



# Sri Pada: Pilgrimage of a Naturalist

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In Sri Lanka there are no geographic features as well documented or visited as the illustrious Sri Pada, popularly known as Adam's Peak or Samanalakanda. Writer and photographer Ian Lockwood encounters abundant wildlife en route to its heavenly peak.

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 and short holiday 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 in the remote vastness of Tibet. No wonder, then, that generations of Lankans, be they Sinhalese, Tamils, or their predecessors, worshipped this mountain. The time was right for a pilgrimage to the holy mountain.

Many paths lead to the summit of Sri Pada. Some are longer and more arduous than others. The two main arteries connecting Sri Pada with human habitation are the Hatton (Dalhousie) and Ratnapura routes. These approaches have broad, well-defined concrete steps as well as electric lighting during the pilgrimage season. There are also a

**Main - Sri Pada casts its shadow.**

**Above - Temple on the summit.**

handful of longer, lesser-known routes that are used by pilgrims seeking greater merit from the experience. All of these paths pass through parts of the large, forested 224km<sup>2</sup> area called Peak Wilderness surrounding the holy mountain. This impressive protected area is especially important because it contains a swathe of undisturbed different forest types. At the lower boundaries of Peak Wilderness there are lowland rainforests that gradually give way to mid-altitudinal montane rainforest. Above 1,900m this changes to cloud forest, characterized by gnarled, stunted trees near the summit of Adam's Peak. Friends at the Field Ornithology Group of Sri Lanka (FOGS) advised me to take the Erathna path to the peak if I wanted to maximize bird and other wildlife sightings.

The Erathna route offered the most interesting ascent of the peak although we were aware that it was a more challenging trek. After some careful planning, several colleagues and I set out on a November weekend. As we drove towards Ratnapura early in the early hours of a new day, we were greeted by clear skies and a stunning view of the peak towering above lower hills. A few wispy clouds blew under the peak and the temple at the top was visible with binoculars. The view energized us and we started off from the small hamlet of Erathna in high spirits. This being off-season, the path was disused and overgrown. It led us through beautiful lowland rainforest with tree ferns, gurgling streams and



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frequent feeding flocks of birds. Several Blue Magpies (*Urocissa ornata*) noisily flew across the path, giving me only enough of a view to identify them. I was happy to find several clumps of the endemic insectivorous pitcher plants (*Nepenthes distillatoria*). I scanned the ground for snakes and was on the lookout for pit vipers, interesting lizards, and other endemic reptiles and amphibians. There were run-down shelters for pilgrims along the way and a few overgrown dagobas. The steps on the sheet rock faces were hand-cut grooves, worn smooth by generations of pilgrims. Passing alongside the fast-flowing

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 Erathna route 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 hillsides 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

1 - Pitcher Plant (*Nepenthes distillatoria*).

2 - Green Pit Viper (*Trimeresurus trigonocephalus*).

3 - Hump-Nosed Lizard (*Lyriocephalus scutatus*).

4 - Yellow-Eared Bulbul (*Pycnonotus xantholaemus*).

5 - Giant Wood Spider (*Nephila maculata*).

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 lagged down the back, weighed down by too much camera gear and several months of overeating. I used a large beach umbrella that helped a little but didn't prevent me getting soaked below the waist. One of my hiking partners

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had optimistically left his rain gear in the car and was soon drenched. He struggled with a poorly designed suitcase-backpack and was clearly not happy about conditions. It was difficult not knowing how far we had to go and barely being able to see a few metres from our feet. I occupied my mind with thoughts of my family and tried to ignore aching muscles and suggestions of disaster in the swirling mist.

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 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. It was a magical view under the shadow of the looming summit. We finally reached the complex of temple buildings at the top at 9.00 pm after what had become an unforeseen 12-hour challenge.

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 sordida*) 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



6 - Early morning light on Peak wilderness.

7 - Pilgrims ascending Sri Pada.

8 - Erathna Route to the peak.

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



Sunset on the summit of Sri Pada.

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The shadow cast an ethereal pyramid over the deep blues of the hills into the cream colours of the formless horizon.

Peak Wilderness came alive with golden tinges and hues. What a large expanse of astonishing forest! To the south, the hills of Sinharaja 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.

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 xantholaemus*) 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. ✍

*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](http://www.highrangephotography.com).*

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horizon. As the shadow of the peak recedes into the distance it appears to form a perfectly symmetrical pyramid in the right weather conditions.

What unfolded in front of me was a magnificent daybreak over the rain-washed land. 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. As the day grew longer the shadow metamorphosed into a more ordinary outline of a great mountain. Meanwhile, the dark colours of

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