

Amba Yaalu

Posted on

Redefining Hospitality through Women's Leadership

Amba Yaalu, a women-led hotel in Kandalama, Sri Lanka, offers a unique blend of hospitality, design, and community spirit.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.



Hospitality with a woman's touch – Amba Yaalu managed entirely by women, led by Jeewanthi Adhikari, Resort Manager.

Design that Tells a Story

A gentle breeze quietly sweeps through the interiors of Amba Yaalu, the only women-led hotel in Kandalama, Sri Lanka. The property is simple and understated in design, yet its presence is striking. Its open architecture, harking to minimalist constructs, wide entrance leading into a spacious hall that flows seamlessly to the pool, and a mango farm at the rear, give it the aura of an ancient royal audience chamber.

The pool feels timeless, reminiscent of a serene pond from Sri Lanka's ancient kingdoms. Elevated above the ground and edged with rugged rock, it blends effortlessly with the natural surroundings. The scenery at the back of the hotel is stunning; beyond the orchard of mango trees lies the storied Kandalama tank where the majestic elephants often gather, and beyond the waters, mountain ranges stretch into the horizon. This breathtaking background is ubiquitous, whether from the poolside, the garden, or the rooms; the hills stand still, offering guests the privilege of basking in their grandeur.

Amba Yaalu carries many layers of meaning, each deeply tied to identity and location. Amba, the Sinhala word for mango, reflects its setting – 3.5 acres of land

flourishing with 457 trees, not just of any variety, but the prized TJC mango. Yaalu, meaning friend, adds another dimension of warmth and connection. The name also recalls the beloved Sinhala novel Amba Yaaluwo, which tells the story of friendship so enduring that later it was adapted into a film and television series. This way, the name signifies not only the land and its bounty, but also friendship, hospitality, and cordiality, the very essence of the hotel.

Artful Interiors

The interior decor of Amba Yaalu speaks volumes, an ode to Sri Lanka's layered history. A hint of mango greets guests right at the entrance in a basket. Then, at the center, as you ascend the steps, a miniature lamp is perched atop a wooden peacock at whose feet lies a snake. This evokes Sri Lanka's guardian deity, Lord Kataragama, also known as Murugan or Skanda, who is traditionally depicted riding a peacock. At Amba Yaalu, the connection goes further: it references a tale of a demon who transformed into a mango tree to escape Lord Kataragama's wrath.

The first intense object to capture the eye is the striking figure of a Gara Yaka, a folkloric demon from traditional dance rituals, and the Yak Beraya (Drum) used in exorcism rituals. Above this figure, decorating the wall are more than 50 vibrant and fierce Raksha (demon) masks, long used in rituals and festivals as symbols of protection against evil.

The left wall tells another story; over 50 original Sri Lankan movie posters, carefully sourced from a passionate collector, stand as a gallery of cinematic history. Complementing them are vintage cameras that were once used in filmmaking. For locals, these pieces stir nostalgia; for visitors, they open a window into Sri Lanka's artistic heritage.

The decor continues to surprise. Enormous fabric-covered lanterns mark the entrance, while inside, oversized kites float from the ceiling. Behind the reception desk, thousands of multicolored bangles shimmer together to form an unconventional, dazzling background.

What makes Amba Yaalu truly unforgettable is this marriage of the unexpected. Ancient ritual objects meet 20th century cinema, creating a space that is at once unique, unusual, and deeply evocative. Every detail sparks curiosity, urging guests to explore the island's timeless and modern history.

The hotel is part of the Thema Collection, founded by veteran hotelier Chandra Wickremasinghe, a chain in which each property is designed to address a distinct social issue.



Golden skies embrace the hotel nestled against the Kandalama tank and the mountains.



The open restaurant carries forward the hotel's cinematic theme.



A serene welcome at the ayurvedic spa.



Grace in service, strength in leadership – The front office staff with the unique backdrop at the reception counter.

The Unique Concept - An All-Women Ensemble

What's the story behind Sri Lanka's first women-led hotel? According to Resort Manager Jeewanthi Adhikari, who is warm, courteous, and always ready to accommodate guests, the idea was inspired by Chairman Chandra Wickremasinghe's admiration for his mother. Having witnessed his mother raise seven children independently, he believed that women can realize their full potential when empowered to thrive without depending on male support. The hotel is part of the Thema Collection, founded by veteran hotelier Chandra Wickremasinghe, a chain in which each property is designed to address a distinct social issue.

Jeewanthi explained that the hotel was founded to encourage more women to

pursue careers in Sri Lanka's hospitality industry. She pointed out that despite receiving the same education as men, many women are compelled by cultural norms to step away from their careers after marriage, often around the age of 24-25. The hotel seeks to challenge this trend by providing opportunities for women to advance their careers while balancing family responsibilities.

During recruitment, the management deliberately hired 20 percent of employees without hospitality experience, opening doors for more women to join the industry. For leadership roles, they focused on women from surrounding communities to support a healthier work-life balance and selected candidates previously overlooked for promotions in male-dominated workplaces. This approach generated enthusiasm among the staff, as many were allowed to step into positions one level higher than their prior experience.

Naturally, opening a new hotel with an all-female team came with challenges, especially during the pre-opening phase, when much was still unfamiliar. The property was handed over in late November 2024, with some areas becoming available by the end of the month. A soft opening took place on December 2, 2024, the team welcomed Christmas guests by December 25, and the hotel officially opened on January 10, 2025.

The hotel has many firsts to celebrate. For the first time, its engineering and IT departments are led entirely by women. Another notable milestone is the bell desk, traditionally a male-dominated role in the hospitality industry, successfully managed by women. Jeewanthi credits this achievement partly to the fact that many staff had never witnessed bell desk operations elsewhere, and hence carried no preconceived notions of it being 'men's work.' Moreover, many women brought physical strength from their previous experiences working in homes, farms, or abroad.

Breaking norms is the standard at Amba Yaalu. A symbolic example can even be seen in some staff uniforms; some blouses have asymmetrical sleeves, a creative idea from the Chairman to challenge convention. Guests will undoubtedly find this subtle yet striking detail unusual and intriguing.

The Aesthetic Journey in the Accommodation

The hotel offers 33 bedrooms, categorized into deluxe rooms, suites, and attic suites. Each room includes an additional bed that converts from a sofa, eliminating

the need for extra roll-ins. Deluxe rooms feature bathtubs on the balcony, allowing guests to soak in scenic mountain views in complete indulgence, while suites are equipped with Jacuzzis and pantry facilities with microwaves. All rooms open onto private balconies.

Adding a touch of symbolism, the hotel's four suites are named after the goddesses Parvathi, Sarasvati, Durga, and Lakshmi. Each is connected in some way to the mango tree, its fruits, or leaves, making the choice of name far from accidental.

The bedrooms continue the property's minimalist aesthetic: neat, understated, and sustainable. Steel structures for the framework for beds, side tables, stools, and racks, while walls are intentionally left with a rustic, unfinished texture, echoing the lobby's design, and reinforcing the ethos of minimal material use. A whimsical highlight awaits on the terrace, where lampshades are crafted in the shape of mangoes - a playful nod to the hotel's design story.

For recreation, guests can enjoy a fully equipped gym, spa, billiards, giant chess, table tennis, and nearby attractions like Sigiriya, Minneriya National Park, Pidurangala Mountain, village tours, and elephant safaris.

The hotel has embraced various sustainability initiatives, including organic farming, effective waste management, and reducing plastic use through refillable glass bottles. Guests are also encouraged to reuse linens, helping to reduce water and chemical consumption.



The hotel's chef and her assistant ready with a fresh catch of fish from the Kandalama tank.



From the kitchen to the table prepared with love.



Breaking barriers, setting standards – the kitchen staff at Amba Yaalu.



Women managing every detail.



A celebration of women's empowerment through hospitality.

The Mango Farm, Menu Features, and Entertainment

The hotel invites guests to participate in mango harvesting, offering hands-on lessons on organic farming practices such as using protection bags for pest control and slow ripening. Keeping mangoes in grow bags for 90 days allows the fruit to mature gradually, developing a richer flavor and an even coloration. Mangoes are then woven into the guest experience, featured in the hotel's welcome drink and highlighted in the menu with specialties like mango curry and mango-inspired starters, creating a meaningful connection between the property's mango farm heritage and the culinary offerings. That said, dining at Amba Yaalu goes far beyond mangoes. Their all-female kitchen staff crafts a wide array of local and international dishes, catering to the diverse palates of guests who choose the hotel to spend their well-deserved vacation.

The restaurant carries forward the cinematic theme, greeting guests with a nostalgic 'No Smoking' sign reminiscent of those once displayed in old cinemas. Inside, vintage cameras and classic movie posters enhance the decor, while the open layout creates an informal, relaxed atmosphere that echoes throughout the property.

The hotel offers evening entertainment featuring soothing melodies from flutists and a female sitarist, a university student supported through their community development program. For local guests looking for a refreshing change from their routine, the hotel occasionally invites in a master musician and his daughter to perform beloved movie songs.

The guest experience at Amba Yaalu is defined by teamwork and a warm and welcoming culture. According to Jeewanthi, after six months of operation, the all-female team of 86 distinguishes itself through meticulous attention to detail and a genuine care for their work. Guests have responded enthusiastically to the women-led concept, often praising and supporting the initiative, which was launched as a sustainability project aimed at boosting female workforce participation in a country where women outnumber men.



The hotel's pool merges effortlessly with the backdrop of the mango orchard.



Amba Yaalu – A sanctuary of freedom and tranquility.

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