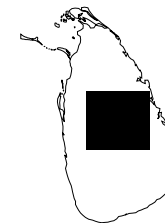


# The Ancient Cities



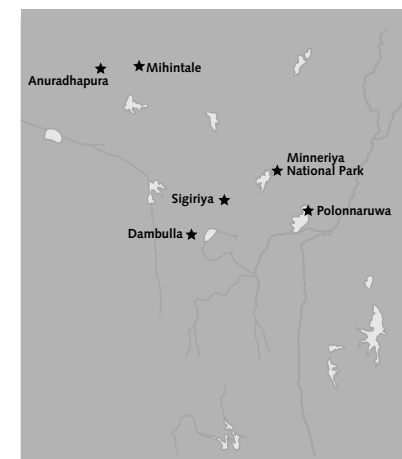
North of the Hill Country, in one of the driest parts of the country, lies the original heart of Sri Lankan civilisation. During the golden age of Sinhalese civilisation, it was called Rajarata – the Land of Kings. For 1500 years of dynasties, wars, invasions and religious missions to Asia, increasingly ambitious dams and irrigation systems supported two great cities – Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa – and many other magnificent examples of the region’s Buddhist culture. For almost a thousand years the jungle did its best to reclaim them, but major archaeological excavations over the past century have partially restored their glory. Engineers, too, have patched the irrigation system, marvelling at the skill of the original builders.

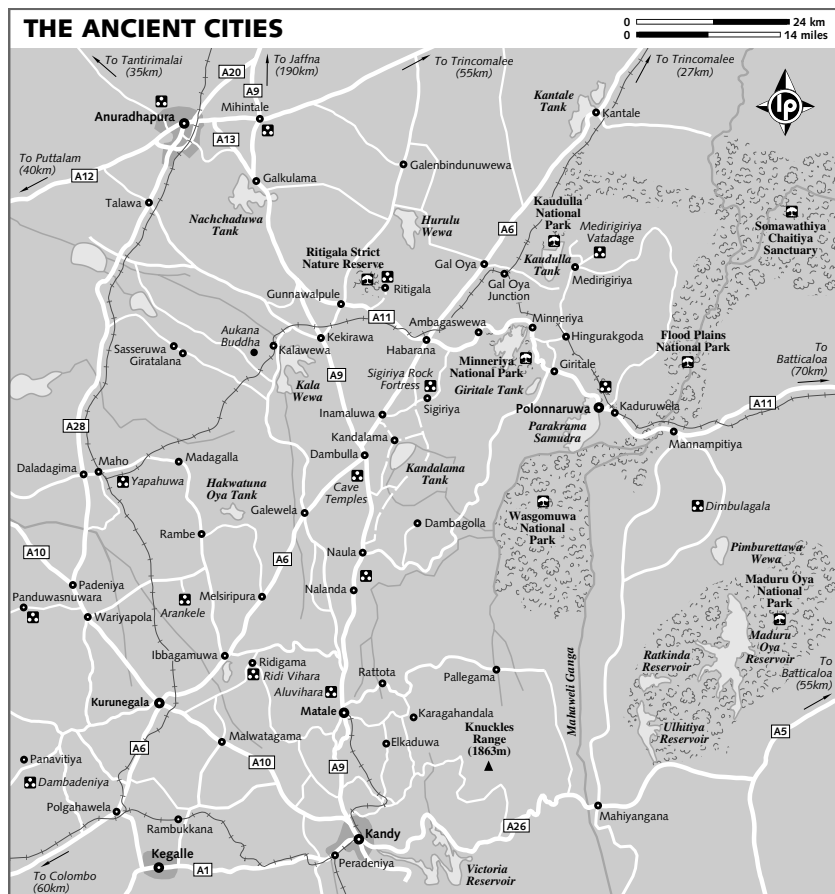
A long-running partnership between the Sri Lankan government and Unesco continues to restore the region’s ancient sites. The Cultural Triangle project centres on the old capitals of Kandy, Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, which are the focus of much local and international tourism.

Kandy is a good starting point for visiting the ancient cities; afterwards you could also continue up the east coast through Ampara, or inland along the fine roads of the Mahaweli irrigation scheme area. You can comfortably explore the area while staying in either Anuradhapura or Polonnaruwa, or you could easily spend a few days in each. Some visitors base themselves Sigiriya or Habarana, which are more or less centrally located for visiting the sites.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Pondering the enigma of **Sigiriya** (p233) while climbing its near-vertical rock face.
- Enjoying the panoramic view of Anuradhapura’s great dagoba (stupa) from the top of the sacred hill at **Mihintale** (p255)
- Cycling through the trees and gardens surrounding the 1000-year-old ruins of **Polonnaruwa** (p237) and basking in the serene gaze of the Gal Vihara Buddha
- Admiring the intensely painted murals inside the rock cave temples in **Dambulla** (p231)
- Pausing in the shade of Anuradhapura’s **Sri Maha Bodhi** (p250), the sacred bodhi tree and living Buddha relic





## Information

Foreign visitors must purchase tickets to visit the major Cultural Triangle sites as well as a few of the minor ones. You can buy either a 'round ticket' that covers most of the major sites, or individual tickets at the sites themselves. Currently a round ticket costs US\$40 (payable either in US dollars or in the rupee equivalent) and covers the following: Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Sigiriya, Ritigala, Medirigiriya and Nalanda, plus a few sites in Kandy (but not the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic).

The round ticket is valid for 60 days from the date of purchase, and you must finish using your ticket within 14 days of the first time you use it. The ticket entitles

you to one day's entry only – if you wish to spend a second day at any site, you pay the full day's fee. If paid for individually, the tickets cost US\$20 each for Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Sigiriya; US\$10 for Medirigiriya; and US\$5 for Ritigala and Nalanda. All foreign nationals and even foreigners with resident visas must pay the full amount. There are no student discounts on the round ticket, though sometimes you can get half-price tickets for individual sites if you sweet-talk the ticket seller. Children under 12 years are charged half price, while those under six get in for free.

Many Buddhist shrines within the Cultural Triangle area, including the Dambulla cave shrines, Sri Maha Bodhi and Mihintale,

are run by the Sangha (the community of Buddhist monks) and charge separate entry fees, varying from Rs 100 to 500.

Round tickets can be bought at the Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Nalanda ticket offices. You can also buy them at the **Colombo Cultural Triangle office** (☎ 011-258 7912; 212 Baudhaloka Mawatha, Col 7) and the Cultural Triangle office in Kandy (p165).

## Getting Around

The towns and cities of the Cultural Triangle are well connected by public and private bus, and in some cases by train. Distances are not great and most roads are sealed, so getting around by public transport is relatively comfortable (although buses can be very crowded certain times of day and during holiday periods). Departures between major towns and tourist sites are fairly frequent – you generally won't find yourself waiting hours and hours for a bus or train to depart.

On the other hand, many visitors hire a car and driver to visit the ancient cities. A sedan that can comfortably carry three passengers (four if you don't have much luggage) will cost around Rs 2500 to 2800 per day. For more than four people, a minivan is a better choice; these cost around Rs 3000 to 3500 per day.

## MATALE

☎ 066 / pop 37,700

This mid-sized regional city at the heart of the island lies in a broad, fertile valley at an elevation of 300m. The road to Kandy, 24km south, ascends past paddy fields, areca palm plantations and pepper vines. Other regional specialities include vanilla, rubber, cinchona and cardamom. The area is also famous for *kohila* (a type of water-cress) and small, mild chillies. The town's pleasant park includes a monument to the leaders of the 1848 Matale Rebellion – one of the less famous contributions to the Year of Revolutions!

## Sights

Not far north of the bus stop for Kandy is an interesting Hindu temple, the **Sri Muthu-mariamman Thevasthanam** (admission Rs 45). A priest will show you the five enormous, colourful ceremonial chariots pulled along by people during an annual festival.

A drive east through **Knuckles Range**, east of Matale, presents some remarkable mountain views. The B38 heads uphill from the north end of town to a pass near Rattota, while other roads head southwest to the hill villages of Elkaduwa and Karagahandala before winding down to Kandy and the Victoria Reservoir. For more details about Knuckles Range, see p194.

## ALUVIHARA

The rock monastery of Aluvihara (also spelt Aluvihare) sits beside the Kandy–Dambulla road, 3km north of Matale. The monastery caves are picturesquely situated among rocks that have fallen from the mountains high above the valley. Legend has it that a giant used three of the rocks as a base for his cooking pot, and the name Aluvihara (Ash Monastery) refers to the ashes from the cooking fire. Ancient drip ledges line the rocks above the frescoed caves, while bats rustle in sheltered corners of the rocks.

The first cave you come to contains a 10m reclining Buddha and impressive lotus-pattern murals on the ceiling. Another is filled with cartoonlike murals of the realms of hell – if you're considering straying from the straight and narrow, you may think twice after seeing the statues of devils meting out an inventive range of punishment to sinners in the afterlife. One scene shows a sexual sinner with his skull cut open and his brains being ladled out by two demons.

Up a flight of rock steps is a cave dedicated to Buddhagosa, the Indian scholar who is supposed to have spent several years here while working on the Tipitaka (Buddhist canon written in Pali, a dialect of Sanskrit). Although histories affirm that Buddhagosa lived in Anuradhapura in the 6th century AD, there's no clear evidence he stayed at Aluvihara. Nonetheless the cave walls are painted with scenes showing Buddhagosa working on *ola* (palm-leaf) manuscripts.

Stairs continue to the summit of the rock bluff, where you'll find a dagoba (stupa) and sweeping views of the surrounding valley.

The Tipitaka was first transcribed from oral and Sinhalese sources into Pali text by a council of monks held at Aluvihara in the 1st century BC. Two thousand years later, in 1848, the monk's library was destroyed by British troops putting down a revolt.

The long process of replacing the *ola* manuscripts still occupies monks, scribes and craftsmen today. You can see their **workshop** (admission Rs 100); the price includes having your name inscribed on a small length of *ola*. See p53 for information about *ola* manuscripts.

A three-wheeler from Matale to Aluvihara will cost about Rs 280 return plus waiting time, and a bus will cost Rs 4.

### MATALE HERITAGE CENTRE

About 2km north of Matale, this **heritage centre** (☎ 222 2404; 33 Sir Richard Aluvihara Mawatha) draws on the rich craft traditions of the area, producing quality batik, embroidery, carpentry and brasswork. It occupies a sprawling compound of bungalows, workshops and gardens. The centre's Aluvihara Kitchens does meals for groups of four or more, if you book by phone a day ahead; it costs Rs 550 per person for a banquet with three kinds of rice and up to 25 different curries. A three-wheeler from Matale will cost about Rs 250 return plus waiting time, while a bus will cost Rs 4.

There are many **spice gardens** and several **batik showrooms** along the road between Matale and Aluvihara. The various treats you can expect on a tour of the gardens include milkless cocoa tea sweetened with vanilla and banana, and various creams and potions claimed to make hair shine or cure flatulence. Prices at some spice garden shops are high, so check in a market before you set out so that you can compare prices.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Rock House Hotel** (☎ 222 3239; 17/16A Hulangamuwa Rd; with/without air-con Rs 2000/1200; 🏠) Set in a pretty garden, this is a semimodern place just to the south of the Matale Rest House (it is signposted on the main road). There are seven plain rooms sharing a broad balcony, but considering they don't have hot water they're a bit overpriced.

**Matale Rest House** (☎ 222 2299; thilanka@ids.lk; Park Rd; s/d Rs 1000/1200, r with air-con Rs 1700; 🏠) There are 14 clean doubles (with hot water) in this rather institutional building, which lies south of the town centre in the old cantonment (British garrison) area. The rest-house has a broad front lawn and a garden centring on a lovely bodhi tree that predates

the hotel. The restaurant's menu includes a lunch buffet if there are enough guests, a mixed grill and a few Chinese dishes; meals cost Rs 300 to 500.

**A&C Restaurant** (☎ 223 3619; 3/5 Sir Richard Aluvihara Mawatha; meals Rs 250-500; 🍴 lunch) This very special eatery is found on the same turn-off as the Matale Heritage Centre, but you'll need to take a sharp left rather than the road to the centre if you're coming from Matale. With tables on a sheltered veranda, it's an excellent place to stop for lunch if you're travelling by car or van. It's slightly expensive, but the menu is huge and focuses on lots of fresh local produce. Service is excellent.

### Getting There & Away

Bus 594 to Matale (private bus/intercity express Rs 33/19) leaves from beside the central clock tower in Kandy. Dambulla or Anuradhapura buses from Kandy or Matale will drop you at Aluvihara or the spice gardens. There are six daily trains on the pretty 28km spur line between Matale and Kandy (Rs 9, 1½ hours).

### NALANDA

☎ 066

Nalanda is known for the venerable **Nalanda Gedige** (adult/child US\$5/2.50), about 25km north of Matale and 20km before Dambulla. Built in the style of a South Indian Hindu temple, it consists of an entrance hall connected to a taller *shikara* (holy image sanctuary), with a courtyard for circumambulations. There is no sign of Hindu gods, however, and the temple is said to have been used by Buddhists. This is one of the earliest stone buildings constructed in Sri Lanka.

The temple's richly decorated stone-block walls, reassembled from ruins in 1975, are thought to have been fashioned during the 8th to 11th centuries. The plinth bears some of Tantric carvings with sexual poses – the only such sculptures in Sri Lanka – but before you get excited, the carvings are weather beaten and it's difficult to see much. Entry is included in the Cultural Triangle round ticket (see p228).

The site is beside a tank (artificial lake) 1km east of the main road – a sign marks the turn-off near the 49km post. Anuradhapura buses from Kandy or Matale will drop you at the turn-off.

### DAMBULLA

☎ 066 / pop 68,200

A service-oriented town at the junction of highways A6 and A9, Dambulla is most well known for the impressive cave temples (officially known as the Royal Rock Temple) atop a massive hill on the edge of town. You can visit it as a day trip on public transport from Kandy, or stop by on your way to or from Sigiriya. If you decide to stay the night, there is decent accommodation for all budgets.

### Sights

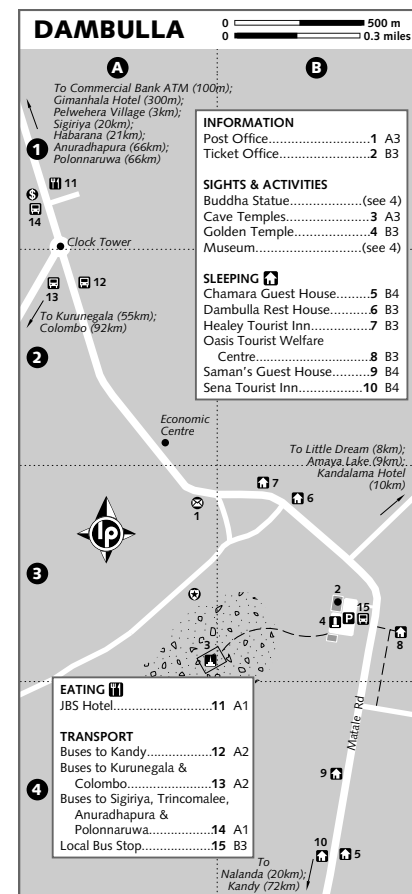
#### CAVE TEMPLES

The beautiful **Royal Rock Temple** (adult/child Rs 500/free; 🕒 7am-7pm) sits 100m to 150m above the road in the southern part of Dambulla. The hike up to the temples begins along a vast, sloping rock face with steps in some places. The ticket office is at the gate near the monstrous Golden Temple, and your receipt is checked at the entrance at the base of the hill; the Cultural Triangle ticket isn't valid here. Photography is allowed inside the caves, but you're not allowed to photograph people. There are superb views over the surrounding countryside from the level of the caves; Sigiriya is clearly visible.

The caves' history as a place of worship is thought to date from around the 1st century BC, when King Valagamba (Vattajamini Ahhaya), driven out of Anuradhapura, took refuge here. When he regained his throne, he had the interior of the caves carved into magnificent rock temples. Further improvements were made by later kings, including King Nissanka Malla, who had the caves' interiors gilded, earning the place the name Ran Giri (Golden Rock).

There are five separate caves containing about 150 Buddha images. Most of the paintings in the temples date from the 19th century.

At the foot of the hill facing the highway stands the modern **Golden Temple**, a very kitschy structure completed in 2000 using Japanese donations. On top of the cube-shaped building sits a 30m-high Buddha image in the *dhammachakka mudra* (dharma-turning pose). Signs claim it's the largest Buddha in the world, but it's not even the largest in Sri Lanka. A **museum** (adult/child Rs 100/50; 🕒 7.30am-11.30pm) displays replicas of the cave paintings, imported Buddha images and little else, with only



brief labels in Sinhala. Attached is an Internet café and a Buddhist publications bookshop.

#### Cave I (Devaraja Viharaya)

The first cave, the Temple of the King of the Gods, has a 15m-long reclining Buddha. Ananda, the Buddha's loyal disciple, and other seated Buddhas are depicted nearby. A statue of Vishnu is held in a small shrine within the cave, but it's usually closed.

#### Cave II (Maharaja Viharaya)

The Temple of the Great King is arguably the most spectacular of the caves. It measures 52m from east to west and 23m from the entrance to the back wall; the highest point

of the ceiling is 7m. This cave is named after the two statues of kings it contains. There is a painted wooden statue of Valagamba on the left as you enter, and another statue further inside of Nissanka Malla. The cave's main Buddha statue, which appears to have once been covered in gold leaf, is situated under a *makara torana* (archway decorated with dragons), with the right hand raised in *abhaya mudra* (a pose conveying protection). Hindu deities are also represented. The vessel inside the cave collects water that constantly drips from the ceiling of the temple – even during droughts – which is used for sacred rituals. There are brilliantly coloured frescoes of Buddhism's arrival in Sri Lanka, meritorious deeds done by kings and great battles.

#### Cave III (Maha Alut Viharaya)

This cave, the New Great Temple, was said to have been converted from a storeroom in the 18th century by King Kirti Sri Rajasinghe of Kandy, one of the last of the Kandyan monarchs. This cave, too, is filled with Buddha statues, including a beautiful reclining Buddha, and is separated from Cave II by only a masonry wall.

#### Cave IV (Pachima Viharaya)

The relatively small Western Cave is not the most westerly cave – that position belongs to Cave V. The central Buddha figure is seated under a *makara torana*, with its hands in *dhyana mudra* (a meditative pose in which the hands are cupped). The small dagoba in the centre was broken into by thieves who believed that it contained jewellery belonging to Queen Somawathie.

#### Cave V (Devana Alut Viharaya)

This newer cave was once used as a storehouse, but it's now called the Second New Temple. It features a reclining Buddha; Hindu deities including Kataragama (Murugan) and Vishnu are also present.

#### Sleeping

Because it's an important highway junction as well as a tourist destination, Dambulla boasts a good variety of places to stay.

#### BUDGET

**Healey Tourist Inn** (☎ 228 4940; Matale Rd; s/d Rs 400/600) Well located near the post office and within walking distance of the caves and bus

station, Healey has good value rooms and friendly management.

**Chamara Guest House** (☎ 228 4488; Matale Rd; r Rs 900) This is a relaxed place with basic but clean rooms, friendly management and good Sri Lankan food.

**Sena Tourist Inn** (☎ 228 4421; Matale Rd; s/d Rs 600/800) This inn has six basic rooms in a friendly family house.

**Little Dream** (☎ 072 618871; s/d Rs 440/660) This is a friendly, laid-back place where you can swim in the nearby Kandalama Tank, bathe in the river or snooze in a hammock. It's about 8km along the road to Amaya Lake (opposite) – a three-wheeler costs Rs 500 from the temple and about Rs 200 from the clock tower, or you can look for the guesthouse's three-wheeler.

**Saman's Guest House** (☎ 228 4412; Matale Rd; r Rs 700) This little guesthouse has four simple rooms sitting off a central hallway, which is cluttered with antique stuff from the shop at the front.

**Oasis Tourist Welfare Centre** (☎ 228 4388; r from Rs 400) A cheap place almost directly opposite the entrance to the temple car park, this is dark and rough, but all rooms share a reasonable bathroom. One room with attached bathroom is available.

#### MIDRANGE

**Dambulla Rest House** (☎ 222 2299; Matale Rd; d/tr US\$25/28, with air-con US\$35/38; 🍴) A one-storey affair of semimodern design, this Ceylon Hotels Corporation-operated resthouse offers four large, comfortable rooms, plus a reliable restaurant (meals Rs 500 to 700) and bar. Reader feedback says the food is very good.

**Gimanhala Hotel** (☎ 228 4864; gimanhala@sltnet.lk; 754 Anuradhapura Rd; r with/without air-con Rs 4300/3400; 🍴 📺 🚰) About 800m beyond the Colombo junction on the north edge of town, this is a good value midrange hotel. The staff are helpful, the rooms sparkle and there's a swimming pool. The restaurant's daily lunch buffet is popular with tour groups.

**Pelwehera Village** (☎ 228 4281; r US\$20-40; 🍴) Three kilometres north of Dambulla (at Bullagala Junction) and just off the main road, this is a modern place with 10 spotless, bare rooms with hot water. The restaurant serves good food too – it's a nice place to stop for a bite to eat.

#### TOP END

**Amaya Lake** (☎ 446 8100; www.amayarresorts.com; villas from US\$153; 🍴 📺 🚰) Formerly Culture Club, Amaya Lake is a huge, breezy complex comprising 92 stylish villas set in beautiful gardens. Facilities include a pool, tennis and badminton courts, cricket pitch, Ayurvedic spa and bird-watching trails. There are also 11 'ecolodges', which were built with traditional materials and methods, and have solar hot water, adjacent to a traditional village. On the resort premises are two restaurants, one of which serves Ayurvedic cuisine using herbs and vegetables cultivated in the village. The resort can be reached by following the Kandalama road for about 3km from Dambulla and then veering left for another 6km or so.

**Kandalama Hotel** (☎ 228 4100; www.aitekenspencehotels.com; s/d/tr US\$150/175/235; 🍴 📺 🚰) If you're interested in modern Sri Lankan architecture, this Geoffrey Bawa-designed place will set your heart racing. It's a huge establishment – 1km from end to end, with 162 rooms and three swimming pools – but the design beautifully complements the landscape. The whole place underwent a major renovation in 2005. The staff offer bird-watching walks and 4WD safaris, and as at Amaya Lake, there's a hotel-supported traditional village, Puranagama.

#### Eating

**JBS Hotel** (Anuradhapura Rd; dishes Rs 70-250; 🍴 24hr) Upstairs in a shop-house next to the Singer store, JBS serves tasty Sri Lankan and Chinese food.

All of the accommodation listed have restaurants. Those with food worth recommending include **Dambulla Rest House** (☎ 222 2299; Matale Rd; meals Rs 500-700), **Chamara Guest House** (☎ 228 4488; Matale Rd), **Pelwehera Village** (☎ 228 4281) and **Gimanhala Hotel** (☎ 228 4864; 754 Anuradhapura Rd).

#### Getting There & Away

Dambulla is 72km north of Kandy on the road to Anuradhapura. The Colombo to Trincomalee road meets this road 2km north of the cave temple, then splits off from it a couple of kilometres further north, leading to Sigiriya and Polonnaruwa. Because Dambulla is on so many major routes, plenty of buses pass through with varying frequency. However, the nearest

train station is at Habarana, 23km to the north, from where you can catch a Kandy-bound bus to get to Dambulla.

By bus it takes 1½ hours to get to Polonnaruwa (Rs 40, 66km), two hours to Anuradhapura (Rs 40, 68km), and two hours to Kandy (Rs 40). There are buses to Sigiriya (Rs 14, 40 minutes) roughly every 30 minutes. Touts will tell you otherwise to get you into a three-wheeler. The bus takes four hours to get to Colombo (normal/air-con Rs 85/170).

You can flag buses plying this busy route to go between the two parts of Dambulla, or take a three-wheeler for Rs 50.

#### SIGIRIYA

☎ 066 / pop 1000

Rising 200m straight up over the dusty plains of north central Sri Lanka, the flat-topped rock formation of Sigiriya is not only one of the island's most impressive geological formations but also one of its greatest archaeological legacies. The leafy village that has grown up near its base serves the comings and goings of tourists and pilgrims and is of relatively recent origin.

#### History

Originally called Sihagiri (Remembrance Rock) and later dubbed Sigiriya (Lion Rock), the rock mass is actually the hardened magma plug of an extinct volcano that long ago eroded away. Pocked with natural cave shelters and rock overhangs – supplemented over the centuries by numerous hand-hewn additions and modifications – the rock may have been inhabited in prehistoric times.

Popular myth says that the formation served royal and military functions during the reign of King Kassapa (AD 477–495), who allegedly built a garden and palace on the summit. According to this theory, King Kassapa sought out an unassailable new residence after overthrowing and murdering his own father, King Dhatusena of Anuradhapura.

A new theory, supported by archaeological, literary, religious and cultural evidence rather than local legend, says that Sigiriya was never a fortress or palace, but rather a long-standing Mahayana and Theravada Buddhist monastery built several centuries before the time of King Kassapa. Monks were using it as a mountain hermitage by

the 3rd century BC, and there is abundant evidence to show it had become an important monastery by the 10th century AD. According to *Sigiriya and its Significance: A Mahayana-Theravada Buddhist Monastery*, by Dr Raja De Silva, Sri Lanka's former archaeological commissioner, the ancient site's much treasured frescoes of buxom women were not portraying ladies from Kassapa's court, as was popularly believed. Instead, they were intended to represent Tara Devi, an important Mahayana Buddhist goddess.

After the 14th century, the monastery complex was abandoned. British archaeologist HCP Bell discovered the ruins in 1898, which were further excavated by British explorer John Still in 1907. Whatever exact purposes Sigiriya may have served in the past, the visible ruins today suggest a significant urban site complete with relatively sophisticated architecture, engineering, urban planning, hydraulic technology, gardening and art.

Unesco declared Sigiriya a World Heritage Site in 1982.

## Orientation

The village, on the south side of the rock, is just a collection of grocery stores, guest-houses and small restaurants.

## Information

The **Centre for Eco-Cultural Studies** (CES; www.ces.srilanka.org) and **Sigiriya Ecocultural Tour Guide Association** (Setga; Hotel Rd; ☎ 8am-6pm) have an information desk with brochures on the region's fauna. These organisations run a range of wildlife and cultural expeditions, including tours of the Sigiriya rock.

## Sights

Sigiriya is covered by the Cultural Triangle round ticket (p228); if you don't already have one of these, a single ticket costs US\$20 or the rupee equivalent. Both single and round tickets are sold near the site entrance and at Sigiriya Rest House (p236).

Hopeful guides hang around the entrance to the site and will also approach you once you're inside. CES/Setga does a three- to four-hour tour of the royal complex for Rs 350 per person. On a relatively busy day

you can overhear the commentaries given to tour groups, as long as you can find one in your language.

The site's **archaeological museum** (admission free; ☎ 8am-5pm Wed-Mon), near the entrance, is in poor condition. A small **bookstand** (☎ 8am-4pm) is outside.

An early or late ascent of the rock avoids the main crowds and the fierce heat. Allow at least two hours for the return trip, and more on very busy days. Bring plenty of water and wear a hat, as it's often too windy near the summit to carry an umbrella. The ascent involves a steep climb, so if you're not fit it may be tough. Beware of 'helpers' who latch onto visitors who look as if they may have difficulty. Drinks are available at stalls near the lion's paws for inflated prices.

The verifiable theory that the Sigiriya rock complex was always a Buddhist monastery has not caught on with the locals. Hence the terms traditionally used to describe the various features on the rock city assume it was once a royal palace.

## ROYAL GARDENS

The landscaped gardens around Sigiriya consist of water gardens, boulder gardens and terraced gardens.

The usual approach to the rock is through the western (and most elaborate) gate. This takes you through beautiful symmetrical **water gardens**, which extend from the western foot of the rock; bathing pools, little islands with pavilions that were used as dry-season palaces, and trees frame the approach to the rock. The rock rises sheer and mysterious from the jungle. A series of steps leads up through the boulders at its base to the western face, then ascends it steeply.

The **boulder gardens**, closer to the rock, feature rocks that once formed the bases of buildings. The steeple depressions in the sides of boulders were the foundations of brick walls and timber columns. The cistern and audience hall rocks are impressive.

The base of Sigiriya has been landscaped to produce the **terraced gardens**.

## COBRA HOOD CAVE

This rocky projection earned its name because the overhang resembles a fully opened cobra's hood. Generally you will pass by this cave after descending the rock on your way to the south gate and the car park. Below the

drip ledge is a 2nd-century-BC inscription that indicates it belonged to Chief Naguli, who would have donated it to a monk. The plastered interior of the cave was once embellished with floral and animal paintings.

## FRESCOES

About halfway up the rock there is a modern spiral stairway that leads up from the main route to a long, sheltered gallery in the sheer rock face.

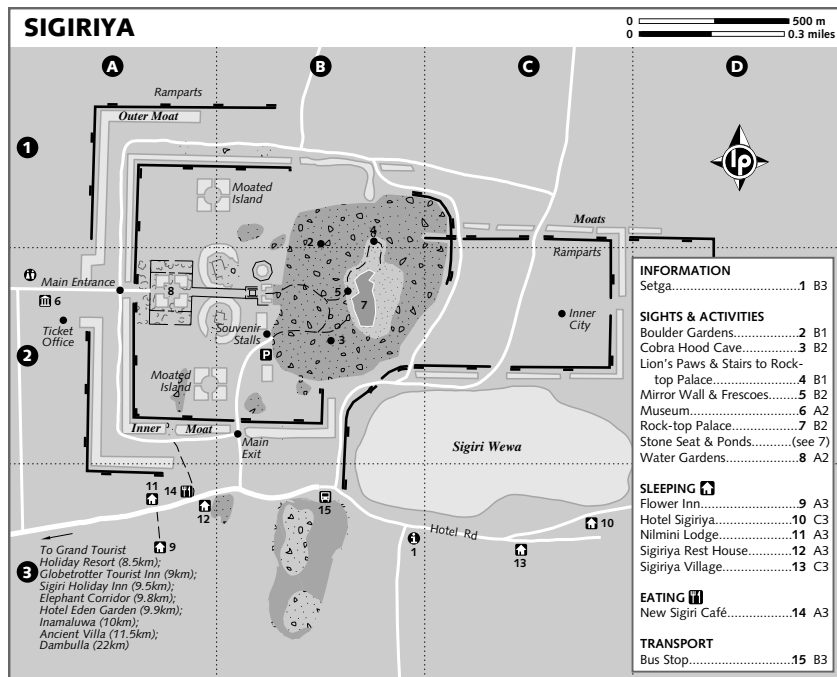
In this niche is a series of paintings of buxom, wasp-waisted women, popularly believed to represent either *apsaras* (celestial nymphs) or King Kassapa's concubines. Modern theory suggests the female forms represent aspects of Tara Devi, the consort of Avalokitesvara – a Bodhisattva (a divine being who chooses to remain on the human plane to help others reach enlightenment) and one of the most important figures in Tantric Buddhism. They are similar in style to the rock paintings at Ajanta in India, but have a specific character in their classical realist style. No one knows the exact dates of the impressive frescoes, though it's unlikely they date as far back as the 5th century (when King Kassapa reigned).

Although there may have been as many as 500 portraits at one time, only 22 remain today – several were badly damaged by a vandal in 1967. Today security is quite tight on the approach to this section of the rock. Protected from the sun in the sheltered gallery, the paintings remain in remarkably good condition, their colours still glowing. They're at their best in the late afternoon light. Flash photography is not allowed.

## MIRROR WALL

Beyond the fresco gallery the path clings to the sheer side of the rock and is protected on the outside by a 3m-high wall.

This wall was coated with a smooth glaze upon which visitors of 1000 years ago felt impelled to note their impressions of the women in the gallery above – or so says local legend. The graffiti were inscribed between the 6th and 14th centuries, and 685 of them have been deciphered and published in a two-volume edition, *Sigiri Graffiti*, by Dr S Paranavitana. The graffiti are of great interest to scholars because they show the development of the Sinhala language and script, and because they demonstrate an



appreciation of art and beauty. You'll have to look hard beyond the modern mess to see the ancient messages.

One typical graffiti reads, 'The ladies who wear golden chains on their breasts beckon me. As I have seen the resplendent ladies, heaven appears to me as not good.' Another, by a female scribbler, reads, 'A deer-eyed young woman of the mountain side arouses anger in my mind. In her hand she had taken a string of pearls and in her looks she has assumed rivalry with us.'

### LION'S PAWS

At the northern end of the rock the narrow pathway emerges on to the large platform from which the rock derives its later name – the Lion Rock, Sigiriya. HCP Bell, the British archaeologist responsible for an enormous amount of discovery in Sri Lanka, found the two enormous lion paws when excavating here in 1898. At one time a gigantic brick lion sat at this end of the rock, and the final ascent to the top commenced with a stairway that led between the lion's paws and into its mouth. The lion symbolism serves as a reminder to devotees ascending the rock that Buddha was Sakya-Simha (Lion of the Sakya Clan), and that the truths he spoke of were as powerful as the sound of a lion's roar.

The 5th-century lion has since disappeared, apart from the first steps and the paws. Reaching the top means clambering up across a series of grooves cut into the rock; fortunately there is a handrail.

### SUMMIT

The top of the rock covers 1.6 hectares. At one time it was covered with buildings, but only the foundations remain today. The design of this so-called palace, and the magnificent views it commands, suggests that Sigiriya was more a place of residence than a fortress. A 27m-by-21m pond hewn out of the rock looks for all the world like a modern swimming pool, although it may have been used merely for water storage.

De Silva has pointed out that there is no archaeological evidence of a palacelike structure anywhere on the summit. In particular there is a complete absence of stone bases, post holes, visible foundations for cross walls or window sashes, and a lack of lavatory facilities. Instead what you see is an enclosed terrace lying next to the ruins of

a dagoba, suggesting it was a spot reserved for meditation.

A smooth stone slab (the so-called king's throne, possibly another meditation spot) sits 30m away from the ruins of a dagoba. You can sit and gaze across the surrounding jungle as Kassapa – or the Buddhist monks – probably did over 1500 years ago.

### Sleeping

#### BUDGET

**Nilmini Lodge** (☎ 223 3313; nilmini\_lodge@yahoo.com; r with shared/private bathroom Rs 500/800) In the family home here there are six small but comfortable rooms, and a front porch from which you can watch the world go by. The hosts are friendly and the food is good. Guests can use bicycles for free, and the proprietor also offers taxi service in his well-maintained 1957 Morris Minor.

**Flower Inn** (☎ 078 875 3683; s/d Rs 450/600, r with air-con Rs 1500; 🚽) On the same side of the rock as the Sigiriya Rest House and down a path, this six-room lodge is run by a friendly family and has a pretty garden. Living up to its name, the décor is dominated by floral motifs. Good Sri Lankan meals are inexpensive.

**Sigiriya Holiday Inn** (☎ 072 251 5210; sholidayinn@yahoo.com; Sigiriya Rd; r with/without hot water Rs 1500/800) This is a compact and friendly place 500m from the Inamalawa junction on Sigiriya Rd. With spotless bathrooms and an outdoor restaurant, it's a pleasant spot. Rooms downstairs are smaller and don't have hot water. Keep your windows closed, as monkeys roam the area.

**Ancient Villa** (☎ 228 5322; ancient@slt.net.lk; r incl breakfast Rs 900-1500) Rustic cabins with antique furniture set the theme here. It's near the 2km post on Sigiriya Rd, about 1.5km from the Inamalawa junction.

#### MIDRANGE

**Globetrotter Tourist Inn** (☎ 078 875 4350; rajaguna8@slt.net.lk; Sigiriya Rd, Inamalawa; r with/without air-con Rs 1500/1000; 🚽) This relatively new place features friendly father-and-son management and five rooms in separate earthen cottages.

**Sigiriya Rest House** (☎ 223 1899; ceylonhotels.lk; r with/without air-con US\$36/26; 🚽) Only about 400m from one side of the rock, this place has a great location. It's one of the Ceylon Hotels Corporation's better-looking resthouses, and the 17 rooms are clean and tastefully decorated in faux colonial.

There's a large, airy restaurant with friendly but slow service. You can buy tickets to the rock here.

**Hotel Sigiriya** (☎ 228 4811; inquiries@serendibleisure.lk; s/d incl breakfast Rs 4600/6300; 🚽) Popular with birders, this 80-room tourist hotel is also a good choice for the splendid views of the rock from the dining room and a large pool (Rs 250 for nonguests), as well as all the usual facilities and comfortable, airy rooms. It's about 1km past the Sigiriya Rest House.

**Hotel Eden Garden** (☎ /fax 228 4635; eden@digitel.lk; Sigiriya Rd, Inamalawa; r Rs 3000, with air-con Rs 3600-4600; 🚽 🚿) Despite the rather ungainly façade, this is a good spot – large, clean rooms, some with balconies, overlook a well-kept garden. There's a pool (Rs 150 for nonguests). Hotel Eden Garden is 100m from the junction, at Inamalawa.

**Grand Tourist Holiday Resort** (☎ 567 0136; Sigiriya Rd; r with/without air-con Rs 1500/1000; 🚽) In a peaceful garden setting down a track about 4km from Inamalawa junction, the resort offers spacious rooms with hot water, and the restaurant, roofed with *cadjan* (coconut-frond matting), serves very good Sri Lankan food.

#### TOP END

**Sigiriya Village** (☎ 223 1803; www.sigiriyaivillage.lk; r US\$152; 🚽) This accommodation has clusters of luxurious rooms in leafy landscaped grounds. The pool (Rs 200 for nonguests) has views of the rock, and an organic garden supplies the hotel's kitchen. It's in the same vicinity as Hotel Sigiriya.

**Elephant Corridor** (☎ 223 1950; hotel@elephantcorridor.com; Kibissa; ste from US\$275) It's a cliché to say 'if you have to ask the price, you can't afford it', but truthfully this is one of those occasions. Hidden away on 200 acres of unfenced grasslands wedged between the Kandalama Hills and Pothana Lake, this boutique resort takes its name from the wild elephants that can often be seen wandering through the area. Each of the 21 cavernous, high-ceilinged suites comes equipped with giant-screen TV, a DVD player, binoculars, an artist's easel and pastels, and a private plunge pool. Breakfast/lunch/dinner cost US\$8/10/20. Facilities include a spa, a swimming pool, horse riding and a private helipad. The turn-off is 4km from the Inamalawa junction en route to Sigiriya, down a dirt track and just beyond the Grand Tourist Holiday Resort.

### Eating

**New Sigiri Café** (dishes Rs 125-280) This rustic open-air restaurant caters to tour groups, but the varied menu offering Sri Lankan and Western food is good.

Guesthouses offer meals of home-cooked rice and curry for around Rs 350. **Flower Inn** (☎ 078 875 3683), **Nilmini Lodge** (☎ 223 3313), **Globetrotter Tourist Inn** (☎ 078 875 4350; Sigiriya Rd, Inamalawa) and **Grand Holiday Tourist Resort** (☎ 567 0136; Sigiriya Rd) have especially good food.

### Getting There & Away

Sigiriya is about 10km east of the main road between Dambulla and Habarana. The turn-off is at Inamalawa. In the morning buses run from Dambulla about every 30 minutes from around 7am (Rs 14, 40 minutes), but they are less frequent in the afternoon. The last bus back to Dambulla leaves at around 7pm (but double-check this). A three-wheeler from Dambulla to Sigiriya costs about Rs 400.

### POLONNARUWA

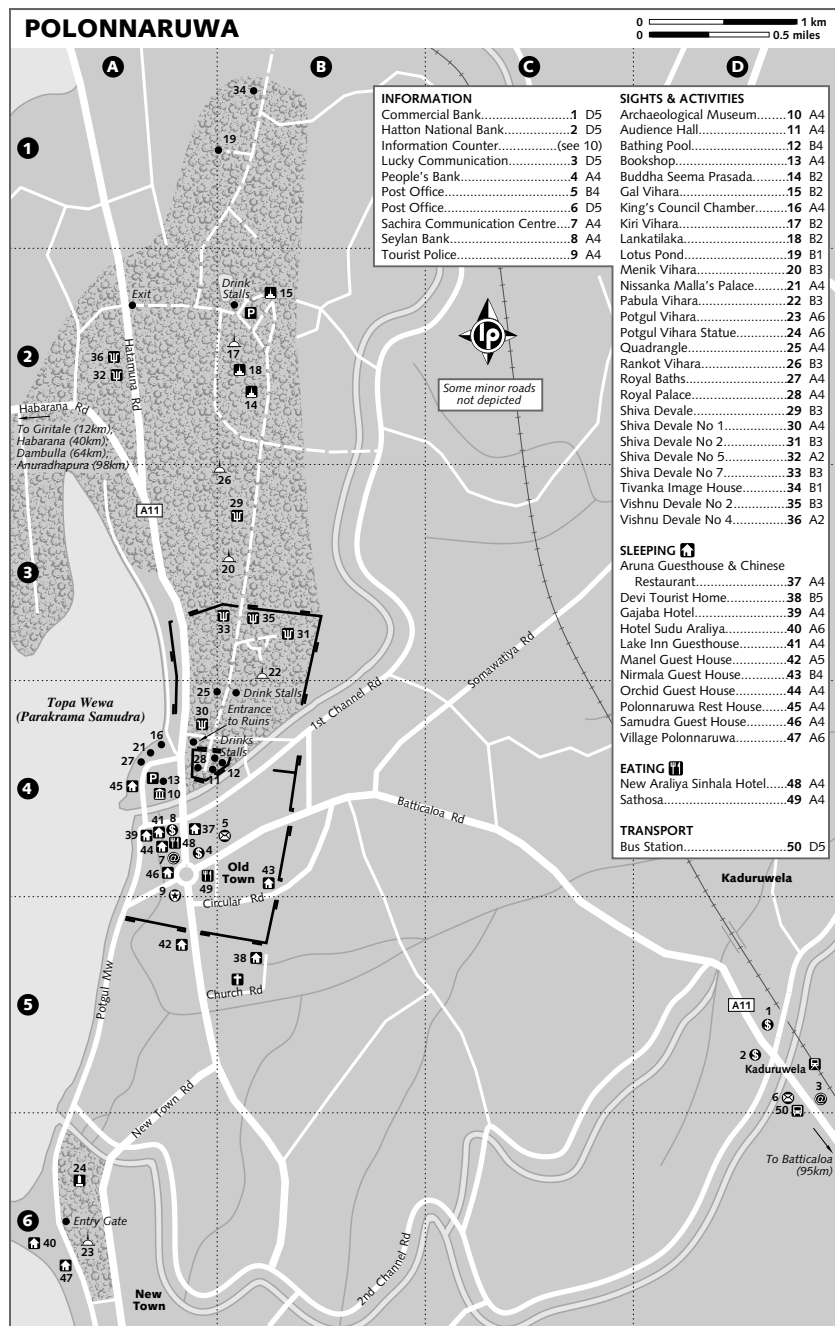
☎ 027 / pop 106,000

Once the site of an important royal capital, this town in northeastern central Sri Lanka blossomed into a medium-sized city due to its location along the most important land transport route between Colombo and Batticaloa, and more famously because of its ancient city site, well preserved as a historical park. The fact that it's conveniently close to several national parks also draws a number of visitors.

### History

For three centuries Polonnaruwa was a royal capital of both the Chola and Sinhalese kingdoms. Although nearly 1000 years old, it is much younger than Anuradhapura and generally in better repair. The monuments are arranged in a reasonably compact garden setting and their development is easier to follow. All in all, you'll probably find Polonnaruwa the easier of the two ancient capitals to appreciate. It is best to explore by bicycle, which you can rent from several places in town.

The South Indian Chola dynasty made its capital at Polonnaruwa after conquering Anuradhapura in the late 10th century, as Polonnaruwa was a strategically better place to guard against any rebellion from the Ruhunu Sinhalese kingdom in the southeast.



It also, apparently, had fewer mosquitoes! When the Sinhalese king Vijayabahu I drove the Cholas off the island in 1070, he kept Polonnaruwa as his capital.

Under King Parakramabahu I (r 1153–86), Polonnaruwa reached its zenith. The king erected huge buildings, planned beautiful parks and, as a crowning achievement, created a 2500-hectare tank, which was so large that it was named the Parakrama Samudra (Sea of Parakrama). The present lake incorporates three older tanks, so it may not be the actual tank he created.

Parakramabahu I was followed by Nissanka Malla (r 1187–96), who virtually bankrupted the kingdom through his attempts to match his predecessors' achievements. By the early 13th century, Polonnaruwa was beginning to prove as susceptible to Indian invasion as Anuradhapura, and eventually it too was abandoned and the centre of Sinhalese power shifted to the western side of the island.

In 1982, Unesco added the ancient city of Polonnaruwa to its World Heritage list.

## Orientation

Polonnaruwa has both an old town and, to its south, a sprawling new town. The main areas of ruins start on the northern edge of the old town and spread north. Accommodation is mostly in and around the old town. The main bus and train stations are in Kaduruwela, a few kilometres east of the old town on Batticaloa Rd. However, buses from anywhere except the east go through the old town on their way in, so you can get off there.

The ruins can be conveniently divided into five groups: a small group near the Polonnaruwa Rest House on the banks of the tank; the royal palace group to the east of the Polonnaruwa Rest House; a very compact group a short distance north of the royal palace group, usually known as the quadrangle; a number of structures spread over a wide area further north, known as the northern group; and the small southern group, towards the new town. There are also a few other scattered ruins.

## Information

The Cultural Triangle round ticket (p228) is valid for Polonnaruwa. There's an **information counter** (☎ 222 4850; 🕒 7.30am–6pm) at the museum, near the Polonnaruwa Rest House. You can get maps and brochures

and buy tickets to the site; individual entry costs US\$20/10 for an adult/child. Near the museum entrance is a well-stocked bookshop. Officially the site closes at 6pm, but in practice you can stay till dark. Tickets are not checked at the Polonnaruwa Rest House group or at the southern group, but the other three groups are within a single big enclosure, which you have to enter from Habarana Rd, just north of the royal palace. Although the ticket technically allows you only one entrance, you can ask a ticket collector to sign and date your ticket so you can enter again. This way you could visit the site in the morning, take a break over midday to avoid the heat, and head back to the site in the late afternoon. Don't believe three-wheeler drivers who say you don't need a ticket if you travel with them.

There's a Seylan Bank near the channel. In Kaduruwela, there are several banks on Batticaloa Rd within 350m of the bus station on the new town side. All banks listed below have ATMs.

**Commercial Bank** (Batticaloa Rd)

**Hatton National Bank** (Batticaloa Rd)

**Lucky Communication** (Kaduruwela) Internet access; opposite the bus station.

**People's Bank** (Batticaloa Rd)

**Post office** (Batticaloa Rd) In the centre of the old town.

**Sachira Communication Centre** (70B Habarana Rd) Internet access.

**Seylan Bank** (Habarana Rd)

## Sights

### ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

The **Archaeological Museum** (🕒 9am–6pm), near the Polonnaruwa Rest House, is first class. It's designed so you walk from one end to the other, passing through a series of rooms, each dedicated to a particular theme: the citadel, the outer city, the monastery area and the periphery, and Hindu monuments. The latter room contains a wonderful selection of bronzes. Of particular interest are the scale models of buildings, including the *vadadage* (circular relic house), which show how they might have looked in their heyday – if you follow the theory that they once had wooden roofs. Towards the back of the museum is a small bookshop with a good selection of reading on Sri Lankan archaeology and history, as well as folio-sized books containing temple drawings. To enter, you'll need a current round ticket

or a one-day ticket to the site. It's worth visiting before you head out to the site.

### ROYAL PALACE GROUP

This group of buildings dates from the reign of Parakramabahu I. Parakramabahu's **Royal Palace** was a magnificent structure measuring 31m by 13m, and is said to have had seven storeys. The 3m-thick walls have holes to receive the floor beams for two higher floors, but if there were another four levels, these must have been made of wood. The roof in this main hall, which had 50 rooms in all, was supported by 30 columns.

Parakramabahu's **Audience Hall** is notable for the frieze of elephants, each of which is in a different position. There are fine lions at the top of the steps.

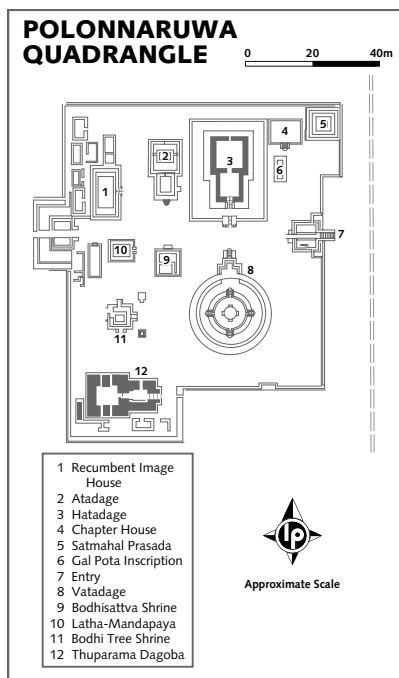
In the southeast corner of the palace grounds, the **Bathing Pool** (Kumara Pokuna) still has two of its crocodile-mouth spouts remaining.

### QUADRANGLE

Only a short stroll north of the royal palace ruins, the area known as the quadrangle is literally that – a compact group of fascinating ruins in a raised-up area bounded by a wall. It's the most concentrated collection of buildings you'll find in the ancient cities. As well as the following ruins, there's a **recumbent image house**, **chapter house**, **Bodhisattva shrine** and **bodhi tree shrine**.

In the southeast of the quadrangle, the **vatadage** is typical of its kind. Its outermost terrace is 18m in diameter and the second terrace has four entrances flanked by particularly fine guardstones. The moonstone at the northern entrance is reckoned to be the finest in Polonnaruwa, although not of the same standard as some at Anuradhapura. The four entrances lead to the central dagoba with its four Buddhas. The stone screen is thought to be a later addition, probably by Nissanka Malla.

At the southern end of the quadrangle, the **Thuparama Gedige** is the smallest *gedige* (hollow Buddhist temple with thick walls) in Polonnaruwa, but is also one of the best – and the only one with its roof intact. The building shows a strong Hindu influence and is thought to date from the reign of Parakramabahu I. There are several Buddha images in the inner chamber, but they're barely visible in the late afternoon light.



The **Gal Pota** (Stone Book), east of the *vatadage*, is a colossal stone representation of an *ola* book. It is nearly 9m long by 1.5m wide, and 40cm to 66cm thick. The inscription on it, the longest such stone inscription in Sri Lanka (and there are many!), indicates that it was a Nissanka Malla publication. Much of it extols his virtues as a king, but it also includes the footnote that the slab, weighing 25 tonnes, was dragged from Mihintale, nearly 100km away!

Also erected by Nissanka Malla, the **Hatadage** is a tooth-relic chamber; it is said to have been built in 60 days.

The busy Nissanka Malla was also responsible for the **Latha-Mandapaya**. This unique structure consists of a latticed stone fence – a curious imitation of a wooden fence with posts and railings – surrounding a very small dagoba. The dagoba is encircled by stone pillars shaped like lotus stalks, topped by unopened buds. It is said that Nissanka Malla sat within this enclosure to listen to chanted Buddhist texts.

Nearly nothing is known about ziggurat-style **Salmahal Prasada**, which may have been

influenced by similar Mon-built stupas in Lamphun and Chiang Mai, Thailand. The construction consists of six diminishing storeys (there used to be seven), shaped like a stepped pyramid.

A shrine for the tooth relic, the **Atadage** is the only surviving structure in Polonnaruwa dating from the reign of Vijayabahu I.

### CLOSE TO THE QUADRANGLE

Continuing along the road leading north from the quadrangle, a gravel road branches off to the right, just before you reach the city wall. Most of the following structures are on this road, as are many others.

Just south of the quadrangle, the 13th-century Hindu temple **Shiva Devale No 1** displays the Indian influence that returned after Polonnaruwa's Sinhalese florescence. It is notable for the superb quality of its stonework, which fits together with unusual precision. The domed brick roof has collapsed, but when this building was being excavated a number of excellent bronzes, now in the Archaeological Museum (p239), were found.

Similar in style, **Shiva Devale No 2** is the oldest structure in Polonnaruwa and dates from the brief Chola period when the Indian invaders established the city. Unlike so many buildings in the ancient cities, it was built entirely of stone, so the structure today is much as it was when built.

**Pabula Vihara**, also known as the Parakramabahu Vihara, is a typical dagoba from the period of Parakramabahu I. It is the third-largest dagoba in Polonnaruwa.

### NORTHERN GROUP

You will need a bicycle or other transport to comfortably explore these spread-out ruins, all north of the city wall. They include the Gal Vihara, probably the most famous group of Buddha images in Sri Lanka, and the Alahana Pirivena monastic group, which is the subject of a Cultural Triangle restoration project. The Alahana Pirivena group consists of the Rankot Vihara, Lankatilaka, Kiri Vihara, Buddha Seema Prasada and the other structures around them. The name of the group means 'crematory college', since it stood in the royal cremation grounds established by Parakramabahu.

The 54m **Rankot Vihara** dagoba, the largest in Polonnaruwa and the fourth largest on the island, has been ascribed to the reign

of King Nissanka Malla. Like the other major dagobas in Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, the dome consists of earth fill covered by a brick mantle and plaster. The construction clearly imitates the Anuradhapura style. Surgical instruments found in a nearby ruined 12th-century hospital are said to be similar to those used today.

**Buddha Seema Prasada** is the highest building in the Alahana Pirivena group, and it was the monastery abbot's convocation hall. This building features a fine *mandapaya* (raised platform with decorative pillars).

Built by Parakramabahu, and later restored by Vijayabahu IV, the huge *gedige* **Lankatilaka** has 17m-high walls, although the roof has collapsed. The cathedral-like aisle leads to a huge standing headless Buddha. The outer walls of the *gedige*, decorated with bas-reliefs, show typical Polonnaruwa structures in their original state.

The building of the dagoba **Kiri Vihara** is credited to Subhadra, King Parakramabahu's queen. Originally known as the Rupa-vati Chetiya, the present name means 'Milk White' because, when the overgrown jungle was cleared away after 700 years of neglect, the original lime plaster was found to be in perfect condition. It is still the best preserved unrestored dagoba at Polonnaruwa.

**Gal Vihara** is a group of beautiful Buddha images that probably marks the high point of Sinhalese rock carving. They are part of Parakramabahu's northern monastery. The Gal Vihara consists of four separate images, all cut from one long slab of granite. At one time each was enshrined within a separate enclosure. You can clearly see the sockets cut into the rock behind the standing image, into which wooden beams would have been inserted.

The standing Buddha is 7m tall and is said to be the finest of the series. The unusual position of the arms and sorrowful facial expression led to the theory that it was an image of the Buddha's disciple Ananda, grieving for his master's departure for nirvana, since the reclining image is next to it. The fact that it had its own separate enclosure, and the discovery of other images with the same arm position, has discredited this theory and it is now accepted that all the images are of the Buddha.

The reclining image of the Buddha entering nirvana is 14m long, and the beautiful



grain of the stone of the image's face is the most impressive aspect of the Gal Vihara group for many people. Notice the subtle depression in the pillow under the head and the sun-wheel symbol on the pillow end. The other two images are both of the seated Buddha. The one in the small rock cavity is smaller and of inferior quality.

Unfortunately authorities have constructed a very unsightly metal roof structure over the Buddhas at Gal Vihara. This means that some portion of the each statue is always in shade and it's impossible to take a well-exposed photograph.

A track to the left from the northern stretch of road leads to unusual **Lotus Pond**, nearly 8m in diameter, which has five concentric, descending rings of eight petals each. The pool was probably used by monks.

The northern road ends at **Tivanka Image House**. This spectacular image house is, like the Lotus Pond, one of the few surviving structures of the Jetavanarama monastery. Its name means 'thrice bent', and refers to the fact that the Buddha image within is in a three-curve position normally reserved for female statues. The building is notable for the carvings of energetic dwarfs cavorting around the outside, and for the fine frescoes within – the only Polonnaruwa murals to have survived. Some of these date from a later attempt by Parakramabahu III to restore Polonnaruwa, but others are much older.

### SOUTHERN GROUP

The small southern group is close to the compound of top-end hotels. By bicycle it's a pleasant ride along the bund of the Topa Wewa (Topa Tank).

Also known as the library dagoba, the **Potgul Vihara** is an unusual structure. A thick-walled, hollow, dagoba-like building, it is thought to have been used to store sacred books. It's effectively a circular *gedige*, and four smaller solid dagobas arranged around this central dome form the popular Sinhalese quincunx arrangement of five objects in the shape of a rectangle – one at each corner and one in the middle.

Another interesting structure in the southern group is the **statue** at the northern end. Standing nearly 4m high, it's an unusually lifelike human representation, in contrast to the normally idealised or stylised Buddha figures. Exactly whom it represents is a

subject of some controversy. Some say that the object he is holding is a book and thus the statue is of Agastaya, the Indian religious teacher. The more popular theory is that it is a yoke representing the 'yoke of kingship' and that the bearded, stately figure is Parakramabahu I. The irreverent joke is that the king is really holding a piece of papaya.

### REST HOUSE GROUP

A delightful place for a postsightseeing drink is the Polonnaruwa Rest House, situated on a small promontory jutting out into the Topa Wewa. Concentrated a few steps to the north of the Polonnaruwa Rest House are the ruins of the **Nissanka Malla's palace**, which aren't in anywhere near the same state of preservation as the royal palace group.

The **Royal Baths** are the ruins nearest to Polonnaruwa Rest House. Farthest north is the **King's Council Chamber**, where the king's throne, in the shape of a stone lion, once stood. It is now in the Colombo's National Museum (p90). Inscribed into each column in the chamber is the name of the minister whose seat was once beside it. The mound nearby becomes an island when the waters of the tank are high; on it are the ruins of a small summer house used by the king.

### Sleeping BUDGET

**Devi Tourist Home** (☎ 222 3181; fax 222 3947; Lake View Watta; s/d/tr Rs 550/650/800, r with hot water Rs 1800, with air-con Rs 1900; 🚽) Featuring five spotless rooms around a shady garden, this guesthouse is about 1km south of the old town centre and down Church Rd (there's a sign on the main road). The friendly owner is one of Sri Lanka's small Malay population. Bicycles are available for Rs 175 per day.

**Lake Inn Guesthouse** (☎ 222 3220; 1 1st Channel Rd; r with/without air-con r Rs 900/1200; 🚽) Just off the main road in the Old Town and next to Seylan Bank, Lake Inn has four dim but passable rooms. Rice and curry meals here cost just Rs 250. The friendly owners hire bicycles for Rs 150 per day.

**Samudra Guest House** (☎ 222 2817; Habarana Rd; r Rs 500-800) In the old town, this has a range of rooms, including a garden room and cabana at the bottom of the garden. The hosts can organise trips to Minneriya National Park (p245) and Kaudulla National Park (p245). Bicycles can be hired for Rs 150.

**Orchid Guest House** (☎ 222 5253; 70 Habarana Rd; s/d/f Rs 400/600/750) Near the Samudra, this is not the cleanest option in town, but it's one of the cheapest.

**Nirmala Guest House** (☎ 222 5163; 65 Circular Rd; s Rs 620, d with/without air-con Rs 1020/740; 🚽) This place has clean rooms in both the modern family home and separate buildings.

**Aruna Guesthouse & Chinese Restaurant** (☎ 222 4661; Habarana Rd; r Rs 600-900) This place has box-like rooms along a long corridor behind a Chinese restaurant. The food is not bad.

**Manel Guest House** (☎ 222 2481, 077 743 5358; New Town Rd; r Rs 700-900) In a quiet spot just outside the old-town wall, friendly Manel's spacious rooms differ in price according to the bathroom standards. Very good meals are served under the veranda.

### MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Gajaba Hotel** (☎ 222 2394; Kuruppu Gardens, Lake Rd; s/d Rs 875/1250, d/tr with air-con Rs 1500/1875; 🚽) In the old town beside the tank, this is a friendly and popular hotel. It has a lovely leafy garden and 23 rooms, of which five come with air-con and two with hot water. Good Sri Lankan food is available. You can hire bicycles for Rs 200 per day.

**Polonnaruwa Rest House** (☎ 222 2299; http://ceylonhotels.lk; Potgul Mawatha; s/d US\$53/58, with view US\$71/76, f US\$100) On a promontory by the tank and just a short distance from the heart of the ancient city, this resthouse has superb views over the water from the veranda and some of the rooms. There's a fine terrace overlooking the lake where you can sip or sup. The rooms, all with hot water and some with a bathtub, are large and well kept. You may even be able to book the 'Queen's Room', where Queen Elizabeth II kipped in 1954. It has a bar and a restaurant with tasty food and prompt service; breakfast/lunch/dinner costs US\$5/7/9.

**Village Polonnaruwa** (☎ 222 2405; fax 222 5100; Potgul Mawatha; s/d/tr US\$95/102/126; 🚽 🚿) On the lakeside just over 2km south of the old town, upmarket Village Polonnaruwa consists of 57 rooms, some of them around a pleasant central courtyard and others in large brick bungalows. Nonguests may use the pool if they purchase a drink or a meal. Also on the premises are a tennis court and a spa.

**Hotel Sudu Araliya** (☎ 222 4849; www.lanka.net/sudu araliya; Potgul Mawatha; s/d US\$48/60; 🚽 🚿 🚿) Set by the tank amid lovely landscaped gardens,

this hotel looks good at first pass, but the rooms aren't very well maintained considering the price. It offers an Ayurvedic treatment centre, an overpriced restaurant, bicycle hire and boat trips on the tank.

### Eating

**New Araliya Sinhala Hotel** (Habarana Rd; dishes Rs 50-150) This popular local eatery serves Sri Lankan meals for breakfast, lunch and dinner, including rice and curry, and *kotthu rotti* (doughy pancake chopped and fried with meat and vegetables).

**Sathosa** (☎ 24hr) This supermarket is opposite the People's Bank.

Guesthouses and hotels are safe bets for good eating in Polonnaruwa, a town not exactly renowned for cuisine. Among the better hotel and guesthouse dining rooms are **Devi Tourist Home** (☎ 222 3181; Lake View Watta), **Gajaba Hotel** (☎ 222 2394; Kuruppu Gardens, Lake Rd), **Polonnaruwa Rest House** (☎ 222 2299; Potgul Mawatha), **Manel Guest House** (☎ 222 2481, 077 743 5358; New Town Rd) and **Lake Inn Guest House** (☎ 222 3220; 1 1st Channel Rd).

### Getting There & Away BUS

Polonnaruwa's main bus station is actually in Kaduruwela, a few kilometres east of the old town on Batticaloa Rd. Buses to and from the west pass through the old-town centre, but if you're leaving Polonnaruwa and want to make sure of a seat, it's best to start off at Kaduruwela.

Central Transport Board (CTB) buses run regularly to Kandy (Rs 78). Air-con intercity buses to Kandy (Rs 150, four hours) run until 4pm via Dambulla and Habarana. If you want to get to Dambulla, catch this bus.

CTB buses for Anuradhapura (Rs 60, three hours) leave regularly from 5.15am to 4.15pm; there are no air-con buses. Alternatively, you can go to Habarana and pick up another bus there, but a lot of people do this and seats are rare.

There are regular CTB buses to Colombo (Rs 170, six hours) until 7.15pm. The intercity air-con buses (Rs 230) leave every 30 minutes during the day.

### TRAIN

Polonnaruwa is on the Colombo-Batticaloa railway line, and is about 30km southeast of Gal Oya, where the line splits from the

Colombo–Trincomalee line. The train station is at Kaduruwela, near the bus station, and in fact the sign over the station entrance reads Kaduruwela Railway Station.

Trains to Colombo (six to seven hours) depart at 8.13am, 8.40pm and 11.27pm. Tickets cost Rs 335 in a 2nd-class sleeper (seat only Rs 285), Rs 560 (seat only Rs 490) in 1st class. For Trincomalee there is a direct train at 3.15pm or you can catch the 8.13am Colombo train and change at Gal Oya for a 12.30pm Trinco-bound train.

### Getting Around

There are frequent buses (Rs 8) between the Old Town and Kaduruwela, where the bus and train stations are located. A three-wheeler costs Rs 100.

Bicycles are the ideal transport for getting around Polonnaruwa's monuments, which are surrounded by shady woodland. Bicycles with gears can be hired for about Rs 200 a day from a couple of places in the town's main street. Some guesthouses also hire bicycles (usually gearless) from Rs 150 a day.

For around Rs 500, a car and driver or three-wheeler can be hired for about three hours, which is long enough to have a quick look around the ruins.

## AROUND POLONNARUWA

### Dimbulagala

Set off the Polonnaruwa–Batticaloa road, about 8km south of Mannampitiya, a rock called **Dimbulagala** or Gunners Quoin stands 545m above the surrounding scrub. There are hundreds of caves cut out of the rock in a Buddhist hermitage that has been occupied almost continuously since the 3rd century BC. The temple at the base of the rock is the first of 15 cave temples that adventurous visitors can explore on their way to the dagoba at the top of the rock.

### Giritale

☎ 027 / pop 14,300

Twelve kilometres northwest of Polonnaruwa on the Habarana road, Giritale is a sleepy village alongside the 7th-century Giritale Tank. It's a good base for visiting Polonnaruwa and Minneriya National Park, especially if you have your own transport.

A simple place near the tank, **Woodside Tour Inn** (☎ 224 6307; Polonnaruwa Rd; s/d Rs 600/800) has a pretty garden setting and a big mango tree.

The 10 older rooms are bare but fine, and the five new rooms upstairs have balconies from which you can almost smell the mangoes.

Set around a big veranda and a grassed area, **Hotel Hemalee** (☎ 224 6257; Polonnaruwa Rd; s/d Rs 1500/1850; 📶) has 15 rooms, three of which come with air-con. Discounts are available for stays of more than two nights. The restaurant is a bit pricey (rice and curry costs Rs 400) for a hotel in this range.

**Giritale Hotel** (☎ 224 6311; s/d/tr US\$60/71/80, all incl breakfast; 📶) has plain but good value rooms and eight luxury rooms. The restaurant has great views of the Giritale Tank, even if the food is rather mediocre.

The modern **Royal Lotus** (☎ 224 6316; www.lanka.net/jinasena/hotels/royallotus; s/d US\$45/52, top fl US\$62/69, ste US\$67/74; 📶 🚿) sits high on a hillside, and every room has views of Giritale Tank below. Rooms are large and comfortable, and the public areas are breezy and open, as befits the warm, dry climate.

Several steps up from The Royal Lotus in the posh stake, **Deer Park** (☎ 224 6272; deer.park@angasana.com; cottages US\$146-228, ste US\$702, all incl breakfast; 📶 🚿) has 77 well-furnished cottages in single units, duplexes and four-unit blocks. All have lovely garden sitting areas, while the most expensive have views of Giritale Tank. The grounds are beautifully maintained. Also on the premises are two restaurants (Sri Lankan and international), a fitness centre, a squash court, a new spa with Ayurvedic, Thai and Balinese treatments, and the Mahout Adventure Club (an ecotourism agency). The resort offers a number of innovative excursions, from a 'champagne and sky' picnic (US\$50) to elephant-viewing safaris (US\$45) in nearby Minneriya National Park (opposite).

### Mandalagiri Vihara

Near Medirigiriya, about 30km north of Polonnaruwa, is the Mandalagiri Vihara, a *vataadage* virtually identical to the one at Polonnaruwa. Whereas the Polonnaruwa *vataadage* is crowded among many other structures, the Mandalagiri Vihara stands alone atop a low hill. Some find it a disappointment, but the site's isolation means that it doesn't attract as many visitors as Polonnaruwa.

An earlier structure may have built here around the 2nd century, but the one that stands today was constructed in the 7th century by Aggabodhi IV. A granite flight of

steps leads up to the *vataadage*, which has concentric circles of 16, 20 and 32 pillars around the dagoba. Four large Buddhas face the four cardinal directions. This *vataadage* is noted for its fine stone screens. There was once a hospital next to the *vataadage* – look for the bath shaped like a coffin.

The site is included in the Cultural Triangle round ticket (p228), or individual tickets cost US\$8/4 for an adult/child; it's rare, however, that anyone materialises to check your ticket. Tickets are not sold at the site, so buy one from the museum (p239) in Polonnaruwa before you come.

Mandalagiri Vihara is best visited as a day trip. There are no places to stay or eat, nor are there any worth mentioning in nearby Medirigiriya.

Without your own transport, getting to Medirigiriya is time consuming. It's located about 24km northeast of Minneriya village, which is on the Polonnaruwa–Habarana road. To reach Medirigiriya by bus from Polonnaruwa, Habarana or Dambulla involves at least one change at Giritale, Minneriya or Hingurakgoda, from where you can catch a bus or maybe a three-wheeler. The *vataadage* is 3km from the Medirigiriya bus stop.

## NATIONAL PARKS

The national parks situated around Polonnaruwa and Habarana offer excellent access to elephants and other animals without the crowds of Yala National Park. To visit either Minneriya or Kaudulla, you must be accompanied by a licensed guide and you must enter and leave by vehicle. Both parks are well served by tours. Prices range from US\$25 to US\$35 per person including entry fees and snacks for a four-hour trip from Habarana; more expensive trips usually feature better food and drink or nicer vehicles. From Polonnaruwa, Sigiriya and Giritale, you'll pay about Rs 2000 to Rs 3000 for the 4WD, excluding entry fees. The cost of getting to either park is about the same. However, Habarana is closer to Kaudulla and Polonnaruwa is closer to Minneriya; the less time you spend travelling the longer you have in your chosen park.

### Minneriya National Park

Dominated by the ancient Minneriya Tank, this **national park** (adult/child US\$12/6, plus service charge US\$6, plus per vehicle charge Rs 150) has plenty of scrub

and light forest in its 8890 hectares to provide shelter for its toque macaques, sambar deer, leopards and elephants – to name a few. The dry season, from June to September, is the best time to visit. By then, water in the tank has dried up, exposing grasses and shoots to grazing animals; elephants, which number up to 150, come to feed and bathe; and flocks of birds, such as little cormorants and painted storks, fish in the shallow waters.

The park entrance is along the Habarana–Polonnaruwa road. A new visitor centre near the entrance sells tickets and offers a variety of exhibits about the park's natural history.

### Kaudulla National Park

This **park** (adult/child US\$6/3, plus service charge US\$6, plus vehicle charge Rs 150) was opened in 2002 around the ancient Kaudulla Tank. It established a 6656-hectare elephant corridor between Somawathiya Chaitiya National Park and Minneriya National Park. Just 6km off the Habarana–Trincomalee road at Gal Oya junction, it is already a popular safari tour from Polonnaruwa and Habarana because of the good chance of getting up close and personal with elephants. In October there are up to 250 elephants in the park, including herds of juvenile males. There are also leopards, fishing cats, sambar deer, endangered rusty spotted cats and sloth bears.

The best time to visit is from August to December. A catamaran is available for boat rides on the tank.

## HABARANA

☎ 066

The highlights of this small village are a small tank and its central location between all the main sites. It is also a good base for visits to the Minneriya and Kaudulla National Parks, and has a midrange to top-end group of hotels principally aimed at package tourists. Habarana has the nearest train station to Dambulla and Sigiriya.

Elephant rides around the tank can be arranged for a pricey US\$20 to US\$30 per person per hour. If you're spending the night here, the only free entertainment is to wander along the tank bund spotting birds.

One of the more reliable outfitters for an organised national park trip (which is the only way you can visit the park) is **Piya Special Green Track Elephant & Jeep Safari** (☎ 086-227 0225; Dambulla Rd).

## Sleeping & Eating

**Habarana Inn** (☎ 227 0010; Dambulla Rd; d/f Rs 1200/2000) This basic place is the town's cheapest place to sleep. The seven rooms are fine but nothing special. It's just past the Lodge, on the Dambulla road. The restaurant serves Sri Lankan (rice and curry Rs 395), Western and Chinese dishes.

**Habarana Rest House** (☎ 227 0003; ceylonhotels.lk; r/w/without air-con US\$35/25; ♿) This one-storey resthouse, set in a pleasant garden, has four rooms fronted by a long shaded veranda. It's right on the crossroads where the buses congregate. Meals are available (curry and rice Rs 450).

Both of Habarana's neighbouring top-end resort hotels are part of the Keells group and offer similar services and facilities – pools, bird-watching walks, 4WD and elephant safaris, Ayurvedic treatments and views to the tank.

**Village** (☎ 227 0046; village@keells.com; s/d from US\$63/75; ♿) This nice place offers spacious terraced rooms with verandas. The restaurant looks over the swimming pool, and there are also badminton and tennis. The lakefront setting makes for easy bird-watching before breakfast.

**Lodge** (☎ 227 0011; lodge@keells.com; s/d/tr US\$76/88/133; ♿) The 150 spacious rooms come in vaguely Portuguese colonial-style duplexes stacked side by side or in two levels, and set in 11 hectares of lush landscaping. A nature trail leads to a treehouse platform for viewing birds and monkeys.

## Getting There & Away

Buses leave from the crossroads outside the Habarana Rest House. A direct inter-city bus from Colombo costs Rs 88. From Habarana there are very frequent departures in all directions; for example, you can pick up the air-con Trinco-Colombo bus, or buses travelling between Anuradhapura and Ampara, Batticaloa and Colombo, or Kandy (via Dambulla) and Trincomalee, but you're not guaranteed a seat. If you are embarking on a long-haul trip, it's best to start as early as possible.

The train station is 1km out of town on the Trincomalee road. There are trains leaving for Polonnaruwa (3rd/2nd class Rs 14/35) and Batticaloa (3rd/2nd class Rs 18/65) at 11.34am, and for Colombo at 12.33am (3rd/2nd class Rs 64/150).

## RITIGALA

Deep inside the Ritigala Strict Nature Reserve, off the Anuradhapura-Habarana road, are the partially restored ruins of an extensive monastic and cave complex. The ruins lie on a hill, which at 766m isn't exactly high, but is nevertheless a striking feature in the flat, dry landscape surrounding it. The 24-hectare site is isolated and almost deserted. The site is included in the Cultural Triangle round ticket (p228), or individual tickets cost US\$8/4 for an adult/child.

The true meaning of the name Ritigala remains unclear – *gala* means rock in Sinhala, but *riti* may come from the Pali *aridha*, meaning 'safety'. Thus Ritigala was probably a place of refuge, including for kings as long ago as the 4th century BC.

Ritigala also has a place in mythology. It's claimed to be the spot from where Hanuman (the monkey king) leapt to India to tell Rama that he had discovered where Sita was being held by the king of Lanka. Mythology also offers an explanation for the abundance of healing herbs and plants found in Ritigala. It's said that Hanuman, on his way back to Lanka with healing Himalayan herbs for Rama's wounded brother, dropped some over Ritigala.

Monks found Ritigala's caves ideal for a ascetic existence, and more than 70 such caves have been discovered. Royals proved generous patrons, especially King Sena I, who in the 9th century made an endowment of a monastery to the *pamsukulika* (rag robes) monks.

Ritigala was abandoned following the Chola invasions in the 10th and 11th centuries, after which it lay deserted and largely forgotten until it was rediscovered by British surveyors in the 19th century. It was explored and mapped by HCP Bell in 1893.

## Sights

Ritigala has none of the usual icons: no bodhi tree, no relic house and no Buddha images. The only embellishments are on the urinals at the forest monastery – it's been conjectured that by urinating on the fine stone carving the monks were demonstrating their contempt for worldly things.

Near the Archaeology Department bungalow are the remains of a *banda pokuna* (tank), which apparently fills with water during the rainy season. From here it's a

scramble along a forest path via a donations hall to a **ruined palace** and the **monastery hospital**, where you can still see the grinding stones and huge stone baths. A flagstone path leads upwards; a short detour takes you to what is often described as a stone fort – or, more accurately, a lookout.

The next group of ruins of note are the double-platform structures so characteristic of forest monasteries. Here you can see the **urinal stones**, although they almost certainly weren't always in this exact spot. The two raised stone platforms are supported by stone retaining walls. The platform oriented to the east is rectangular, while the western one is smaller and square; unlike its counterpart, it may have had a roof of some sort. Scholars think they were used for meditation, teaching and ceremony. Someone from the Archaeology Department bungalow will accompany you (and will expect a tip, say Rs 300) but may be reluctant to take you beyond this point – although the ruins extend right up to the top – because of wild animals and dense vegetation.

You'll need at least 1½ hours to see the site properly. Staff at the Archaeology Department bungalow sell tickets to the site and staff check all tickets, although there's no-one present after about 4pm.

## Getting There & Away

Ritigala is 14km northwest of Habarana and 42km southeast of Anuradhapura. If you're coming from Habarana, the turn-off is near the 14km post. It's a further 9km to get to the Archaeology Department bungalow (which is 2km past the turn-off at the Wildlife Department bungalow). You need your own transport to get here and the road may be impassable in the wet season (October to January). As this is a very isolated area, you are advised to go in a group.

## AUKANA

According to legend, the magnificent 12m-high standing **Aukana Buddha** (admission Rs 250) was sculpted during the reign of Dhatuvena in the 5th century, though some sources date it to the 12th or 13th century. Kala Wewa, one of the many gigantic tanks he constructed, is only a couple of kilometres from the statue, and the road to Aukana from the Kekirawa runs along the tank bund for several kilometres. Aukana means

'sun-eating', and dawn, when the first rays light up the huge statue's finely carved features, is the best time to see it.

Note that although the statue is still narrowly joined at the back to the rock face it is cut from, the lotus plinth on which it stands is a separate piece. The Buddha's pose, *ashiva mudra*, signifies blessings, while the burst of fire above his head represents the power of total enlightenment. There's a local story that the statue was so finely carved that a drop of water from its nose would fall (without any breeze) directly between Buddha's feet.

The Aukana Buddha is well known and often visited despite its isolation. Fewer people travel on to another image, also 12m high, although incomplete and of inferior craftwork, at **Sasseruwa**, the site of an ancient cave monastery in the jungle. A legend relates that the two Buddhas were carved at the same time in a competition between master and student. The master's more detailed Aukana Buddha was finished first and the Sasseruwa image was abandoned by the conceding student. Buddha's gesture here is *abhaya mudra*, conveying protection. This statue, sometimes called the Resvehara Buddha, stands in a rectangular hollow in the rock. Sasseruwa is 11km west of Aukana, reached by a rough road.

It's easy to catch a bus from Dambulla or Anuradhapura to Kekirawa, and another from there to Aukana. There are five or six buses a day between Kekirawa and Aukana. Aukana is on the railway line from Colombo to Trincomalee and Polonnaruwa, and the station is just a short walk from the statue. Four trains a day (2nd and 3rd class only) stop here. A van from Kekirawa will set you back about Rs 1500 for a Kekirawa-Aukana-Kalawewa (or back to Kekirawa) circuit; a three-wheeler costs about Rs 700. From Habarana, a van to Aukana will cost about Rs 2000 return.

## ANURADHAPURA

☎ 025 / pop 56,600

For over 1000 years, Sinhalese kings – and occasional South Indian interlopers – ruled from the palaces of Anuradhapura. It was the most extensive and important of the Sri Lankan royal capitals, but its size and the length of its history, and the length of time since its downfall make it more difficult to comprehend than younger, shorter-lived

Polonnaruwa. Current-day Anuradhapura is a rather pleasant, planned city. Mature trees shade the main guesthouse areas, and the main street is orderly compared to the ugly concrete agglomerations seen in so many other regional centres.

The modern town was developed in the 20th century. In recent years a seamier side of the sacred city has emerged; the large army population (the town was a staging post for the northern battlefields) has brought an influx of prostitutes. The town has a huge number of guesthouses, many of which cater to the rent-by-the-hour market. The ones listed in this book (hopefully) don't attract that sort of business. The town was also a centre for war profiteering: political and business alliances conspired to loot the nearby forests of valuable timber. Some of the timber came from areas controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) – evidently the Tigers were happy to cooperate in return for a cut.

## History

Anuradhapura first became a capital in 380 BC under Pandukabhaya, but it was under Devanampiya Tissa (r 247–207 BC), during whose reign Buddhism reached Sri Lanka, that it first rose to great importance. Soon Anuradhapura became a great and glittering city, only to fall before a South Indian invasion – a fate that was to befall it repeatedly for more than 1000 years. But before long the Sinhalese hero Dutugemunu led an army from a refuge in the far south to recapture Anuradhapura. The 'Dutu' part of his name, incidentally, means 'undutiful', because his father, fearing for his son's safety, forbade him to attempt to recapture Anuradhapura. Dutugemunu disobeyed him, and later sent his father a woman's ornament to indicate what he thought of his courage.

Dutugemunu (r 161–137 BC) set in motion a vast building program that included some of the most impressive monuments in Anuradhapura today. Other important kings who followed him included Valagamba, who lost his throne in another Indian invasion but later regained it, and Mahasena (r AD 276–303), the last 'great' king of Anuradhapura, who was the builder of the colossal Jetavanarama Dagoba. He also held the record for tank construction, building 16 of them in all, plus a major

canal. Anuradhapura was to survive for another 500 years before finally being replaced by Polonnaruwa, but it was harassed by invasions from South India again and again – invasions made easier by the cleared lands and great roads that were a product of Anuradhapura's importance.

## Orientation

The ancient city lies to the northwest of the modern town of Anuradhapura. The main road from Kandy, Dambulla and Polonnaruwa enters the town on the northeastern side then travels south to the centre, which is a spread-out affair with two bus stations – the old bus station (intercity express buses leave from near this station) and the new bus station 2km further south. Buses heading for the new bus station usually call at the old one on the way through, and will also let you off anywhere else along their route.

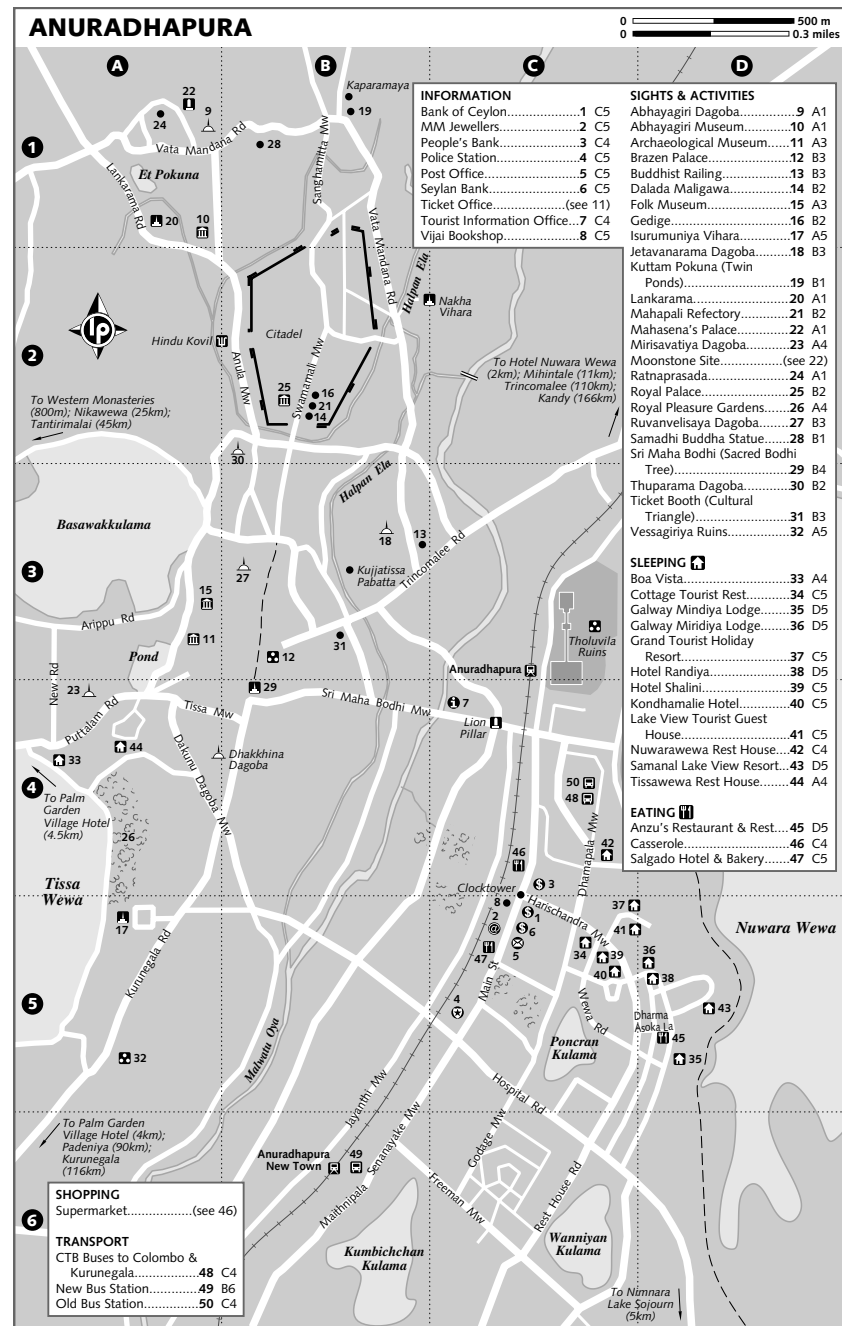
There are also two train stations. If you're just arriving by train, the northern station is the one most convenient for places to stay and the ruins.

The ancient city is rather spread out. There is one important starting point for exploring it, and that is the Sri Maha Bodhi (the sacred bodhi tree) and the cluster of buildings around it. Because of roadblocks around Sri Maha Bodhi, a bicycle is the best way to explore Anuradhapura. However, you can't take a bicycle everywhere; near the bodhi tree shrine you will have to park your bike and walk. There are plenty of cold drink stalls scattered around the site, as well as plenty of people willing to act as a guide. Most guesthouses in town rent bicycles for around Rs 200 per day.

Remember to remove your shoes and hat before approaching a dagoba or the sacred bodhi tree.

## Information

A US\$20 entry ticket (or a round ticket for the Cultural Triangle – see p228) is required by foreigners visiting the northern areas of the ancient city. Both types of ticket can be bought at two places: the **ticket office** (☎ 7am–7.30pm) near the Archaeological Museum (p253) on the west side of the city, and a **booth** (Trincomalee Rd; ☎ 7am–7.30pm) near Sri Maha Bodhi. Unfortunately your ticket, whether single or round, is valid for one day's visit only. This is a real shame considering the



ancient city remains are easily worth two or more days of exploration.

You must pay an extra Rs 30 to visit the nearby Folk Museum (p253), and Rs 50 for the Isurumuniya Vihara (p252). Entry to the Sri Maha Bodhi compound area costs Rs 100, but if things aren't busy you may not be approached for the money.

**Hotel Shalini** (☎ 222 2425; 41/388 Harischandra Mawatha) Has Internet facilities, as do a few other hotels and guesthouses.

**People's Bank** Changes travellers cheques.

**Post Office** (Main St)

**Seylan Bank** (Main St) ATM.

**Tourist Information Office** (☎ 222 4546; Sri Maha Bodhi Mawatha; ☎ 9am-4.45pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Offers a rather ordinary map and a couple of brochures, but little else.

**Vijai Bookshop** (Main St) Has a small but interesting selection of English-language titles in a back room.

## Sights

### SRI MAHA BODHI

The Sri Maha Bodhi, the sacred bodhi tree, is central to Anuradhapura in both a spiritual and physical sense. The huge tree has grown from a cutting brought from Bodhgaya in India by the Princess Sangamitta, sister of Mahinda (who introduced the Buddha's teachings to Sri Lanka), so it has a connection to the very basis of the Sinhalese religion. This sacred tree serves as a reminder of the force that inspired the creation of all the great buildings at Anuradhapura, and is within walking distance of many of the most interesting monuments. The whole area around the Sri Maha Bodhi, the Brazen Palace and Ruvanvelisaya Dagoba was once probably part of the Maha Vihara (Great Temple).

The sacred bodhi tree is the oldest historically authenticated tree in the world, for it has been tended by an uninterrupted succession of guardians for over 2000 years, even during the periods of Indian occupation. There are not one but many bodhi trees here; the oldest and holiest stands on the top platform. The steps leading up to the tree's platform are very old, but the golden railing around it is quite modern. The railing and other structures around the trees are festooned with prayer flags. Thousands of devotees come to make offerings at weekends and particularly on *poya* (full-moon) days. April is a particularly busy month as pilgrims converge on the site for *snana puja* (offerings or prayers). You

must remove your shoes and your hat before entering this site.

### BRAZEN PALACE

So called because it once had a bronze roof, the ruins of the Brazen Palace stand close to the bodhi tree. The remains of 1600 columns are all that is left of this huge palace, said to have had nine storeys and accommodation for 1000 monks and attendants.

It was originally built by Dutugemunu more than 2000 years ago, but through the ages was rebuilt many times, each time a little less grandiosely. The current stand of pillars (now fenced off) is all that remains from the last rebuild – that of Parakramabahu around the 12th century.

### RUVANVELISAYA DAGOBA

Behind the Folk Museum, this fine white dagoba is guarded by a wall with a frieze of hundreds of elephants standing shoulder to shoulder. Apart from a few beside the western entrance, most are modern replacements for the originals from 140 BC.

This dagoba is said to be King Dutugemunu's finest construction, but he didn't live to see its completion. However, as he lay on his deathbed, a false bamboo-and-cloth finish to the dagoba was organised by his brother, so that Dutugemunu's final sight could be of his 'completed' masterpiece. Today, after incurring much damage from invading Indian forces, it rises 55m, considerably less than its original height; nor is its form the same as the earlier 'bubble' shape. A limestone statue south of the great dagoba is popularly thought to be of Dutugemunu.

The land around the dagoba is rather like a pleasant green park, dotted with patches of ruins, the remains of ponds and pools, and collections of columns and pillars, all picturesquely leaning in different directions. Slightly southeast of the dagoba, you can see one of Anuradhapura's many monks' refectories. Keeping such a number of monks fed and happy was a full-time job for the lay followers.

### THUPARAMA DAGOBA

In a beautiful woodland setting north of the Ruvanvelisaya Dagoba, the Thuparama Dagoba is the oldest dagoba in Sri Lanka – indeed, probably the oldest visible stupa in the world. It was constructed by Devan-

ampiya Tissa in the 3rd century BC and is said to contain the right collarbone of the Buddha. Its 'heap-of-paddy-rice' shape was restored in 1862 in a more conventional bell shape and to a height of 19m.

The surrounding *vatadage's* slender, capital-topped pillars, perhaps the dagoba's most unique feature, enclose the structure in four concentric circles. Impressions on the dagoba pediments indicate the pillars originally numbered 176, of which 41 still stand. Although some Sri Lankan scholars believe these once supported a conical wooden roof, there is no archaeological evidence for this theory, nor does it follow any known antecedent in south India, whose dagobas were the prototypes for virtually all Sinhalese dagobas.

### NORTHERN RUINS

There is quite a long stretch of road, which starts as Anula Mawatha, running north from the Thuparama Dagoba to the next clump of ruins. Coming back you can take an alternative route through the Royal Palace site and then visit the Jetavanarama Dagoba.

### Abhayagiri Dagoba

This huge dagoba (confused by some books and maps with the Jetavanarama), created in the 1st or 2nd century BC, was the centrepiece of a monastery of 5000 monks. The name means 'Hill of Protection' or 'Fearless Hill' (though some local guides mistakenly claim 'Giri' was the name of a local Jain monk). The monastery was part of the 'School of the Secret Forest', a heretical sect that studied both Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism. Chinese traveller Faxian (also spled Fa Hsien) visited in AD 412.

The dagoba was probably rebuilt several times to reach its peak 75m height. It has some interesting bas-reliefs, including one near the western stairway of an elephant pulling up a tree. A large slab with a Buddha footprint can be seen on the northern side of the dagoba, and the eastern and western steps have unusual moonstones made from concentric stone slabs.

### Mahasena's Palace

This ruined palace northwest of the Abhayagiri is notable for having the finest carved moonstone in Sri Lanka. Photographers will be disappointed that the railing around it makes it almost impossible

to achieve an unshadowed picture. This is a peaceful wooded area full of butterflies, and makes a good place to stop and cool off during a tour of the ruins.

### Ratnaprasada

Follow the loop road a little further and you will find the finest guardstones in Anuradhapura. Dating from the 8th century, they depict a cobra king, and demonstrate the final refinement of guardstone design. You can see examples of much earlier guardstone design at the Mirisavatiya Dagoba (p252).

In the 8th century a new order of *tapovana* (ascetic) monks settled in the fringes of the city, among the lowest castes, the rubbish dumps and the burial places. These monasteries were simple but grand structures; ornamentation was saved for toilets, now displayed at the Archaeology Museum (p253). The monks of Ratnaprasada (Gem Palace) monastery gave sanctuary to people in trouble with the authorities, and this led to a major conflict with the king. When court officials at odds with the king took sanctuary in the Ratnaprasada, the king sent his supporters to capture and execute them. The monks, disgusted at this invasion of a sacred place, departed en masse. The general populace, equally disgusted, besieged the Ratnaprasada, captured and executed the king's supporters and forced the king to apologise to the departed monks in order to bring the monks back to the city and restore peace.

To the south of the Ratnaprasada is the Lankarama, a 1st-century-BC *vatadage*.

### Samadhi Buddha

After your investigations of guardstones and moonstones, you can continue east from the Abhayagiri to this 4th-century statue, seated in the meditation pose and regarded as one of the finest Buddha statues in Sri Lanka. Pandit Nehru, a prominent leader in India's independence movement, is said to have maintained his composure while imprisoned by the British by regular contemplation of a photo of this statue.

Local authorities recently erected a modern metal roof over the statue, somewhat spoiling the artistic integrity of this masterpiece.

### Kuttam Pokuna (Twin Ponds)

The swimming-pool-like Twin Ponds, the finest bathing tanks in Anuradhapura, are

east of Sanghamitta Mawatha. They were likely used by monks from the monastery attached to Abhayagiri Dagoba. Although they are referred to as twins, the southern pond, 28m in length, is smaller than the 40m-long northern pond. Water entered the larger pond through the mouth of a *makara* (mythical multispecies beast) and then flowed to the smaller pond through an underground pipe. Note the five-headed cobra figure close to the *makara* and the water-filter system at the northwestern end of the ponds.

### Royal Palace

If you return south along Sanghamitta Mawatha, after about 1.5km you'll pass through the Royal Palace site. Built by Vijayabahu I in the 12th century, after Anuradhapura's fall as the Sinhalese capital, the palace is indicative of the attempts made to retain at least a foothold in the old capital.

Close to it are a deep and ancient well and the Mahapali refectory, notable for its immense trough (nearly 3m long and 2m wide) that the lay followers filled with rice for the monks. In the Royal Palace area you can also find the Dalada Maligawa, a tooth-relic temple that may have been the first Temple of the Tooth. The sacred Buddha's tooth originally came to Sri Lanka in AD 313.

### JETAVANARAMA DAGOBA

The Jetavanarama Dagoba's massive dome rises from a clearing back towards the Sri Maha Bodhi. Built in the 3rd century by Mahasena, it may have originally stood over 100m high, but today is about 70m, a similar height to the Abhayagiri, with which it is sometimes confused. At the time it was built it was the third-tallest monument in the world, the first two being Egyptian pyramids. An early British guidebook calculated that there were enough bricks in the dagoba's brick core to make a 3m-high wall stretching from London to Edinburgh.

Behind it stand the ruins of a monastery, which housed 3000 monks. One building has door jambs over 8m high still standing, with another 3m underground. At one time, massive doors opened to reveal a large Buddha image.

### BUDDHIST RAILING

A little south of the Jetavanarama Dagoba, and on the other side of the road, there is a

stone railing built in imitation of a log wall. It encloses a site 42m by 34m, but the building within has long disappeared.

### MIRISAVATIYA DAGOBA

Mirisavatiya Dagoba is one of three very interesting sites that can be visited in a stroll or ride along the banks of the Tissa Wewa. This huge dagoba, the first built by Dutugemunu after he captured the city, is across the road from the Tissawewa Rest House. The story goes that Dutugemunu went to bathe in the tank, leaving his ornate sceptre implanted in the bank. When he emerged he found his sceptre, which contained a relic of the Buddha, impossible to pull out. Taking this as an auspicious sign he had the dagoba built. To its northeast was yet another monks' refectory, complete with the usual huge stone troughs into which the faithful poured boiled rice.

### ROYAL PLEASURE GARDENS

If you start down the Tissa Wewa bund from the Mirisavatiya, you soon come to the extensive royal pleasure gardens. Known as the Park of the Goldfish, the gardens cover 14 hectares and contain two ponds skilfully designed to fit around the huge boulders in the park. The ponds have fine reliefs of elephants on their sides. It was here that Prince Saliya, the son of Dutugemunu, was said to have met a commoner, Asokamala, whom he married, thereby forsaking his right to the throne.

### ISURUMUNIYA VIHARA

This rock temple, dating from the reign of Devanampiya Tissa (r 247–207 BC), has some very fine carvings. One or two of these (including one of elephants playfully splashing water) remain in their original place on the rock face beside a square pool fed from the Tissa Wewa, but most of them have been moved into a small museum within the temple. Best known of the sculptures is the 'lovers', which dates from around the 5th century AD and is built in the artistic style of the Indian Gupta dynasty of the 4th and 5th centuries. It was probably brought here from elsewhere, since it was carved into a separate slab. Popular legend holds that it shows Prince Saliya and Asokamala.

One bas-relief shows a palace scene said to be of Dutugemunu, with Saliya and

Asokamala flanking him, and a third figure, possibly a servant, behind them. There is also a fine sculpture showing a man and the head of a horse. The image house south of the pond has a reclining Buddha cut from the rock. The view over the tank from the top of the temple is superb at sunset. You can't miss the resident colony of bats. You'll be asked for a 'donation' of Rs 50.

South of the Isurumuniya Vihara are extensive remains of the Vessagiriya cave monastery complex, which dates from much the same time.

### MUSEUMS

Anuradhapura's **Archaeological Museum** (admission with Cultural Triangle or Anuradhapura ticket free; ☎ 8am–5pm Wed–Mon, closed public holidays) also houses a ticket office for the ancient city. It's worth visiting for the museum's gorgeous old building, let alone the exhibits inside. It has a restored relic chamber, as found during the excavation of the Kantaka Chetiya Dagoba at nearby Mihintale, and a large-scale model of Thuparama Dagoba's *vatadage* as it might have been if a wooden roof (for which there is no physical or epigraphic evidence) had existed.

In the museum's grounds are the carved squatting plates from Anuradhapura's western monasteries, whose monks had forsaken the luxurious monasteries of their more worldly brothers. To show their contempt for the effete, luxury-loving monks, the monks of the western monasteries carved beautiful stone squat-style toilets, with their brother monks' monasteries represented on the bottom! Their urinals illustrated the god of wealth showering handfuls of coins down the hole.

A short distance north of the Archaeological Museum there's a **Folk Museum** (admission Rs 50; ☎ 8.30am–5pm Sat–Wed, closed public holidays) with dusty exhibits of country life in Sri Lanka's North Central Province.

The Chinese-funded **Abhayagiri Museum** (admission free; ☎ 10am–5pm), just to the south of the Abhayagiri Dagoba, commemorates the 5th-century visit of Chinese Buddhist monk Faxian to Anuradhapura. Faxian spent some time living at the Abhayagiri monastery, translating Buddhist texts, which he later brought back to China. The museum, arguably the most interesting in Anuradhapura, contains a collection of squatting plates,

jewellery, pottery and religious sculpture from the site. There is a bookshop selling Cultural Triangle publications.

### TANKS

Anuradhapura has three great tanks. **Nuwara Wewa**, on the east side of the city, is the largest, covering about 1200 hectares. It was built around 20 BC and is well away from most of the old city. The 160-hectare **Tissa Wewa** is the southern tank in the old city. The oldest tank, probably dating from around the 4th century BC, is the 120-hectare **Basawakkulama** (the Tamil word for tank is *kulam*) to the north. Off to the northwest of the Basawakkulama are the ruins of the **western monasteries**, where the monks dressed in scraps of clothing taken from corpses and, it's claimed, lived only on rice.

### Sleeping

Anuradhapura has a good choice of accommodation, with the greatest concentration of places to stay found off Harischandra Mawatha near the Nuwara Wewa. If you're taking the train to Anuradhapura, be aware that touts begin boarding a few stations before arrival, and will try very hard to steer you away from places not paying them a commission.

### BUDGET

**Lake View Tourist Guest House** (☎ 222 1593; 4C/4 Lake Rd; s/d Rs 700/900, with air-con Rs 1250/1400; 🍽️) On a lane off Harischandra Mawatha, almost opposite the Cottage Tourist Rest, this is a friendly place with 10 rooms, some with hot water; the ones in the front of the building looking out towards Mihintale are best. The owners are cheerful, and the Sri Lankan food is good. Bicycle hire is Rs 150 to 200.

**Grand Tourist Holiday Resort** (☎ 223 5173; the granddami@yahoo.com; 4B/2 Lake Rd; r with/without air-con Rs 1500/700; 🍽️) Though grandly titled, this is really a large house converted to a tourist bungalow with nine rooms. There's an unobstructed view of Nuwara Wewa from an attractive veranda. Meals are available, and it's a quiet spot.

**Samanal Lake View Resort** (☎ 222 5092; 388/5 Lake Rd; s/d Rs 900/1100, with air-con Rs 1200/1500; 🍽️) Nearby the Grand Tourist Holiday Resort, this friendly three-storey guesthouse offers clean rooms with balconies that have views of the lake, city and temples. It hires out bicycles and offers home-cooked meals as well.

**Hotel Shalini** (☎ 222 2425; www.hotelshalini.com; 41/388 Harischandra Mawatha; s Rs 559-1305, d Rs 808-1553, r with air-con Rs 1926; 🏠 🚗) This place has a cute gingerbread-house-like annexe with a pleasant open-air restaurant, rooftop garden and Internet café. Rooms with hot water are available. You can rent bicycles for Rs 150 a day, or take a tour of Anuradhapura's ancient city for Rs 750 (Rs 1500 for Mihintale and Anuradhapura combined). The friendly owners will pick you up (or drop you off) for free at the bus or train station if you make arrangements in advance.

**Milano Tourist Rest** (☎ 222 2364; www.milanorest.com; 596/40 JR Jaya Mawatha; s/d/r Rs 650/750, r with air-con Rs 1600; 🏠 🚗) Milano features 12 clean, modern and relatively spacious rooms along with a restaurant serving Sri Lankan, Western and Chinese food. You can hire bicycles for Rs 200 per day.

**Cottage Tourist Rest** (☎ 223 5363; 38/538 Harischandra Mawatha; s/d/tr Rs 500/750/950) Just past the roundabout, this is a cheap family-run guesthouse with spartan rooms – it might get some street noise.

**Kondhamalie Hotel** (☎ 222 2029; 42/388 Harischandra Mawatha; r Rs 1250) This hotel has 32 assorted rooms – the rooms in the newer wing are better value than the faded rooms in the older house. Bicycles can be hired, and inexpensive food is available.

**Boa Vista** (☎ 223 5052; 142 Old Puttalam Rd; s/d/tr Rs 1000/1500/2000, r with air-con Rs 3500; 🏠 🚗) A sparsely furnished but exceptionally clean hotel run by a Canadian–Sri Lankan couple, who sometimes put people up in their modern flat if there are only a few guests. The location close to the Tissa Wewa and the royal pleasure gardens is a bonus, and the owners offer Sri Lankan and Western meals. Boa Vista doesn't pay touts commissions, so many three-wheeler drivers will tell you the guesthouse is full or closed.

**Nimnara Lake Sojourn** (☎/fax 074 580256; www.hotelnimnara.com; 21/146 Wijaya Mawatha, Attikulama; r from Rs 600, with air-con Rs 1500; 🏠 🚗) On the banks of the Nuwara Wewa 6km south of town, it offers 11 rooms in a new building. The grounds of the guesthouse are rich in birdlife, and there are views across to Mihintale. The owners are helpful and experienced, and the food is noteworthy. There are bicycles for hire. A three-wheeler from town should cost Rs 140, or you can call and the owners will pick you up.

**Hotel Nuwara Wewa** (☎ 223 5339; s/d/r Rs 750/1300) With a charming rural location 3km from Anuradhapura (signposted on the left as you head for Mihintale), this three-storey building has nine clean rooms, plus verandas with chairs on each floor overlooking the fields and trees. It is run by an affable family, but not much English is spoken. A three-wheeler from town will cost Rs 100.

#### MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Hotel Randiya** (☎ 222 2868; www.hotelrandiya.com; 394/19A Muditha Mawatha; s/d/tr US\$17/20/24) A pleasant new addition to the city's lodging choices, the 14-room Hotel Randiya imitates *walawwa* (minor palace) bungalow-style architecture.

**Galway Miridiya Lodge** (☎ 222 2519; miridiya@slt.net.lk; Wasaladantha Mawatha; s/d US\$43/46; 🏠 🚗) This is a modest two-storey, 39-room modern hotel with a pretty garden running down to the tank. Nonguests may use the pool for Rs 150. This place is popular with groups.

**Tissawewa Rest House** (☎ 222 2299; hotels@quickshaws.com; d/tr US\$35/40, all incl breakfast; 🏠 🚗) A Raj-era relic with a style all its own, the century-old Tissawewa is authentic right down to the shower railings and claw-foot baths. Besides high-ceilinged lounge areas and verandas, it has 4.4 hectares of gardens with mahogany and teak trees. It also has the advantage of being right in there with the ruins. Since the resthouse stands inside the 'sacred area' alcohol can't be sold, although you can bring your own with you. A big veranda looks out on gardens with lots of monkeys, which have no qualms about stealing your afternoon tea. The 25 quaint rooms are mostly enormous, but try to avoid the annexe, where the shabby rooms are not good value. You can hire bicycles here. As with all resthouses, the set menu is relatively pricey, but the à la carte menu is reasonably priced. Guests can use the swimming pool at the Nuwarawewa Rest House. The hotel is popular with groups, so it would be wise to book ahead.

**Nuwarawewa Rest House** (☎ 222 3265; hotels@quickshaws.com; r US\$40; 🏠 🚗) This place, Anuradhapura's other resthouse, backs on to the Nuwara Wewa. It's pleasant, even though it resembles a 1960s hospital. The 60 rooms cost the same whether or not they face the tank. It has a good, clean pool in the garden – nonguests can swim for Rs 250.

**Palm Garden Village Hotel** (☎ 222 3961; www.palmgardenvillage.com; Puttalam Rd, Pandulagama; r US\$90, villas US\$118; 🏠 🚗) Accommodation at Anuradhapura's top hotel, 6km west of town, is in very spacious rooms in well-designed duplex units or separate villas set in 38 hectares of gardens complete with tennis courts, an Ayurvedic centre, a fitness centre and a Catholic chapel – not to mention resident deer, peacocks and the occasional elephant. The centrepiece is a stunning swimming pool – nonguests can use it for Rs 250 per day. The suites are almost the same as the standard rooms, except for a bathtub, a TV with local channels and a four-poster bed. A three-wheeler from town costs Rs 350.

#### Eating

There's little in the way of eating places apart from the guesthouses and hotels.

**Anzu's Restaurant** (☎ 222 5678; 394/25A Harischandra Mawatha; dishes Rs 175-350) A relaxed house restaurant that's actually down a side street called Dharma Asoka Lane, this place is run by chefs from northern China, which gives it an authenticity that sets it apart from nearly all of the Chinese restaurants out in the provinces.

**Salgado Hotel & Bakery** (Main St; dishes Rs 35-75) This is an old-fashioned place serving Sri Lankan breakfasts, short eats and biscuits.

**Casserole** (279 Main St, dishes Rs 70-250; 🏠 🚗) A busy, very clean air-con spot serving Sri Lankan, Chinese and Western meals. There's a super-market downstairs.

#### Getting There & Away

##### BUS

Anuradhapura has 'old' and 'new' bus stations – the old bus station is further north, closer to the train station. Private express buses leave from near the old bus station. Buses heading south start at the old bus station and call by the new bus station, while buses heading north to Vavuniya and east to Trincomalee start from the new bus station. It is easier to get a good seat from the starting point. There are departures to Trinco (Rs 47, 3½ hours) from early morning; to Kandy (CTB/intercity bus Rs 75/150, three hours), via Kekirawa and Dambulla, every hour or so until about 5pm; and to Polonnaruwa (Rs 46, three hours) every hour from around 5.30am to 6pm. Buses to Kurunegala (CTB/intercity bus Rs 45/100, two hours) leave every 30

minutes from about 6am; those to Colombo (CTB/intercity bus Rs 107/210, five hours) leave every 30 minutes between 4.30am and 7pm. For Puttalam you may have to catch a bus to Kala Oya (private bus Rs 20), and then another bus on to Puttalam (Rs 27). Buses to Kala Oya go past the road to Wilpattu National Park (get off at Maragahawewa and change for Hunuwilagama).

#### TRAIN

Anuradhapura has two train stations; the main Anuradhapura station and the smaller Anuradhapura New Town further to the south. Trains to Colombo depart at 7am, 8.40am, 2.30pm and 11.40pm. First-class seats are available on the 7am intercity express and the 2.30pm and 11.40pm trains. It takes four to five hours to reach Colombo, all being well. Prices are Rs 102 for a seat in 3rd class, Rs 191/309 in 2nd class for a seat/sleeper and Rs 420/520 in 1st class for a seat/sleeper. For Matara (9½ hours) and Galle (3rd/2nd class Rs 154/291, 8½ hours) catch the *Rajarata Rajini* at 5am. You can also travel between Anuradhapura and Kandy by any train, changing at Polgahawela.

#### Getting Around

The city is too spread out to investigate on foot. A three-hour taxi trip costs about Rs 900 and a three-wheeler about Rs 650, but a bicycle (Rs 150 to Rs 200 a day) is the nicest and most leisurely way to explore the ruins. There's also a terrific bike track along the bund of Nuwara Wewa. You can hire bicycles at resthouses and several guesthouses.

Numerous buses run between the old and new bus stations, via Main St.

#### MIHINTALE

##### ☎ 025

Thirteen kilometres east of Anuradhapura on the Trinco road, Mihintale is of enormous significance to the Sinhalese because it is where Buddhism originated in Sri Lanka. In 247 BC, King Devanampiya Tissa of Anuradhapura met Mahinda, son of the great Indian Buddhist emperor Ashoka, while deer hunting around the hill at Mihintale, and was converted to Buddhism.

Exploring Mihintale does involve quite a climb, so you would be wise to visit it early in the morning or late in the afternoon to avoid the midday heat. There are seven





### MAHINDA'S RIDDLE

Before Mahinda initiated King Devanampiya Tissa into Buddhism, he needed to gauge the king's intelligence. He decided to test the king with a riddle. Pointing to a tree he asked him the name of the tree. 'This tree is called a mango', replied the king. 'Is there yet another mango beside this?' asked Mahinda. 'There are many mango trees', responded the king. 'And are there yet other trees besides this mango and the other mangoes?' asked Mahinda. 'There are many trees, but those are trees which are not mangoes', said the king. 'And are there, besides the other mangoes and those trees which are not mangoes, yet other trees?' asked Mahinda. 'There is this mango tree', said the king, who as a result passed the test.

(admission Rs 250) is built over the spot where Mahinda stood. Nearby stands a statue of the king in the place where he stood. On the opposite side of the dagoba from the statue is a cloister, and behind that a large, white sitting Buddha. Stone pillars surround the dagoba and may once have been used to hold offerings (or if you believe the local theory, to support a wooden roof). You must remove your shoes and hat, and umbrellas aren't allowed. The shoe minders expect a compensation of around Rs 15.

The name Ambasthale means 'Mango Tree' and refers to a riddle that Mahinda used to test the king's intelligence (above).

Nearby is the **Sela Chetiya**, which has a stone rendering of the Buddha's footprint. It's surrounded by a railing festooned with prayer flags left by pilgrims, who have also scattered coins here.

### MAHASEYA DAGOBA

A stone pathway to the southwest of the Ambasthale Dagoba leads up to a higher dagoba (arguably the largest at Mihintale), thought to have been built to house relics of Mahinda. The bodhi tree to the left of the base of the steps is said to be one of the oldest surviving ones. From here there is a view over the lakes and trees to Anuradhapura, a horizon studded with the domes and spikes of all the massive dagobas. The sunsets here are something else. A small temple at the foot of the dagoba has a reclining Buddha

and Technicolor modern frescoes – donations are anticipated. A room at the side is a *devale* (Hindu complex) with statues of major gods – Ganesh, Vishnu, Murugan (Skanda) and Saman.

### MAHINDA'S CAVE

There is a path leading northeast from the Ambasthale Dagoba down to a cave where there is a large flat stone. This is said to be where Mahinda lived and the stone is claimed to be where he rested. The track to the cave is hard on tender bare feet.

### ARADHANA GALA

To the east of the Ambasthale Dagoba is a steep path over sun-heated rock leading up to a point where there are great views. A railing goes up most of the way. Aradhana Gala means 'Meditation Rock'.

### NAGA POKUNA

Halfway back down the steep flight of steps from the Ambasthale Dagoba, a path leads to the left, around the side of the hill topped by the Mahaseya Dagoba. Here you'll find the Naga Pokuna (Snake Pool), so called because of a five-headed cobra carved in low relief on the rock face of the pool. Its tail is said to reach down to the bottom of the pool. If you continue on from here you eventually loop back to the second landing.

### ET VIHARA

At an even higher elevation (309m) than the Mahaseya Dagoba are the remains of a dagoba called Et Vihara (literally, 'Elephant Temple'). The origin of the name is open to conjecture, but it may have been named after the monastery nearby. The Mihintale tablets mention Et Vihara and its image house. There are good views from here, especially of Kaludiya Pokuna (opposite).

### MUSEUM

There is a small **museum** (admission free; ☎ 9am–5pm Wed–Mon, closed public holidays) on the road leading to the stairs, virtually opposite the ruins of the hospital. There are several rooms, each one dedicated to particular finds, including bronze figurines, fragments of frescoes and remnants of stone tubs from the hospital. The collection includes a replica of the interior of an 8th-century dagoba and a 9th-century gold-plated *ola*

manuscript. Pottery fragments from China and Persia are also on display.

### INDIKATU SEYA COMPLEX

Back on the road leading to Old Rd, and outside the site proper, are the remains of a monastery enclosed in the ruins of a stone wall. Inside are two dagobas, the larger known as Indikatu Seya (Dagoba of the Needle). Evidence suggests that this monastery was active in fostering Mahayana Buddhism. The main dagoba's structure differs from others in Mihintale; for example, it's built on a square platform.

Nearby is a hill that's been dubbed Rajagirilena (Royal Cave Hill) after the caves found here with Brahmi inscriptions in them. One of the caves bears the name of Devanampiya Tissa. A flight of steps leads up to the caves.

### KALUDIYA POKUNA

Further south along the same road is the Kaludiya Pokuna (Dark Water Pool). This artificial pool was carefully constructed to look realistic, and features a rock-carved bathroom and the ruins of a small monastery. It's a peaceful place.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Mihintale** (☎ 226 6599; ceylonhotels.lk; r with/without air-con US\$36/26; 🍽️) Run by the Ceylon Hotels Corporation, this is on the main road near the turn-off to the site. This is the only hotel in Mihintale. There are 10 mostly large and clean rooms, and the staff are slightly hapless but friendly. The setting is pleasant. Moderately priced meals are available. The pavilion café at the front is a good place to pause for a cool drink and a toilet stop.

### Getting There & Away

It's a fairly short bus ride (Rs 10) from Anuradhapura's new bus station to Mihintale. A taxi there and back, with two hours to climb the stairs, costs about Rs 800; a three-wheeler is about Rs 600. It takes less than an hour to cycle here.

### YAPAHUWA

Although it's only roughly half the height of Sigiriya and receives far fewer tourists, this **rock fortress** (admission Rs 200) rising 100m from the surrounding plain is quite impressive in its own right. The granite outcropping

of Yapahuwa (pronounced yaa-pow-a), also known as Fire Rock, was used in the early 13th century as a defensible refuge against the invading South Indian armies. Between 1272 and 1284, King Bhuvanekabahu I used the rock as his capital and kept Sri Lanka's sacred Buddha tooth relic here. Indian invaders from the Pandavan dynasty captured Yapahuwa in 2184 and carried the tooth relic to south India, only for it to be recovered in 1288 by King Parakramabahu I.

Yapahuwa's steep ornamental staircase, which led up to the ledge holding the tooth temple, is one of its finest features. One of the lions near the top of the staircase appears on the Rs 10 note. The porches on the stairway had very fine pierced-stone windows, one of which is now in the museum in Colombo; the other is in the museum on site. Reliefs of dancers, musicians and animals are evidence of South Indian influence. The view from the top of the staircase is wonderful. Climbing right up to the top of the rock is not really feasible as it's very overgrown.

There is a **museum** of sorts to the right of the site entrance. On display are stone sculptures of Vishnu and Kali, fragments of pottery and the carved stone screen, but signs are in Sinhala. Behind the museum is something more fascinating – a **cave temple** that contains some 13th-century frescoes. The repetition of images across a geometric grid also appears in Indian Buddhist sites, such as Ajanta (inland from Mumbai) and Alchi (in Ladakh). Also in the temple are wooden Buddha images and an image made of bronze. The temple is usually locked, but a monk will open it for you if you ask, although you are expected to make a donation. Photography is not allowed.

A guide will attach himself to you in anticipation of a tip.

Yapahuwa is 4km from Maho railway junction, where the Trincomalee line splits from the Colombo–Anuradhapura line, and about 5km from the Anuradhapura–Kurunegala road. It's possible to take a three-wheeler from the Anuradhapura–Kurunegala road to the site, although occasional buses do travel to here from Maho. A three-wheeler from Maho costs Rs 200 one way. A three-wheeler from the main road and back would cost about Rs 600 with waiting time. Most trains going to and from Colombo stop at Maho.

## PADENIYA

About 85km south of Anuradhapura and 25km northwest of Kurunegala, where the Puttalam and Anuradhapura roads branch off, is the Kandyan-style **Padeniya Raja Mahavihara** (donations appreciated), which is worth popping into if you're passing by. It's a pretty, medieval temple with 28 carved pillars and a stunning elaborate door (said to be the largest in Sri Lanka) to the main shrine. There is also a clay image house and a library, as well as a preaching hall with an unusual carved wooden pulpit.

## PANDUWASNUWARA

About 17km southwest of Padeniya, on the road between Wariyapola and Chilaw, are the 12th-century remains of the temporary capital of Parakramabahu I. It's nothing on the scale of Anuradhapura or Polonnaruwa, but it's worth stopping in if you're heading past. The sprawling site, covering some 20 hectares, hasn't been fully excavated. The turn-off to the site is at Panduwasnuwara village, where there is a small **museum** (donation expected). Most of the signs are in Sinhala.

Approaching the site, the first thing you'll see is the moat and the massive citadel wall. After that the road swings to the right and past the remains of the palace, where there are signs in English and Sinhala. Nearby, and indeed throughout the site, are the remains of image houses and dagobas as well as evidence of living quarters for monks. Follow the road past the school and veer left; you will shortly come to a restored tooth temple with a bodhi tree and, beyond that, the remains of a round palace (apparently once multistoreyed) enclosed in a circular moat.

There are many stories about who lived in this palace and why it was built. Legend has it that it kept the king's daughter away from men who would desire her, as it had been prophesied that if she bore a son, he would eventually claim the throne. Another story is that it was built to house the king's wives and, intriguingly, that there was once a secret tunnel that led from the king's palace and under the moat to the queens' palace. However attractive these stories are, they are merely that, and the fact remains that no-one really knows why this place was built.

Buses run between Kurunegala (via Wariyapola) and Chilaw on a regular basis, and it would be possible to be dropped off at

Panduwasnuwara village and to walk the remaining 1km. However, it's far more practical to come with your own transport.

## RIDIGAMA & RIDI VIHARA

Literally the 'Silver Temple', **Ridi Vihara** (donation Rs 100) is so named because it was here that silver ore was discovered in the 2nd century BC. Although not on the beaten track, it's well worth a visit to see its wonderful frescoes and the unusual Dutch (Delft) tiles in the main cave.

Legend has it that King Dutugemunu, who reigned in the 2nd century BC, lacked the funds to finish an important dagoba in Anuradhapura. The discovery of silver ore at the place now known as Ridigama allowed him to complete the work, and as a token of his gratitude he established a temple in the cave where the ore was discovered, and to put in this cave a gold-plated statue of the Buddha. The golden statue is still in the main cave, called the **Pahala Vihara** (Lower Temple). Also within the Pahala Vihara is a 9m recumbent Buddha that rests on a platform decorated with a series of blue-and-white tiles, which were a gift from the Dutch consul. The tiles depict scenes from the Bible, including Adam and Eve being banished from the Garden of Eden, and the transfiguration of Christ. You can also see what remains of a beautiful piece of ivory carving over the lintel. Unfortunately, this and other pieces of art have been subject to vandalism over the years.

The nearby **Uda Vihara** (Upper Temple) was built by King Kirthi Sri Rajasinghe. The entrance has a Kandyan-period moonstone. It's interesting to try to pick out some of the clever visual tricks used by the fresco artists; in one case, what appears to be an elephant at a distance reveals itself on closer inspection to be a formation of nine maidens. Hindu deities and images of the Buddha are represented in the caves.

The huge boulder that looms over the whole temple complex is attractive to the local wild bee population; you can see their nests bulging below the overhang. It's said that those who enter the temple with impure hearts will get stung, so watch out.

Just beyond the temple courtyard is what used to be a hermit's retreat. It now houses only a small shrine, but there's a skillfully carved pillared porch.

Although there are no signs banning flash photography, you should, of course, refrain from using a flash inside the caves in order to preserve the frescoes. Remember, this is not an entertainment for tourists but a working temple, and you should dress and behave appropriately. Cover your shoulders and legs, remove your shoes and hat and conduct yourself as you would be expected to in a place of worship.

Outside the temple complex you can see an abandoned dagoba at the top of a smooth rocky outcrop. On the way up, to your right, is an ancient inscription in the stone, said to have been etched on King Dutugemunu's behalf. An easy 10-minute walk starts to the right of this abandoned dagoba (as you are walking up to it). Head past a modern pavilion to an abandoned bungalow; nearby, on the top of the cliff, is a slab from which you get the most magnificent views.

Ridi Vihara is east of the Kurunegala-Dambulla road. If you are coming by car from Kurunegala, the turn-off to Ridigama village is on your right just past Ibbagamuwa

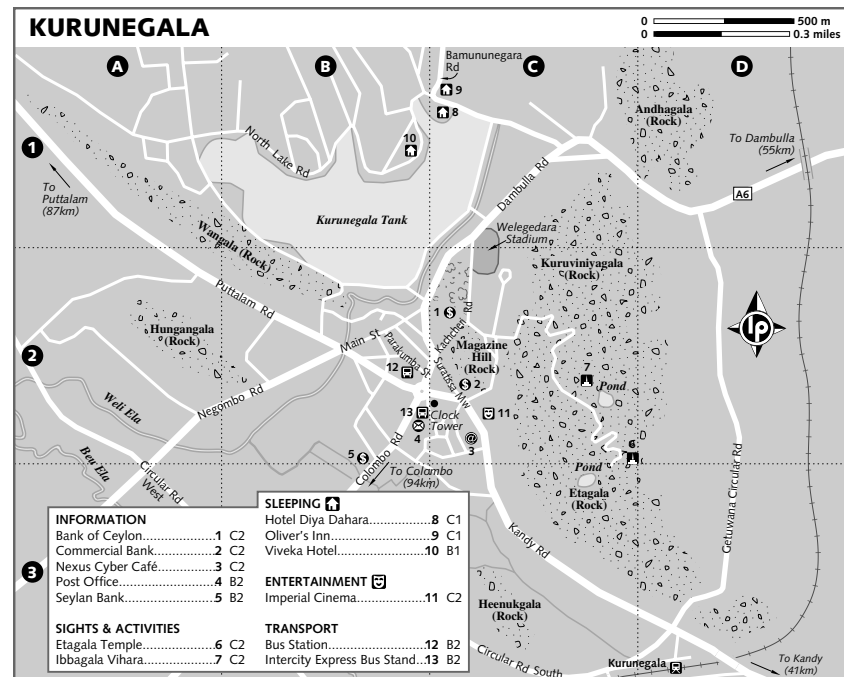
village. The temple is about 2km from Ridigama via Temple Junction. Buses run between Kurunegala and Ridigama village (Rs 14, approximately every 45 minutes). From the village you can take a three-wheeler to the temple (approximately Rs 400 return, including waiting time).

## KURUNEGALA

☎ 037 / pop 29,000

Kurunegala is an important crossroads town on the routes between Colombo and Anuradhapura, and Kandy and Puttalam. The town itself is not particularly interesting, but the region around Kurunegala is rich in archaeological sites and temples.

The large, smooth rocky outcrops that loom over the low-rise buildings are a striking feature of this city. Named for the animals they appear to resemble (Tortoise Rock, Lion Rock etc), the outcrops are, unsurprisingly, endowed with mythological status; it's said that they were formed when animals that were endangering the free supply of water to the town were turned into stone.



## Information

**Bank of Ceylon** (Kachcheri Rd) Changes travellers cheques; it's 450m north of the post office.

**Commercial Bank** (Suratissa Mawatha) ATM.

**Nexus Cyber Café** (60 Kandy Rd) Internet access.

**Post office** (Colombo Rd) In town.

**Seylan Bank** (Colombo Rd) ATM.

## Sights

There's a road going up **Etagala**, a large black boulder on the eastern side of the city. The views are extensive from here. On the way up you pass a small shrine, **Ibbagala Vihara**, and at the head of the road there is a **temple** named after the rock itself. The town also boasts the fine old **Imperial Cinema**, which still pulls a crowd to dramas and romance today.

## Sleeping & Eating

There are a few hotels around town, but the most pleasant are around the lake. A three-wheeler to these places from town should cost Rs 60 to 100 from the train station.

**Oliver's Inn** (☎ 222 3452; fax 222 0092; 2 Bamununegara Rd; r with/without air-con Rs 1000/550; 🍷) This is a 1960s suburban kit home with five rooms, one of them with air-con. The manager is a friendly old chap and the staff are helpful too. It's just around the corner from Hotel Diya Dahara.

**Hotel Diya Dahara** (☎ 526 6662; diyadahara2004@yahoo.com; 7 North Lake Rd; s/d Rs 1200/1750) Featuring seven rooms with hot water and balcony, it's a little expensive for what you get in terms of the rooms alone, but there's a pretty garden, and a good restaurant beside the lake. The grandiose building across the road is under the same management, and has a honeymoon suite for Rs 3850 and large singles/doubles with air-con for Rs 1650/2200.

**Hotel Viveka** (☎ 222 2897; www.hotelviveka.com; 64 North Lake Rd; r with/without air-con Rs 2200/1500; 🍷) This 150-year-old villa, kept up with lots of spit and polish, boasts an elegant veranda looking over the lake. The six rooms are spartan cubes with new bathrooms. Some interesting framed photographs grace the main room, and the hotel has Kurunegala's most convivial bar and restaurant. Weddings are often held here on weekends.

## Getting There & Away

Intercity buses depart from a yard behind the clock tower. You may be dropped here when you arrive. Intercity express buses

heading to Anuradhapura (CTB/express Rs 45/100, two hours) leave every 30 minutes between 6am and 5.30pm. CTB buses for Chilaw (Rs 35, 2½ hours) leave every 30 minutes between 6am and 7pm. There are CTB and express buses to Colombo (express Rs 84, four to five hours) and Kandy (express Rs 64, one hour). Local buses and buses to Negombo (Rs 60, 3½ hours) leave from the nearby bus station on Puttalam Rd.

The train station, 2km from the town centre, sees frequent visits from trains on the Northern Line. There are eight trains between Kurunegala and Colombo daily (2nd/1st class Rs 98/150, two to three hours) and four trains daily to Anuradhapura (2nd/1st class Rs 84/125, three hours).

## DAMBADENIYA

For a short time in the mid-13th century this small town was the site of the capital of Parakramabahu II (r 1236–70). Apart from six ponds, there is little to see in terms of palace remains. About 400m east of the centre of town is a **temple** (Vijayasundarama) with wall paintings said to date from when Dambadeniya served as a capital (but there is a huge amount of recent 'restorative' paint work). The temple is also where the tooth relic was exhibited. More archaeological excavation work in this area has been scheduled.

If you have your own transport you may enjoy a detour to a little-visited site called **Panavitiya**, where an *ambalama* (rest hall) was built in the 18th century. The *ambalama* belonged to an era when people travelled long distances on foot. The structure is very simple; a stone platform (4m by 3m) supports a wooden pillar frame, with raised planks running around the sides so people could (and still can) sit facing into the centre.

The 26 carved wooden pillars support a modern tiled roof. The original also had a roof, judging by the tile fragments that were buried in the ground. Unfortunately white ants have invaded some pillars. The carvings depict lotus flowers, wrestlers, women greeting one another, snakes in combat, dancers, men chatting and deer.

To get to Panavitiya, look carefully for the Quinco Highland Sales Outlet sign (there's a white milk bottle with the sign) 4km north of Dambadeniya. The turn-off is opposite this sign. Panavitiya is 3km down this road, near a temple.

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