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Pilgrimage to Sri Pada

Ian Lockwood accompanies a tenth grade class on an overnight field trip

On the teardrop shaped island of Sri Lanka there are few places that are as central to the rich culture, varied geography and long history as Sri Pada, (popularly known as Adam's Peak). This 7359ft mountain has long attracted explorers, travellers as well as ordinary people.

Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta both describe the peak in their historical accounts of their travels. Arthur C Clark, the celebrated science fiction writer, based his book *Fountains of Paradise* on the peak. More recently Pico Iyer, writing in a special issue of *Time* magazine, referred to Adam's Peak as an ignored metaphor of unity in an island consumed by chronic ethnic conflict.

This year the Overseas School of Colombo (OSC) is celebrating 50 years of international education in Sri Lanka. A reflection of the school's interest in the geography, culture and history of Sri Lanka can be found in a recent overnight field trip to Sri Pada. The trip was

organised for the 10th grade geography class and capped a detailed overview of the geography and culture of South Asia.

The class first encountered Sri Pada when it was mapping the physical geography of South Asia at the beginning of the school year. As a part of the IB Middle Years Programme, the class focused on several essential questions and broad Humanities criteria. This was followed up with lessons to help the class better understand the geography, history and myths of the peak. All of this culminated in an overnight trek to the sacred peak in the relatively dry month of January.

OSC's 10th grade geography class is a diverse group, reflecting the school community: Bangladeshi, Dutch, German, Indian, Japanese, Maldivian, American and Sri Lankan nationalities are all represented in the small class of 12. Only one student had been to Sri Pada before (and she was two when that happened).

The secondary principal, Ms Oli Toohar-Hancock, came along to get to know the students better and as a female chaperone. One of our students is the daughter of an ambassador and we were accompanied by a tough-looking security guard. Despite a hidden pistol and military build he did his best to look like a normal trekker blending in with the other pilgrims!

Most pilgrims ascend the peak at night, but I wanted the students to have a chance to see and appreciate the scenery on the way up. Our motley group approached the starting point at Nalathani at noon and then walked up what is known as the Hatton trail during the afternoon hours.

The trail passes through magnificent montane and cloud forests in a protected area known as Peak Wilderness. It is made up almost entirely of stone and concrete steps and has electrical lighting for pilgrims walking at night. The path was practically deserted and the students were able to take their time approaching the peak. Some were faster than others, but the whole group was at the summit temple by the last hours of light.

The temple that sits on top of Sri Pada is not large, given that it is at the pinnacle of a sharp peak. On busy days it can accommodate about 150 or so people squeezed into a very small area. We bedded down in the pilgrim's shelter just below the temple. Camping in such a public place was a new experience for most of the students, many of whom are used to staying in five star hotels.

As the night progressed, more pilgrims and trekkers crowded into the shelter. A microphone loudly advertised donations and devout groups of pilgrims chanted through the night. It was bone-biting cold. Our students handled it very well and seemed electrified by the experience. Cell phones did not work and the single iPod's battery soon ran out of juice. A few of the students accompanied me on a night round to see the temple, seek out nocturnal wildlife and find the ancient chains that Marco Polo had described in his 14th-century account of the peak.



In the early morning we moved up to the temple to watch the sunrise, view the sacred foot print and ring the famous temple bell. By this time the numbers of people had swelled and the area was packed like a sardine can. The eastern skies over Horton Plains National Park soon lit up with the subdued colours of a new day. Brownbacked needletails soared through the air and a great tit sang from the lightning rod above the temple. Large numbers of endemic yellow-eared bulbuls flittered in the shrubbery below the temple. The sun rose behind a bank of clouds while temple musicians beat a welcome on their drums. The sun came out about 30 minutes later and cast the famous mountain shadow into the thick montane forests of the western hills.



Our group lingered on the top and enjoyed the temple area, now nearly deserted by all the other pilgrims. I was eager to share the view of Maskeliya, Horton Plains and Peak Wilderness with the students who had studied the area on Survey maps. We also had a better chance to appreciate the temple area's detail and architecture.

We descended on the Ratnapura path and then cut back to the Hatton trail through exquisite cloud forest. Three hours later we were back at Nalathani, drinking hot tea and resting sore legs and muscles. In the following week students finished a journal about their experience and produced individual pamphlets about some aspect of the trip.

The challenge was to address an issue that would concern pilgrims preparing to ascend the peak. Some focused on issues of garbage (a serious problem on the peak) and low impact tourism. Others looked at nutritional needs and health concerns for pilgrims preparing for the trek. It is fair to say that for the entire class the pilgrimage was an amazing physical, spiritual and educational experience. The Overseas' School's mission statement refers to 'developing the whole person' and our pilgrimage to Sri Pada certainly helped us fulfil this in every sense!

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