

MORE ABOUT AMBA'S HISTORY

Amba Estate is nestled in the valley of Ambadandegama, on the edge of Uva highlands, looking through the famous Ella Gap to the hills of Kataragama and the plains of Yala. Today the valley can be reached by narrow winding roads from Bandarawela above and Wellawaya below. The valley has borne witness to a rich history which binds together all the diverse strands that make up the amazing tapestry of Sri Lanka today.

Sita's secret hiding place

Amba Estate perches on a cliff above the great Ravana Ella Waterfall – a series of cascades that twist and tumble more than 300 meters from Ambadandegama Valley to the Kirinda Valley far below.

In the great Hindu epic, The Ramayana, written more than 4,000 years ago, Ravana, the king of Lanka, abducts Sita, the beautiful wife of Lord Rama. During Sita's captivity in Sri Lanka, Ravana is said to have hidden her in a cave beneath the Ravana Ella Waterfall. After Rama, with the help of Hanuman and his monkey army, crossed to Sri Lanka and defeated Ravana in a great battle in the mountains of Uva, Sita bathed in the waterfall before being reunited with Rama.

Today, thousands of pilgrims visit the base of the famous waterfall at the point where it passes under the Ella-Wellawaya Road. Our guests can take a winding path from the corner of Amba Estate to the hidden pools and cascades at the top of the falls. There, you can bathe in secluded pools or meditate on the smooth rocks at the top of the falls, overlooked by towering walls of granite and the velvet-green slopes of Ella Rock.

Ancient salt-route from Kataragama to Kandy

Located on the edge of the Ella Gap, Amba Estate straddles one of the ancient trade routes that connects Sri Lanka's southern plains with the central highlands. The ancient path that winds along the Estate's boundary was once used by teams of elephants transporting salt from the salt-flats of Kirinda to the Kingdom of Kandy.

Our visitors can retrace the same path. At the bottom of the climb, the path winds through lush forest, alive with monkeys, boar, deer and other wildlife, before emerging on the cool ridge above the Ravana Waterfall.

Guests can also visit many little-frequented historic sites that attest to the ancient Buddhist civilization in the area. These include the monolithic Buddhist sculptures at Buduruwagala, the 2000-year old Dowa temple, the covered bridge of Bogoda, the stupa of Yudaganawa, and the statues and temples of Maligawila.

Thomas Lipton's favourite lookout

Amba's farmhouse looks up the valley to St Catherine's Mount, the highest peak in the vicinity and the location of Lipton's Seat. While it was James Taylor who first introduced tea-planting to Ceylon in 1867, it was Sir Thomas Lipton who made Ceylon Tea world-renowned towards the end of the 19th Century.

A son of poor Irish immigrants who grew up in the slums of Glasgow, Lipton left school at the age of 10 to support his family. In 1865, he sailed to America and worked as an assistant in a New York grocery store. He returned to Glasgow in 1871 and a couple of years later he opened his own store, where he practiced the skills he had learned in America. By the age of 40, he had a chain of over 300 grocery stores across the UK.

In 1888, Lipton began selling tea, and in 1890 he visited Ceylon. He bought four estates near Haputale, and eventually acquired a dozen more. By growing his own tea and cutting out middlemen, he made tea affordable for working people. His tea, sold in brightly-coloured, eye-catching packets bearing the slogan *Straight from the tea gardens to the tea pot*, soon became synonymous with quality, affordable tea.

Lipton's favourite estate was Dambetenne, on the other side of St. Catherine's Mount from Amba Estate. Lipton would take guests for rather windy picnics on the summit, where they could gaze over the scenery. Today, a steep winding road leads from near Amba Estate to Lipton's Seat, offering some of the most spectacular views in Sri Lanka. Like Lipton, we love to take visitors for a breakfast picnic on the summit, before the clouds roll in from the plains below.

From one self-made tea pioneer to another

Beyond goddesses, elephant salt-trains and pioneering Scottish grocers, perhaps the most unique piece of Amba's history is the tale of how tea first came to be planted in the valley.

Ironically, Lipton and the other British plantation owners looked down on Ambadandegama Valley from their

estates on St. Catherine's Mount, but never got as far as planting tea in the valley. The original founder of Amba Estate was an illiterate, impoverished stone-cutter from Tamil Nadu, who built the entire estate from scratch and became one of the wealthiest men in Sri Lanka.

Thamba Arunasalam Pillai arrived in Ceylon with his wife and two sons from Tamil Nadu in southern India in 1890 (the same year as Lipton). He came to work as a labourer on a British-owned estate, called Pettigala. Despite his poverty and limited education, he quickly decided that there was not much future working for the British and determined to build his own tea business. Over the next ten years, he worked hard, rose to be a supervisor and in 1900, he scraped together enough money to buy 26 acres in undiscovered Ambadandegama valley from a local landowner.

While still working full-time at Pettigala, every weekend he brought his family and fellow workers to Amba, and slowly and painstakingly began the task of clearing the land, building stone terraces, walls and drains, and planting tea seedlings. 90% of the work was done by hand, without the benefit of machinery. Men and materials all came in by foot or bullock-cart, as there were no roads to the valley.

Despite challenges (and the shallow gravelly soil of Ambadandegama Valley), Pillai gradually increased his sales of green-leaf to nearby British tea factories. Just 10 years later in 1911, recognising the value of making his own tea, rather than just selling leaf to other factories, he built his own mini tea factory on the banks for the Kirinda River right above the first cascade of the Ravana Ella Waterfall. Remarkably, unlike most tea factories which rely on firewood and fuel-oil to power their rollers, sifters and driers, Pillai designed his factory to be totally powered by renewable energy. He cut a small channel out of the Kirinda River about 500 meters upstream from the factory and used the resulting 20 meter drop to the factory to run a small turbine which powered all the machinery in the factory.

The factory opened in 1912, and the family's fortune began to accumulate. Soon, neighbouring villagers began planting tea to supply the factory, a second factory was built, and by the 1930s, thousands of acres of tea were being cultivated in the valley by members of the family and their neighbours.

The valley still had no road, and all the materials that came in and the tea that went out was transported by bullock cart. In the 1930s, the Pillai family took out a loan to build the road that to this day connects the valley with the outside world. The loan almost bankrupted the family, but was finally paid off in 1945.

By the time Thamba Arunasalam Pillai died in 1953, the family had grown to be one of the richest in Ceylon, with thousands of acres of tea estates, several tea factories, fine bungalows, houses in Colombo and a fleet of cars. They were also generous benefactors of temples and pilgrim centres in Kataragama and civic facilities in Bandarawela and Badulla.

Decline and Strife

Like so many epic family sagas, no sooner had the family pulled itself from rags to riches, than the seeds of its own decline – decadence, family feuds and jealous rivals – were sown.

Pillai's two sons, Murugues and Agamara, took over the running of the factory and estate in the 1940s. But Agamara was more interested in spending money than earning it. So Murugues took sole ownership of the factory in 1945 to keep the proceeds out of Agamara's hands. After Independence in 1948, demands for greater worker rights increased, and in 1959 conflict with trade unions led to closure of the estate for two years. The business only survived thanks to the family's other investments elsewhere in Sri Lanka and India.

In 1960, Murugues died, and ownership of the factory and estate was split fifty-fifty between Murugues' son on one side and his brother's twelve sons on the other. In the early sixties, the factory was once again earning money and the family were able to buy shops in both Bandarawela and Colombo. However, Murugues' son and most of Agamara's sons had acquired a taste for the "good life", and money was constantly being drained to pay for expensive lifestyles and education at the finest schools for family members. Only one of Agamara's sons, Mohan Raj, stayed on to manage the factory, but he too ended up "cooking the books" to feather his own nest. By 1975, the business was bankrupt and the factory was forced to close.

In 1983, to add insult to injury, when two branches of the family could not agree what to do with the factory, one faction tore down their half of the factory, rather than let the other restart production. To this day, while some descendants of the family have gone on to build successful enterprises elsewhere, the factory stands abandoned and empty. The timbers and stone walls are slowly crumbling under the onslaught of the

elements, termites and other vermin. Most of the factory equipment has been stripped and sold, but fortunately the century-old water channel and turbine remain in place – awaiting the day when the remaining members of the family hope to restart 100% carbon-free production of fine teas.

Alongside the family's troubles, Sri Lanka's wider troubles also had their impact on the valley. In the late 1950s, tensions grew between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamil populations. These tensions eventually flared into civil war, with the Tamil Tigers seeking complete independence for the North and East of the island. The Tigers were defeated and the war ended in 2009, but 30 years of civil war heightened tensions between Sinhalese and Tamils all over the island. Remote Ambadandegama valley with a long history of cohabitation and collaboration between the two communities largely escaped the troubles. But even here, in 1983, a Marxist uprising sparked riots all over the island: many Tamil properties in the valley were burned and destroyed, families were attacked and many family members fled to India, never to return.

Meanwhile in the 1970s, the government introduced sweeping land reforms, nationalised large tea, rubber and coconut estates and limited each individual family's holdings to 50 acres. What remained of the Pillai descendants' estates were divided into 50-acre plots belonging to each family group or allocated to the Land Reform Commission. Some of this was distributed to local villagers and the rest remained in State control.

Gradual rebirth and recovery

The nationalisation of the large tea estates was reversed in the early 1990s, and management of most larger estates and factories was taken over by private companies. But the former estates of Ambadandegama valley remained fragmented, and the two factories remained idle, with local smallholders selling their greenleaf through middlemen to factories outside the valley.

In the late 1990s, a Sinhalese doctor from Colombo with an interest in the environment and traditional ayurvedic practices, began to buy up fragments of the former estate, with a view to one day creating a spiritual, ayurvedic retreat in this magical place. He slowly pieced together 100 acres of forest and former tea gardens, began to revive and replant the tea, and planted other crops like coffee and pepper, thereby creating the nucleus of what we today call Amba Estate.

Meanwhile, four friends, 1 originally from Sri Lanka, 1 from Uzbekistan, 1 from Italy and 1 from the US (all of whom had worked on projects to stimulate investment and local enterprise in various countries around the world) were on the lookout for an ideal place to start their own model development enterprise – a remote location with untapped tourism potential where the resulting job-creation and supply opportunities would benefit the local population. Through an ayurvedic doctor who operates a clinic just below Amba Estate, they were introduced to Dr. Pem and took over investment in the project in 2006. They immediately converted the Estate to organic and launched a plan to revive the tea, plant hundreds of other tree crops, restore the estate's water system and gradually build it up as a model community enterprise and farm.

In 2009, Karuna Mohan Raj, the great-grandson of Thamba Arunasalam Pillai, joined the team as full-time Estate Manager. And in 2010, Beverly Wainwright, a Scottish lady who had been a volunteer helping to build the capacity of local enterprises in Uva Province, joined the team as Business Development Manager. She and her husband, Neil Harrower, who had prior experience managing youth volunteer networks, took up residence in 2011. Together with Karuna and the local community, they helped to develop Amba's initial product range and guest services. Beverly and Neil returned to Scotland in 2015, but we remain indebted to them for their pioneering work. Beverly continues to work as a consultant to tea makers around the world.

Karuna's brother also manages the other larger estate in Ambadandegama valley, and both Karuna and his brother are married to Sinhalese women from the valley.

Amba today is in many ways a contemporary embodiment of the rich layers of history that have made this unique place – with a mixed Sinhalese and Tamil management team and workforce, a dose of entrepreneurial canny from the Scots, and a deep commitment to the natural beauty and spiritual resonance of this small corner of paradise.