Sri Lanka – Sri Pada

Sri Pada: Pilgrimage of a Naturalist

Situated at a lofty 2,243m above sea level on the southern rim of Sri Lanka’s Central Highlands, Sri Pada commands a striking position in the country’s physical geography and rich culture. For centuries, if not millennia, Sri Pada has been a magnet for locals and visitors alike. All of the major religions in Sri Lanka hold the peak sacred, and there are a variety of colourful stories to explain the mountain’s spiritual connection to these faiths. What is perhaps less appreciated about Sri Pada is its position set amongst a vast area of rugged hills containing undisturbed rain and cloud forest. In an age of rapidly declining biodiversity, it was these forests that drew me to the sacred mountain. Yet I discovered that no journey to Sri Pada is devoid of the mesmerizing, other-worldly appeal of climbing high into the heavens and closer to the indefinable.

I was first attracted to Sri Pada on a trip to Sri Lanka in the late 1990s. At that time my energies were devoted to seeing as many of the island’s endemic bird species as possible. But I could scarcely ignore the draw of the peak. I glimpsed its hazy silhouette from Sinharaja’s dripping rainforests and saw its gleaming summit temple from a lonely road near Ambewela. Returning to Colombo on a highway near Hatton, Sri Pada towered above the expansive valleys of tea. I waited seven years before returning to Sri Lanka to live, work, and finally climb Adam’s Peak.

Contrary to many reports, Sri Pada is not amongst the highest peaks in Sri Lanka (it is the fifth-highest according to a respected source). However, in its vicinity there is no competition, and the striking conical profile of Sri Pada is visible from many points on clear days. One morning in early September, during a lull in the monsoon, I was amazed to see its distinct profile from the roof of my school in the Colombo suburb of Battaramulla. There it was, standing out unobstructed, a profound azure silhouette against the crimson dawn. It had a pyramid profile quite like Kailash, the 6,638m holiest of holy mountains located against the crimson dawn. It had a pyramid profile quite like Kailash, the 6,638m holiest of holy mountains located in the remote vastness of Tibet. No wonder, then, that like Kailash, the 6,638m holiest of holy mountains located in the remote vastness of Tibet. No wonder, then, that...
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Kuru Ganga (river) we met a monk living alone in the forest, but other than that we were completely alone on the ancient trail.

We didn’t have a good sense of just how long the E Ratnapura trail to the peak was, so the trek ended up being an unexpected physical and mental test. Rain clouds set in soon after we had stopped to eat lunch. We were surrounded by steep sides of dense forest and it was impossible to see the peak or any semblance of the direction that we would take. The rest of the trek became a gruelling challenge that pushed me more than anything since I had participated in a military-run mountaineering course in the Himalaya. The cloud cover was so thick that it became dark by mid-afternoon, and we started using torches soon after. The rain was unrelenting and it got misty as we climbed up farther. At one particular stretch we negotiated thick pockets of bamboo, littered with fresh elephant droppings. I logged down the back, weighed down by too much camera gear and several months of overeating. I lagged down by too much camera gear and several months of overeating.

We eventually reached the deserted Ratnapura trail junction in the early evening. We took a short break in a tattered shelter and then started up the concrete steps that lead up to the summit’s southern face. They got increasingly steep and we were hopeful that we were nearing the top. During the last 30 minutes of the trek we emerged above an amorphous layer of clouds. The inky darkness and mist were replaced by the subtle glow of starlight. Far below us, as if we were soaring in a cosmic airplane, were the shadows of lesser peaks and the distant lights of settlements on the plains. Amazingly, Colombo’s lights cast a dull glow in the west.

The summit of Adam’s Peak lay shrouded in a wet mist the next morning. It had a distinctly sublime beauty to it, made all the more real by the nearly complete absence of other human beings. A Dull Blue Flycatcher (Eumyias sordidus) chirped in the lower shrubs around the temple as I enjoyed a meditative moment before stiffly negotiating the flight of steps down the mountain. Two months later I found myself back on the summit, seeking views, an experience, and something more on a chilly January evening. The annual pilgrimage had started and there were large crowds milling around the temple platform, ringing the bells, viewing the sacred footprint and enjoying the views. I had ascended the steps on the Hatton path the afternoon before, taking in clear views of the peak and its forested slopes.

Dawn on Sri Pada is a sublime experience, something that has attracted pilgrims as much as the sacred footprint and temple. This being the season, a steady stream of pilgrims had been coming up through the night. By the time the sky started to lighten in the east, the temple platform was packed. I watched Venus rise above the Horton Plains horizon and then I withdrew down towards the Ratnapura path. I was less interested in the sunrise than the dreamlike shadow that is cast by the peak as the sun rises above the horizon. The ‘mountain shadow’ phenomenon is caused when the sun’s low angle projects shafts of light past a point protruding above the earth’s
The shadow cast an ethereal pyramid over the deep blues of the hills into the cream colours of the formless horizon.

The shadow of the peak recedes into the distance as the sun came up in the east it projected the celebrated shadow over the western hills and plains. The cloudless sky was a cerulean hue with lighter shades at the horizon. The shadow cast an ethereal pyramid over the deep blues of the hills into the cream colours of the formless horizon. It lingered much longer than I expected.

Meanwhile, the dark colours of Peak Wilderness came alive with golden tinges and hues. What a large expanse of astonishing forest! To the south, the hills of Sinhajara rose above low mist on the plains. I was mesmerized by the panorama of hills and forest that lay spread out in front of me. I followed the path farther down past the ancient chains described by Ibn Batuta and Marco Polo amongst others.

A Rhododendron tree (Rhododendron arboreum) on the slope was in full bloom and there were pink Satyrium nepalense ground orchids in flower. Brownbacked Needletails (Hirundapus giganteus) darted around the summit, oblivious to the dizzying heights and drops.

Emerging on a lower shoulder of the mountain on the Ratnapura path I was struck by how clear and sharp the northern ranges were. Looking over Maskeliya Reservoir to the north I could see Pidurutalagala (2,524m), the Great Western, and, clearly visible in the distance, the Knuckles Range! To the east Kirigalpotta (2,395m) stood out as a small pyramid above Horton Plains.

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Returning to the summit I relished the nearly-deserted temple in the bright morning sunshine. The friendly temple caretakers made me a much appreciated cup of tea. When I slowly (and quite reluctantly) started the descent from Sri Pada, I was the last pilgrim to leave. Unbelievably there were dozens of endemic Yellow-Eared Bulbuls (Pycnonotus xantholaimus) and Sri Lankan White Eyes (Zosterops ceylonensis) on the path! Gazing back up at the summit I saw a solitary Black Eagle (Ictinaetus malayensis) soaring just below the temple. It was a fitting closure to the trip.

When I returned to work on the humid plains it was exceedingly difficult to forget the images and emotions of my pilgrimages to Sri Pada. Sometimes, after you’ve been so close to heaven, ordinary days at work just don’t cut it anymore! I am gearing up to hike back in the coming season.

References

Ian Lockwood’s photography has been exhibited in New Delhi, Mumbai, and New York. Further examples of his photography and writing can be sampled at www.highrangephotography.com.