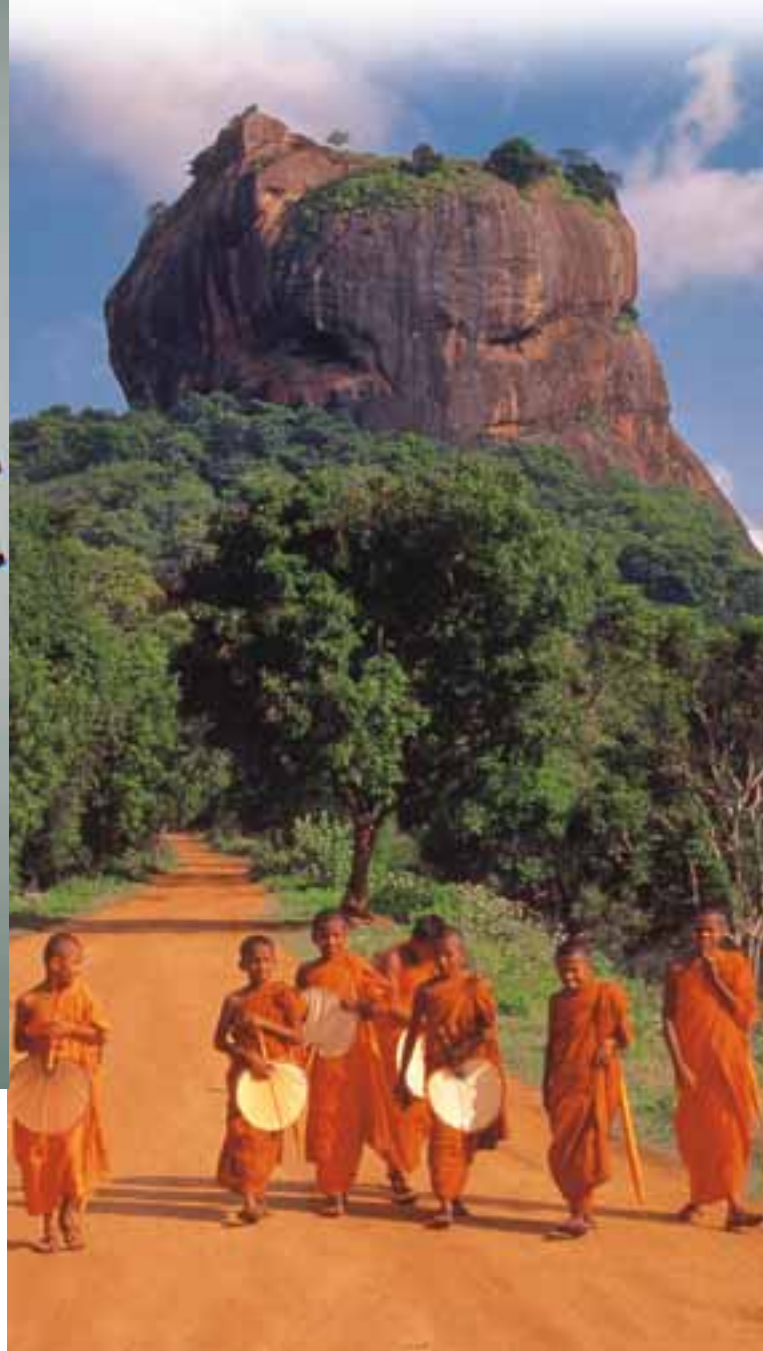


Sri Lanka Tourist Attractions



SRI LANKA

Ancient Cities



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Sri Lanka
A land like no other

Glorious Reminders of a Resplendent Past

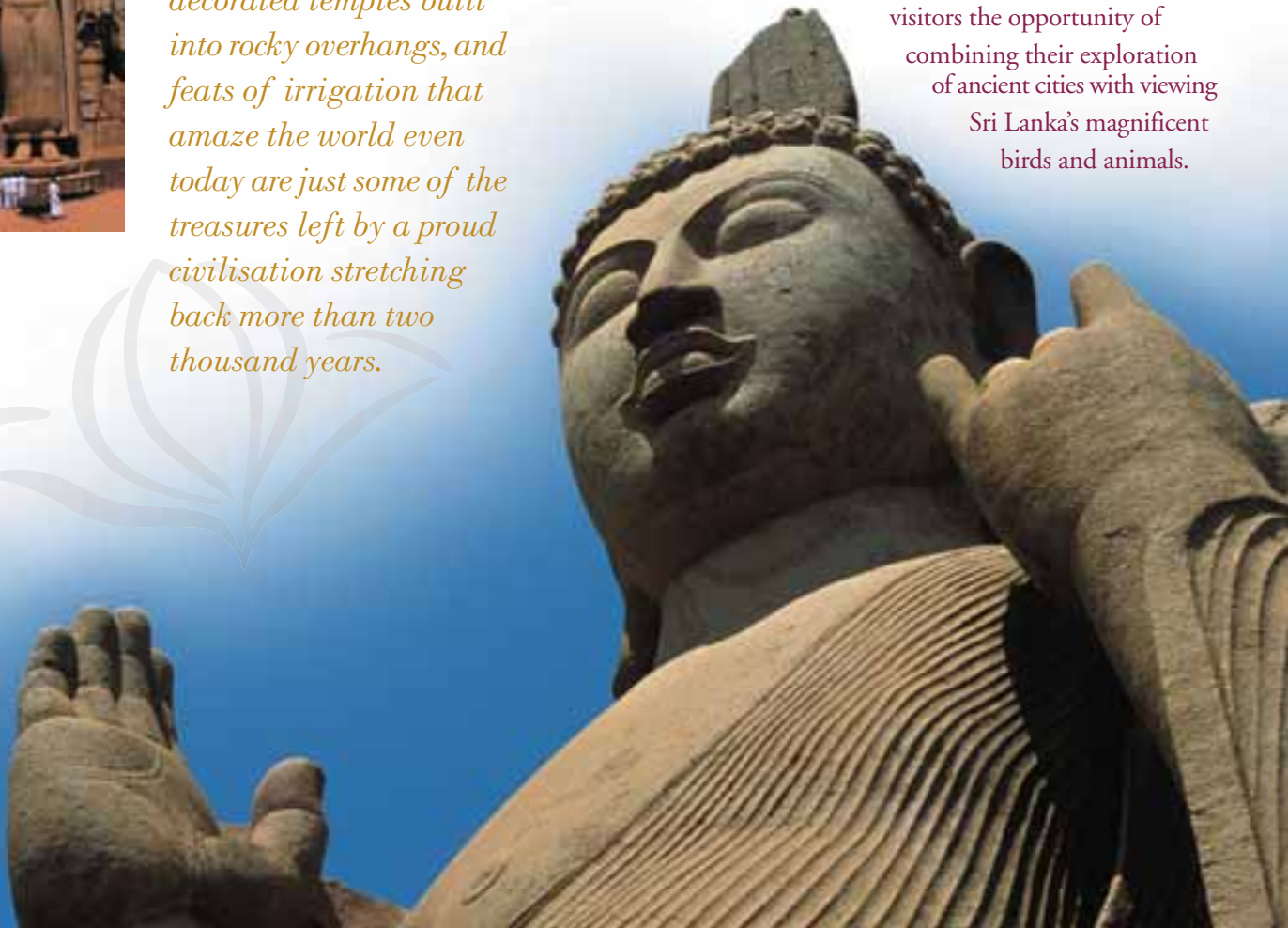


*Exquisitely carved stone
friezes, serene statues of
Lord Buddha, dazzlingly
decorated temples built
into rocky overhangs, and
feats of irrigation that
amaze the world even
today are just some of the
treasures left by a proud
civilisation stretching
back more than two
thousand years.*

The remains of Sri Lanka's ancient and medieval civilisations – palaces, monasteries, shrines, water gardens and temples – bear witness to thriving kingdoms and to the influence of Buddhism.

These reminders of the past are so outstanding that five areas have the distinction of being designated World Heritage Sites by UNESCO. Fortunately for the visitor, four of these are conveniently located in the same region, dubbed the Cultural Triangle.

Another bonus is that several wildlife areas and national parks are found near the Cultural Triangle, offering visitors the opportunity of combining their exploration of ancient cities with viewing Sri Lanka's magnificent birds and animals.



Buddhist monks were bathing in two beautifully carved rectangular stone pools, the Twin Ponds of *Anuradhapura*, as long ago as the 6th century AD. Begun around 5th century BC, Anuradhapura is the oldest city in the Cultural Triangle. In its heyday, tens of thousands of people lived in a city of royal palaces, monasteries, temples topped by glittering jewels, houses of two or three storeys, shops, pleasure gardens, bathing pools and wooded parks.

Today, the restored remains of ancient Anuradhapura are dotted amidst peaceful parks to the north and west of the modern city. Among the many bell-shaped dagobas or temples are

Thuparama (which enshrines a relic of Lord Buddha), and Ruwanweli, rebuilt to its original 2nd century BC bubble shape.

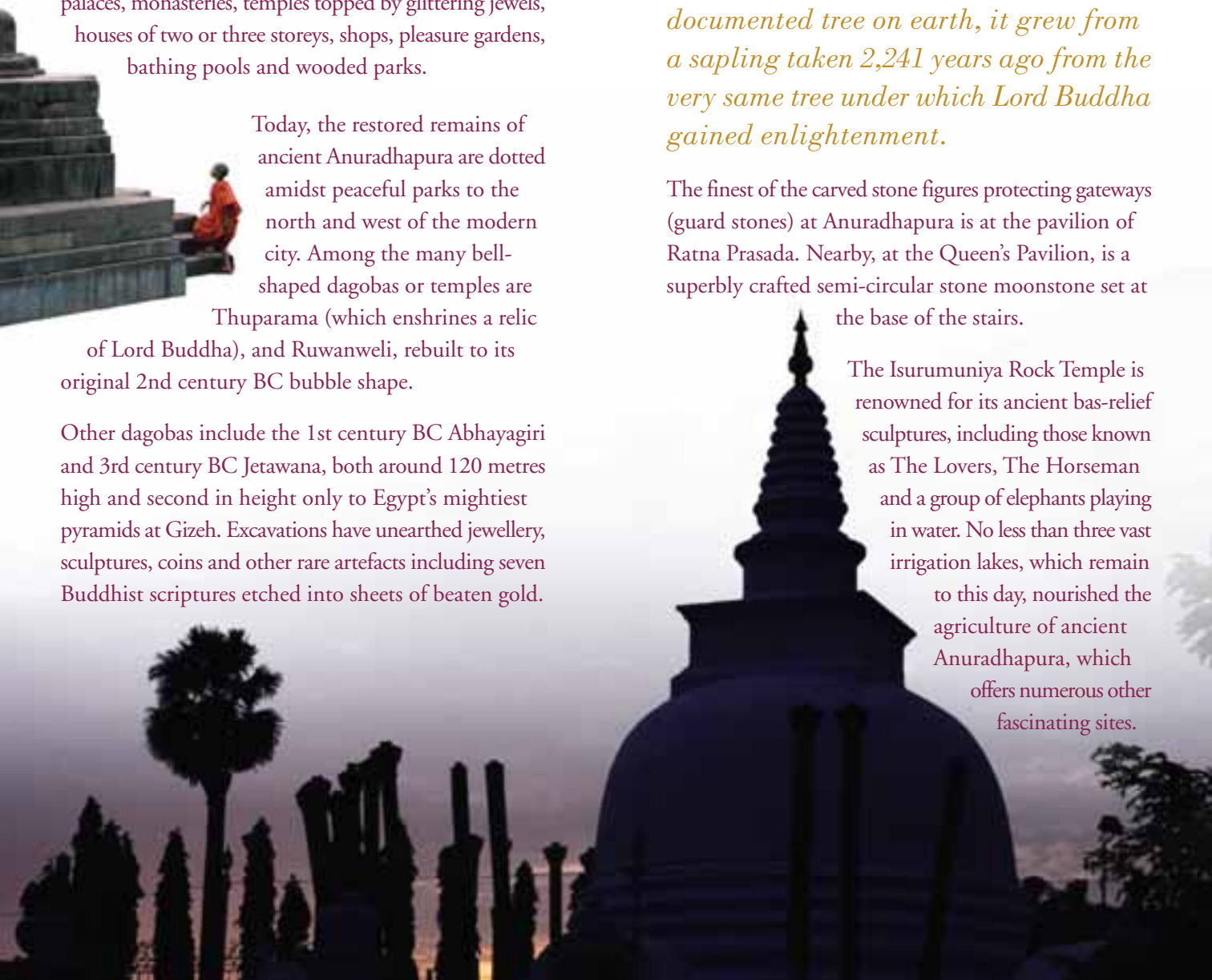
Other dagobas include the 1st century BC Abhayagiri and 3rd century BC Jetawana, both around 120 metres high and second in height only to Egypt's mightiest pyramids at Gizeh. Excavations have unearthed jewellery, sculptures, coins and other rare artefacts including seven Buddhist scriptures etched into sheets of beaten gold.

Stone pillars are all that remains of the 1,000-room monks' residence or Brazen Palace, near Sri Maha Bodhi or the sacred bo tree, a slender fig or *Ficus religiosa* supported by iron crutches.

The oldest historically documented tree on earth, it grew from a sapling taken 2,241 years ago from the very same tree under which Lord Buddha gained enlightenment.

The finest of the carved stone figures protecting gateways (guard stones) at Anuradhapura is at the pavilion of Ratna Prasada. Nearby, at the Queen's Pavilion, is a superbly crafted semi-circular stone moonstone set at the base of the stairs.

The Isurumuniya Rock Temple is renowned for its ancient bas-relief sculptures, including those known as The Lovers, The Horseman and a group of elephants playing in water. No less than three vast irrigation lakes, which remain to this day, nourished the agriculture of ancient Anuradhapura, which offers numerous other fascinating sites.



*The rocky hill where Mahinda – son of the devoutly Buddhist Indian Emperor, Ashoka – converted King Devanampiyatissa in 247 BC, is known as **Mihintale**. Located just 13 km east of Anuradhapura, this holy site is regarded as the seat of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.*



Even today, pilgrims and visitors must climb 1,840 steps up a staircase built by King Abihaya 2,000 years ago to reach the Ambasthala Dagoba. This sacred dagoba is just one of a number of interesting remains at Mihintale, which include various pavilions, image houses, the remains of an ancient hospital, an unusual cistern resembling a lion and a rocky boulder known as Mahinda's Bed.

Built in the 5th century, *Sigiriya* or Lion Rock, rises 200 metres above a forested plain, its flattened summit sloping gently. A series of moats, ramparts and amazingly engineered water gardens spreads out on two sides of the rock, with the remains of a pair of giant



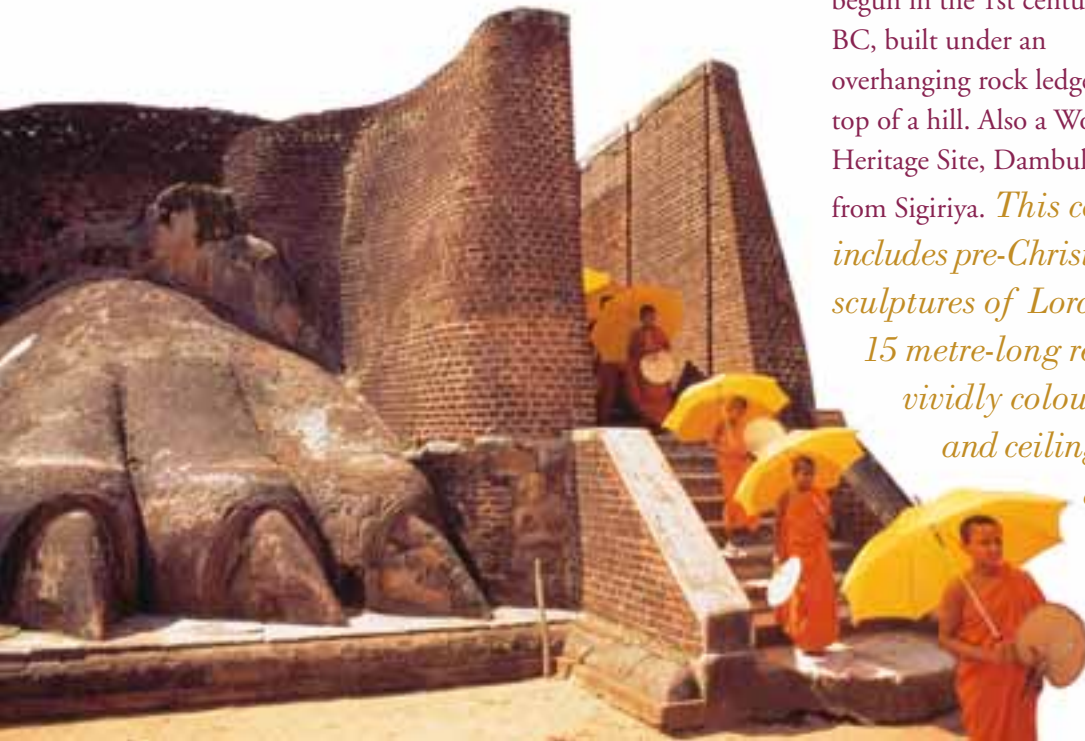
stone lion's paws still guarding the staircase leading to the summit, once occupied by a royal palace.

Sigiriya (a World Heritage Site), is Asia's best preserved city of the first millennium, showing complex urban planning around the base of the rock and sheer bravado in the palace perched on the summit.



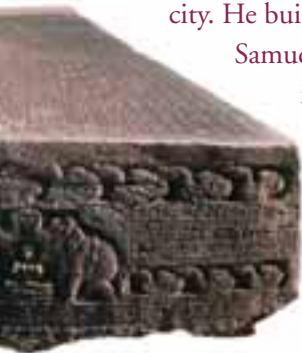
One of the most famous aspects of Sigiriya are the frescoes painted under a rocky overhang part way up the rock, depicting graceful bare-breasted maidens whose beauty inspired ancient graffiti which can still be seen.

Dambulla consists of a series of ancient temples begun in the 1st century BC, built under an overhanging rock ledge on top of a hill. Also a World Heritage Site, Dambulla can be seen in the distance from Sigiriya. *This complex of five shrines includes pre-Christian rock inscriptions, 150 sculptures of Lord Buddha (including a 15 metre-long reclining Buddha) and vividly coloured frescoes on the walls and ceiling, making this the largest antique painted surface in the world.*





Polonnaruwa was established as the capital after Anuradhapura had been invaded in the late 10th century. Under King Parakramabahu, who ruled in the late 11th century, Polonnaruwa became a magnificent walled city. He built the vast reservoir, Parakrama Samudra (the Sea of Parakrama), which is still in use today, and ordered the construction of monasteries, temples, palaces, bathing pools and Buddhist statues, all set in a forested park surrounded by moats.




The remains of Polonnaruwa (a World Heritage Site), are so numerous that only a few highlights can be mentioned. One of the most striking of the many stone statues is a 14 metre Buddha, carved out of living rock at Gal Vihara. To one side of this reclining Buddha stands a 7 metre Buddha, in a rare pose with crossed arms. Another smaller statue of Buddha sits in deep meditation, while a fourth figure is set into a cave cut in the rock wall.

While these statues are regarded as masterpieces of Sri Lankan art, other remarkable carvings include a 4 metre-high bearded figure (probably King Parakramabahu), holding what seems to be a book. Another dramatic work is an inscribed stone “book” measuring 9 metres long and around 50 centimetres thick.



The Quadrangle, with 12 superb buildings standing on a platform in the centre of the ancient city, and the Lankatilleke image house, a vast brick building with a standing Buddha at the rear, are also among the many magnificent remains.





After the invasion and abandonment of Polonnaruwa, a rock fortress built at *Yapahuwa* became the capital of King Bhuvanekbahu in the late 13th century. One of the most outstanding features of this citadel, built on a 100 metre rock mound, is the steep Ornamental Stairway, with its magnificent carved figures of musicians, dancers, goddesses and lions. Remains of the palace complex, moats and ponds can be seen, while there is an interesting cave temple with 13th century frescoes and rare wooden Buddha images.

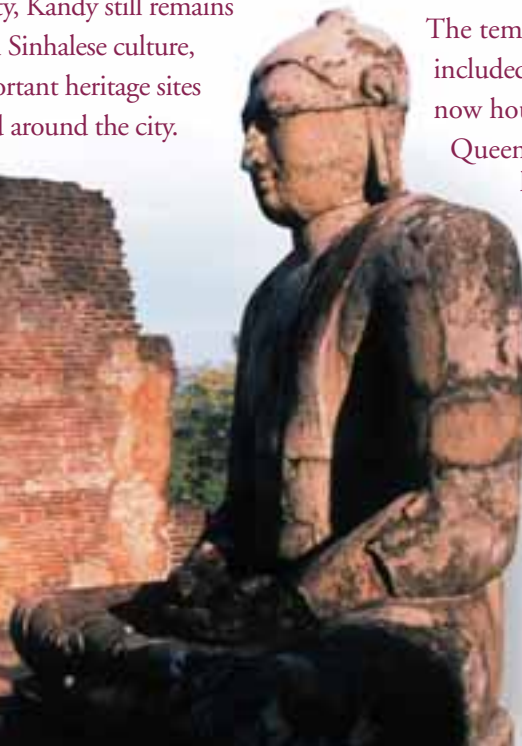
The last stronghold of the Sri Lankan kings against a series of colonial invaders was at *Kandy*, at 500 metres in the Hill Country. Now a bustling city, Kandy still remains a sanctuary for traditional Sinhalese culture, with a number of important heritage sites in and around the city.

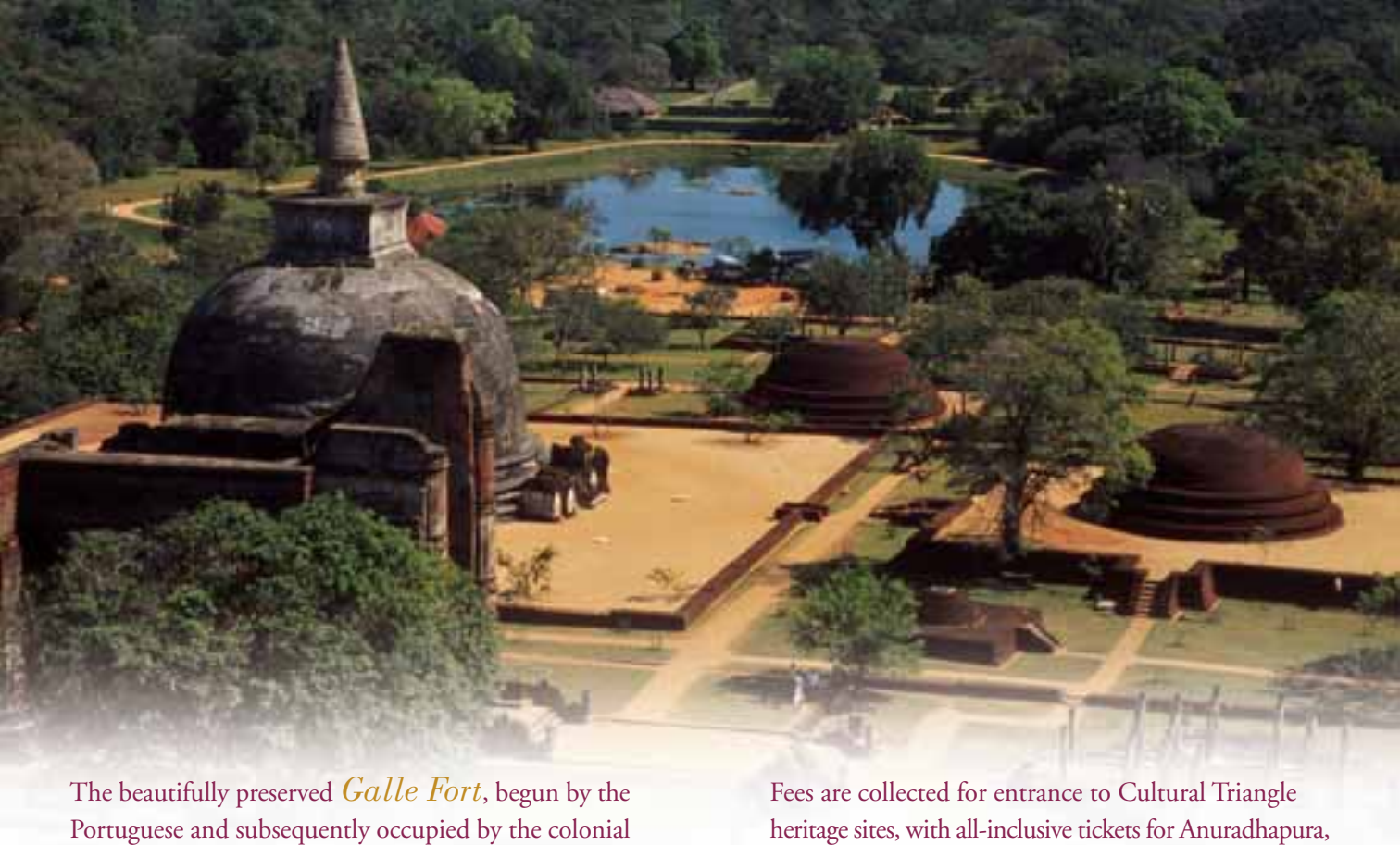
The Temple of the Sacred Tooth enshrines Sri Lanka's most important relic of Lord Buddha. Constructed during the 17th and 18th centuries, this temple is surrounded by a deep moat. Nearby are three impressive shrines or devalas dedicated to guardian deities Natha, Vishnu and Pattini. A fourth devala a short distance away, the Kataragama shrine, is famed for its wooden columns with exquisitely carved panels.



The temple was part of a complex of buildings that included the 16th century King's Palace (part of which now houses the Archaeological Museum), while the Queen's Palace, home to the National Museum, has a collection of royal regalia. Kandy's pleasant Lake in the centre of the old city was created by the last Sinhalese King in 1807.

In the hills around Kandy, many temples feature the distinctive architecture, murals and carving of the late-medieval period. These include two 14th century temples: the beautiful hilltop Lankatilleke and Gadaladeniya, with its wooden doors still bearing the original paintings.





The beautifully preserved *Galle Fort*, begun by the Portuguese and subsequently occupied by the colonial Dutch and British, is now a World Heritage Site.

Set on a peninsula in the south of the island and entirely surrounded by giant ramparts, Galle includes a 17th century fort, bastions, churches, old mosques and houses, offering an atmospheric glimpse of Sri Lanka's more recent past.

These and other heritage sites are easily visited and offer an excellent range of accommodation, from eco-lodges to hotels with swimming pools and other recreational facilities.

Fees are collected for entrance to Cultural Triangle heritage sites, with all-inclusive tickets for Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Sigiriya and Kandy available. Museums and information centres exhibit many of the antiquities unearthed during restoration.

The best season for visiting Cultural Triangle sites is from January to April, while the local pilgrimage season is in May and June.

When entering any Buddhist or Hindu shrine, visitors are requested to remove footwear and head covering, and to be modestly dressed.

For further information, please contact Sri Lanka Tourist Board or click onto www.srilankatourism.org