

The wonder of the Dambulla paintings

The Dambulla cave temple, the largest and best-preserved cave temple complex in Sri Lanka, is situated in Dambulla in the Matale District. The rock towers 160 metres over the surrounding plains. Major attractions are spread over five caves, which contain statues and paintings. These paintings and statues are related to the Buddha and his life. There are a 153 Buddha statues, three statues of Sri Lankan kings and four statues of gods and goddesses. The murals cover an area of 2,100 square metres (23,000 sq ft). Depictions on the walls of the caves include the temptation by the demon Mara, and the Buddha's first sermon.

Dambulla belongs to two important periods in Sri Lanka's history; the troubled times of King Valagambahu in the first century BCE when the shrine was first created by him and again in the 18th-century reign of King Kirti Sri Rajasingha of Kandy who had carried out the renovation and restoration work of the Dambulla cave temple.

The 18th-century restoration work of the Dambulla paintings was carried out by a dynasty of highly skilled artists and specialist temple painters residing in the hamlet of Nilagama in Matale.

A section of this family, Jeevan Naide was the last set that restored the paintings in Dambulla. They used the original leather templates as well as rare formulas for the preparation of plaster and vegetable dyes used during the reign of King Kirti Sri Rajasingha. These formulas used by the 18th-century craftsmen and artists are a fascinating demonstration of the use of indigenous natural materials mostly available in the surrounding environment.

The Dambulla Cave Temple has been a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1991.

Text, photographs and graphic: Mahil Wijesinghe



The rock cave temple of Dambulla and paintings

