

A visit to the Ambewela Farm



The vantage view point at Ambewela Farm affords mesmerising views of the surrounding landscape.

The lush green pastures of Ambewala and crisp cold climate takes you to another land. Soon, speckles of brown, black, and white appear, creating a picturesque scene. We were at the Ambewala Dairy Farm, and the cows had been led out for grazing.

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Photographs Menaka Aravinda.

Ambewala Farm had been established in the 1940s during World War II as a part of the food production program initiated by the then Minister of Agriculture, D S Senanayake. The Farm came under the purview of the Department of Agriculture, and European breeds were imported to yield high production of milk. In 2001, following the privatization initiative of the Government, Lanka Milk Foods acquired the Farm that consists of 500 hectares of land. The Farm produces over eight million liters of milk per year. Pasture lands have been developed with

nutritious types of grass, infrastructure, and new housing to enable animal/cow comfort. The best feeds, with required micronutrients, are prepared and given to the animals, and the in-house team of veterinary surgeons and nutritionists take care of the animals.

The Farm has three sections: the Ambewala Farm, New Zealand Farm, and Ambewala Products Farm. While the Ambewala Farm and Ambewala Products are not accessible to the public, New Zealand Farm is open for visitors. We were privileged to have been allowed to visit the Ambewala Farm and explore the premises.

The cows at the Ambewala farm are of the best quality, and it is the only modern and state-of-the-art facility in Sri Lanka. The two cow breeds are Holstein Friesian (black and white) from the Netherlands and Ayrshires from the UK. There are 2,500 animals with 1,000 being milked at the three locations.

The morning work had just begun, and the cows were taken to the grasslands. We were amazed by the magnitude of the operations. The pastures were well maintained, with the dung of the cows/cattle recycled as fertilizer for the soil. We took a drive up to the vantage point, where the massive windmills are located, and we were privy to the mesmerizing views. No one is allowed to this location without special permission from Lanka Milk Foods. The nature reserves of Seetha Eliya, Horton Plains and Hakgala surrounded us and on a clear day the four highest mountain peaks of the country (Piduruthalagala, Thotupola Kanda, Kirigalpotta, and Samanala Kanda) can be seen from the vantage point.

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The pasture is of an imported variety that has a three leaf clover and is the only such area in the country. The Farm also makes it a point to protect the environment by maintaining natural forest pockets, as well as waterways.

We next proceeded to one of the cow shelters, where the comfort of the animal is ensured by providing spacious living spaces with adequate waste disposal

systems. The floors are made in a manner that the animal feels as if they are on the grassy ground. The sounds of the cows mooing and moving around gave a sense of activity. Walking through while patting the animals was indeed an enjoyable experience. Thereafter, we proceed to the milking station. Milking is done three times a day; at five in the morning, noon, and nine in the night. As if on cue the cows came in single-file towards the milking station. They stood in line, in their allotted spaces, while the preliminary work of washing the containers, checking whether the cow is ready to be milked, ensuring that everything is cleaned and fixing the pumps were completed.

Pure and fresh milk started to fill into the containers. Generally, a cow would produce 25-28 liters on average per day. The milk thus collected is thereafter sent to the production facilities for processing and the manufacturing of the various Ambewala products. The cows will provide milk up to ten months of giving birth to a calf. Thereafter the cows are given a period of rest before they give birth to another calf, and the cycle continues.

Our next stop was where the little calves were kept. They each had their small area and were continuously fed and looked after by their care-givers. It was indeed surprising to see calves just born the previous day. The calves grow quickly as they are an imported breed and are weaned and introduced to the herd after three months.

We headed towards the New Zealand Farm, which was about a four-kilometer drive away from Ambewala. This Farm was thus named due to the support provided by the New Zealand government during its inception. Crowds were gathering to visit the Farm, and many were already inside discovering the workings of a dairy farm. In New Zealand Farm, the primary breed of cows is the black and white variety known as Friesians.

As in Ambewala here too, the cows were housed in comfortable shelters, and there were herds grazing on the grasslands as well. As the rain started to pour, the cows huddled together for warmth. New Zealand Farm is also home to rabbits and goats. The rabbits, kept as pets, are of two varieties; the breed from New Zealand Farm is pure white, and the breed from California, USA is white with black on the ear tips, nose, and tail. These animals are fluffy, almost like cotton balls hopping around. The beautiful white Saanen goats are from the Netherlands. The female goats and their offspring are kept separately from the males. These

goats easily climbed on to higher elevations and were curious as we passed them.

Having spent the day exploring the Ambewala Farm, we headed out drenched in rain and mud but content that we had experienced the workings of a fully integrated farm that encapsulates the concept of 'from the grass to the glass of milk.'

