythologies. Then the tsunamis came. A year after my trip, thousands more were killed along the coast, casting further doubt on the possibility of a life lived there without turmoil.

All this ethnic, political, natural, and religious violence has happened in the very shadow of sacred Sri Pada, with its holy "footprint" sunk deep into bedrock at the summit of this divided island.

But whose footprint is it?

## Kandy

It was into this setting that I arrived in Colombo on a sultry March day. I was on a five-month, around the world trip and carefully timed my visit to Sri Lanka to avoid summer monsoon rains and gunplay. The Norwegians had brokered something of a peace treaty, and I arrived in that lull. I was mostly here to climb Sri Pada during the pilgrimage season and live out a childhood dream. Maybe it was the name of the city I was heading for — Kandy — that first caught the eye of a child. As a man, it was the elegance of Buddhism that drew me away from the sweltering coast for a 3½ hour, 90¢ bus ride up into the cooler highland air.

The British called mountain towns like Kandy and Nuwara Eliya "Hill Stations," where they retreated from tropical heat and malaria. I was dumped at the bus station in a crowded street in downtown Kandy and walked up a hill to a guest house called the Expedito, which was run by a friendly woman named Khantih. A young man named Ravi helped me find my room. Khantih called him "the boy" even though he was in his twenties. For \$12.75 per night, I got a tidy room with a ceiling fan, mosquito netting, and a full vegetarian breakfast and dinner. Out of my window, I could see a massive whitewashed statue of Buddha looking across the city.

At 5:30 the next morning, the amplified sound of chanting Buddhist monks rose up the slope. At 6:30, they began drumming.

By 7:00, all was quiet except the songs of birds I didn't recognize and the barks of dogs I did.

I spent most of the day visiting the Temple of the Tooth, said to house an incisor of Lord Buddha. This ancient temple complex had been erected around the Tooth Relic with a modern moat added to prevent further Tamil attacks like an infamous 1988 truck bombing that damaged the shrine. Two elephants lolled in the shade out front, calmly napping as a small crowd drifted by. I chose to miss the Temple of the Tooth festival season, when Kandy gets crammed with tens of thousands of Buddhist pilgrims jostling to see a parade of elephants decorated with brightly colored garlands and electric lights.

I preferred the nearby Pinnewala Elephant Orphanage, where dozens of animals live in safety after losing their parents to land mines or meth-induced heart attacks in illegal logging operations. One of the elephants was named Sama, meaning "peace" in Sinhala. Her right foot was blown off when she stepped on a land mine during the height of the war. Her spine had twisted from years of hopping on three legs. Sama has rejected all attempts at fitting her for a prosthesis and will only tolerate the presence of her *mahoot* (handler) and no other humans.

Sama. Shalom. Salaam.

Words and worlds can be hard to live up to.

One night I watched the sun go down



Shrine of the Footprint: Shrine of the sacred footprint at the summit, but whose footprint is it?



Sama shows her injury from a land mine in the Sinhalese-Tamil War.



from a vantage point and chatted with a former member of the Sri Lankan Air Force. His face grew sad when I asked him about the war. "It seems it is us at our worst," he said quietly. I told him how we all wrestle with the same challenges. He petted his dog, thanked me for some reason, and walked home. That night, Khantih and I sipped tea and watched a game show on her television. Contestants tried to act out a movie role, knelt at the feet of a celebrity judge, and did a Buddhist prayer to win a microwave.

It was time to climb Sri Pada.

### *The Pilgrimage to Sri Pada.*

At 1:30 a.m., there was a wake-up knock on my door in the Wathsala Inn at the base of the peak near Delhousie. I dressed, shouldered a day pack, and wandered outside. I was here during the peak of the pilgrimage season that begins on the *Unduvap* full moon in December and ends on the *Vesek* full moon in April. If you miss that window, the monsoon makes the peak inaccessible and inauspicious. Signs in Sinhala seemed to direct me, but I simply followed a line of devotees who seemed to know their way in the darkness. I was told that the most esteemed pilgrimage reached the 7,360-foot summit at dawn when I would experience a spiritual insight called *irasevaya* – "the effulgence of the rising sun." As a *kodukaraya* (novice), I stopped for tea and a biscuit to prepare.

The pilgrimage itself began just past a small shrine. I hiked up a pathway of concrete steps called the Hatton Route. It was lined with dim electric lights, and I joined hundreds of walkers in an easy rhythm. I estimated the hike to the top was only four miles long with 2,500 feet of elevation gain. A minor climb, but I sensed it would be more challenging from the looks on people's faces. Groups of *nades* (pilgrims) from home villages stayed close to each other, chanting low. Young people in blue jeans and pile jackets joked as they moved quickly upslope. Praying couples carried sleeping children in sashes across their chests. Some of the pilgrims were barefoot; others wore Nikes. In the dimness, it was impossible to tell Sinhalese from Tamil, Buddhist from Hindu. Perhaps they knew. Perhaps for at least these few hours they could forget.

A simple, whitewashed Buddhist *dagoba* (stupa) appeared ahead. Sri Lankan plainness. Women sold necklaces, soft drinks, and potato chips laid out on small tables. The pilgrimage had become a



*Pilgrims. No dress code in force, lights and rails show the way.*



*Waiting for the effulgence of the rising sun at the top of Sri Pada.*





Buddhist Dagoba, Stupa, or Wat – cookies and Coke's for sale.

commercial venture, as they all do eventually: Jerusalem, Sinai, Rome, Santiago de Compostela, el Santuario de Chimayo in New Mexico. Simple practicality. People get hungry and thirsty when they walk; people need money, so money is made. And no one seemed to take the slightest offense.

As the pilgrims continued, I couldn't help but ponder about the history of the deity of such a sacred place. Saman was the first known deity of the mountain, one of four Veddah godheads of the island. The names "*Samanala Kanda*" and "*Sumanakula*" translate as "Peak of the God Saman." Saman is still widely believed to be the principle guardian of the mountain. Pre-Hindu/pre-Buddhist priests called *kapuralas* tend shrines at its base.

Hindus say that Lord Shiva (Siva in Sanskrit) left his footprint on this peak and that he uses it and Mt. Kailas in Tibet to shed his divine light on the world. *Civan-oli-pata* and *Sivanolipadam* refer to "the mountain path of Siva's Light" and "the Foot of Siva's Light." Shiva's Peak is more widely used today. Shiva is called The Destroyer (of evil) and was said to carry a trident as he rode a white bull to the top.

Lord Buddha is said to have visited Sri Lanka three times in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. On one of these visits, he presented his teachings to God Saman who became a *sotapanna* ("stream-enterer"), a devotee of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold

Path. Buddha ascended the peak and pressed an imprint of his left foot on the summit. Pilgrims to this day hold a syncretic view of things (crossing religious boundaries by combining different views from different religions), some of them chanting to Saman as their kind protector during the climb, "*Saman devindu, api enava*" ("God Saman, we are coming"). Hindus return the favor, saying that Buddha was one of ten *avatars* (incarnations) of Vishnu. In any case, after introducing his teachings to Sri Lanka, Buddha strode over to Thailand, where another sacred footprint is found at Phra Sat. Similar signs are said to exist in Laos (Pha Baat Phonsan), Cambodia (Phnon Santuk), and China (We-Tai-Shan). The actual imprint of Buddha for me has always been the tangible simplicity of this spiritual path. I have met monks who meditate on the same four lines their entire lives:

*May I be filled with loving kindness.  
May I be well.  
May I be peaceful and at ease.  
May I be happy.*

So much death in a place with so much love. I walked on, sobered by this *koan* a riddle we have not solved.

A small group of nuns sat quietly drinking tea at a rest station. The fog was getting thicker. The Portuguese brought Christianity to the island and called this place Pico de Adam, which was anglicized

by the British to Adam's Peak. According to their version, when Adam fell from the Garden of Eden, God sent him to Sri Lanka, where he stood on this summit for a thousand years on one foot as penance before ascending to Heaven. Sri Lankans say that this is clear evidence of God's kindness since Sri Pada is the closest thing to Paradise. Still other Christians believe the footprint was left by St. Thomas the Doubter during his missionary work in India and Sri Lanka thus the name, St. Thomas' Peak.

Muslim women walked ahead of me with their husbands, eyes cast upward, heads covered in white scarves. Muslims use the name Adam-malai (Adam's Peak) for similar reasons as Christians, another demonstration of a shared Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition. This is widely known but seldom honored.

Farther up the mountain, the air got colder and my clothes were damp with mist. One older Buddhist pilgrim softly called out *karunawai, karunawai* ("compassion, compassion."). I was also more than ready for *irasevaya*.

Just below the summit, I stopped for a final rest in a rock shelter. Not even a flicker of dawn shown in the east. Dozens of pilgrims lay inside, wrapped in white, blue, and pink blankets. Many of them were barefoot. An Aussie named Robert sat down for a chat; there were only a handful of non-Sri Lankans in the thousands of climbers. "Pretty good tramp, eh?" he said softly. I smiled. "Not too steep," I said. "The steps and handrails were a surprise though." "Just takin' precautions I reckon," Robert said. "In case someone falls from grace." He smiled big and so did I. "See ya mate," he said glancing at his watch. "It's time for the party."

It was now 6 a.m. Somehow four hours had gone by. I moved up the final fifty steps to the summit. True to their nature, the British had precisely measured its size: just 74 feet x 24 feet. It seemed less than that in the darkness and fog. Only a string of tiny bulbs lit the white shrine and its gold ornamented doorway. Inside, was the holy footprint. There was no way to view it, which is strictly forbidden, and no one was there to ask. I had heard that a Brahmin priest or Buddhist monk might be here to make an offering of cooked rice like Tenzing Norgay did on Everest. All I smelled was incense and sweat. Some pilgrims say that there is a 68 inch x 30 inch footprint impression in solid rock hidden inside and that Buddha was really 30 feet tall. Others say that the real footprint lies below that



boulder, encrusted in gems and gilded filigree since the bedrock print is far too crude and ungodly to be worthy of veneration. Most people I saw seemed too lost in their own souls (or too cold) to care.

I sat down cross-legged in the lee of a concrete wall and waited for the sun. Sri Lankan flags snapped in the 20 mph wind. It was cold, even for a Montanan, so the highest place stayed nearly empty. A few Buddhist women ventured out to prostrate themselves before the shrine. Tamil women, shrouded in blankets, faced east chanting "*Sadhu sadhu sa*," calling out the Hindu name for an ascetic holy man, imploring the sun to appear. A young Sri Lankan man in a Land's End jacket handled a crucifix, moving his lips in prayer.

It stayed dark. The fog grew thicker and drenched the summit in cold, wind-blown mist. It was far past the appointed hour for the *irasevaya*. It was said to be so transcendent a sight that people wept as the sun rose and cast the shadow of this peak with so many names across the sleeping world. We all waited patiently at first; it had been such a long climb. An hour went by, then two, but the sky barely brightened. People straggled up to the summit platform for a look until the cold drove them down to a hut just below the heights for a cheerful mug of tea.

*Karunawai* – compassion.

The basic rules about mountains came to me – show respect on high summits. If the weather is poor, move downhill. I decided that this was my effulgence on this day. It was practical and real, and it was enough. Besides, I had seen the view from hundreds of peaks in dozens of countries. While none of them had accumulated the cultural layers of Sri Pada, the feeling of transcendence on each was somehow less premeditated. Borah Peak, Ben Lawers, Blue Mountain. When lessons come they come. I remembered a Buddhist teacher's warnings about the "stink of Zen."

I walked over to a large bell hanging to one side. Tradition said the pilgrim should ring it the number of times they have climbed to the top. I waited while a man rang it more than 30 times. I gently took the rope and rang it once.

I began my walk back into the world. The trail was still crowded with pilgrims on their way up. Most were devotees; others were curious visitors to this place, *kodukarayas* like me. There were families, elderly ascetics, troops of red-capped young men – boy scouts or military? As the morning progressed, I could see trash lining the sides of the path, food wrappers

and soda cans cast beside the trail to enlightenment. Faces streamed by, every human tint and shape, the genographic history of the world passing before me. The languages became a blur. Sinhala. Tamil. English. Indo-Portuguese. Sri Lankan Malay Creole. Perhaps Veddah. Something people called "Moor" that was not quite Arabic and not quite African. "Kaffirs" is what some called those dark skin people ascending the peak. I later learned it was a profound slur. The Sri Lankan "K-word."

Sri Lankans have so many divisions between them, those of religion, language, race, economic status, region, and mythology. Contested frontiers lay all around. I came to understand that Sri Pada is not a refuge from those divisions, nor is it a beacon for them. It is a place where we go searching for something, and such treks are never simple. Pilgrims carry their culture with them like a stone or a feather. They climb with open or closed hearts and minds to reinforce their bias or cast it aside. Some gain insights and others are relieved of them. Just as mountains become both more and less themselves when burdens fall away, Sri Pada provides only the opportunity to change. We are merely granted a chance to use new words and create new worlds. But this transformation is by no means always welcomed. Arrogant assurance in the rightness of our god, race, landscape, and story is the most ancient emotion we carry, a transparent mask for something deeper. Back when the distant Ratnapura route required grasping chains bolted to bedrock to ascend the mountain, people's most common emotion was fear. Fear of falling, of God, of not being worthy, and perhaps, fear of uncertainty itself. The pilgrim may have wondered, "What if I climb this sacred peak and I still do not *know*?"

No one can view the soul of another to comprehend their dreams, frights, and aspirations. But I am sure some of the people I shared my long day with were inspired by their god to continue fighting the Sinhalese/Tamil war. Others may have sought forgiveness for acts of violence and hate against their fellow Sri Lankans. Here, as elsewhere, war provides job opportunities, which poor people are forced to accept to feed their families. Killing becomes industrialized. For others, clannish superstition prevails, and reason surrenders to blind faith. In these ways, intolerance becomes a warped reflection of a society's true heart. I believe Sri Lanka is such a case. I prayed in my own way for our

world to gain the simple effulgence of peace and quiet.

I felt *karunawai* for all of us.

On my way down, I learned from a small woman with wide eyes that the peak had a far older name than religion can claim – butterfly mountain. "Sri Pada is Nature," she said, smiling. Before all the spiritual toponymy, the butterflies, birds, and monkeys simply understood it as home. "Look, see," she said, pointing to a raptor drifting by.

Despite the war, most Sri Lankans I met during my weeks there seemed kind and mostly happy. I could see it in their eyes and body language. At Sri Pada, it was even more apparent. Freed from the holy summit and all its insistences, they smiled and laughed again. The air got warmer and lighter. We all chatted easily now, making do with whatever words we could share. Kids ran up to huts to buy Snickers bars and Fanta orange sodas. They were free, mom and dad's strange path over with.

At the bottom, the sun came out. As I looked back, clouds wafted away from the summit, and the sky turned into a deep blue. People laughed. "We missed it," one woman said, smiling. "Oh well," another man said, "next time."

Next time we will see it all clearly.

That afternoon, Robert and I caught a ride to Colombo. The national cricket teams for Sri Lanka and Oz were having a test match, and he talked me into going. A day later, I watched, barely grasping the rules, drinking beer on the edge of a throng of hysterical Aussies. A group of Sri Lankans sat next to us caught up in the match. During one particularly exciting defense of the wicket, I collided with the Sri Lankan guy sitting next to me, spilling a pint of bitters all over him.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to..."

He laughed and touched me on the shoulder. "No worries, mate. No dramas."

My pilgrimage was complete.

#### Further Reading

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