

THE FLAME TREE HERALD TRIBUNE

news, views,
reviews,
& off-grid
jungle intel

IN
THIS
EDITION

OH, CORIANDER!
THRILLER
KING OF THE MONTH
THE ISLAND'S GREAT RIVERS
THE THIRD WONDER OF ANCIENT LANKA
THE LION OF THE SKIES

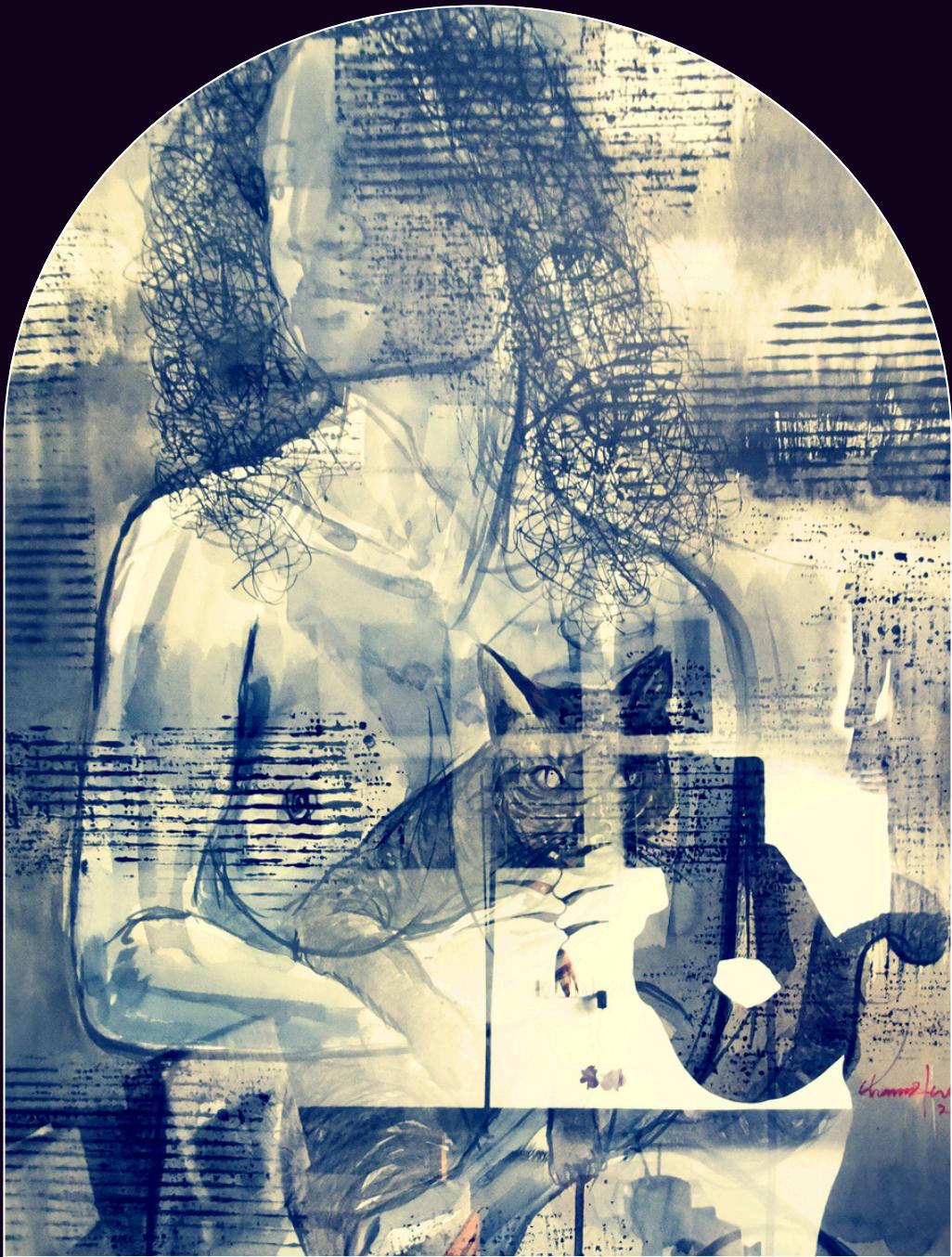
December 2025

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“ Beautiful
and
blissful. ”

CHAMMIKA JAYAWARDENA



Born in 1977, Chammika Jayawardena is one of the country's leading young contemporary artists, exhibited from Tokyo to Vienna. He is particularly noted for the striking, often erotically domestic, series of nudes he has created, which the onlooker views as if through the wonderous windows of a slow-moving train.



“ We were lucky to be able to spend three nights at Flame Tree Estate, and we loved every minute of it. ”

THE LION OF THE SKIES



Of the island's real eagles, the White-bellied Sea Eagle, the Changeable Hawk Eagle and the Crested Serpent Eagle are often seen; the Legge's Hawk-Eagle less so. But the Black eagle is the eagle that beats them all – larger, grander – truly a deeply impressive bird, easily the lion of the skies.



It is a large reclusive solitary bird with a yellow bill and a wingspan of up to 6 feet. And for some reason appears most frequently on Sundays in the skies above our estate, soaring on thermals, something attacked by smaller birds eager to distract it from their vulnerable nests.

It is usually very silent but when it chooses to make the most stunning loud deep whistling sounds like a rock star warming up for a concert.





“ Sri
Lanka in
style ”

DETOX CAULIFLOWER SALAD



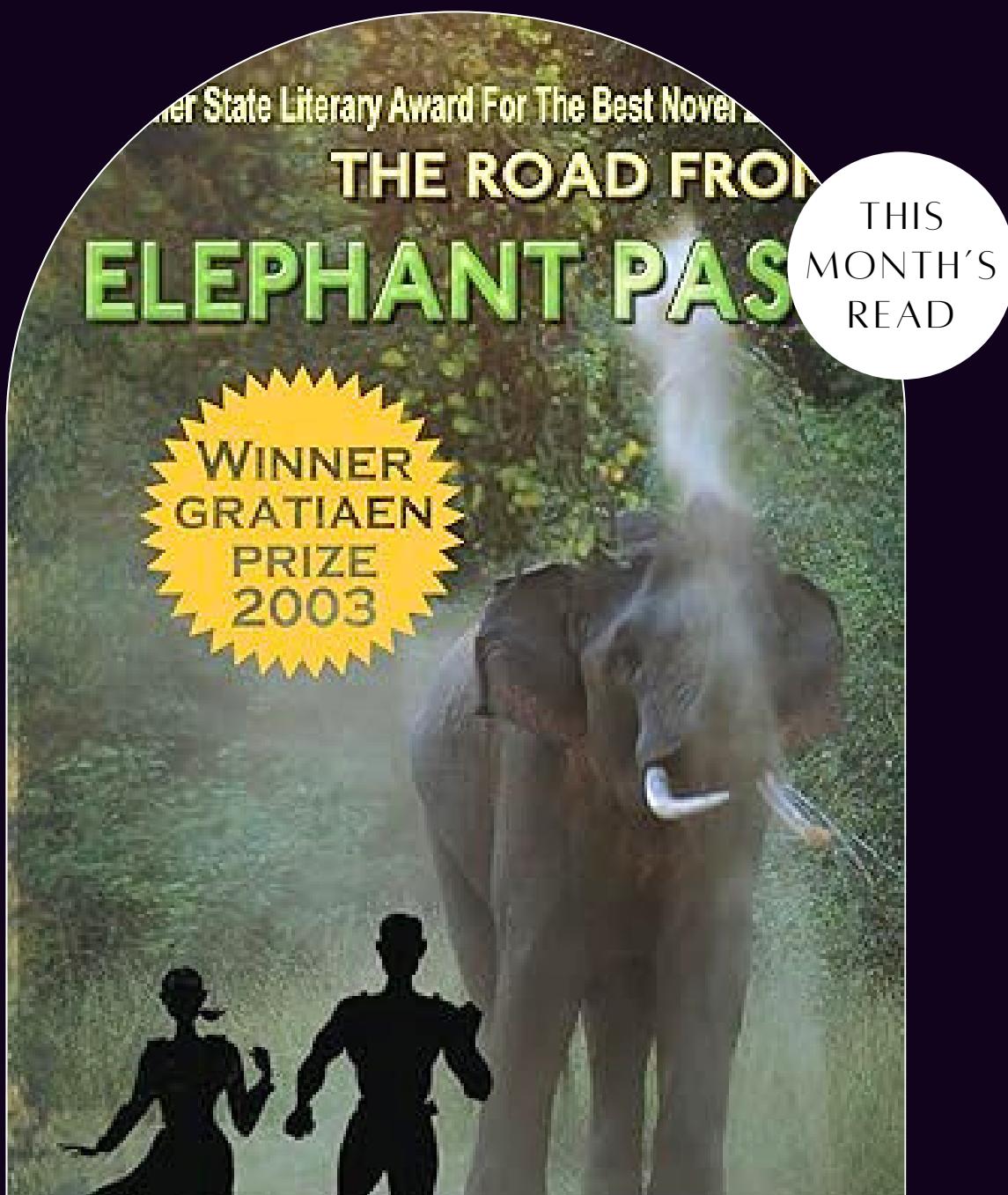
Chickpeas; Chili Powder; Salt; Pepper; Cauliflower Florets; Apple; Shallot; Parsley; Mint; Avocados; Mustard; Honey; Olive Oil; Lime.

“ Our room was very comfortable, and it was lovely being able to learn about the history of the furnishings and artwork it contained. ”



THRILLER

NIHAL DE SILVA



Nihal De Silva's untimely death on 28 May 2006, by a land mine explosion at the Wilpattu National Park ended the career of one of the country's most talented thriller writers, winner of many awards and accolades. Sri Lanka's long agony of war and corruption was his most certainly too.



His first and greatest book, the war story, "The Road From Elephant Pass" (2003) was also made into a film and together the two forms captured the times like little else, wining a place in the minds of all who followed the story of the LTTE Tamil woman and her Sinhalese army officer.

"The Far Spent Day," published in 2004, tells the story Ravi, returning to Sri Lanka only to be caught up political violence, the ruin of his family and home and the vengeance that this creates.

Despite his early death, several more books were posthumously published including most famously "The Giniralla Conspiracy" in 2008. "When you say Sinhalese are vicious murderers, you imply that ALL Sinhalese are like that. Surely that is not true," he was to write. His obituarists rightly mourned the end of a man who wrote "courageously about political parasites and their terminal torture of a nation and its helpless masses."

His books include: "The Road From Elephant Pass," published in 2003; "The Far Spent Day," published in 2004 and "The Giniralla Conspiracy" in 2008.

A large, vibrant green plant with prominent red edges on its leaves, serving as the background for a speech bubble. The plant has a textured, ribbed surface and several large leaves.

“ A
beautiful
retreat

”

HAND GESTURES OF LORD BUDDHA



Even the most serene and pacific statue of Lord Buddha offers a dynamic lesson in the evangelising of fundamental Buddhist beliefs – but such insight is only readily available to those amongst us who can interpret the gestures he is pictured making with his hands and fingers. For if ever hands can speak, those of Lord Buddha most certainly do.

There are at least 11 core messages encoded in such hand signals, known as "mudras," some with the most subtle of further variants; and most, but not all, in common use in Sri Lanka.





“ The hotel is beautiful, from the rooms (we were upgraded to a mountain view), to the reception, and especially the pool with a view. ”

KING OF THE MONTH

GAJABAHU I, KING OF ANURADHAPURA

The third monarch of the Lambakanna Dynasty (1st Period) (66 CE – 436 CE); and the 48th recorded monarch in Sri Lanka in the line running from Prince Vijaya (543 BCE); the dates of his reign being 113 - 135 CE. Gajabahu was to rule for 22 years,. His governance is remembered for its predictable religious sensibility – and its military might, the two not often going hand in hand. He built monasteries (in Matuvihara and Rumika) and a stupa (Abhayuttara). More remarkably, he also co-opted the Hindu goddess Pattini to Sri Lanka. But it is his military capabilities that are most honoured today, not least in the Sri Lanka Army's infantry regiment, The Gajaba Regiment, or the country's Navy with its ship the SLNS Gajabahu. For Gajabahu did that rarest of things: he took the fight with the Cholas, to the Cholas, leading an army to southern India to liberate the 12,000 thousand Sinhalese prisoners seized in his father's reign. Ancient sources also mention other visits to Tamil kings, this time more peaceful. Trade too seems to have flourished. Excavations at the ancient (now partially underwater) port of Godavaya in the far south have unearthed his regulations regarding custom tolls – as well as a collection of seventy five thousand Roman coins.





“ Thank you to all of the staff for making our stay an experience that we will never forget. ”



“ Must visit
when near
Kandy ! ”

CORIANDER



Coriander is the Marmite of the spice world. You either love it or hate it - a predisposition that is said to be genetic. Its distinctive strong spicy citrus green taste and aroma is never in purdah in any dish. Native to the Mediterranean and Middle East, and ancient beyond wrinkles, coriander first appears back in 5000 BCE in Sanskrit literature before popping up in the ancient Greek papyri and the Bible - Exodus 16:31, to be exact: "...and the house of Israel called the name thereof Manna: and it was like coriander seed, white; and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey." The spice travelled with the Romans, Chinese, and Arabs on every possible trade route to go as rapidly global as ABBA. An annual, it grows absurdly easily from seeds; and, led by India, has mushroomed into a five billion dollar a year market. Traditional medicines across the world have any number of medicines that include it to treat most problems from fever, diarrhoea, indigestion, and piles to vomiting, arthritis and gout. Modern scientific research is a little pickier, but many studies have begun to show its value in dealing with disorders of the nervous system, and diabetes, and in combating malign microorganisms. The more you cut it, the more it grows. In cooking every part of coriander can be used – its strongly flavoured seeds, its grassy leaves, and stalks, even its delicate white flowers, which pair very well with cheese. It appears in any number of curries from South to SE Asia as well as – famously in Yemeni Zhug, Salsas, Tiger Salad, the carrot Potage de Crécy soup, Egyptian bissara dips, and, of course, Sri Lankan Kothamalli Tea – the go-to comfort drink that everyone sips on the island if feeling mildly out of sorts.

“ Huge old colonial hacienda exquisitely restored. Stunning views around the property and a beautiful infinity pool. ”



THE THIRD WONDER

Despite their iconic status, the original seven wonders of the ancient world come up short when compared to the seven wonders of ancient Lanka.

The world's first Seven Wonders comprised a garden, two tombs, two statues, a temple, and a lighthouse. It featured the Pyramids of Giza, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Statue of Zeus at Olympia, the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus, the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, the Colossus of Rhodes, and the Lighthouse of Alexandria. Sri Lanka's list, though, is not all architecture with a nod to gardens – it is comprehensive, including as it does a painting, a monastery, a book, a piece of revolutionary new technology that enabled a treasured dish, a shrine, a tree, and a lake.

Its first great wonder was a lake – Panda Wewa; and its second the Sri Maha Bodhi. Its third was to comprise Asia's equivalent of the three great pyramids of Giza – the three great stupas of Anduraupura: the Ruwanweliseya; the Abhayagiri; and the Jetavanaramaya.

Stupas are a structure exclusive to Buddhist countries. The shape is made for perfect skylines. Bells, bubbles, pots, lotuses – even heaps of paddy: Sri Lanka's many thousands of stupas were built in a range of related shapes, and in such numbers that it is unlikely that a five-minute car journey anywhere in the country will fail to take you past one. They are still being constructed to this day – in Kandy, Kalutara and Kotmale, to name just three.

Whatever their shape or age, they are outstanding architectural creations,

THE 7 WONDERS OF ANCIENT LANKA





mesmerizingly graceful as they rise over their visiting pilgrims, providing them with a place to meditate and a home for the relics and religious objects they venerate. And its three most important ones are found in the island's heartland - Anuradhapura.

The oldest of the tree is the Ruwanweliseya, built between 161 to 137 BCE by King Dutugamunu, with a height today of 103 meters. The first steps in its construction are told in extraordinary detail by the Mahavamsa Chronicle which started "on the full moon day of the month of Vesak. King Dutugamunu had the workers dug a 7 cubit deep excavation. He had soldiers brought in round stones and had them crushed with hammers. Crushed stones were placed at the bottom of the excavation and compacted using elephants. The Elephants had their feet bound with leather to protect their feet. Fine clay was brought in from a nearby river. This clay was known as butter clay since it was very fine. King Dutugamunu ordered to spread butter clay on top of crushed stones. After placement of the butter clay layer, King ordered to bring bricks. Bricks were placed on top of the butter clay layer. On top of bricks, mesh of iron was placed. Mountain crystals were placed on top of iron bars. Another layer of stones was placed on top of mountain crystals. On top of stones, 8" thick copper plate was placed. Copper plate was sprayed Arsenic and Sesame oil. On top of the copper plate, seven inch thick silver plate was placed."

And that was just the beginning. The king was to die long before the stupa was completed and the Mahavamsa retells the story of the dying monarch being carried on a palanquin to see the works.

Standing for centuries, and now much restored, its fabled relic chamber has yet resisted all attempts at excavation. Within it is said to be a vessel filled

with Lord Buddha's artifacts, placed atop a seat of diamonds, encased in a golden container adorned with gems, and set inside a room decorated with murals and a silver replica of the Bo Tree. The Mahavamsa Chronicle notes its sovereign importance: "The relic-chamber shall not shake even by an earthquake; flowers that were offered on that day shall not wither till the end of Buddha Gotama's Dispensation; the lamps that were kindled shall not be extinguished; the clay that was mixed with perfume and sandalwood shall not dry; even a single scratch shall not appear within the relic-chamber; stains shall not appear in any of the golden goods that were offered."

Just decades later the stupas was to be joined by another, the Abhayagiri Stupa, built by King Valagamba in the 1st century BCE. Although today it is just 70 meters high (having lost part of its pinnacle), it once towered above its older sibling at 115 meters.

But it was controversy not size that really marked out its creation, for the structure was built for the use of the Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist sects whose teachings were seen as profane by the competing and dominant Theravadin sect. Appalling though the views of Mahayana monks were to Theravadins, for their habit of putting the enlightenment of others before oneself, those of the Vajrayana was so far beyond the red line as to be heretical - for the Vajrayanas put great faith in mysterious and super-fast ways paths to enlightenment – including mantras, mnemonic codes, symbolic hand gestures, spiritual diagrams, and divine visualizations.

Made partially from material removed from the buildings of the Theravada practicing Mahavihara monks, the stupa's bricks were plastered in lime mortar and sat on a vast platform enclosed by a rampart, admittance to which was guarded by 4 guard house entrances. And when the Tooth Relic of Lord Buddha first came to the island it was housed here in the complex of this stupa.





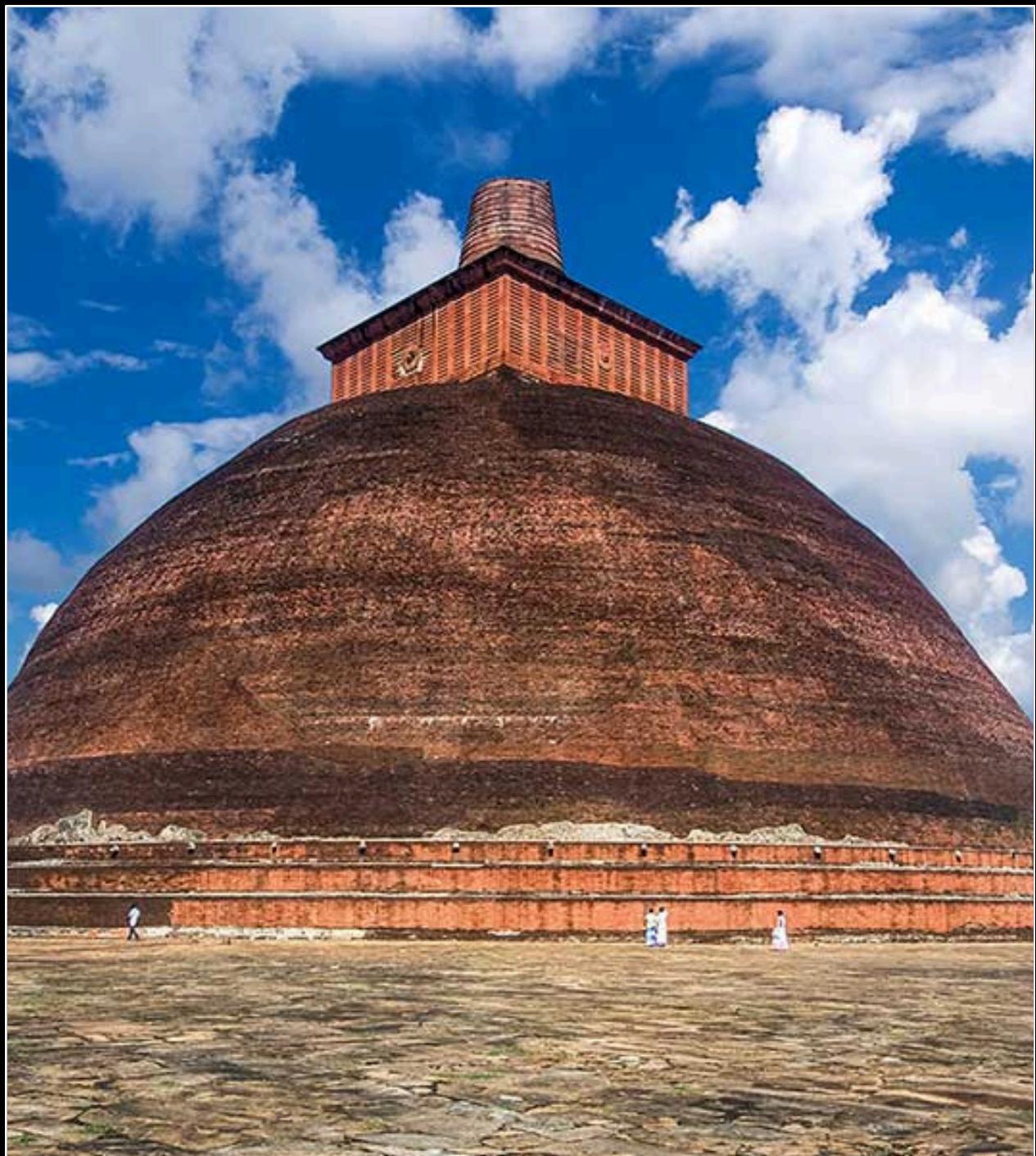
Centuries later, the well-travelled Chinese monk, Faxian was to describe the site as hosting a 30 foot high jade statue of Lord Buddha: "it glitters all over with those substances and has an appearance of solemn dignity which words cannot express. In the palm of the right hand there is a priceless pearl."

Both these two stupas however were put into the shadow over 400 years later by the Jetavanaramaya. Commissioned by King Mahasena sometime between 273 to 301 CE, this is the stupa that put Sri Lanka on the map, the stupa of all stupas, and at an original height of 122 meters, the world's third tallest building, eclipsed only by the Great Pyramid of Giza and Pyramid of Khufu; and much later by the Eiffel Tower.

It is the class of building to which superlatives and statistics cleave like clams. Together with its compound and related buildings the site covered nearly 6 hectares, housing over 10,000 monks and sitting tight on foundations that reached down almost 10 metres. Even the relatively simple act of manufacturing the almost 100 million bricks used in its construction was to turbo charge ancient Sri Lanka's building capacities. Within its vast and elegant bulk, lies buried part of a belt tied by Lord Buddha.

But Mahasena's blatant favouring of the Mahayana sect set the kingdom on a perilous path. Indeed, it even promoted a civil war, the fighting only abandoned when the recalcitrant king recanting his errors and re-empowered the much disgruntled Theravada monks. Thereafter, however, all, or nearly all, was sweetness and light in the kingdom, and the old king was to end his days having earnt the sobriquet as Minneri Deviyo – the God of Minneriya, for building, no doubt in further repentance the 4670 acres Minneriya Tank whose 230 billion gallons of water turned the dry east of the kingdom in a paddy paradise.

Quite apart from their sheer seismic might and beauty, these 3 great stupas stood as a reminder, if ever it was needed, of the dominance of Buddhism across the island. When the religion first arrived its royal adoption ensured that it caught on fast, rapidly replacing the Hindu, animist and Aboriginal cults of the original or other early islanders.



But as Buddhism spread, it took with the ever-stronger political reach of the Singhala kingdom, expanding its authority and character, embedding a common language that would become known as Singhala, and a common script that evolved from ancient Brahmi. Religion became the glue of an unusually early unified state that for well over a thousand years would reach right across the island, invasions, rebellions, and occasionally competing statelets notwithstanding. Four hundred years of later colonialism may have dented it, but it failed to stop it. As the centuries pushed Buddhism into the corners of Asia leaving it survive in just a handful of countries such as Bhutan, Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Mongolia, and Laos – in Sri Lanka it stayed fast, a flourishing rarity.



“ Highlight
of our Sri
Lanka trip! ”



THE GIN GANGA



At one hundred and thirteen kilometres, the Gin Ganga is the country's fourteenth longest river, collecting its cool waters from the mountains around the Sinharaja Forest, a Jurassic era rainforest whose scores of endemic trees, insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals make it the Celestial City for nature lovers and spotters of all sorts. The Gin Ganga flows south, pausing briefly at Thelikada where it has been dammed to create a reservoir, before flowing towards Gintota, a little village near Galle famous for being where many of the country's plywood tea chests are made.



“ Fantastic property, well maintained, every detail is brilliant. ”

AYUBOWAN

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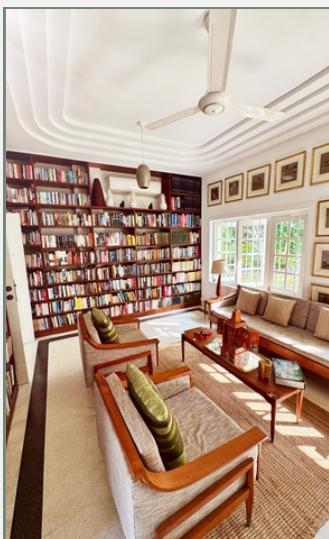


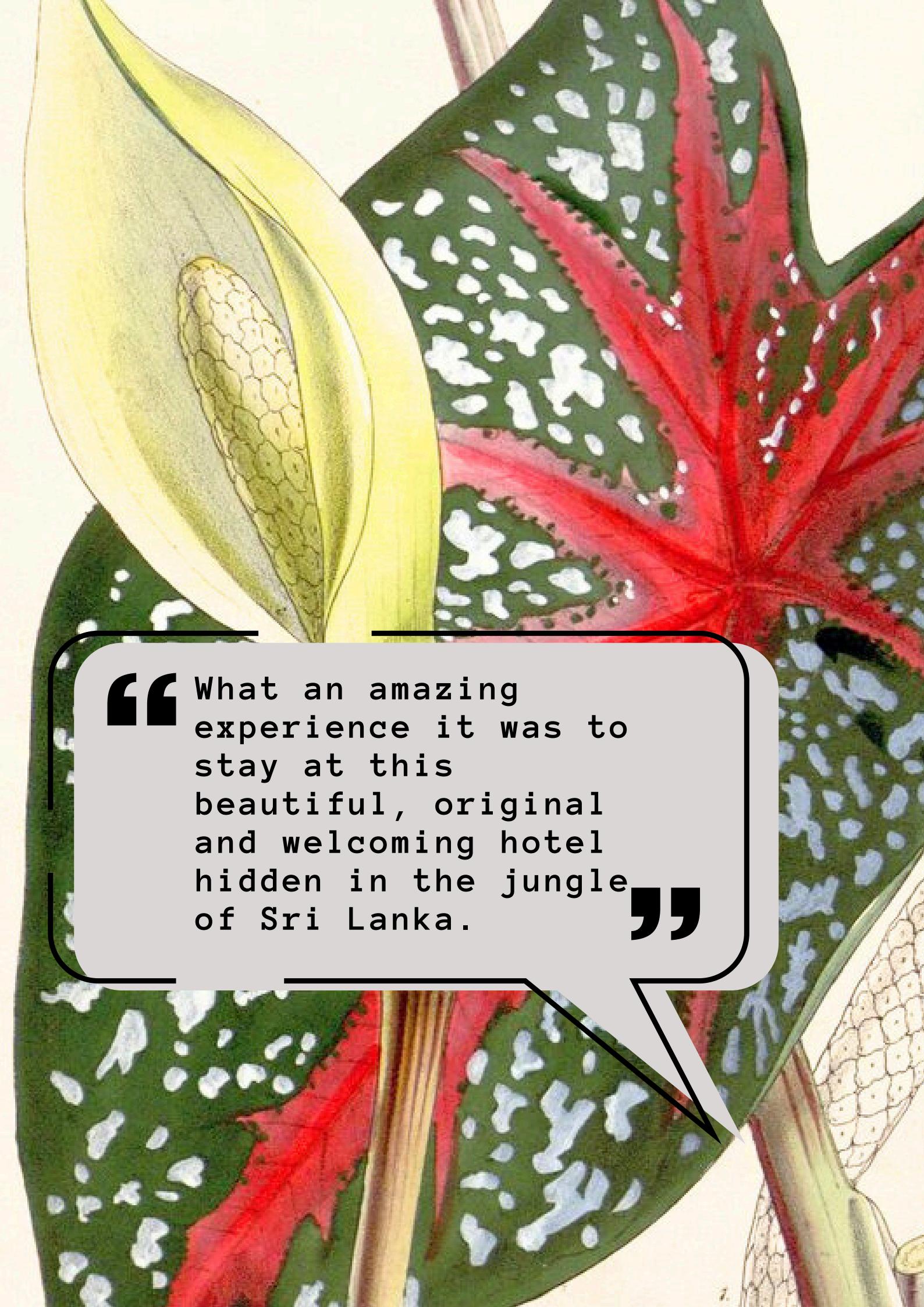
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“ What an amazing experience it was to stay at this beautiful, original and welcoming hotel hidden in the jungle of Sri Lanka. ”