

Exploring Handunugoda: The Tea Estate that Doubles as a Museum

Posted on

Home to a tea museum and an immersive tea experience, the Handunugoda Tea Estate offers visitors a journey through history, craftsmanship, and flavor.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

Photography Sujith Heenatigala and Dinesh Fernando.



Each bud is carefully cut into golden bowls — the art of Virgin White Tea at Handunugoda.

A notice at the Handunugoda tea factory proudly declares: Handunugoda Tea Factory operates machines that are over 145 years old. It's a working, living museum.

True to its word, this tea estate nestled in the southern district of Galle stands as a living tribute to Ceylon Tea – representing not just an industry with a rich history and craftsmanship, but also a celebration of heritage lovingly preserved.

At the heart of this story is Herman Gunaratne – a doyen of Sri Lanka's post-independence tea journey – who owns and manages the Handunugoda Tea Estate, under whose stewardship the estate has evolved into a destination that brings the romance of tea to life. From the hum of century-old machinery to the aroma of freshly brewed blends, visitors are treated to an immersive tea experience that includes a museum and curated tastings, an education in flavor and history. Here, every sip tells a story of soil, skill, and legacy steeped in time.

Exploring Handunugoda: The Tea Estate that Doubles as a Museum

At the heart of this story is Herman Gunaratne –a doyen of Sri Lanka’s post-independence tea journey – who owns and manages the Handunugoda Tea Estate, under whose stewardship the estate has evolved into a destination that brings the romance of tea to life.

The Handunugoda estate was once a sprawling 2,200-acre expanse of rubber and coconut plantations owned by Herman Gunaratne’s family. Life, however, had its own unpredictable turns. A thousand acres were lost to his grandfather’s gambling, and another 900 were taken over by the government. What remained – a modest 200 acres – might have seemed a shadow of its former glory, but in Herman’s hands, it became the seed of a remarkable revival.

Nearly four decades ago, Herman returned to his ancestral land, bringing with him over fifty years of experience in the tea industry. Having served as chairman of the Janatha Estates Development Board (JEDB) and deputy chairman of Dilmah Plantations, he poured his expertise, passion, and imagination into creating what is believed to be the world’s first tea plantation at sea level. Of the 200 acres, 100 are planted with tea, while the remainder is used for the cultivation of rubber, cinnamon, vanilla, and coconuts.



Herman Gunaratne, a visionary behind the legacy.



Handunugoda Tea Factory, with machines over 145 years old, preserves the art of traditional tea-making.

From the ground up, he built a new factory that boasts history. He salvaged machines from long-forgotten colonial-era tea factories, restoring them and giving the estate a soul steeped in heritage. These time-worn engines still buzz with energy, transforming the factory into a living chronicle of Ceylon Tea.

The estate offers visitors a truly immersive and educational experience. Guided tours are conducted by knowledgeable hosts fluent in English, Sinhala, Tamil, and German, ensuring that every guest feels at home. As visitors walk through the

Exploring Handunugoda: The Tea Estate that Doubles as a Museum

plantation, they gain an intimate understanding of the tea-making process, a journey that often leaves them amazed by the effort and artistry behind a single cup of tea. According to Herman, it kindles in them a new respect for tea.

The 90-minute experience begins with a tour of the plantation, followed by a tour of the working factory, where one can witness the machinery that has been in operation for over a century still at work. The processes of sifting and separating offer a glimpse into how tea leaves are transformed into graded varieties.

The tea museum is housed on the upper floor of a modest two-storey building that exudes rustic charm. Inside, a fascinating collection of artifacts tells the story of Sri Lanka's tea heritage.

Among the exhibits are relics from bygone estates – an old sewing machine, probably used in a planter's bungalow, vintage typewriters, an old-style tea leaf roller, and antique balance scales that were indispensable to the trade. These scales played a crucial role in quality control and trade, when every ounce of precision determined the value of the tea.



The journey begins here—freshly plucked tea leaves are laid out for withering.



From leaf to cup, discover the rich heritage of Ceylon tea at Handunugoda's tasting room.

Handunugoda is more than a tea estate; it is a thriving eco-habitat where birds and creatures coexist harmoniously with the people, forming a blended community within the tea ecosystem.

Visitors can also admire vintage tea boilers and dispensers that once served as the heart of colonial tea rituals, along with a delicate display of chinaware – fine porcelain cups and saucers, intricate teapots, and floral-patterned tableware that recalls the elegance of Ceylon's early tea culture. Even a clock from an old

plantation finds its place here.

The walls are lined with photographs chronicling Herman's journey through the decades in the tea industry, alongside posters, paintings, and historical notes that capture the faces and the stories behind the island's tea legacy.

Downstairs, the experience comes alive. The ground floor transforms into a sensory theater. It's the tea tasting room where visitors are invited to sample up to 45 different types of tea produced on the estate.

The plantation tour at Handunugoda is often described as a must-do experience, offering a captivating story behind Herman's superior Virgin White Tea, one of the rarest teas in the world.

Herman recounts that his inspiration came from an ancient Chinese tradition dating back to around 500 BCE. According to legend, Mandarins once employed virgins to harvest tender tea leaves using golden scissors, allowing them to fall into golden bowls. The tea thus made was presented as a tribute to the emperor. "I was enchanted by the story, not by the logic," Herman remarks.

Intrigued by the tale, he embarked on an experiment, comparing tea that had not been touched by human hands to conventionally processed tea. When professional tea tasters consistently found the untouched variety to be superior, the results spoke for themselves. Scientific analysis by SGS Switzerland later confirmed that this rare tea contains 10.11 percent antioxidants, compounds known for their anti-carcinogenic and anti-aging properties.

At Handunugoda, this remarkable tradition continues with a modern twist. Women wearing special attire and gloves delicately pluck only the unopened buds with scissors, placing them directly into golden bowls. The process is slow, meticulous, and almost ceremonial in nature. From this labor of love emerges just 20 kilograms of Virgin White Tea each month, making it as precious as gold.



Every glass narrates a tale of craftsmanship and tradition. Tea tasting at Handunugoda Tea Estate.





Echoes of the past – traditional tea-making equipments preserved at the Handunugoda Tea Estate.

The Handunugoda Estate is sustained by a close-knit community. Around 30 to 40 Tamil workers, who live on the plantation itself, are described by Herman as possessing the real skill in harvesting, while others come from nearby villages. Altogether, nearly a 100 families draw their livelihoods from this small yet vibrant estate. Each day, the tea experience at Handunugoda attracts close to 200 visitors.

For Herman, his goal is clear – to transform Handunugoda into a model plantation in southern Sri Lanka before the end of his life. “Tea has been my inherent way of living,” he says. To honor that bond, Herman has planted a section of rainforest trees on the estate, creating a sanctuary where nature and tea coexist in harmony. Today, Handunugoda is more than a tea estate; it is a thriving eco-habitat where birds and creatures coexist harmoniously with the people, forming a blended community within the tea ecosystem.

Having long been a livewire in Sri Lanka’s grand tea industry, Herman possesses an intimate knowledge of its storied past. Driven by a life-long desire to share that legacy with the world, he has woven together history, culture, and craftsmanship into a living narrative that celebrates the spirit of tea – its authenticity, purity, and enduring significance.

Through Handunugoda, Herman has created more than a plantation. He has made a tapestry of heritage, one that continues to teach, inspire, and remind the world of Sri Lanka’s most treasured gift: tea.

Handunugoda Tea Factory Tittagalla, Ahangama,
(+94) 77 972 0095
info@hermanteas.com
hermanteas.com