Umandawa: A Spiritual Retreat

Posted on



At Umandawa, discipline and mindfulness are inculcated and reflected in daily life.

Discovering Mindfulness, Wellness and Happiness in a one of a kind monastery:

Nestled amidst the mountainous valley in Melsiripura, Kurunegala, Umandawa is a unique retreat that exudes tranquility, serenity and peace. A place where one could learn the art of living through Buddhist philosophy, those who arrive at Umandawa ease into a journey of mindfulness, wellness and happiness.

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Photography Menaka Aravinda.

A distinctive concept of Most Ven Siri Samanthabhadra Arahath Thero, Umandawa is spread across 70 acres. Umandawa was initially an abandoned land that was overgrown with jungle, the Thero visualized a master plan to create an aesthetically pleasing and environmentally friendly ‘walking monastery’ with hamlets, gravel paths, gardens, organic farms, ponds and large water bodies, and sculptures. The balance of the environment was re-aligned by creating rain gardens and by growing several varieties of plants, flowers as well as trees both Sri Lankan and foreign. By doing so wildlife too has been encouraged to flourish at Umandawa. The Thero created a healthy, and nourishing environment, where people can learn the art of living in harmony with one another and with the Earth.

The meaning of Umandawa is the sanctuary of the wise or the spiritually awakened as it is a place where both the Sangha and lay persons inculcate the practice of mindfulness and spirituality. Furthermore, the *kavya* or poem of the Ummagga Jathakaya was written in Kurunegala, and the name of the book containing the *kavya* is known as Umandawa. Thus, there is a rich history and meaning to the name. Those participating in the retreats will work side-by-side with Buddhist monks *(Bhikkhu)* and nuns *(Bhikkhuni)*. Everyone lives freely, without any disturbance from the pressures of daily life. Each and every element is linked to the environment.

> ***A concept of Most Ven Siri Samanthabhadra Arahath Thero, Umandawa is a haven for those who seek consolation in life. Built in harmony with nature and reminiscent of ancient Sri Lankan Kingdoms, Umandawa delivers complex Buddhist teachings to laypersons in a simple and practical manner to experience mindfulness, wellness and happiness in everyday life.***

The key is to be mindful. At Umandawa, Vipassana meditation is practiced, which is learning to be mindful in every activity that one does. For beginners, first *Maithree Bhavana*, which is the meditation on loving, kindness and *Anapanasathi Bhavana* that is focusing on your breathing is taught before proceeding to Vipassana mediation, which is a more advanced form of training for the mind to be mindful.

Mindfulness is woven into all daily activities, where training is given to be

mindful throughout the day: while eating, walking, working, or enjoying a meal together. Umandawa is a beautiful, nourishing, simple environment in which to cultivate the mind of awakening. Both the Sangha, Nuns and participants enjoy periods of silence, sitting meditation, rest, relaxation and mindful work. Residents of the Monastery have to travel on foot, and engage in the daily activities of the Monastery including, planting trees, maintenance, engaging in organic farming as well as preparing meals, thereby learning mindfulness by focusing on each activity. Everything is organic at Umandawa, and no artificial fertilizer is used in the cultivation of fresh produce or paddy. There is lush greenery, and abundance of fruits, vegetables and flowers. Spice gardens and fields of ginger are also a part of the landscape.



Serene and verdant Umandawa Monastery spreads across 70 acres.

Umandawa is a hive of activity with Buddhist Monks and Nuns in saffron robes together with volunteers and participants working to develop mindfulness. Fresh vegetables are brought into the kitchen to prepare meals. Both the Buddhist monks and nuns together with the participants prepare the ingredients, adding spices and condiments to cook the meals. Wood-lit stoves and copper saucepans are used to ensure that the nutritional goodness of the ingredients are preserved. Bio gas is

generated on the property and is utilized to fuel the cookers. It is a self-sufficient cycle at Umandawa where everything is inherently linked with the environment.

> ***Umandawa is a hive of activity with Monks, Nuns and volunteers participating in daily activities. Fresh, organic home-grown vegetables are brought into the kitchen to prepare meals. Wood-fired stoves and traditional cooking methods ensure the nutritional goodness is retained.***
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> ***Mindfulness is woven into every daily activity and it is a self-sufficient cycle at Umandawa where mankind exists in harmony with the environment.***

On the upper level of the kitchen herbs and spices are dried and packed, fruit jams are made, other condiments and food items such as dried tomatoes, ash plantain, jak and even manioc flour are made and packaged. Furthermore, coconut butter, ice cream, and various types of oil are also made at Umandawa. Generally, the Buddhist nuns together with volunteers make food items and beverages, which are not for commercial purposes. It is done to provide the knowledge and experience to those of all age groups that visit or participate in the retreats. Water purification is done at Umandawa as well, where all drinking water requirements are supplied from within. Water is bottled in large glassware ensuring that the environment too is taken into consideration.

Walking along the gravel paths at Umandawa, you experience the beauty of the cooling environment. Ponds and various other water bodies have been created to provide water for cultivation as well as to cool the environment. Large trees provide shade and the stream that runs along the boundary provides the soothing sounds of flowing water. The large ponds have both native as well as foreign varieties of fish. Reminiscent of ancient Sri Lanka, replicas of historical sculptures are placed at various places of the Monastery, this includes the Samadhi Buddha statue from the Anuradhapura era, Buddha statue with the elaborate pandol from Uththararamaya and guard-stones from the Polonnaruwa era as well as Nagarupa (cobra statues) amongst many others. Each and every element of the Monastery has been designed and planned according to the vision of Most Ven Siri Samanthabhadra Arahath Thero. The architecture and designs of the buildings are beautiful as well as aesthetically pleasing each with a unique theme. Colors are used perfectly with

interiors furnished to match the theme.

> ***At dawn, the Bhikkhu and Bhikkhuni arrive at the dining hall, in a manner that demonstrates how mindful they are, even at taking every new step on their path.***

Kethumathi Prasadaya is the *awasaya* (residence) of the Most Ven Siri Samanthabhadra Arahath Thero has been inspired by ancient temples that were multi-storeyed. The vibrant colors that have been used are similar in color to the flowers in the garden. Beautiful murals adorn the walls and a resplendent Buddha statue, which is a replica of the statue at the Lankathilake Viharaya in Kandy. The interior is white and pure. The selection of colors and furnishing also indicate the teachings of life.

The scenic Manel Asapuwa and Mayurashramaya are two other chalets providing accommodation to those participating in the retreats.

At dawn the *Bhikkhu* and the *Bhikkhuni* arrive in a disciplined manner, mindful of each step. They sit on the grassy lawn and engage in a discussion with Most Ven Siri Samanthabhadra Arahath Thero. Once the discussion is over, first the *Bhikkhu*, then the *Bhikkhuni* and finally the lay men and women serve themselves and partake their meals, all at the same time. This is a deviation from the norm where generally the meals are served to those who are ordained by the devotees. And, lay men and women eat only after the *Bhikkhu* and the *Bhikkhuni* have finished. But it is not so at Umandawa, as Most Ven Siri Samanthabhadra Arahath Thero explains that we are all humans and when it comes to food all are equal. The midday Dane is served at the Kethumathi Prasadaya in a similar manner.

The tree house is a unique feature providing triple accommodation. Open on all sides visitors can enjoy views of the paddy fields and the beautiful surroundings. The Cottages are convertainer rooms and are on a platform atop the pond. Each hamlet has double occupancy. Umandawa provides accommodation from luxury, semi luxury to standard, that totals 20 chalets. Visitors can embark on a journey of mindfulness by participating in retreats that are three to seven days or even longer. All facilities are provided by the Monastery.

> ***Umandawa offers comfortable choices for those who wish to***

follow their heart and stay for a while*. *From luxury Kethumathi Prasadaya to sharing accommodation in Mayura Ashramaya, there are many options available to the visitor.

Ravana Asapuwa is where the ayurvedic centre is located with the provision of wellness for body and mind. Further, a qualified ayurvedic doctor is also present to provide treatment. Digayu Café serves food and beverages including, tea, coffee, herbal beverages, fruit juices and refreshments. Dinner too is served at the Digayu Café for the participants of the retreat. The Café is located in the Nandana Uyana with a waterfront view, where boat rides can be taken on the lake as well. The Ambalama and Mayurasanaya are multipurpose halls that are used for almsgivings, Dhamma discussions, meditation, yoga and other group activities. The Pyramid located on a small islet is a replica of the pyramids in Giza. The pyramid has no religion, and anyone can meditate or practice their faith in this tranquil space.

The Maha Sukhawathi Auditorium is the main Dhamma Shalawa and as evening approaches all Buddhist monks, nuns and other residents and volunteers engage in prayer and worship within its confines. The resplendent golden statue of Most Ven Siri Samanthabhadra Arahath Thero evokes a sense of spirituality and calmness.

If one should decide to stay at the Monastery, there are categories from luxury rooms to tree-houses – to suit every need, and preference.

Mindfulness is inculcated not only through daily activities but visitors can engage in excursions and other programs. Hiking across the surrounding mountains (Galpaya, Madahapola Kanda, Udangaraya and Alumgala), excursions to Hulangala, boat rides and visits to neighbouring reservoirs, bird watching and witnessing wild elephants. As an activity of the retreat, participants can visit villages and schools in the surrounding mountains. They can experience the culture and lifestyle of village life, and during their visits, assist school children with the provision of educational materials. Visitors can also engage in tree planting programs to ensure that the environment is protected for posterity. Retreats can be organized throughout the year, according to personal preferences, and all inclusive packages are offered with transport. Visitors can also travel by air, as Umandawa has its own helipad.

To be mindful is the path to freedom and happiness. Umandawa Monastery provides a unique experience to generate positive energy in everyday life.

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UMANDAWA











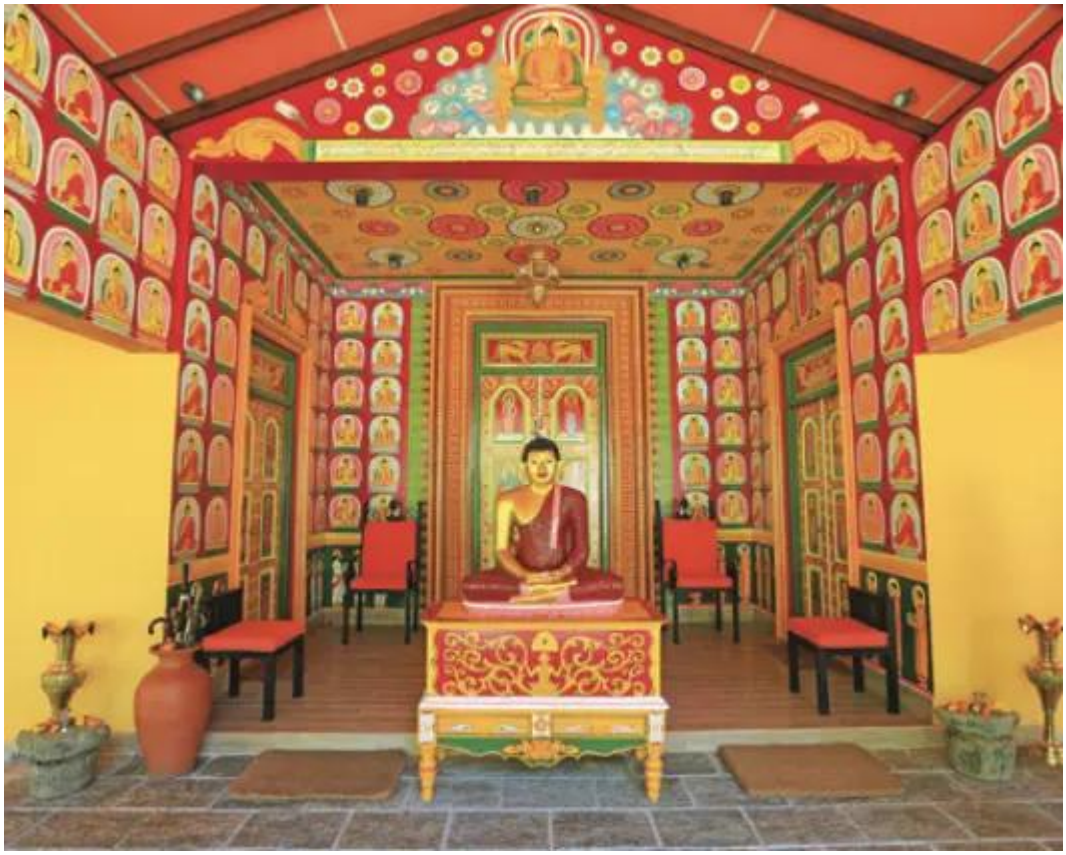



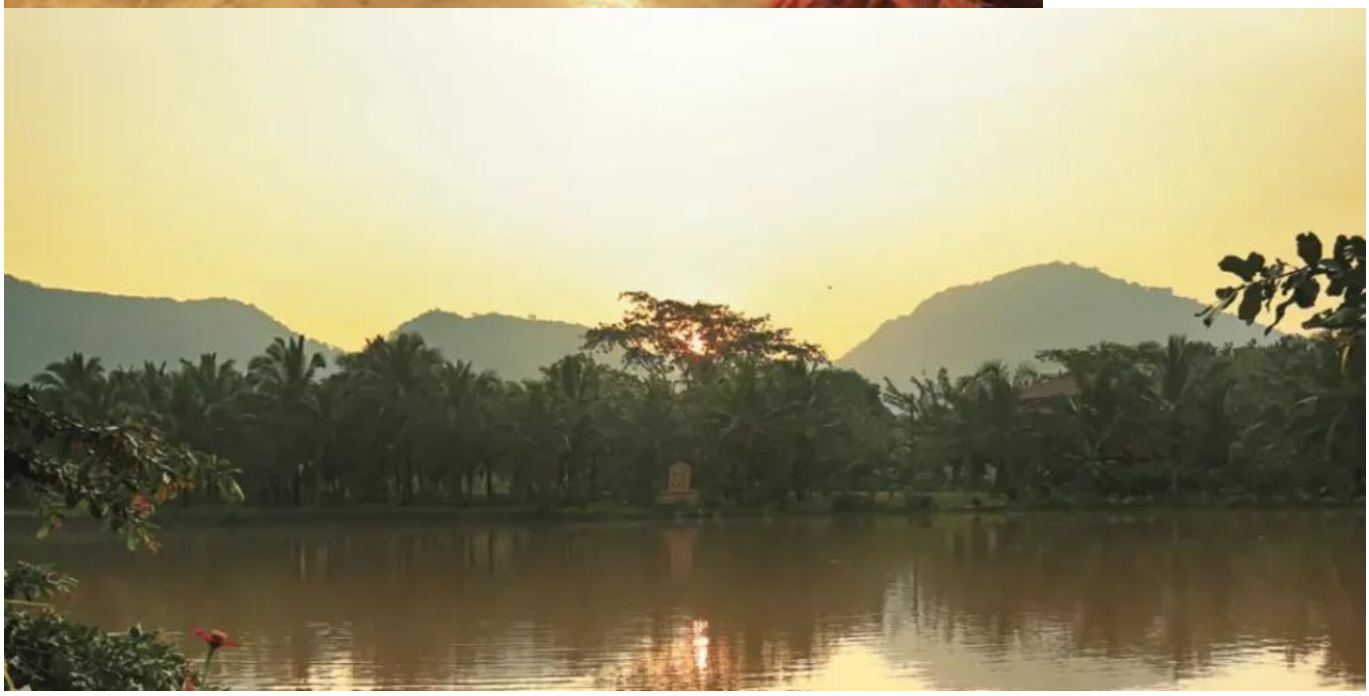

Kethumathi Prasadaya

Five luxurious double bedrooms with ensuite bathrooms.





Manel Asapuwa

Semi-luxury accommodation with a private garden.
Two bedrooms, ensuite bathrooms
Ideal for 4 – 6 pax









The Tree House

A chance to experience the most unexpected...
One bedroom with double and single beds.
Ideal for 3 – 4 pax





The Cottages

Airconditioned accommodation in convertainers on water.
Two beds, ensuite bathrooms
Ideal for 2 – 3 pax





Mayura Ashramaya

Perfect accommodation for young groups and students.
Two bedrooms, one large bathroom
Ideal for 10 pax









