

PRIMEVAL PEAK

A modern pilgrim's guide to Adam's Peak, Sri Lanka's holy mountain. Text and photographs by **Ian Lockwood**

Climbing 4,800 steps is not generally my idea of a good time but when you're walking in the footsteps of Ibn Battuta, Marco Polo and other intrepid medieval pilgrims, it seems like a trivial inconvenience. Some legends even suggest that Alexander the Great climbed Sri Lanka's holy mountain, Sri Pada. Sinbad the Sailor visited Serendib and the peak on his sixth voyage, according to the Richard Burton translation of the *Arabian Nights*. Arthur C. Clarke centred his *Fountains of Paradise* on the peak. In a recent *Time* special on Marco Polo, Pico Iyer cited it as a neglected metaphor of unity in a country plagued by persistent civil conflict. Perched at 2,243m on the rim of the Central Highlands, Sri Pada commands a striking position in Sri Lanka's physical geography and rich culture. Popularly known as Adam's Peak or Samanalakanda (in pre-Buddhist accounts), Sri Pada continues to attract old and young, able-bodied and not-so to its pyramid-shaped peak. As a curious newcomer, I too discovered that the many paths to the peak offer a unique communion with humanity, a sublime experience of nature and glimpses of the divine.

When I moved my family to Sri Lanka from Pune, Sri Pada seemed like a good place to begin our orientation into this resplendent yet tragically tortured island. On rare rain-washed days I caught glimpses of Sri Pada's conical profile on the outskirts of Colombo, and it was not long before I had made several trips to the peak. I climbed with colleagues, took my father, lead a group of students and walked up alone on a handful of different pilgrimages.



Modern pilgrims approach Sri Pada on what is known as Hatton Path. It starts at the 'good waters' of Nalathani near the small town of Dalhousie in the tea estates of the Central Highlands. The path ascends a relatively straightforward set of mostly concrete steps up about 700m to the summit. There are fluorescent lights along the entire distance, since most people climb at night. This area was once inaccessible, entirely covered in dense mon-

tane rainforest. The introduction of tea, the railways and modern roads by the British changed all this. For 2,000-plus years prior to this, pilgrims had approached Sri Pada from one of two paths starting on the lower plains near the town of Ratnapura. The area is famous for its gems and Sri Pada has been associated with the rubies, sapphires and other jewels that are still mined in the area. Ibn Battuta, Marco Polo and their contempo-

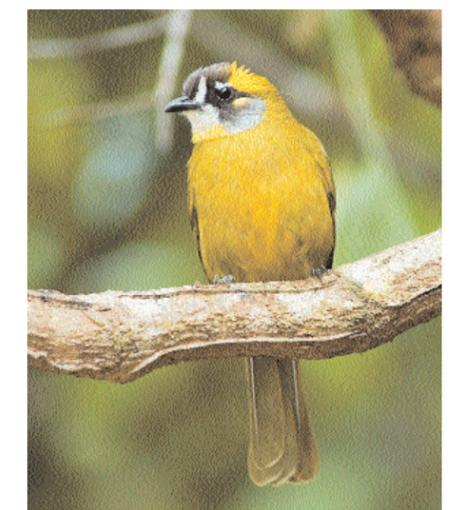
raries almost certainly used one of these paths to climb the peak. These paths (Gilmale and Kuruwitha) are much more physically challenging and are said to offer more merit to devout pilgrims.

Extra merit is always a bonus but I wanted to experience what that tenacious Moroccan and globetrotting Venetian had experienced in the 13th and 14th centuries. After narrowly avoiding disaster on the monsoon-drenched Kuruwitha

View from the peak at dawn

path last year, I decided that a good compromise would be to ascend Hatton Path and descend on Gilmale Path.

Pilgrimage season on Sri Pada coincides with the short dry season in the southwestern 'wet zone' of the island. The first Poya (full moon) in December marks the beginning and the season wraps up on the April Wesak Poya. During this time



Left to right: sunrise on Hatton Path; the peak's conical shadow; a Yellow Bulbul

Hatton Path can get extremely crowded and the risk of not making it to the peak (or even being trampled) are very real. My solution has been to walk up in the afternoon and spend the night on the summit to experience the new day's dawn.

The beginning of Hatton Path is cluttered with stores selling a collection of warm clothes, teddy bears, plastic guns and other knick-knacks. One stall displays posters of the guardian deity Saman and the Buddha juxtaposed against Bollywood stars. These enterprises are run by families from the nearby plantations. Further up the path, a shop offers Ayurvedic massage oils. Their staff solicits pilgrims beside an encased human skeleton, a bizarre detail that lingers in my mind as I start up the steep steps. The path ascends dizzily up the mountain, through degraded cloud forest and past frequent snack shacks. Men carry head-loads 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. The few pilgrims we meet are friendly and cheerful in passing. When we reach the top of Sri Pada in the fading light, the summit temple is cast in a magical pastel glow.

The legends surrounding the sacred footprint link Sri Pada to most of the world's major faiths. It is likely that the earliest human inhabitants of the island venerated the mountain, and the patron deity, Saman, is thought to predate other traditions. Hindus say that the large impression of a footprint is Shiva's. Buddhists claim that the Buddha placed his left footprint here on his last visit to the island (there is a temple in Thailand with the right footprint). Muslim traders were the first to suggest the link with Adam, the first of all men (I'm not sure how Eve fits into this). When Adam was thrown out of the Garden of Eden, Sri Pada was apparently the first place on the earth that he set foot. Ever since, Serendib was associated

as the closest earthly place to heavenly paradise. Later, the name Adam's Peak was popularised by the Portuguese ("Pico de Adam") and British colonisers. Some Christians have suggested that it was the Apostle Thomas's footprint. The footprint is now enclosed in a small temple and covered in linen such that mortal pilgrims are not allowed to actually view it—a point of frustration for some. Regardless of its origin, the sacred footprint is an original yet uncommon excuse for humanity to come together in unity.

The temple is virtually deserted at dusk but pilgrims trickle in through the night. Many of them shiver away the long night hours, waiting for the arrival of dawn. Pilgrims ring a bell the numbers of times that they have been here. A temple official announces donations over a speaker. Large mercury vapour lights illuminate the premise, blocking out the bright constellations above. Wisps of mist float by and the air is bone-biting cold. Monks keep watch over the main temple and a temple priest takes offerings at the Saman shrine next door. Ceremonies with drumming and chanting colour the monotony of the night. There are spartan shelters below the temple for pilgrims to rest in, but sleep is next to impossible.

Dawn on Sri Pada is sublime, reminding me that the peak has attracted pilgrims as much as the sacred footprint. By the time the sky starts to lighten in the east, the temple platform is packed with people who have walked up during the

SRI PADA



Pilgrims taking in a view of the summit

night. As the sun emerges it projects the celebrated mountain shadow over a bank of clouds just below the peak. The shadow appears to be a perfectly symmetrical pyramid painted on to the clouds with a small hallow around the peak. Temple musicians announce the moment with a thunderous drum roll. I bathe in the sunlight as the clouds evaporate and the shadow gradually merges into the mountain. The view and the experience are spectacular and beyond description.

One of the first things I encounter on the descent down to Gilmale are the rusty chains that once helped pilgrims up the steepest part of the ascent. Both Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta described these in their accounts of the pilgrimage. Today there are fixed railings that support pilgrims and the chains lie hidden in thick vegetation. The path to Gilmale is about 15km long and it takes almost eight hours to descend through the exquisite forested undulations of the Peak Wilderness Area. The last few hours are a straight 45° descent down stone steps, and my legs are wobbly by the time we reach the Ratnapura plains. Like most pilgrims, our journey back to Colombo is spent dipping in and out of hallucinations, nursing aching muscles and remembering the ecstasy of a pilgrimage to Sri Lanka's sacred mountain. ●

INFORMATION



GETTING THERE

Most pilgrims start their journey to Sri Pada from **Dalhousie**, about 220km east of Colombo in the Central Highlands (Hatton Path). The starting points for the Gilmale and Kuruwita routes are both 20km from **Ratnapura**, two hours west of Colombo. There are state transport buses that connect to Hatton from the Colombo Fort station during the pilgrimage season.

THE CLIMB

The climb from Dalhousie to the summit takes 3-5 hrs depending on your fitness and how crowded the path is. This route is approximately **7km** long and climbs up 4,800 steps. The paths from

Gilmale and Kuruwita are **15km** and **17km**, respectively. They ascend a greater altitude but also pass through more interesting and less disturbed habitat. Expect to hike at least 8-10 hrs from Gilmale and 10-12 hrs from Kuruwita. Most pilgrims start from Dalhousie at about 2am to be on the summit for sunrise. An alternative is to walk during the day and stay on top at night.

WHEN TO GO

Climbing up during the season offers a better chance of catching the fabulous view and mountain shadow. **January** and **February** are ideal (avoid weekends and Poyas). By April the paths are crowded with other pilgrims. An off-season visit is a magical experience, but expect rain and mist. There are no entry tickets or permits needed in order to walk through the Peak Wilderness Area.

WILDLIFE HIGHLIGHTS

A walk to Adam's Peak offers a unique opportunity to experience **three distinct vegetation zones**. The Gilmale and Kuruwita paths pass through lowland and mon-

tane rainforest before ending up in Cloud Forest at the summit. These paths offer some spectacular **bird-watching**. Many of the endemic bird species can be seen on all three paths, with Yellow Eared Bulbuls and Sri Lankan White Eyes being as abundant as house sparrows. I once spotted the super rare Sri Lanka Whistling Thrush.

WHERE TO STAY

There are a number of places to stay at Dalhousie. Try the **Wathsala Inn** (Sri Lankan Rs 1,500 for a double; 0094-51-2225261) or the **Green House**. On the summit, there are basic shelters, running water and clean toilets but no food facilities. There is no cost but you can donate to the temple fund.

EQUIPMENT

Carry light clothes for the walk up and warm clothes for the summit. **Rain jackets** are helpful since the weather is unpredictable even in the dry season. You can rent and buy warm parkas in Dalhousie. Some hikers swear by **walking sticks**, which reduce muscle strain and can prevent injuries.