A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE

GODS & GHOSTS

A TOUR OF SECRET TRINCOMALEE

THE CEYLON PRESS
ALTERNATIVE GUIDES

GODS & GHOSTS

THE CEYLON PRESS
ALTERNATIVE GUIDES

GODS & GHOSTS

A Tour of Secret Trincomalee

DAVID SWARBRICK
& The Editors of The Ceylon Press

Published By The Ceylon Press 2025

THIS BOOK IS PUBLISHED BY
The Ceylon Press
The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel
Mudunhena Walawwa,
Galagedera 20100,
Kandy,
Sri Lanka.

www.theceylonpress.com

FOR

RALPH

GENIUS & ADVENTURER

"The secret, Alice, is to surround yourself with people who make your heart smile. It's then, only then, that you'll find Wonderland."

LEWIS CARROLL
ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND
1871

ONE

ENCOUNTERING JANE AUSTEN

Gods, Graves & and the faintest haunting of historical whispers of what was and - just about - still is, is the subject of this guide, which delves beneath Trincomalee on Sri Lanka's eastern seaboard.

Haunted might be too strong a word for Trincomalee – but by any measure the town like the country has more than its fairly allocated measure of ghosts.

And plenty of gods as well: all of them centre stage; stage left, stage right. Indeed, rarely, if ever, off stage. Not least Buddhism itself, the foremost and complex creed that is little different now to when it first arrived on the island in 236 BCE.

From the ten-headed demon king Ravana of Lanka, to the country's founding father, a terrorizing prince descended from lions, the island's very earliest creation myths feature a multitude of alarming divinities.

Set beside them, the animist and ancestral sprits of the island's original inhabitants, the Vedda, feature with almost kindly comfort.

Kindness might be said to have been in short supply with much of what followed: the demanding Catholic dogmas of the early Portuguese invaders, the innumerable Hindu gods of the Tamils, the strict protestant god of the Dutch, and his Anglican iteration; the rigorous god of Islam – albeit with a more forgiving spirit among the Malay moors.

And all are present in distant Trincomalee.

But for a place so abundantly represented on any map, Trincomalee itself remains oddly invisible.

It is not what it seems, a small town of passing consequence. Like a true aristocrat, it wears it reputation with uttermost modesty, restrained as crown of sapphires under a hoodie. The great eastern port of the ancient kings, a later key link in the chain of European wars fought from 1652 to the downfall of Napoleon that turned South Asia British, it holds its history with absolute discretion, noticeable only if you look amongst its graves and within some of its almost vanished communities; in the scared walls of temples and buildings linked to the passage of its many gods, its forgotten kings and even great artists – all symbolised by the rare birds that flock to an overlooked lagoons north of the town.

Whilst Sri Lankans and tourists alike cluster around the south coast, and a few choice parts of the centre of the island, barely any make it to this part of the east coast.

Once part of the Rajarata, the homeland of the first island kings, Trincomalee and the east slowly became ever more isolated as the island's development surged around the western seaboard, the hill country, and the far south. The modern world pushed it even further to a back seat - thirty years of civil war, a tsunami, and the troubled new decades of the twenty first century, years marked so extravagantly by the fact that it was an island off the town that was selected as one of the only remote safe spots to house a prime minster, toppled by the 2022 Aragalaya that saw so much old government swept aside.

Two main roads lead into the town – the A12 from Anuradhapura, and the A6 from Dambulla, both skirting a large wildlife park, whilst a third, the A15 leads towards the coastal villages of the south. None bring with them that dawning sense of bleak certainty that you are approaching an urban centre. There are no outlying suburbs or factory sites to speak of. Optimistic

half-built retail outlets, busted petrol stations, billboards proclaiming glittering but affordable developments of villas and family homes: all are missing. A beautiful sparse and dry landscape borders the roads, ceding very occasionally to almost green forests. A most untwenty first century silence grows as you cut through the countryside, arriving, almost without notice at Trincomalee itself.

And almost immediately you find yourself driving along an esplanade, the sea on one side and a graveyard of miniature and broken architectural wonders on the other. Within it, most unexpectedly lies a monument connected to the world's greatest novelist: Jane Austen, for the cemetery contains the grave of her favourite brother, Charles Austen - her "own particular little brother," and the model for the manly and caring character of William Price in Mansfield Park. Etched indelibly across a wide rectangle of granite read the words ""Sacred to the memory of His Excellency C.J. Austen, Esq., Champion of the Most Honourable Military Order of the Bath, Rear Admiral of the Red and Commander-in-Chief of Her Majesty's Naval Forces on the East India and China Station, Rear Admiral Charles Austen CB. Died off Prome, while in command of the Naval Expedition on the river Irrawaddy against the Burmese Forces, aged 73 years."

Outliving his more famous sister by decades, Charles was an euthanistic reader of novels – especially hers; and it is perhaps no little accident that the brother of so great a writer should lie in gentle comfort here on an island whose contemporary writers have so recently burst like firecrackers over world fiction – from Sri Lanka itself of course, but also from Canada, Australia, the UK, the US or New Zealand, part of a raw diaspora created by civil war and corruption. Their fiction has become an unexpected globally embassy, bringing

humour, a unique sensibility and a sharp, ironic eye to the themes that preoccupy every great novel - from war, sex, fashion, addiction and love to loss, pets, the jungle, fame, fortune, bankruptcy. And, of course, family; for in Sri Lanka, as almost nowhere else, the family really does come - inconveniently, beautifully, reassuringly, alarmingly - first.

Family was close to Chales Austen's heart far beyond his famous sister for he was to create a titillation of scandal back home for his serial marriage of two sisters. But this failed to detract from his lasting memory, and he is remembered by one of his subordinates as stoic and dutiful to the end. "Our good admiral won the hearts of all by his gentleness and kindness while he was struggling with disease and endeavouring to do his duty as Commander-in-Chief of the British naval forces in these waters. His death was a great grief to the whole fleet. I know that I cried bitterly when I found he was dead."

All around his grave are earlier and later graves, mostly of British colonists, military officers and engineers who staffed this most distant part of the empire. Out of tombs and obelisks boosting the weathered details of Georgian architecture grow trees and shrubs. Buffalo graze amidst them. "Home at last, thy labours done, "reads the tomb of Charles Frank Miller, who died aged 235 in 1899, "safe and blessed the victory won...angels now have welcomed thee."

It is rumoured that occasionally a few dedicated members of the Jane Austen society fly out to tend Charles Austen's grave; but come more often they must, for within the next few decades the graveyard will be all but obliterated by weather and neglect, like the vanished church of St Stephen's that once oversaw it all.

TWO WHISPERS

In the placid residential suburbs north of the graveyard lives another fast disappearing record of the island's colonial times – this one linked to the Portuguese, who first came to the island in 1505. For here, around the self-contained streets of Palayittu live the last descendants of island's Burgher community – descendants of Portuguese and sometimes Dutch men and local women who still speak a remarkable patois - Portuguese Creole.

For over 350 years this language flourished as one of the country's main lingua francas, a mixture of Singhala, Tamil, and Portuguese and peppered with loan words from the Javan and Kaffir slaves and soldiers that the Portuguese brought with them.

Although largely a spoken language, its slight and brittle written record now lies in the British Library in a series of documents called the Sri Lanka Portuguese Creole Manuscript. They were collated by Hugh Nevill, the scholar civil servant in colonial Ceylon between 1865–1897 and include pieces so wonderfully entitled "The Portuguese Song of Batticaloa;" "the Songs of the Portuguese Kaffir"; and "The Story of Orson and Valentine". Today its speakers barely number a thousand. Yet go into any one of these houses in Palayittu, and you will hear it, history spoken as if every day, even if its perishable date is held in the voices of an aging and disappearing community, its register vanishing a little more with each passing day before your eyes and ears.

One small enterprise bucks the trend – for a young member of the community, Derrick Keil, has taken to singing songs in his family patois, retelling fables of the past with beautifully choreographed dramas playing out old stories that have become quite a hit on You Tube.

Of course, Trincomalee is most famous for its status as a port, its harbour being the fourth largest natural harbour anywhere in the world, much fought over by the Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British. Even the Danes had a go in trying to occupy it, though nothing remains of their 2 month invasion.

Despite its deep water attributes, the harbour has attracted little commercial attention since its use by the early Anuradhapuran and later Kandyan kings when as the port of Gokanna it was a main access into the island.

Since then its use has largely been military – a deterrent to invaders protected by a large fort and marked later in life by a lighthouse offshore on Round Island and on the mainland at Foul Point.

Now an ever more diminishing columnar wreck, Foul Point Lighthouse overlooks the beaches of the coastal south, home to some of the very last villages of the Coastal Vedda. Its walls are still scarred from the many battles fought around it during the Sri Lankan civil war, a conflict that engulfed the Tamil dominated Eastern province during which time it was often in the hands of the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

The war was a catastrophe for all concerned, but the Vedda's already tested lifestyle was ruinously challenged by the fighting.

These descendants of the original Mesolithic settlers who migrated from India in prehistoric times some 40,000 years ago are an ever more ghostly presence on the island, their bloodlines dissipated by intermarriage, though genetic studies show that they are more closely related to several north and west Indian tribes than the Tamil and Sinhalese communities on the island today.

The Vedda worship a range of ancient folk deities as well as such mainstream Hindu gods as Murugan. Ancestor worship and the cult of the dead marks out many of their still just-living practices. Scraping a precarious living by fishing and farming, their language is a variant of Tamil. Rarely translated, one song, sung by honeycomb cutters asks: “The bees from yonder hills of Palle Talawa and Kade suck nectar from the flowers and made the honeycomb. So why should you give them undue pain when there is no honey by cutting the honeycomb.”

THREE

LOST TEMPLES

Close by to Foul Point Lighthouse is a link to the arrival in Sri Lanka of its greatest treasure: the Sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha. Here, guarding the entrance to the Ullackalie Lagoon lies a temple, the Lankapatuna Samudragiri, all that is left of the once great port of Lankapatuna, once another major marine gateway into the Anuradhapura Kingdom.

The relic - said to be Lord Buddha's left upper canine tooth - arrived on the island around 371 CE hidden in the hair ornamentation of an Indian princess, brought to the island to safeguard guard it from the warfare that threatened it in India.

Almost immediately it became the island' s most precious possession, legitimising the reign of kings and validating a priestly theocracy. As a relic it has plenty of competition. Scores of alternative artefacts assert a connection to Lord Buddha – including bowls, hairs, and bones. But the tooth is considered the most important for it touched the words he uttered as he prayed. Across the world, thirty-two other places claim ownership of Buddha's teeth. If all are credible it would account for the teacher's entire set - eight incisors, four canines, eight premolars, and twelve molars. But somehow, by dint of custom, history, worship, faith and record, this tooth, arrived eventually to Anuradhapura, where the monks of the Abhayagiri fraternity took custody of it, under the protection of the then king, Mahasena. A bare wide beach bordered by flat dry farmland and scrub forest surrounds the old temple that marks its arrival. Destroyed by war and the tsunami, the temple's vast ruins stretch out across a 50 acre site, at one end of which is a small new temple of forgettable architectural beauty. Even so, it is a singular place to sit and consider the unique marvels of the island and the byzantine stories that explain its real nature.

A little inland from here are the ruins of another, even older temple, Seruwawila Mangala Raja Maha. Built in the 2nd century BC by the client kings of Rhuana, its importance rests on its reputation for being a Solosmasthana – one of the sixteen or seventeen holiest Buddhist shrines in Sri Lanka, their significance gained from ancient chronicles stating that they had once been visited by Lord Buddha. The source for such visits rest largely in the pages of the Mahavamsa, a chronicle created by a Buddhist monk in the 5th or 6th-century CE. The is little other than faith to corroborate such beliefs – but in Sri Lanka faith goes all the way.

Seven of these sacred places exist in Anuradhapura itself – the revered Bodhi tree; the 2nd century BCE Mirisaweti and Rathnamali stupas, this last a vast structure filled with sacred relics; the still larger stupas of Abhayagiri and Jetavanaramaya; and the historic Sela Cetiya, which marks the spot where King Devanampiya Tissa met Mahinda, missionary son of the Indian emperor Ashoka, and was converted to Buddhism. Another hides in plain site in the jungle of southeast Sri Lanka – the Kiri Vehera in Kataragama, with another, Tissamaharama Raja Maha, once a major centre of Buddhist education from the earliest times, nearby by. Adam's Peak and a cave in Divaguham mark two more; along with the Nagadeepa Purana near Jaffa; the stunning Kelaniya Raja Maha near Colombo, its gem studded throne now vanished; and the ruined stupa of Deeghawapi.

All these once great religious centres and shrines fell into absolute disrepair following the annihilating invasion of the island in 993 by Rajarata, the Chola emperor in India, but since independence they have been gradually brought back to notice. The one nearest to Trincomalee, the Seruwawila Mangala Raja Maha, is said to enshrine a hair and part of the teacher's

forehead. Destroyed by Tamil invasion in the 11th centuries it was rediscovered in the 1920s, its entrances, ponds, terraces, and dormitories rescued from jungle.

Heading back into Trincomalee you find the ruins of the buildings that marked out the town's later colonial life – most especially Fort Frederick.

This citadel began its colonial life rather eccentrically, being constructed from stones stolen from the ancient Hindu Koneswaram temple, the Temple of a Thousand Pillars – by the Danish in 1619.

Quite what these latter day Vikings were really up to so far from home remains a treasured if niche debating point.

The Portuguese soon took it over and completed the destruction of the ancient temple, part of their campaign against Hinduism. The temple, which for over 1000 years had collected an almost unbelievable treasurey of gold, manuscripts and gems, was looted bare in just a few hours, and its remaining stones carried off to create the new fort. Amongst the many acts of colonial theft and vandalism, this one stands out as among the very worst.

But the Dutch had little respect for Portuguese fort-building skills. Having captured the territory back in 1639, they rebuilt the whole thing by 1665 but by 1795 it fell again – this time to the British, amongst whose early visitors was Arthur Wellesley, later Duke of Wellington, then much preoccupied expelling the French from southern India.

His bungalow remains – now the officer's mess of the 2nd battalion of the Gajaba Regiment of the Sri Lankan Army.

Little but the fort's colossal bastion walls, its old entrance gates, a museum housed in a restored 18th century building and a scattering of other ruins remains. The entire site is strewn with the vast dressed stones of the ancient temple; and is home also to yet another ancient graveyard, this one containing 4 antique Table Tombs, all that is left of a Dutch burial ground, now more favoured by monkeys than mourners.

But more positively, it is home again to the rebuilt Temple of a Thousand Pillars, and a fit address for a Pancha Ishwaram, one of the five abodes of Shiva located along the circumference of Sri Lanka.

Once again, a major place of pilgrimage, this rebuilt temple stands as it once did on a promontory overlooking the sea, its entrance guarded by a vast statue of lord Shiva and its halls home again to a few of the ancient artefacts and statues recovered from the jungle and in the sea in recent times. All through the day priests attend the spiritual needs of an unending stream of worshippers.

FOUR

THE JEWEL

Thirteen kilometres north of the Temple of a Thousand Pillars and a few kilometres inland from the sea lies Trincomalee's greatest and most overlooked jewel – the Velgam Vehera.

Like so much in and around Trincomalee, it had – for centuries – been utterly forgotten, until in 1929, as Wall Street crashed and the roaring twenties came to an abrupt end, archaeologists chanced upon it.

If buildings could ever be said to bewhispers, this then is the most haunting wisper of the lot.

Beneath earth, trees, and jungle, stretching out to the shores of a great lake, the Velgam Vehera's many scattered ruins were brought back to sight for the first time in centuries: brick stupas, stone inscriptions, balustrades, buildings, moon stones – and mura gals.

These mura gals – or guard stones – are especially moving, standing in silent upright pose, guardians of the flights of steps that had led a multitude of forgotten people out of the everyday and into the sacred temple itself.

The steps they protect have worn down to just a few flights, the moonstone they encompass is almost entirely rubbed away; the temple beyond is now just an outline of ancient bricks, and the guard stones themselves are plain, almost stumpy, but still doing their ageless job as sentinels of the site.

The temple was bult by one of the island's greatest kings, Devanampiya Thissa between 307 and 267 BCE. It became one of the kingdom's most important monasteries, a centre of learning, worship and care that ensured its continued nurture by many successive monarchs.

Extraordinarily, it even managed to survive the collapse of the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa kingdoms and the wholesale destruction brought to almost every other part of the island by the invasion of the Chola emperor, Rajaraja I. Recently uncovered Tamil inscriptions found in the temple even record donations to the temple by the emperor. A later 11th century Tamil inscription records the gift of 84 cows for the purpose of maintaining the perpetual lamps. And in a wonderful moment of serendipity, archaeologists were to find a bronze lamp over two feet in height whose inscription read: "the sacred perpetual lamp, donated by Eranadan Yakkan".

The site is vast and though only modestly studied boasts a huge number of notable buildings: steps and walls, verandas and platforms, buildings of long forgotten uses that stretch deep into jungle, a long image house decorated with Dravidian mouldings, statues of Lord Buddha; a large stupa whose bricks are decorated with tera cotta figures. It is a deeply spiritual place, one of the most otherworldly sites on the island, utterly tranquil and almost wholly forgotten by academics, government, worshippers, or tourists.

An hour's drive north of here takes you to what is said to be the country's very first stupa, the Girihandu Seya. Stupas are a structure exclusive to Buddhist countries and are one of the sights that make Sri Lanka so distinctively beautiful. 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 complimentary 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 the shape or age, they are outstanding architectural

creations, 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.

Various ancient sources attest to this particular stupa's origins, built when two merchants arrived with a casket containing a relic hair of Lord Buddha. The merchants - Tapassu and Bhalluka – had more than the usual sense of spiritual concerns that typically characterise most businessmen and women.

Returning from lunch they were unable to move their casket. That decided them. They built a small stone structure around it and left, leaving to others the task of building out this still beautiful structure with statutes, protective walls, and the pillars of once overarching roofs – a vatadage of concentric circles accessed by flight of steps with guard stones and balustrades.

Still further north stretches the Kokkilai Lagoon, one of the least known and most unvisited bird sanctuaries in the country. Swamps of mangrove and sea grass make up its richness, its shores boarding onto scrub and forest. And here live, amongst the many sea birds, the cormorants, ducks, egrets, flamingos, herons, and ibis, two that speak most eloquently for Trincomalee: the pelican, the great ancient Egyptian symbol for death and the afterlife; and the stork, forever associated with the soul.

And birds are an appropriate place to bring this tour to it end – not here in the lagoon but further south in a small, serene hotel called Cbeyond Nilaveli. Designed for and with Laki Senanayake, one of the most important and significant Sri Lankan artists of the post-independence period and a friend of Geoffrey Bawa and his bother Bevis Bawa, Donald Friend, Barbara

Sansoni and Ena de Silva, this getaway on the beach is filled with his paintings and statues of owls, sea birds, and sea horses.

For anyone troubled by a troubled world, it is a place of utter peace - and an opportunity to sit before the gentle waves and consider that history, even the most ancient of histories, in living on undetected, provides anyone with the right antenna to better cherish and enjoy the living world. Even so subtle a world as Trincomalee.

DISCOVER MORE

A HISTORY LIKE NO OTHER

Contrary & creative, Sri Lanka built a tropical Versailles as the West constructed in wattle & daub. When the Cold War ebbed, its own began. The Ceylon Press History Of Sri Lanka Podcast unpicks its serpentine history.

BEHIND EACH GREAT STORY

From elephants to sapphires, tea to cricket, Island Stories: The Sri Lanka Podcast explores the things that make Sri Lanka, Sri Lankan.

OFF PISTE

The Ceylon Press' Alternative eGuides go to the places without crowds; forgotten as they are by most academics, historians, and modern travellers.

LESS IS MORE

The Ceylon Press' Tiny eBooks fillet the essentials of their subject from nature to history, culture to travel.

INSTANT OVERVIEWS

With their short, and readable introductions, The Ceylon Press' Pocket Professor eBooks illuminate Sri Lankan subjects from ancient dynasties to endemic mammals.

COMPANIONABLE LOOK-UPS

The Ceylon Press Companion to Sri Lanka and its subject Companions makes visible the whole island – from its arts, wildlife, & landmarks to religion, food, & history.

A LITTLE LIGHT RELIEF

And least it gets too serious, enjoy the off-grid Jungle Diaries blog & Podcast; and Archaeologies, the blank verse diaries of an occasional hermit.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, hermit, and writer.

He was born in Colombo and raised, with few concessions to modernity, in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. Cornish, he gained his degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales, and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as was decently possible.

Having worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as board director for various otherwise homeless departments including sales, marketing; and HarperCollins India, he ran Hachette's consumer learning division. Prior to this, he launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls, bottom lines, and divas diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

Today, as the Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of hospitality teams; and overseen by several small schnauzers.

It also helps fund The Ceylon Press, set up to make Sri Lanka's rich and complicated story, a mystery to many, and a secret to most, more accessible. The Press' books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at theceylonpress.com. The Press also publishes Poetry from the Jungle, a podcast that recasts the orthodox view of the world's best poets and poems.

ABOUT THE FLAME TREE ESTATE & HOTEL

"It's absolute paradise," wrote one guest recently; "I would fly back to Sri Lanka simply to stay in this place for a couple more days."

Centred on a 25-acre organic spice and timber plantation, The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel has been renovated and furnished with art & antiques; its healthy menus fusing street food with fine dining.

Its 1,000 high rocky hills stalled the Dutch army in 1765; and until the civil war the estate stretched over 100 acres with 3 working elephants.

Today its restored plantations grow cardamom, turmeric, ginger, cloves, pepper, cocoa; rubber, coffee, vanilla; cinnamon, coconuts - and scores of trees from ebony to sapu – best enjoyed from the vantage point of the hotel's infinity pool. Visit www.flametreeestate.com.

It also houses and funds The Ceylon Press whose books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at theceylonpress.com.

A GIFT FOR READERS

As a reader of this book, you naturally qualify for special treatment should your holiday every bring you to Sri Lanka and The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel. Simply drop the general manager a note to tell him how you came across us and to make arrangements to best suit your time and budget:
GeneralManager@flametreeestate.com