

# Spiritual heights

**The trek to the sacred peak of Sri Pada in the Central Highlands of Sri Lanka is an unforgettable experience. TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY IAN LOCKWOOD**

Warm sunlight bathed the gilded temple. Dew and mist evaporated from the hillside. The great mountain's shadow morphed gradually into the side of the peak.

*"Standing there, surrounded by that matchless prospect, there on that proud pinnacle and above that enchanting view, one may well refuse to accept that rock-mark as the answer to his question. I want a higher, nobler answer, and is it not afforded? Let each decide for himself; but I like to believe that these legends are all after-thoughts; that the place was already sacred to the primal religion of humanity – the worship of nature – as the enduring, all originating, all absorbing universal whole: – that to this*

*faith, man's first, and perhaps his last, this spot was already consecrated as its most fitting temple. In a question of this kind I care little for historic evidences or their absence. There are many things of which history knows nothing, many more of which it has not chosen to tell."*

*Ceylon Observer, October 2, 1869*

*Quoted in Adam's Peak*

*by William Skeen, pages 10-11*

THERE are many paths to the sacred peak of Sri Pada, a mountain of immeasurable significance in the Central Highlands of Sri Lanka. Sri Pada commands a striking position in Sri Lanka's rich physical geography and culture and is perhaps one of the best-documented mountains in South Asia. In its early records, the pyramid-shaped peak is referred to as Samanalakanda (a mountain of butterflies).

The name "Sri Pada", of course, refers to the sacred or resplendent impression of a footprint, which crowns a large granite boulder on the summit.



**SRI PADA MALUWA** at dusk. The shrine at the summit is a modest, gilded structure that covers the sacred footprint. A platform around the boulder allows pilgrims to rest, contemplate and gaze out at the landscape while waiting for sunrise or a 'pujawa' to happen.



**SRI PADA MALUWA**, the temple at the summit of Adam's Peak, emerges from the morning mist being swept over the west side of the peak. The zigzag of Hatton Path, which leads to the temple, is visible under the temple structures. The slopes of Sri Pada are composed of degraded cloud forest and precipitous granite rock faces.

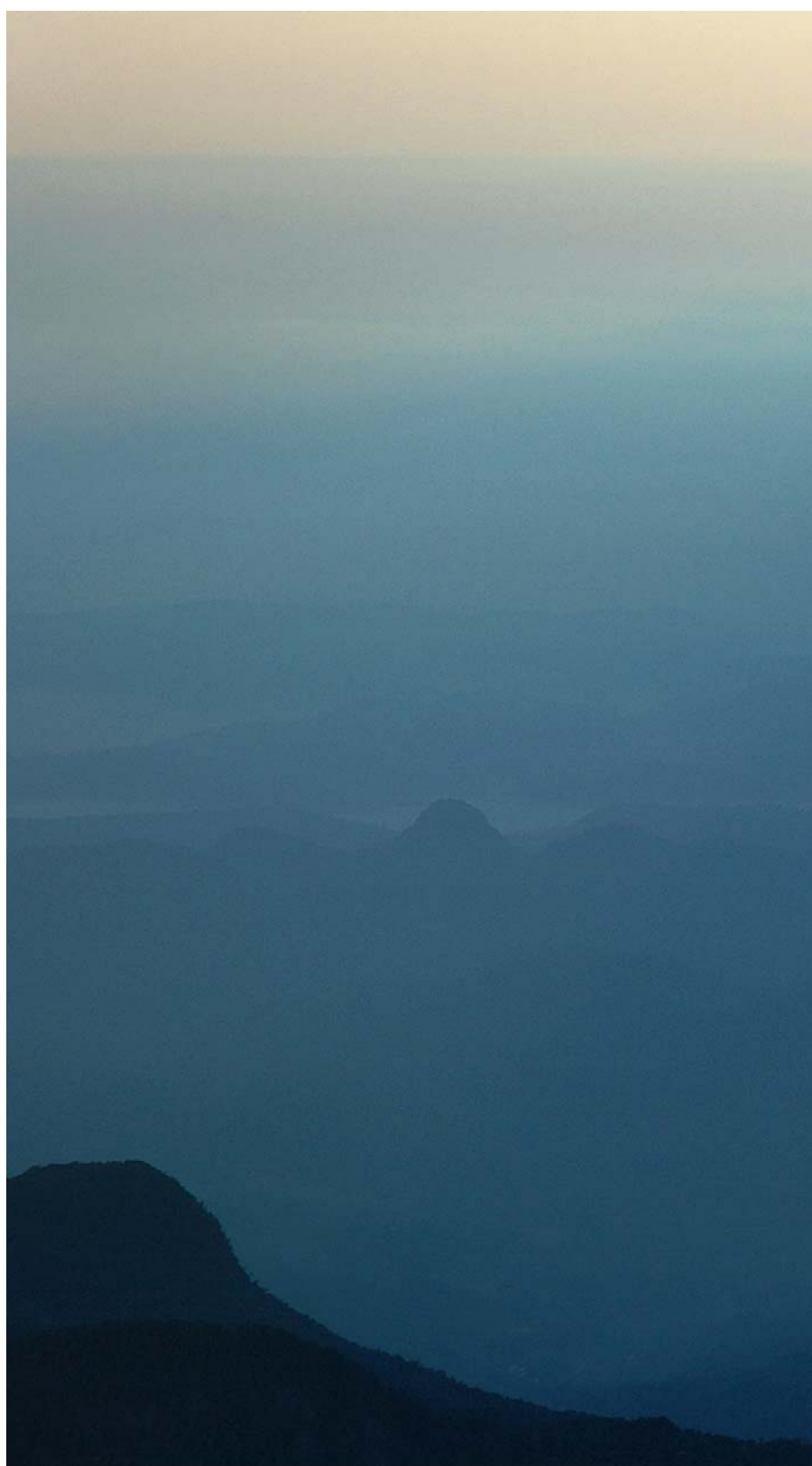
“Peak of Adam” was the name given to the peak by early Muslim traders and it was well documented by medieval travellers such as Ibn Battuta and Marco Polo. In colonial times this was simplified to Adam’s Peak, the name on most maps and that many outside of Sri Lanka are familiar with.

Though its summit is a lofty 2,243 metres, Sri Pada is not the highest mountain on the island. It is, however, the highest point in the south-west portion of the Central Highlands and commands a matchless view of the hills and the southern plains area. Hydrologically, Sri Pada gives birth to several important rivers, including the Kalani Ganga and the Kalu Ganga (though not the Mahaweli Ganga as some think). The cold heights of it and of the rest of the Central Highlands are crucial in trapping the warm air that brings the monsoon the island depends on for its water and irrigation needs.

From an ecological point of view, the area that is now protected as Peak Wilderness Reserve is significant in that it hosts three different forest types: lowland rainforest, montane forest and the peculiar cloud forest of the high altitudes. These are forests with very ancient roots – dating perhaps to a time when the island and the Indian plate were part of the Gondwanaland super-continent. A cloud-free view from the summit allows you to step back several million years in time and it is a wonder that the forests have survived unlogged and relatively undisturbed into the 21st century. In 2010, this was further recognised when the Central Highlands were named a World Heritage Site by the United Nations

#### THE CELEBRATED MOUNTAIN

shadow of Sri Pada cast over the low foothills around Ratnapura to the west of Sri Pada. Weather conditions with clear skies to the east of Sri Pada are a necessity for this phenomenon to occur. The shadow is, in fact, an “immensely long tunnel of unlit air, a variation of a crepuscular ray”.







**HATTON PATH. THE** granite steps on the Sri Pada ascent have been worn smooth by generations of pilgrims and cascading monsoon showers. This segment is between Citagangule and Geththampane.

**TEMPLE DRUMMER.** **ONE** of the temple attendants who periodically accompany the formal 'puja' procession that leads up to the temple from the quarters below.



**A YOUNG PILGRIM** with lotus flowers as an offering just below the temple.

Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.

Despite all the man-made structures and waste on its slopes, the summit temple on Sri Pada remains a magnet for some of Sri Lanka's rarest endemic birds: the yellow browed bulbul (*Pycnonotus xantholaemus*) and the dull blue flycatcher (*Eumyias sordida*) are common and I have stumbled upon two different arrengas (*Myophonus blighi*) below the peak. The lights of the temple attract a dazzling number of moths, delicate creatures that cling to prayer flags and sacred cloth decorating the shrine.

Modern pilgrims approach Sri Pada on one of three main paths, but there are others that are less known. The most popular approach is the Hatton Path. It starts at the 'good waters' of Nalathani near the small town of Dalhousie in the tea estates of the Central Highlands and ascends about 700 metres on a relatively straightforward set of steps to the summit. The steps are mostly concrete and are lit up with fluorescent lights along the whole distance since most

pilgrims climb at night. Devout pilgrims perform a series of rituals on the approach and there are numerous sheds to rest and rehydrate on the ascent.

The beginning of the Hatton path is cluttered with stores selling a curious collection of warm clothes, teddy bears, plastic guns and other knick-knacks. A few stalls display posters of the guardian deity, Saman, and the Buddha juxtaposed against a collection of Bollywood stars and well-fed babies. The enterprises are run by families from the nearby plantations. At Citagangule, pilgrims bathe in the cold waters of a stream running off the slopes of the peak. Pilgrims chant “*ape buddhun*” (Our Buddha) and “*api vandinde*” (we worship) on the ascent. Going down you hear “*ape buddhun*” (Our Buddha) “*api venda*” (we have worshipped). Both are interspersed with calls of “*sadhu sadhu, saa.*”

The path ascends dizzily up the mountain, through degraded cloud forest and past snack stalls. Men carry headloads of rice, bottled water and other rations to supply these shops and the team of monks that stays at the summit temple during the season. High on the slope, at Geththampane, pilgrims tie a ritual string and run it up along side the path to symbolise a tear on the Buddha’s robes as he ascended the peak to leave his footprint.

The Gilmale (Palabaddelle), Kuruwita and Hapugastenne paths start on the southern slopes and require much more endurance. These, too, have electrical lighting in season but they are used far less. These paths pass through a spectrum of vegetation determined by altitude as they wind through the forests up to the summit.

It is not uncommon to come across the droppings of elephants, as I did on an unforgettable ascent on the Kuruwita path. Pachyderms are found in abundance in the dry, lowland forests of Sri Lanka but are rare in hilly areas. In several places, pilgrims use the ancient rock-hewn steps and iron railings to ascend steep slopes. There are few signs of plastic and concrete on this route; one gets the feeling of a



**EAST VIEW FROM** the temple roof. Throngs of pilgrims descend through Hatton Path shortly after an overcast sunrise.

timeless journey less disturbed by the gadgets and conveniences of the 21st century world.

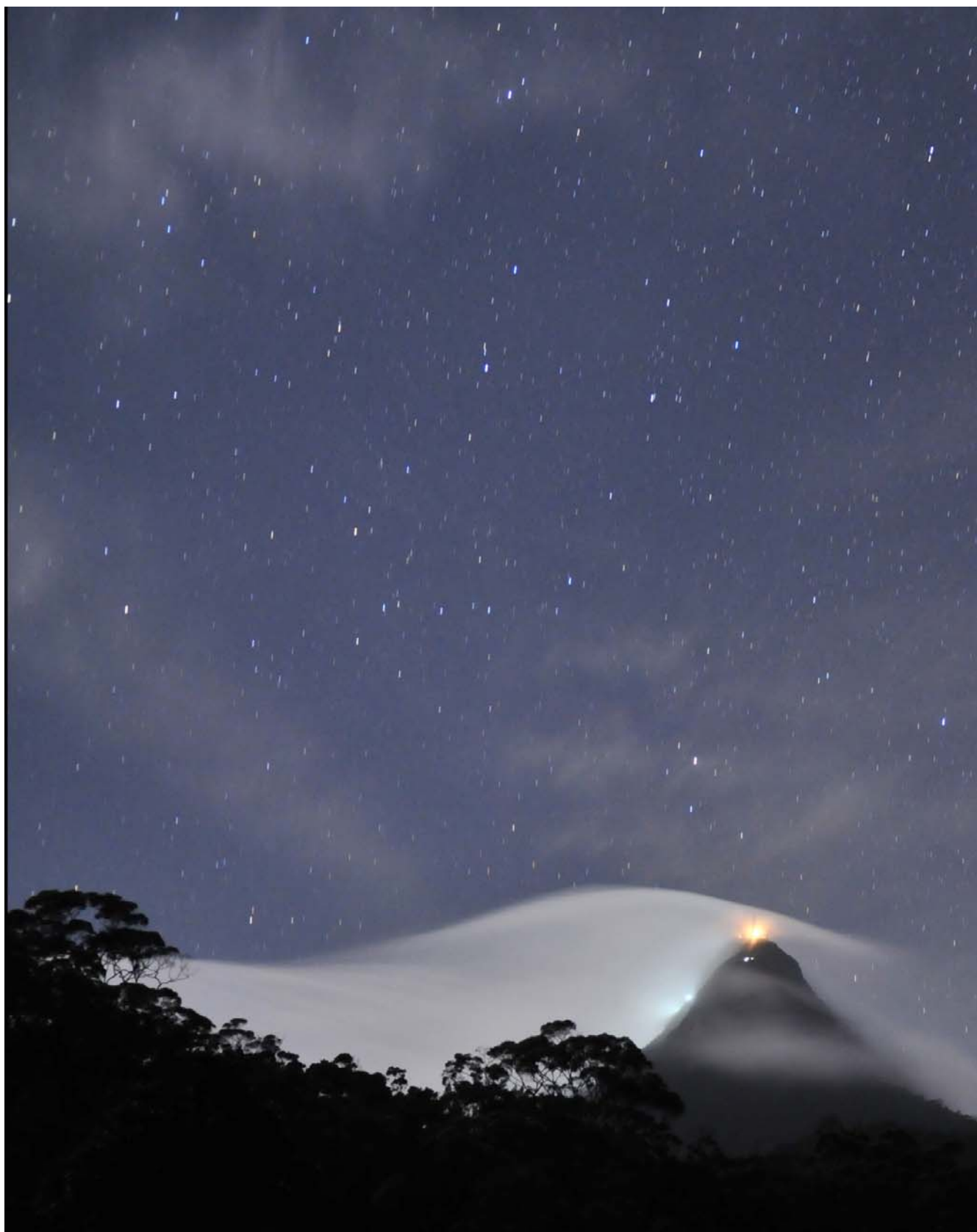
Ibn Battuta, Marco Polo and their contemporaries most likely used one of these paths to approach and climb the peak. The Gilmale and Kuruwita paths are more physically challenging but they are said to offer more merit to devout pilgrims.

The pilgrimage season on Sri Pada coincides with the short dry season in the south-western “wet zone” of the island. The first Poya in December marks the beginning, and the season wraps up on the May Vesak Poya (full moon day). A Colombo newspaper estimates that five million people visit

during the season (a huge number given Sri Lanka’s total population of 20.7 million).

It is primarily a pilgrimage of Buddhists, but Sri Lankans of all stripes, religions and ethnic groups can be found on the peak. Many are groups of teenagers, but family groups with infants and elderly grandparents make up a significant part of the flock. As with historical visitors to the island-nation, the climb is a must-do event on the itineraries of many foreign visitors.

At the summit of Sri Pada, in what is known as Sri Pada Maluwa, several concrete structures surround the large boulders that host the sacred footprint. The devotion of the





**WINTER MIST**  
**ENVELOPES** the eastern  
face of Sri Pada on a  
moonlit night in Peak  
Wilderness.

pilgrims, tired and exhausted from the climb, reaches its climax here in this temple in the clouds; pilgrims of all ages and faiths line up to pay homage to the sacred footprint. Temple-keepers announce donations on an amplified speaker that can be heard on all sides. Other messages urge people to take back their plastic waste, a serious challenge that is hard to ignore.

Pilgrims ring one of the two bells as many times as they have made the journey. Others simply stare out at the mist or magnificent view depending on the constantly changing meteorological conditions. In the early morning, before the highly anticipated sunrise, pilgrims shelter in shivering groups in covered spaces below the main temple platform.

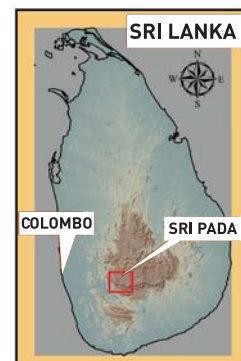
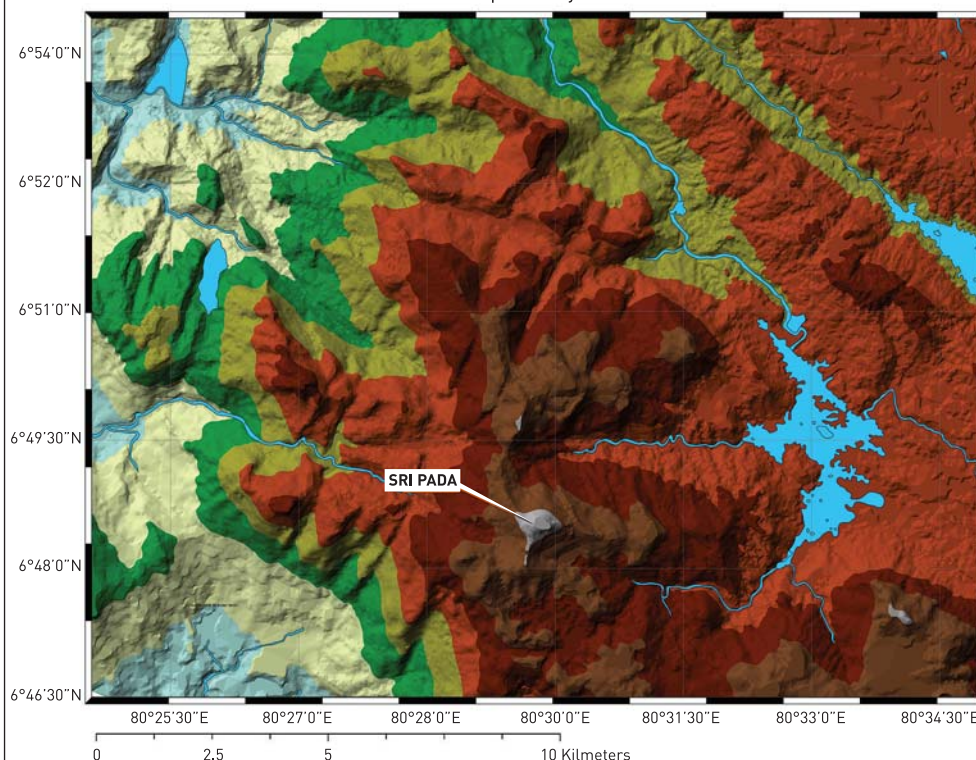
Dawn on Sri Pada is sublime; it has attracted pilgrims as much as the sacred footprint has. Depending on the time of the year and the weather



**THE MASKELIYA RESERVOIR.** It was created when the valley was dammed for hydroelectricity in the mid-20th century. Adam's Peak can be seen on the right while the pyramid-shaped Kirgilapotha, Sri Lanka's second highest peak, is visible on the Horton Plains horizon.

## SRI PADA (ADAM'S PEAK) AREA

Elevation and proximity in Sri Lanka



### Legend

■ Lakes & Rivers

### Elevation (meters)

■	2,227 - 2,500
■	1,953 - 2,227
■	1,680 - 1,953
■	1,407 - 1,680
■	1,133 - 1,407
■	860 - 1,133
■	587 - 860
■	313 - 587
■	40 - 313

Map created by Ian Lockwood  
March 2011

Data source:  
Sri Lanka Survey Department  
Sheet #68 (1:50,000)  
Datum: Kandawala



conditions, the experience can vary a great deal. On one winter visit that I made, I had the good fortune to experience the classic, much described mountain-shadow dawn. It had been a

## Historical links

Sri Pada and Sri Lanka's Central Highlands share geological origins and biogeography with the southern Western Ghats (roughly from the Nilgiri Hills south to Kanyakumari). Both places are rich in biodiversity, play a key hydrological role and yet have been impacted adversely by commercial agriculture, development and other anthropogenic factors in the last two centuries. There are sacred mountains in both places and the forested hilltops offer important points of pilgrimage in the Western Ghats and the Central Highlands. (see [www.highrangephotography.com](http://www.highrangephotography.com) for further explorations of these connections).

long night and I had bedded down with an excited group of pilgrims in the shelter below the temple. Sleep had come in scant waves and cold hallucinations. Excited by the prospect of the coming morning, I got up frequently and wandered around the temple platform. The energy and anticipation started to build in the fluorescent-punctuated inky darkness. Pilgrims positioned themselves for optimal views looking eastwards.

At first the sky started to lighten up in the east and Venus rose above the Horton Plains horizon. Maskeliya Lake, shrouded in mist far below to the north, came to life. Other details of the exquisite montane landscape emerged from the darkness. Pilgrims, dressed as if for an Arctic expedition, crowded the steps on the east and I retreated to the western side.

As the sun emerged, it projected the celebrated mountain shadow over a bank of clouds just below the peak. The shadow appeared to be a perfectly symmetrical pyramid painted on the clouds with a small hallow around the peak. Temple musicians announced the moment with a thunderous drum roll.

Time stood still for a moment and it was as if the world was born afresh. Warm sunlight bathed the gilded temple. Dew and mist evaporated

from the hillside. The great mountain shadow morphed gradually into the side of the peak. The view and experience were breathtaking and beyond adequate description. Many of the pilgrims headed back down the Hatton path quickly. Muscles and limbs moved slowly, but spirits had been revitalised and renewed. Yellow browed bulbuls and great tits fluttered by, competing for the crumbs left by pilgrims. I lingered at the summit to breathe in the moment, place and experience. □

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