

TAPPING INTO HIGH-YIELD TOURISM

BY REPOSITIONING SRI LANKA'S DESTINATION IMAGE

SHIROMAL COORAY

MANAGING DIRECTOR - JETWING TRAVELS

Could you give an overview of Jetwing Travels and your current role in the organization as its Managing Director?

Jetwing as a brand is quite popular in Sri Lanka through our chain of hotels but of course we also have our own travel section where we offer both inbound and outbound travel. Our inbound travel section is in the business of bringing in foreign tourists into the country and we take care of all their needs from the time they arrive at the airport until we drop them back at the airport by arranging them everything needed including hotels, guides, and transport within

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the country. What we do in our outbound section is that we take Sri Lankan people overseas on guided tours. We also have specialized areas for eco holidays, adventure and we also have an airline section, that functions as a GSA for airlines. So, that's briefly about the Jetwing Travel related company. My brother and I run it as if it is a family business. I currently work in the capacity of chairman and managing director of Jetwing Travels.

Has the persisting economic situation in the country had an impact on the Jetwing Travels progression in the short run? If so, how?

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Yes, unfortunately it has. Even before the Covid pandemic, we had the Easter attack in 2019, and then numbers fell but it actually took off very well before Covid. Unfortunately, after Covid we had very little business for about 18 months. Then from November last year things started to look better; and even back in March 2022, we had good occupancy and people coming into the country from different parts of the world. The curfew we imposed, the acts of violence that took place, the lack of fuel, gas, power and medicine plus all these images going up in international media showing how people are affected is having an impact on the tourism industry. Tourists are also concerned that if they have a medical emergency, we may not be equipped to take care of them. So, people are reluctant to book immediately; they want to wait and see.

We have seen the number of bookings reducing, but we are hopeful that since things seem to have eased off a bit, the numbers will increase from July onwards, because anyway May and June are low season months for foreign tourism in Sri Lanka.

Have you noticed a change in traveller sentiment and willingness to travel to Sri Lanka in the current context? If so, what are the steps that you have taken as an organization to build traveller confidence?

If there is no violence, no curfew, and no state of emergency, we can quietly build up the confidence by talking to our partners. And of course, if these images are not on their TV screens in the main media, social media, then they forget about all the negatives, and they will only think about the positives



of Sri Lanka because, everybody loves Sri Lanka. The protests don't matter as long as they are peaceful, and they carry on the way they are carrying on now. It's simply the long queues, and that constant negative publicity on the situation where potential travelers see people complaining about various things that have the biggest impact. If you look at tourists from countries like France and UK, they're all used to peaceful protests. But the economic and political instability of the country will affect the tourism industry.

Many people are banking on the tourism industry to play a pivotal role in the country's road to economic recovery. In this case what do you think is the role that Organizations like Jetwing Travels have to play to aid the local tourism industry?

We are taking all necessary steps that we can take at this stage. For



an example we are attending all relevant travel fairs and regularly meeting our tour operator partners. Since we don't have to travel for meetings now, and we can do them online, talk to them and explain to them the current situation. Having said that, because May and June are anyway low months, I don't believe that we will have a major pick up in these months. But from July onwards we are confident that things will improve because we are constantly talking, reminding and sending positive stories to our partners and our clients.

When clients come to Sri Lanka, we ask them to take photographs of their experiences and post it on social media. We will commit towards planting as many positive stories as possible, and hopefully that will bring back the tourists.

The government has an ambitious plan of making Sri Lanka a 10 billion USD industry by 2025. What is your perspective on this and what challenges (apart

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from the current economic situation) do you think we need to overcome to achieve this goal?

Personally, I'm not sure whether we need 6 million tourists. USD 10 billion revenue from tourism is fine, but we are a small country, and we

already have 22 million people in 65,000 square kilometers so whether we can have another 6 million is questionable. I think we need to have tourists representing various niche clusters. We do need to have the lower spending tourists because they are like the cake in our tourism industry, and we have a lot of products which are catering to that particular market segment.

Also getting young people to travel to Sri Lanka is very good because they market the country in social media and that generates free publicity for the destination.

However, whilst catering to such market segments we also need to concentrate on the higher end of travellers who are willing to spend a little bit more, especially the older people who have both savings and time to travel due to less commitments.

I think we need to have a good mix and maybe reduce the volume and increase the value, so if we can go to that equation, achieving the target of 10 billion USD will be fine. We will definitely not achieve it in 2025 with the current situation, but we should target for it maybe in another five years.

What is your opinion on Sri Lanka's current destination brand? Do you think Sri Lanka can improve its destination positioning to be better recognized as a high value travel destination in the future?

There is an overall confusion about the destination image that we are sending out as a country. Everybody knows it's a beautiful country and there is no doubt about that. But since we haven't done a proper destination marketing campaign, what is out



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they are aspiring to join the tourism industry in the future?

I think it's not rocket science. All you need is a bit of intelligence, but I think the main thing is the attitude because this is the hospitality industry, and we are dealing with people. We can't have our egos and then serve people. We must have that serving culture.

You need to be willing to go that extra mile and have the ability to be humble, flexible and have a positive attitude towards learning. You must be able to stay on your toes and do things that are appropriate for a particular situation. It's also very important for people to be able to effectively communicate and possess technical skills, especially in terms of managing social media. Additionally, e-marketing skills and proficiency in various software are going to be very important as most of our work now is on systems. The ability to read and understand a foreign language is also important. Of course, if you are to progress in your career you must also possess the typical management skills that you require to run a business as well.

By **Janith Iddawala & Shalini Wijewardana**

there at the moment are the social media posts generated by our own travelers; typically, the younger generation of travelers who are active on social media. They are marketing Sri Lanka as a fun, interesting, beautiful destination with a lot of nice people where you can get a lot of positive experiences with great food. This is great, and since this perspective is being very effectively marketed, Sri Lanka is being spoken up so much globally. But I think we also need to have a proper destination marketing campaign after deciding where we are positioning whilst maintaining this great market

which we have already secured. If we are to position at a higher end, then we need to see what appeals to that market, without ignoring the needs of that segment. So, we must consciously have a message and do a marketing campaign and improve the product. Merely having a few products catering to the youth segment is not enough if we are to stand out as a high-end destination.

What are the skills and capabilities you expect undergraduate students to develop if