

Forest monasteries and spiritual tourism: A study of Karandulena Aranya Senasanaya

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Abstract

Sri Lanka, often called the “Island of the Dhamma,” has a deep Buddhist tradition that goes back more than 2,500 years. This long history can be seen in the many temples, monasteries, stupas, and forest hermitages found across the island. The Tissa area in the Southern Province is a special spiritual region where ancient Buddhist practices, peaceful natural surroundings, and living monastic life come together. This study explores how forest monasteries support and promote spiritual tourism, with a special focus on Karandulena Aranya Senasanaya and several important Buddhist sites in the Tissa region, including Nimalawa, Madunagala, Situlpawwa, Kirinda, Tissamaharama, and Kiri Vehera in Kataragama.

The research draws on historical records, archaeological remains, site visits, and observations of present-day religious life. It looks at the history, spiritual meaning, physical features, and present importance of these sacred places. Special attention is given to Karandulena Aranya Senasanaya, an ancient forest monastery dating back to the 1st century BCE. The monastery is closely linked to early meditation traditions, the Sacred Tooth Relic, and the life of Arahant Cittagutta Thera. Its quiet forest setting, rock caves, ancient inscriptions, and active community of monks show that forest monastic life is still very much alive in Sri Lanka today.

The study shows that forest monasteries offer a different kind of tourism—one based on silence, simplicity, meditation, and personal reflection. Unlike crowded and commercial tourist sites, these places invite visitors to slow down, respect the culture, and connect deeply with both nature and living Buddhism. The study concludes that forest monasteries like Karandulena Aranya Senasanaya play an important role in protecting Sri Lanka’s living Buddhist heritage while also meeting the growing global interest in spiritual and mindful travel. When promoted with care and respect, these sacred sites can support heritage preservation, sustainable tourism, and the inner well-being of visitors.

Keywords: Karandulena aranya senasanaya, buddhist sites, spiritual tourism

Introduction

Sri Lanka, often celebrated as the “Island of the Dhamma,” is a land deeply intertwined with Buddhist civilization. With a history spanning more than 2,500 years, it is home to innumerable sacred sites, monasteries, stupas, and hermitages that embody the rich religious, cultural, and architectural heritage of the island. Among these, the Tissa area, located in the Southern Province, stands out for its concentration of historically and spiritually significant sites. Pilgrims and tourists alike are drawn to this region, where ancient forest monasteries, relic veneration, royal patronage, and natural beauty converge to create a unique Buddhist tourism landscape.

This article explores the foremost Buddhist sites in the Tissa area, including

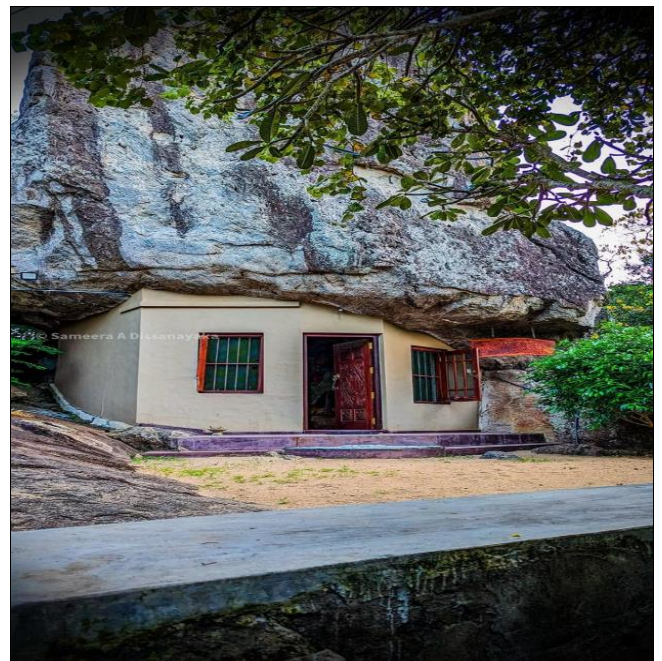
- Karandulena Aranya Senasanaya,
- Nimalawa Forest Monastery,
- Madunagala Forest Monastery,
- Kirinda Rajamaha Viharaya,
- Tissamaharama Rajamaha Viharaya,
- Situlpawwa Rajamaha Viharaya,
- Kiri Vehera in Kataragama

By examining their historical origins, spiritual significance, archaeological features, and living traditions, we gain insight into the enduring relevance of these sacred destinations for both local devotees and international tourists.

Karandulena Aranya Senasanaya

Sri Lanka, often celebrated as the “Island of the Dhamma,” is home to countless monasteries, shrines, and sacred

landscapes that trace back to more than two millennia of Buddhist civilization. Among these, Karandulena Aranya Senasanaya, located in the Hambantota District of Southern Sri Lanka, stands out as a unique site where history, spirituality, and natural beauty harmoniously converge. For both pilgrims and travelers seeking meaningful encounters with Buddhist heritage, Karandulena offers a journey into the serene world of meditation, devotion, and timeless simplicity.



The Location and Natural Setting

Nestled between the hills of Suriyawewa and Madunagala, Karandulena lies hidden amidst rugged rocky outcrops and tranquil forest landscapes. The site rests in close proximity to the Walawe River, a region known for its striking geography and biodiversity. Unlike the bustling sacred cities of Anuradhapura or Polonnaruwa, Karandulena’s setting is one of peaceful isolation, making it a natural retreat for those seeking silence and reflection.

For the modern Buddhist tourist, the journey to Karandulena is as rewarding as the destination itself. The rocky terrain, dry-zone forest, and gentle breezes of the Hambantota District provide a glimpse of the same environment that sheltered monks for centuries. The natural charm of the area amplifies its sacred character, reminding visitors that the earliest monasteries were often established in places where human activity was minimal and the presence of nature was strong.

Historical Origins

Karandulena’s history reaches back to the 1st century BCE, making it one of the oldest forest monasteries in the island. Inscriptions identify the site by its ancient name, Bilivana Vihara, confirming its prominence during early Buddhist times. The monastery is also associated with King Sri Meghavanna (4th century CE), who is remembered for strengthening Buddhist institutions in Sri Lanka.

What makes Karandulena especially significant in Buddhist tourism is its connection to the Sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha. According to tradition, the relic was once safeguarded within its caves, elevating the monastery’s importance to that of a national shrine. For pilgrims, this link to the relic adds deep devotional meaning, as the Tooth Relic continues to be one of the most revered symbols of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

The Legacy of Arahant Cittagutta Thera

Perhaps the most inspiring figure tied to Karandulena is Arahant Cittagutta Thera, a great elder monk renowned for his spiritual dedication. Tradition holds that he meditated in a cave at Karandulena for more than sixty years, maintaining an unbroken discipline of renunciation and mindfulness. His life of unwavering simplicity transformed the monastery into a beacon for other monks seeking the path of liberation.

Historical accounts even suggest that thousands of arahants attained enlightenment in Karandulena’s serene environment. While such numbers may belong to the realm of legend, they underscore the site’s enduring reputation as a place of spiritual power. For the Buddhist tourist, standing within the same caves where Arahant Cittagutta lived invites reflection on the depth of commitment required to walk the path of the Buddha.



Archaeological and Artistic Features

Karandulena’s landscape is dotted with caves, stupas, and inscriptions that reveal much about the devotional life of early Buddhist communities. Many caves are fitted with drip-ledges, a simple architectural adaptation that prevented rainwater from entering the living spaces of monks. Some of these caves still carry inscriptions in ancient Brahmi script, testifying to the donors—often kings, nobles, or lay devotees—who offered the caves to the Sangha.

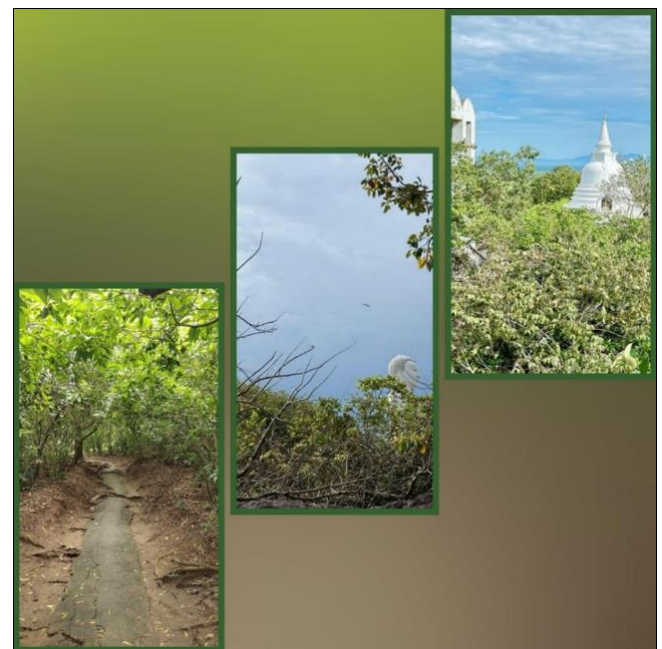
Visitors will also encounter faded red murals, fragments of artistic expression that once decorated the cave walls. Though weathered by time, these paintings offer glimpses into the aesthetic sensibilities of early Buddhist practitioners. Small stupas, built in unadorned simplicity, also stand as reminders of the spiritual aspirations of those who lived and meditated here.

These archaeological remains are not grand in scale compared to monumental sites like Anuradhapura, but they possess an intimacy and humility that reflect the forest tradition of Buddhism—one grounded in detachment, simplicity, and direct practice of the Dhamma.

A Living Monastery

What distinguishes Karandulena from many ancient ruins is that it remains a living monastery even today. Approximately thirty to thirty-five monks currently reside here, continuing the unbroken tradition of meditation and renunciation. The atmosphere is one of silence and discipline, where the rhythms of daily life follow the ancient monastic code (Vinaya).

For visitors, this living dimension enhances the experience of Buddhist tourism. Karandulena is not only a site to admire historically but also a place to witness Buddhist practice in action. The sight of monks walking silently for alms, meditating in forest caves, or chanting under the evening sky provides a direct link between the past and the present. Unlike purely archaeological sites, Karandulena offers an immersion into the living heart of Theravāda practice.



Environment and Features Protected Heritage

Recognized officially as an archaeological monument under its ancient name, Bilivana Vihara, Karandulena enjoys

protection for its historical and cultural value. This dual identity—as both a heritage site and an active hermitage—presents an important dimension for Buddhist tourism. Travelers are reminded that while the monastery is open to respectful visitors, it is first and foremost a sacred space for practice.

For those engaged in spiritual tourism, this dual role reinforces the concept that heritage is not only about preservation of the past but also about continuity of living traditions. At Karandulena, the lines between archaeology, history, and devotion blur, creating a holistic experience.



The Tourism Experience

For Buddhist tourists and pilgrims, Karandulena provides multiple layers of engagement

- 1. Spiritual Encounter:** Visitors can step into the same caves where arahants meditated, experiencing the silence that nurtured awakening.
- 2. Historical Discovery:** Inscriptions, murals, and stupas provide insight into early Buddhist life and the devotion of ancient communities.
- 3. Natural Beauty:** The surrounding hills, forests, and rocky landscapes enrich the atmosphere of serenity and solitude.
- 4. Living Buddhism:** Observing the resident monks keeps the tradition alive for modern visitors, offering inspiration for personal reflection.

Unlike commercialized tourist attractions, Karandulena does not overwhelm the senses with spectacle. Instead, it invites quiet participation, encouraging visitors to slow down, listen, and reflect. For many travelers, this kind of experience aligns with the growing global interest in mindful tourism—journeys that nurture inner peace as much as outward exploration.

Symbolism and Relevance Today

In the modern world, where fast-paced lifestyles often lead to stress and disconnection, sites like Karandulena hold renewed relevance. They symbolize purity, discipline, and the timeless human search for meaning. For Sri Lanka, promoting Buddhist tourism at places like Karandulena also supports sustainable travel by drawing attention to less commercialized but deeply significant sites.

Karandulena embodies the essence of Buddhist tourism: it is a place where one does not merely see but feels, where

history merges with living faith, and where nature itself becomes a teacher of impermanence and peace.

Karandulena Aranya Senasanaya stands today as a rare sanctuary where the past and present of Buddhism coexist in harmony. With its 1st-century BCE origins, association with the Tooth Relic, legacy of Arahant Cittagutta Thera, and continued monastic presence, it offers visitors an experience that is historical, spiritual, and deeply personal.

For Buddhist tourism, Karandulena is more than a destination; it is a journey into the heart of the Dhamma. Travelers who step into its caves and walk its forest paths participate in a living tradition that has endured for over two thousand years. In its silence, one can still hear the echoes of arahants meditating, monks chanting, and the timeless call of the Buddha's path.

In this way, Karandulena continues to inspire, offering a sacred encounter where history, meditation, and nature embrace—a true jewel of Buddhist tourism in Sri Lanka.

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