

# Mirissa Hills

Posted on

## **Where Cinnamon tells its Story**

Nestled within the Mirissa Hills in the southern district of Matara stands the world's first museum dedicated to cinnamon.

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“The Poetry of Cinnamon” wall at the Cinnamon Museum celebrates the exotic spice through words, art, and scent.

Celebrated as the world's most exotic spice, cinnamon has long been synonymous with allure and luxury, inspiring poets worldwide. So tempting and opulent is its appeal that the Poetry Wall at the Cinnamon Museum in Mirissa can't help but wax lyrical about it – some verses even mischievously so. One quips, “The whore displaces the wife; and in perfumes, the cinnamon more is esteemed than the rose!” Hundreds of lines of prose and poetry alike sing tributes to this aromatic treasure, and who could blame them? Such is its value.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka proudly holds the crown as the birthplace of “True Cinnamon” or *Cinnamomum zeylanicum*, prized for its purity, authenticity, and delicate flavor. So rare and refined is Ceylon Cinnamon that it exudes an air of quiet sophistication in a world where countless imitations masquerade as the real thing.

Mirissa is known for many things – but cinnamon rarely makes that list. This seaside haven, celebrated for its beaches and surfing, hides a fragrant secret inland – rolling hills carpeted with cinnamon plantations. Among them, none is as expansive as Mirissa Hills.

Spread across 50 acres, the estate was acquired in 2002 by Miles Young, a British citizen, who breathed new life into the timeworn property. What was once a neglected plantation now thrives as a fully restored, working cinnamon estate.

From the moment one enters Mirissa Hills, the transformation begins. The roads narrow into lush paths. The terrain rises gradually, while to one side the cinnamon plantation gleams across the slopes, a testament to the quiet labor of those who climb and descend its inclines to harvest this precious spice.

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The Phoenix on its final flight to gather cinnamon — a captivating sculpture by Chinese artist Zhang Zhaohong.



A journey through time and spice — where history, trade, and aroma converge at the Cinnamon Museum. A journey through time and spice — where history, trade, and aroma converge at the Cinnamon Museum.



Laki Senanayake's vibrant sculpture of the mythical bird Cinnamolagus celebrates imagination, nature, and the legendary spice of cinnamon.



Brass plaques honoring the Great Bonfires

of Cinnamon.



Today, Mirissa Hills unfolds in three distinct tiers of experience. At its base rests The Bungalow, a restored old estate house. Midway up the hill stands the Cinnamon Museum and Visitors' Center, home to four simple rustic rooms that invite guests to rest amid the stories of cinnamon—the world's only museum dedicated to this aromatic marvel. And, crowning the summit is Mount Cinnamon, a striking contemporary residence with sweeping 360° views, where modern luxury meets the soul of Sri Lankan art and design.

In 2012, Miles Young introduced the Cinnamon Trail, a guided walk through the plantation that reveals the art and craft of cinnamon cultivation and processing. His vision soon expanded to creating a cinnamon museum, a place that would celebrate the spice's rich heritage. Young began gathering information, artifacts, and curiosities from Sri Lanka and around the world to bring this dream to life.

After several unforeseen delays, the museum finally opened its doors in April 2024. Every artifact within its walls has been personally selected, designed, and curated by Miles Young himself, who also serves as the Warden of New College, Oxford—a testament to his passion for curation and his keen eye for cultural storytelling.

The Cinnamon Museum and Visitors' Center is the work of one of Sri Lanka's celebrated architects, C. Anjelandran, whose masterful touch bears the unmistakable influence of his mentor, the legendary Geoffrey Bawa. His architectural language, minimal yet deeply rooted in place, flows through the museum as well as Mount Cinnamon that crowns the estate.

The museum's open courtyard stands as a quiet tribute to Bawa's love of light, air, and fluid spaces. The ground floor, designed for guest accommodation, unfolds around a serene central courtyard, connected by a seamless corridor that invites stillness. Its village-like aesthetic surrounded by cinnamon groves and shaded by trees, gives the place a gentle remoteness – a retreat from the hustle and bustle.



The VOC insignia and exhibits from the Dutch colonial period highlight the historical

legacy of Ceylon cinnamon.

The Cinnamon Museum stands as a charming, saffron-hued retreat, its simplicity echoing the quiet grace of old Sri Lankan homes, devoid of ostentation. At its heart lies a plain courtyard, brought to life by a sculpted phoenix by Chinese artist Zhang Zhaohong, captured in its final flight to gather cinnamon. Vintage furnishings, rough-hewn floors, and earthy tones complete the space, creating a rustic grace that perfectly mirrors the spirit of its surroundings.

A narrow staircase, lined with vintage maps of the island, leads visitors upward into the world of cinnamon. At the center stands an imposing sculpture by legendary Laki Senananayake: a colossal Cinnamolagus, the mythical beast invented by Arab traders in the Middle Ages to ward off intruders from their most prized treasure: cinnamon.

The museum journey begins with a striking revelation – a piece of cassia bark, the so-called “pretender” to True Cinnamon, displayed to educate visitors on the difference between the two. From this first encounter, the narrative unfolds, placing Ceylon Cinnamon on its rightful pedestal as the queen of spices.

The estate’s Cinnamon Trail is as immersive as the museum experience. It begins with an explanation of cinnamon’s history and various plant varieties, then proceeds to the factory, where visitors learn about planting, growing, and maintaining cinnamon, as well as the process of cinnamon peeling.



The flag of the Salagama caste, known for their hereditary role as cinnamon peelers on the island.



Tracing the spice routes that connect continents through the aroma of cinnamon.



A recreated kitchen at the Cinnamon Museum showcases traditional Sri Lankan cooking utensils and methods.

As visitors move through the exhibits, they discover the history of cinnamon, its scientific and botanical details, and the tools and techniques used in its cultivation and peeling. Displays highlight its cultural significance, the legends woven around it, and its historical role in global trade, from Arab merchants to the Dutch colonists who once controlled the island's cinnamon trade.

Three brass plaques embedded on the floor commemorate the Great Bonfires of Cinnamon in Holland – fiery testaments to its immense value. At one end are replicas of historic ships – the Arab Dhow, the Portuguese Caravel, and the Dutch East Indiaman – that illustrate how cinnamon carried the island's name across the seas.

The story deepens with accounts of Dutch fortresses colonialists built inland to protect their trade, including remnants like the fort at Katuwana, and with rare artifacts that Miles Young himself had painstakingly sourced, among them the insignia of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the flag of the Salagama caste – the hereditary cinnamon peelers of the island.

The journey concludes in the evocatively named Love Room, a sensorial tribute to cinnamon's role as an elixir of desire, celebrating its use in perfumes and incense.

The museum opens into an octagonal-shaped balcony on the upper floor, a vertical connection to the downstairs courtyard. Here, a space is dedicated to celebrating the multifaceted role of cinnamon in cuisine and its healing properties. One side houses a recreated kitchen, complete with traditional utensils, at its heart a grinding stone, once used to turn cinnamon bark into powder. Nearby, an area for visitors features two magnificent artworks by Ena de Silva, once again as odes to this treasured spice.

Downstairs, by night, the courtyard transforms into a tranquil haven, unfolding an evening spent under the stars, with lamps aglow in the quietness of the night, and the scent of cinnamon lingering in the air.

After the museum experience, visitors can also visit Mount Cinnamon, a four-bedroom luxury villa perched at the plantation's summit. Its design echoes the

property's tasteful simplicity, featuring open terraces, airy spaces, and a sweeping sea-facing veranda overlooking Weligama Bay. Inside, an imposing sculpted screen of figurines, designed by Laki Senanayake, separates the drawing room from the dining room. A breakfast terrace invites lingering at any hour, while a courtyard pool offers the perfect getaway.

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Thilak has been part of Mirissa Hills since Miles Young acquired the property in 2002. As its longtime manager, he knows every path, tree, and corner of the property. He explains that museum and estate tours run daily from 9:30 am until 4:30 pm, with guided walks offered hourly, even for a single visitor. The experience is immersive, complete with cinnamon-inspired cuisine like cinnamon rice, cinnamon ice cream, and cinnamon pancakes. The estate also employs three families of seasonal peelers and one resident peeler, who skillfully demonstrates each step of the process, from loosening the bark to curling the quills that become Ceylon's most prized cinnamon.

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The sculpted screen by Laki Senanayake serves as the visual centerpiece of Mount Cinnamon.



Tranquil hospitality at the Cinnamon Museum and Visitor Center — where comfort

meets heritage.