

# BUSINESS DIALOGUE



JANUARY - DECEMBER 2023

FROM SO SRI LANKA TO SO SUSTAINABLE SRI LANKA

2023  
ISSUE 1



NAVIGATING THE  
CHALLENGES AND  
OPPORTUNITIES  
IN SRI LANKA'S  
TOURISM SECTOR

PAGE 26

FROM SO  
SRI LANKA TO  
SO SUSTAINABLE  
SRI LANKA

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THE SUCCESS  
MANTRA DURING  
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TOURISM  
FROM THE  
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PRESERVING  
HERITAGE  
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## VICE-CHANCELLOR'S MESSAGE

NSBM Green University, as a forward-thinking entity, constantly strives to mould global graduates primed to face a future riddled with both challenges and opportunities. We believe in the importance of instilling students with knowledge, ethics, values, and skills that are much sought after in today's ever-changing world. Our commitment to providing a holistic education remains resolute, and we are prepared to embrace emerging trends and technologies that will shape the academic landscape of tomorrow. Indeed, NSBM: South Asia's first ever green university, is not merely a place of learning; it is a nexus of diverse, innovative ideas and a catalyst for positive change.

The Business Dialogue magazine is an initiative of our university to encourage potential leaders of the young generation to build an exceptional future with zest, dedication, and goodness of heart. As one of NSBM's most anticipated publications, Business Dialogue has continuously proven to spark much-needed discussions on the best and most productive ways of moving forward. This issue, which focuses on the need to 'leverage the tourism sector to reignite the Sri Lankan economy', is bound to be yet another a source of immense value and inspiration.

As a university dedicated to cultivating undergraduates with the capacity to think critically, innovatively, and analytically, we see it imperative to engage in discussions that vividly portray real-world challenges and viable solutions. As such, insights from seasoned and accomplished professionals are not only warranted but essential to providing a comprehensive understanding of the actualities shaping the global landscape.

Let me take this opportunity to extend my heartiest congratulations to the Business Dialogue magazine team on the success of this issue that strives to add value to a timely discourse. This endeavour will indeed provide insight into the incisive decisions and processes taken during a time of revaluation and redevelopment, presenting a genuine advantage to all its readers.

With a clear vision of nurturing graduates equipped for the future, NSBM Green University will persist in impactful and timely initiatives that aim to ensure the deliverance of requisite knowledge and exposure needed to achieve the highest level of success. As the Vice Chancellor of this transformative institution, I express my gratitude to the NSBM team for their unwavering commitment to excellence. To my esteemed team and all avid readers of this issue, I wish you the resilience to turn adversity into optimal opportunities!

**Prof. E. A. Weerasinghe**  
**Vice Chancellor**  
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# BUSINESS DIALOGUE

FROM SO SRI LANKA TO SO  
SUSTAINABLE SRI LANKA

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## PUBLISHED BY

NSBM Green University

## PRINTED BY

Vishwa Graphics (Pvt) Ltd.



The professional opinions and views expressed by the Business Dialogue Magazine are those of the interviewees and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the NSBM Green University.

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## MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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**I**n the ever-evolving landscape of higher education, we find ourselves at a crucial juncture that requires innovation, adaptability, and a steadfast commitment to excellence. Identifying the demands of the current world, the Business Dialogue magazine strives to initiate important discussions that ignite a spark in future leaders with discerning minds. Each issue of the magazine has continuously made a significant value addition to a plethora of timely discourses.

This issue of the Business Dialogue magazine attempts at collating diverse perspectives, opinions, and viewpoints on the theme: "Leveraging the Tourism Sector to Reignite the Sri Lankan Economy", with the sole intention of providing an intellectual contribution to alleviate the current economic crisis. Within these pages, you will find stories of industry practices, groundbreaking innovations, accomplishments, and prospective solutions that contribute to the greater tapestry of knowledge-based efficiency in the tourism sector.

The Business Dialogue serves as a testament to the industry collaborations, collective achievements, aspirations, and intellectual prowess inculcated within our vibrant university community. It is a result of the contribution of a dedicated team comprised of academics, industry professionals, administration officials, and students. I wish to express my sincere thanks to all the distinguished resource personnel who devoted their precious time in sharing knowledge and expertise through interviews, whilst looking forward to more fruitful collaborations.

Together, let us embrace the opportunities that lie ahead, continue to chart new horizons, and inspire future generations!

**Prof. Baratha Dodankotuwa**  
**Head of Academic Development and Quality Assurance**

# From So Sri Lanka to So Sustainable Sri Lanka

## Understanding Sustainable Tourism

The concept of sustainable tourism has long been advocated as the only way forward for the global tourism industry both by academics and industry practitioners. Despite its increasing necessity many tourism practitioners are still uncertain about the actual operationalization of the concept. Sustainable tourism in layman's terms refers to "Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities" (UNWTO, 2004). Simply put Sustainable Tourism is about finding a balance between the three pillars of economy, society, and

environment (often referred to as the Triple Bottom Line) whilst operating the day-to-day proceedings of the industry.

## The challenge of achieving sustainable tourism

When you look at it from a definitive point, the concept remains relatively simple but achieving universal sustainability remains perhaps the biggest challenge faced by the global tourism industry in the contemporary context. The underlying problem of achieving sustainable tourism remains two-fold:

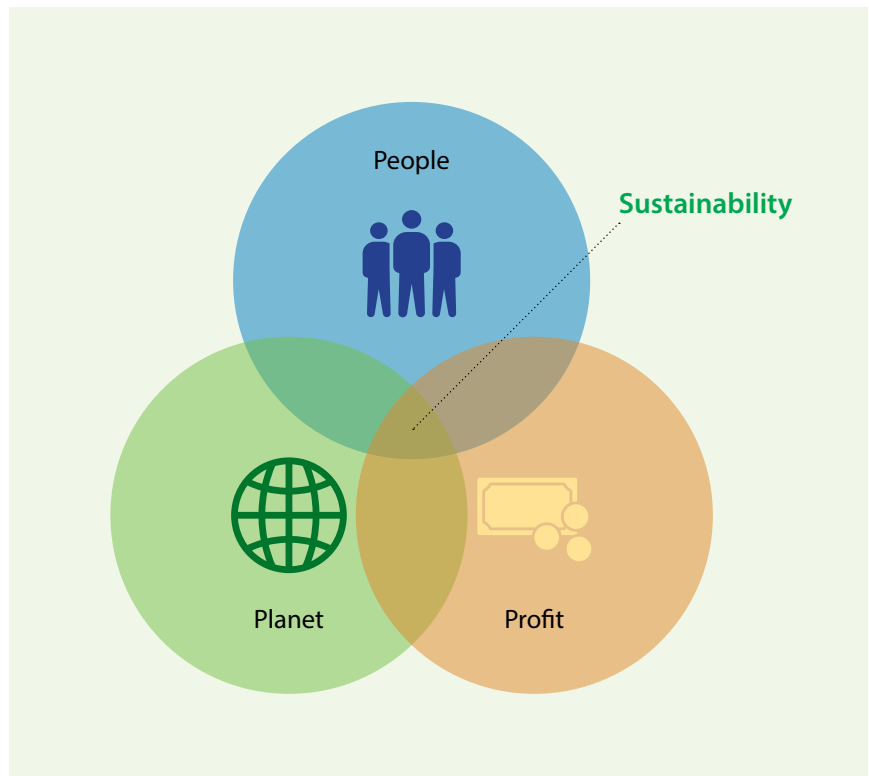
Firstly, the tourism industry's success heavily depends on the interdependency of the three





pillars in the Triple Bottom Line. When you look at it from a broader perspective you can understand that the tourism industry's economic success depends heavily on the environmental and societal pillars. For example, Sri Lanka as a tourist destination will not be able to attract tourists to visit the country if we do not possess the amazing natural and built attractions ranging from azure beaches to breathtaking national parks that we have as a country. The tourist experience is further supplemented by Sri Lanka's unique and warm hospitality along with the unparalleled cultural capital the country possesses which represents the social pillar under the TBL. Hence, it is well evident that the economic success of the destination relies heavily on the sustenance of the environmental and socio-cultural capital in the country.

Secondly, there lies the inherent belief that economic development can't be fully achieved without compromising the environment and several societal factors at least up to a certain extent. This problem is deeply rooted not only in the tourism industry but across all industries globally due to what constitutes 'success' from an organizational/ industrial sense. For example, like many other destinations, Sri Lanka primarily measures its tourism industry success based on two indices, i.e., the number of tourism arrivals to the destination and the revenue generated from the tourism industry. From the outset, both these variables focus on broader economic prosperity, and when the focus is as such at a destination level, the same sentiment trickles down to all industry stakeholders within the destination leading to the entire industry focusing on achieving their economic goals sometimes at the



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**Tourism industry's success heavily depends on the interdependency of the three pillars in the Triple Bottom Line. When you look at it from a broader perspective you can understand that the tourism industry's economic success depends heavily on the environmental and societal pillars.**

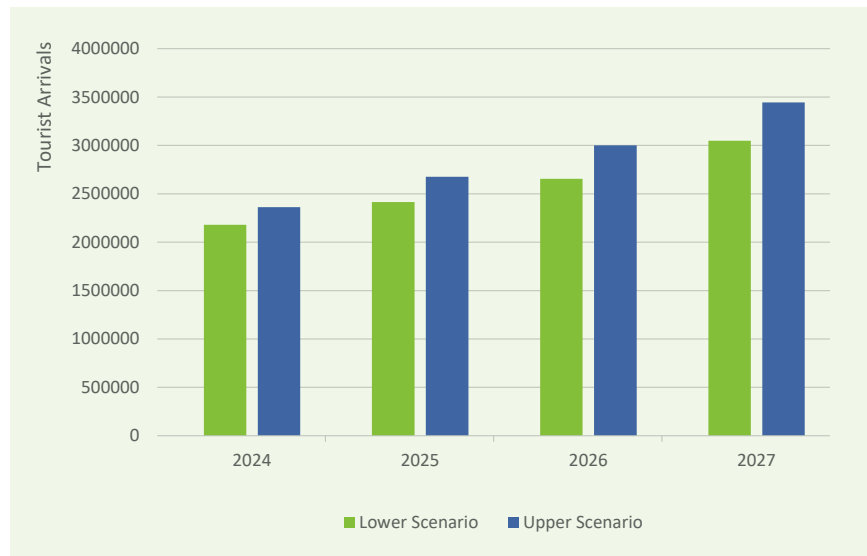


expense of the environmental and societal resources of the destination. To contextualize it very simply, say you are in charge of a premier national park in your destination that focuses primarily on the economic gains from tourism; you may end up selling experiences to the national park to incoming tourists without considering the carrying capacity of the park, the carbon emissions resulting from the excursions, the impacts on biodiversity and local community if you are adamant on economic success alone.

## Sustaining Sri Lanka's Tourism Industry for the Future

Sri Lanka's tourism industry is currently at a unique crossroads. The industry has been given a second wind following multiple and consecutive setbacks in the forms of Easter bombings, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a prolonged economic crisis in the country. This year, Sri Lanka tourism is currently en route to record its most successful year (Between the 2019 -2023 period) with tourism arrivals set to exceed 1.5 million whilst generating over USD 2.7 billion in tourism revenue (Kamel, 2023). Moreover, as elucidated in the SLTDA forecasts in Figure 1 Sri Lanka is most likely to continue this growth trajectory for the foreseeable future with the industry even having an ambitious plan of reaching 5 million tourist arrivals annually in the mid-run.

When you assess this strategic plan, it is evident that the industry's forecasted success is skewed toward economic objectives highlighting the broader sustainability-centric problem discussed in the previous section. However, given Sri Lanka's current economic circumstances, one can't simply discredit this strategic direction as the country



is currently banking heavily on the tourism industry to play a pivotal role in its overall economic recovery and progression. Hence, what the industry needs to investigate both from a strategic and operational perspective, is how we can strive towards these economic goals without compromising our environmental and socio-cultural resources.

There is a multiplicity of avenues that a destination can pursue in its journey towards being sustainable. On one hand, the importance of sustainability must be embedded into the minds of all tourism sector employees through comprehensive sustainability education programs as no policy would be achievable unless and otherwise it is implemented and followed by everyone participating in the industry. On another hand, it is also important for the industry to understand that achieving sustainability is a unified effort and therefore cross-company and cross-industry collaborations must be established to collectively strive towards sustainability as one destination. Additionally, the destination could also look into establishing mechanisms that allow any tourism industry practitioner to implement and systematically

monitor sustainability initiatives that fit their business based on the size and the scale of their organization. Ultimately, in the long run, Sri Lanka tourism could also go beyond these traditional approaches and focus on novel concepts such as regenerative tourism where the destination could look at creating net positive effects by increasing the regenerative capacity of human societies and ecosystems through the tourism industry than merely managing the social-ecological impacts whilst ultimately pursuing infinite economic growth under the banner of sustainable tourism (Bellato, Frantzeskaki, & Nygaard, 2022) ■

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**By: Janith Iddawala**

# Unlocking the Potential: A Conversation with the Chairman of SLTDA

**Mr. Priantha Fernando**

Chairman

Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority



## Can you briefly explain your career, indicating milestones achieved?

My career commenced in the year 1972, when I initially ventured into the field of hotel management. I remained dedicated to the hospitality industry until 1978. During this period, I pursued a craft course at the Ceylon Hotel School. Also, a course conducted by Cornell University in India and many other short-term courses. In 1978, I made a pivotal decision to further my education by traveling to the United Kingdom to complete a diploma in hotel management and tourism.

Before embarking on my educational pursuits to the UK, I was involved in managing Miridiya Hotel in Anuradhapura until 1978. Upon my return to Sri Lanka in 1981, armed with a diploma in tourism and hotel management, I joined the Ceylon Tourist Board.

My initial role at the Ceylon Tourist Board was in the Trade Standards Division, now known as the Quality Assurance and Standards Division. At that time, our primary goal was the implementation of the Hotel Code of 1973, which





**Currently, we have approximately 6,500 registered establishments, along with some 4,500 guides registered with the SLTDA.**



introduced a system of hotel classification to ensure the quality and standards of our accommodation sector.

Maintaining high quality and service standards was a paramount concern, leading to the initiation of hotel classification for all establishments in Sri Lanka. Although legislation had been enacted earlier, it was in 1981 that this initiative gained significant momentum. A dedicated team of six members, known as the Inspectorate, was tasked with visiting hotels across Sri Lanka, conducting inspections, offering guidance on adhering to standards, addressing deficiencies, and then forwarding their findings to the Classification Committee for evaluation.

I served in the Trade Standards Division for approximately one and a half years before being asked to assist the Chairman due to my comprehensive understanding of tourism. This appointment was aimed to bring a more professional approach to the organization, from an overall management perspective. I accepted the position of Personal Assistant to the Chairperson, which provided me with a broader perspective of the entire organization/ industry beyond my initial role in quality assurance and standards.

In 1984, I returned to the UK to pursue a master's degree in Tourism Marketing at the University of Surrey, which I successfully completed in



1986. Upon my return, I assumed the role of Acting Director of Marketing at the Ceylon Tourist Board, and after two months, I was officially appointed as the Director of Marketing, a position I held until 1991. This period presented challenges due to the instability in the country, which adversely impacted on tourism.

In 1982, Sri Lanka experienced its best year in planned tourism, with 402,730 tourist arrivals. However, subsequent years saw a decline, largely attributed to the civil unrest that prevailed. When I assumed the role of Director of Marketing in

the mid 1980s, tourist arrivals had plummeted to around 180,000, a considerable drop from the previous peak.

Our initial goal was to stabilize the industry's decline, but we faced budget constraints. The entire budget of the Tourist Board, covering marketing and other expenses, was a mere 34 million rupees at the time. Of this, marketing received the lion's share with 17 million rupees. With limited resources, we had to carefully strategize our efforts, focusing on comprehensive PR campaigns.

Recognizing the importance of public relations (PR) activities, we

concentrated on bringing journalists from key markets, organizing familiarization trips for industry professionals, and working diligently to create a positive image for Sri Lanka in the tourism sector. These efforts resulted in stabilizing the decline, with tourist arrivals reaching almost 200,000 by 1989.

In 1991, I left the Tourist Board when I received a compelling offer from one of the former Chairpersons of CTB, Mr. Askar Moosajee to join his company in the private sector. This opportunity came with a significantly higher salary and perks compared to my role as Director of Marketing. In the Moosajee Group, I gained exposure to various industries and ventured into tourism consultancy as well. I was involved in diversification efforts, such as establishing Gold Coin Feed Mills in Sri Lanka and manufacturing and exporting brushes and brooms. My role also extended to animal husbandry products, where I managed an account for Solvey Animal Health from Belgium.

My association with the Moosajee Group included serving on various boards and even acting as an alternative director on the Serendib board, a company which managed multiple hotels. I remained with the Moosajees Group until 1995 when I ventured into my own businesses, including construction, the import and sale of poultry-related equipment, exports and other diverse areas, all while continuing to provide tourism consultancy services.

One of my early consultancy projects involved contributing to the Mahaweli Tourism Master Plan in 1992, which covered all geographic areas falling under Mahaweli project. Since then, I have undertaken numerous tourism

**Digital marketing can be a highly productive tool, offering the potential to achieve desired results at a fraction of the cost and in a shorter time frame compared to traditional marketing practices. However, it's a double-edged sword, as any misstep or negative incident can quickly gain traction and cause significant damage. Proper product management and crisis response mechanisms are crucial.**



assignments both locally and internationally. Even when I was invited to serve as the Chairman of the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA), I was involved in developing the tourism master plan for the government of Bangladesh, extending up to 2040, encompassing short-term, medium-term, and long-term strategies.

Throughout my career, I have also engaged in private sector endeavours, focusing on project proposals for new developments, further enriching my knowledge and experience in various fields beyond tourism.

As a National Consultant of ILO, I was instrumental in setting up the National Employment Sourcing and Delivery System of Sri Lanka known as "JobsNet" with 19 centres spread across the island. From 2003 to 2007, as the Project Director, I was in overall charge until the completion of the project phase. In Tourism as well as Employment Services, I have carried out a few assignments for ILO, Sri Lanka.

**Could you please provide an introduction to the organization and an overview of the specific responsibilities and functions that this institution manages?**

The Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) holds a prominent position in the realm of tourism governance. Within the Sri Lankan tourism sector, four distinct organizations operate: the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotional Bureau, the Sri Lanka Convention Bureau, and the Sri Lanka Institute of Tourism and Hotel Management, commonly referred to as SLITHM. It is noteworthy that these four entities were previously consolidated under the umbrella of the Ceylon Tourist Board until the enactment of Act No. 38 of 2005, which led to their division into separate entities, a change that came into effect in 2007.

Since 2007, the tourism landscape has been marked by specialized

areas. The primary motivation behind the enactment of the new act was the fact that tourism heavily relied on government grants for promotional activities, which were often insufficient. Consequently, efforts were initiated in the early 1990s to explore avenues for augmenting the budget to better serve the industry. During this period, discussions revolved around implementing a tourism development levy, initially contemplating a bed tax before settling on a tourism development levy. This levy, introduced in 2005, mandates that 1% of turnover is allocated to the government's coffers to fund promotional activities, development initiatives, and support the hotel school. Additionally, the embarkation tax contributes \$5 per passenger to our tourism revenue. Up until 2018, which marked the pinnacle with 2.3 million tourist arrivals and earnings of 4.3 billion US dollars, we had substantial financial resources for promotional activities, development projects, and other initiatives. However, since the unfortunate events from 2019 to 2022, tourism has



significantly declined, resulting in proportional budget reductions. Recent economic challenges, the need for increased funding, and the imposition of more stringent controls have further compounded the reduction of available funds. Even when funds are available, general government directives prohibiting capital expenditure have hindered our ability to implement planned initiatives. For example, the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotional Bureau faced uncertainties regarding its participation in foreign fairs or exhibitions and road shows. Planning had to adopt an ad hoc approach rather than a structured one, which is suboptimal from a marketing standpoint.

Currently, we have approximately 6,500 registered establishments, along with some 4,500 guides registered with the SLTDA.

Breaking down the hospitality sector, we encompass star-class hotels ranging from 5 to 1 star, boutique hotels, villas, guest houses, homestay programs, and various accommodations classified under hospitality. Additionally, we oversee other entities such as Destination Marketing Companies and recreational service providers, shops catering to tourists. In total, around 6,500 establishments are registered with us, constituting the formal sector of tourism.

You may have heard the term “informal sector,” which refers to entities that, while legal and authorized by local authorities, have not obtained registration and licensing from the SLTDA. Registration is crucial as it ensures compliance with our criteria and guidelines. Non-compliance may result in downgrading or

the necessity to make necessary adjustments to meet the prescribed criteria. Recent developments include the registration of travel apps and travel platforms, which were previously lacking guidelines. We have now established criteria for registration, allowing any interested party to register with us. We will monitor their performance to benefit stakeholders and boost industry momentum. In the realm of marine tourism, we have recently concluded a study, and by the end of the year, we anticipate launching a comprehensive marine tourism master plan. This plan will be implemented in stages to address environmental concerns, particularly as Sri Lanka is the fifth-largest ocean polluter. We must mitigate environmental damage as we promote industry growth, emphasizing sustainability in tourism. In line with this commitment, we are working towards achieving tourism sustainability certifications, with Sigiriya as the first certified

destination. We will subsequently introduce Destination Management Organizations (DMO) sustainability certifications and hospitality sustainability certifications by year-end, targeting certification for around 200 institutions and organizations. These certifications align with travellers’ growing awareness of destinations adhering to standards set by the United Nations’ 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Our strategic efforts also extend to research. The SLTDA encompasses various divisions, including the establishment registration and quality standards division, which is responsible for classification and quality assurance. Additionally, we have the research and international affairs division, which conducts ongoing global and local research to support marketing planning and is available for industry use. We continuously seek best practices and innovations to apply in Sri Lanka. Our organizational structure also includes administration and human resources, finance, and a crucial division focused on domestic tourism and community relations. This division manages sustainability initiatives and maintains a dedicated sustainable tourism unit at both the head office and provincial levels, with nine provincial units in total. Despite being in its infancy, this initiative aims to involve provincial councils in sustainable tourism discussions and ensure benefits reach grassroots levels, including farmers, fishermen, and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the provinces. Currently, only a few provinces have fully harnessed tourism’s potential, while others, notably in the north and east, have yet to maximize their tourism benefits. Our goal is to uplift

**It is essential to acknowledge that implementing such a transformative shift cannot happen overnight. We must carefully consider the supply side of the equation.**



regional economies and empower local communities. It's worth noting that around 500,000 people are directly employed in tourism, with a total of approximately 3 million individuals involved either directly or indirectly in the industry. As we move forward, these numbers are expected to rise. In 2018, when we reached our peak with 2.3 million tourist arrivals, there were 50,000 hotel rooms in the formal sector, a number expected to increase over time.

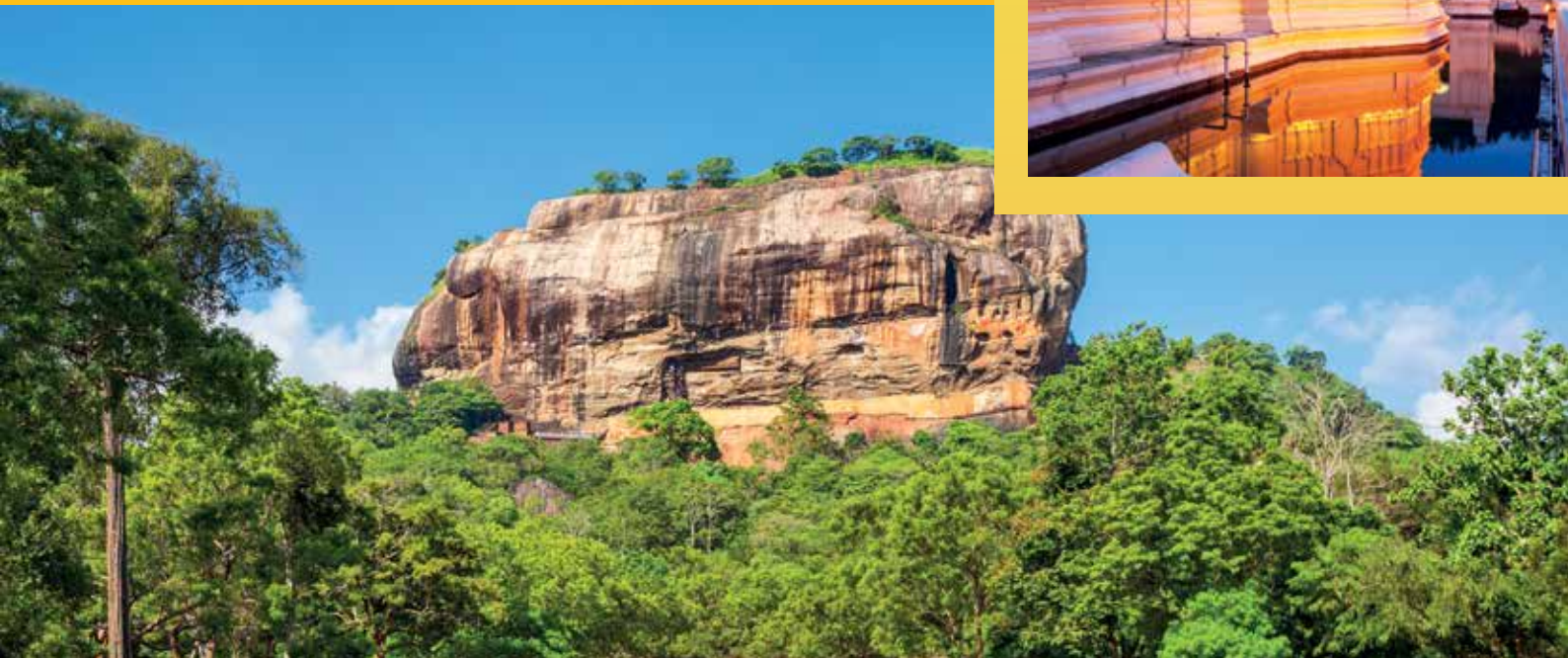
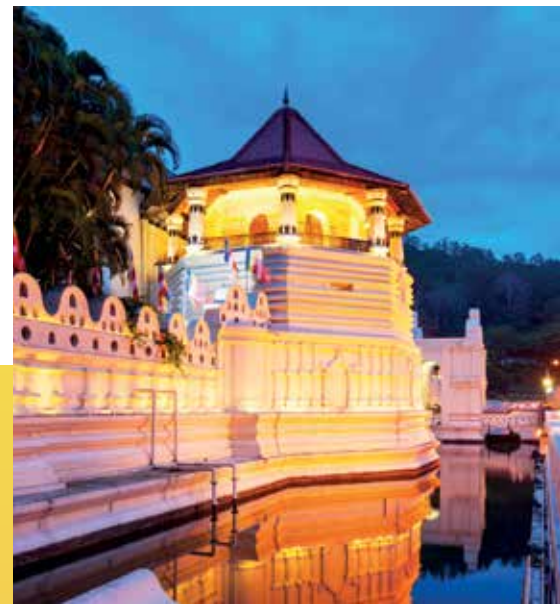
**How does the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) plan to contribute to the Sri Lankan economy, and are there specific targets or objectives that the organization aims to achieve to demonstrate its contribution to the country's economic growth?**

By the year 2027, our ambitious goal is to emerge as the leading contributor to the national economy in terms of foreign exchange earnings through tourism. Furthermore, we aim to achieve another milestone by 2029, where we anticipate hosting 5 million tourists in our country. Out of this figure, 2.5 million tourists are expected to fall within the high-end tourist segment, each spending a minimum of \$500 per day during their stay in Sri Lanka. The remaining tourists will represent a diverse mix of other segments.

It is essential to acknowledge that implementing such a transformative shift cannot happen overnight. We must carefully consider the supply side of the equation. Presently, our country boasts around 9,000 hotel rooms suitable for high-end tourism. Rushing to promote this segment without aligning the supply can be detrimental, as it may lead to unmet expectations and negative reviews, spreading dissatisfaction through social media platforms. Therefore,

a gradual approach to upgrading our tourism offerings is imperative to ensure high levels of satisfaction among tourists.

We must also recognize that today's backpackers could become CEOs or high-end travellers within four to five years. Neglecting this segment would be unwise. Hence, we must make provisions to cater to the diverse needs of backpackers, leisure travellers, adventure enthusiasts, and other segments. Currently, we are promoting Sri Lanka through various themes, encompassing sea, sun, and sand, adventure, wildlife, archaeology, and heritage, among others. In particular, we are



focusing extensively on marine tourism and wellness tourism, as there is a growing demand for these segments in the post-COVID era. These segments tend to attract high-end tourists who stay for longer durations, such as travellers from Japan interested in Ayurvedic experiences. By catering to these specialized segments, we can boost foreign exchange earnings while diversifying our offerings.

From a marketing perspective, it is essential to cater to travellers' desires and preferences. However, we must also be mindful of our cultural and social norms and protect them. While we may not be Thailand or Indonesia, we possess unique characteristics that can be a significant draw for tourists. Our objectives in promoting tourism encompass maximizing foreign exchange earnings, creating employment opportunities, and minimizing economic leakages. Currently, a study has revealed that approximately 51% of tourism-

related revenue exits the country as leakages. We believe that out of this 51%, approximately 17% can be curbed by addressing invisible leakages, where individuals evade bringing foreign exchange earnings into the country. This not only results in economic losses but also deprives the tourism sector of essential funds. Therefore, we plan to implement measures to ensure that money flows through legitimate channels, benefiting both the economy and the tourism industry.

### **What is your perspective on the Minimum Room Charges in the tourism industry? Can you explain the mechanism that SLTDA implemented to regulate and address this issue?**

Our next significant initiative is the introduction of a minimum room rate, which is currently under review by the

legal draftsman's office. This policy is set to be implemented starting from the 1st of October. The impetus for this policy came from the hoteliers themselves. Initially, when they approached me, I emphasized that in a country with an open economic policy, imposing price controls might not be ideal. Instead, I encouraged them to reach a consensus and establish a gentleman's agreement to prevent undercutting and underpricing, ensuring mutual benefit for all stakeholders and the economy as a whole.

However, after three months of negotiations, it became evident that the industry could not arrive at a satisfactory agreement among the hotels and Destination Management Companies (DMCs). Faced with their plea for intervention, we reluctantly decided to take action. Our perspective was primarily rooted in assessing the economic losses resulting from the current situation.



The issue at hand was that some 5-star hotels were charging as low as \$65 for a double room with breakfast included. This pricing created a situation where other hotels had to set their rates even lower to compete. Consequently, the economy suffered as a result of this pricing disparity. In some cases, there was an oversupply of rooms in the market. DMCs would approach hotels, insisting on rates as low as \$65. This fierce competition would ultimately lead to price wars, with both the economy and hoteliers being the ultimate casualties.

Regrettably, this situation has arisen due to circumstances over the past three years. The industry currently carries a staggering debt of around 600 billion Sri Lankan rupees, primarily in the hospitality sector. These businesses enjoyed a three-year moratorium, but the accumulated capital, interest, and interest-on-interest on borrowed funds have led to this significant

debt burden. Unlike some other countries, Sri Lanka's economy lacks the robustness to provide substantial support to the industry during the COVID-19 crisis. Consequently, we have been unable to alleviate this financial strain. Roughly 80% of this debt burden is borne by hospitality sector players.

This predicament will have far-reaching consequences for the industry. If hotels cannot maintain their quality and standards, if they fail to upgrade their offerings to remain competitive, the entire destination will suffer. Hotels may consider selling their properties, and foreign investors, seeking bargains, may seize the opportunity. While this may provide short-term relief, it defeats the overarching goal of tourism – to earn foreign exchange for the Sri Lankan economy. Profits earned may be repatriated by these investors, diverting potential economic benefits.

In introducing the minimum room rate, our intention is to safeguard all hoteliers from exploitation, secure a better yield from tourism for the destination, and send the right message from a marketing perspective. Pricing at a lower rate can create perceptions of a cheap destination, raising doubts about quality standards. By positioning ourselves correctly, we can overcome these challenges through psychological conditioning and a strategic marketing approach. Once demand builds, rates will stabilize and hopefully there will be no need to continue with minimum room rates long-term.

**Is Sri Lanka employing an appropriate pricing strategy to effectively compete in the tourism industry?**

I would like to emphasize that Sri Lanka is currently underpriced in terms of its tourism offerings. If you examine properties in the higher-end category, such as boutique hotels, villas, and establishments maintained to exceptionally high standards, you'll find that they are consistently achieving high occupancy rates at premium room rates. Take, for example, the Yala Wildlife Resort, which boasts approximately 500 rooms. Their room rates start at around \$600 and can go as high as \$2000, yet they maintain an impressive 85% occupancy rate. This illustrates that pricing does not necessarily have a negative impact on the destination. Instead, it underscores the importance of effective marketing strategies, product positioning, and attracting the right market segments.

Even smaller hotels in Colombo and other areas, including boutique properties, are experiencing robust occupancy rates at premium prices. Consequently, there is no compelling justification for reducing prices at this juncture. In fact, even on paper, bookings for the upcoming season appear very promising, indicating a strong demand for Sri Lanka's tourism offerings.

**What do you think about the situation of the skilled staff in Sri Lanka right now?**

Another critical area of concern within the tourism industry is the availability of skilled manpower. Presently, if you assess the industry, you'll find that skill levels are hovering around a modest 30% to 35%. Over the past three years, many individuals have sought better opportunities abroad, primarily due to the industry's challenges. With

**By positioning ourselves correctly, we can overcome these challenges through psychological conditioning and a strategic marketing approach.**



issues persisting, particularly in the Middle East and other countries, significant employment prospects have opened up for our skilled workers.

The continuous training and development of our workforce will be essential. We must recognize that we cannot discourage individuals from seeking employment abroad because a portion of their earnings returns to our economy, ultimately contributing to our economic growth. Therefore, we must strive to increase the pool of skilled professionals in various domains, not limited to the hospitality sector alone. This includes areas such as electricians and mechanics, as they play direct or indirect roles within the industry.

Currently, there is a shortage of approximately 25,000 to 30,000 skilled workers within the industry. This deficit is an area of utmost importance that demands our focus and action. When we look at countries like Saudi Arabia, which is ambitiously targeting 100 million tourists by 2030, we must recognize the immense workforce requirements associated with such a goal. To cater to 100 million tourists, you would require a workforce of at least 250 to 300 million, assuming a 1-to-3 ratio. With advancements in technology, this ratio may decrease to 2.5 or even lower. However, the tourism industry places significant emphasis on human interaction, making a substantial workforce indispensable.

Saudi Arabia and similar countries draw their workforce from nations like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, India, the Philippines, and others. To ensure the sustainability of our own tourism industry, we must continue to produce a substantial number of

skilled persons and professionals. This not only directly benefits the industry but also has a positive ripple effect on our economy as a whole.

## How should Sri Lanka diversify its tourism product to align with its goals as a country?

Adventure tourism represents another area with vast potential for growth. Additionally, what we may not have adequately pursued in the past is conducting promotions based on scientific research and findings. I firmly believe that our approach to development and promotion should be rooted in empirical studies of demand and supply. We must align our supply according to the prevailing demand, which is the cornerstone of sustainable growth.

It's noteworthy that until recently, Sri Lanka lacked a comprehensive tourism policy. Only last year did we finalize the policy document, which has now received cabinet approval. This policy document necessitated the creation of a four-year strategic plan of action, developed in collaboration with all four key organizations in the tourism sector. This strategic plan of action aligns with the policy's objectives and will guide our efforts until 2025.

Beyond this, we recognize the need for a master plan that extends at least a decade into the future. This master plan will include short-term, medium-term, and long-term goals, providing direction for planners and industry stakeholders alike. Within the master plan, there will be specific development plans for each sub-destination within Sri Lanka, such as Kalpitiya, Bentota, Galle, Passikudha, and others. We are currently engaged in the meticulous planning required for these sub-destinations,

## Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) have been gaining market share in recent years due to technology-driven convenience.



which involves quantifying the number of rooms needed based on market demand. Our aim is to prevent oversupply in certain areas, which would be detrimental to all stakeholders.

One critical aspect that impacts the attractiveness of Sri Lanka for tourism investment is the taxation structure. The formal sector faces a higher tax burden, including social security levies, a 1% tourism development levy, a 14.5% tax, and service charges, resulting in an overall tax rate of about 28.5%. In contrast, the informal sector enjoys tax advantages, which has led to its proliferation. The disparity in taxation hinders the appeal of Sri Lanka as an investment destination.

To become more appealing to investors, we need to address political stability, particularly considering the challenges of recent years. Third-party endorsements, such as those from bloggers and influencers, are invaluable in building confidence among travellers. However, it is important to note that foreign governments issue travel advisories and warnings to protect their citizens, which we must





acknowledge when valid. Our efforts should be focused on improving the situation rather than contesting accurate assessments.

To further enhance our appeal, we should encourage more international brand names to invest in Sri Lanka. Projects like the Hyatt and Intercontinental hotels can serve as catalysts for other investors, instilling confidence in both visitors and the industry. India is a key market for us, with 70% of outbound Indian tourists traveling within the region. Collaborations with Indian companies, such as Royal Orchid Hotel, can yield mutual benefits by promoting thematic weddings and destination weddings, driving occupancy rates.

Moreover, there is untapped potential in areas like Jaffna and the Northern and Eastern provinces. Leveraging the diaspora for investment in these regions could generate significant returns and contribute to the local economy. There are ongoing proposals for tourism development in these areas, but these plans are still in the early stages.

In conclusion, Sri Lanka possesses tremendous potential in various aspects of tourism. Our future success hinges on a strategic and well-researched approach, addressing taxation issues, fostering political stability, and leveraging third-party endorsements and international brand names to build confidence and attract both investors and travellers.

### **What are your views on taking technology to promote tourism as an industry?**

Even from a marketing perspective, we have yet to fully harness the potential of digital marketing, which is what many other countries are doing effectively. Digital marketing is not only cost-effective but also requires professionals who understand the intricacies of the digital landscape. I only have a basic understanding of digital marketing. Therefore, I may not delve into its finer details.

Digital marketing can be a highly productive tool, offering the potential to achieve desired results at a fraction of the cost and in a

shorter time frame compared to traditional marketing practices. However, it's a double-edged sword, as any misstep or negative incident can quickly gain traction and cause significant damage. Proper product management and crisis response mechanisms are crucial.

For instance, while the overwhelming majority of tourists (around 95%) are highly satisfied with their experiences in Sri Lanka, a small percentage (5% or less) may encounter difficulties, often involving beach boys or three-wheeler drivers. Unfortunately, such incidents can be highlighted on social media and rapidly spread, potentially harming the destination's reputation. It's essential for operators and authorities to be vigilant in managing such situations.

From a booking perspective, digital innovations can be highly beneficial. Dialog and Mobitel are in discussions about creating digital labs and information apps that can monitor movements and provide essential information for tourists, enhancing their safety and convenience. Such technological advancements can significantly benefit the industry.



However, the introduction of technology can also disrupt established practices. For instance, there are approximately 4,500 guides in Sri Lanka, but if tourists have all the information they need through an app, they may bypass the traditional guide services. It's essential for businesses and individuals in the tourism sector to adapt to technological changes and find ways to leverage technology for their benefit.

Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) have been gaining market share in recent years due to technology-driven convenience. As technology continues to advance, the role of Destination Management Companies (DMCs) may evolve. DMCs should explore ways to incorporate technology while retaining the personalized service and human touch that high-end tourists often seek.

In conclusion, embracing technology is essential for the tourism industry's growth, but it should not come at the cost of losing the warm and personalized service that Sri Lanka is known for. The industry must strike a balance, creating its unique identity while making the most of available technology.

## What message do you have for aspiring students, especially undergraduates, who are considering a career in the tourism industry?

The tourism and hospitality industry offers a wide range of opportunities, and individuals can enter at various stages of their education and career. Whether you are a graduate, have completed O levels, or have just finished A levels, there are pathways into this industry. Even if you start without formal qualifications, it's possible to advance by demonstrating your commitment and skills. There are numerous examples of individuals, both locally and internationally, who began as kitchen helpers and eventually reached the position of a general manager after 18 years of dedicated work. This industry rewards commitment and hard work, offering opportunities for continuous learning and career growth.

However, it's important to note that female participation in the tourism and hospitality industry in Sri Lanka is currently below 10%, which is significantly lower than the global average of around 55-60%. This gender disparity is often

due to societal perceptions and mindsets. It's crucial for parents, opinion leaders, and society as a whole to encourage and support females who have a passion for joining the industry. The tourism and hospitality sector offers competitive salaries, even for entry-level positions like doormen in 5-star hotels, where individuals can earn around Rs. 100,000 per month with service charges and other benefits. Only a few other industries provide such returns for individuals with minimal qualifications.

Furthermore, the opportunities in this industry are not limited to Sri Lanka alone. Qualified and experienced individuals can find employment globally, whether in the Middle East, Europe, or other parts of the world. There are job openings for various roles, including chefs, in countries like Germany and Italy. In essence, the sky is the limit for those who are well-qualified and dedicated to pursuing a career in the tourism and hospitality sector.

SKY IS THE LIMIT ■

*Interviewed by: Janith Iddawala & Chandima Gayan*

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# Navigating the Challenges and Opportunities in Sri Lanka's Tourism Sector

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**Mr. Manesh Fernando**

Area General Manager Sri Lanka at Hilton





**Can we know about your professional journey and its milestones leading up to your current position?**

My father is also a hotelier, so I have had nearly 40 years of exposure to the hospitality industry. I have nearly three decades of experience in the field, with 28 years specifically in the hospitality industry.

I have been schooling in both Sri Lanka and Africa. I pursued my degree in England. I embarked on my career journey at a hotel in Africa, where I started as a trainee. Following that, I became a part of the Hilton Corporate Training Programme, joining the Hilton Hotel as a management trainee several years ago. This opportunity led me to work across the Asia Pacific region. For the past 15 years, I have proudly held the role of General Manager.

**What are the key challenges faced by the Sri Lankan tourism sector after the COVID-19 pandemic, and how is your organization, government, or university addressing these challenges?**

During COVID, our main focus was on looking after our team members. No one was laid off, and we continued to operate the hotel. We learned a lot in terms of resilience. At times, there were guests who wanted to leave but had exhausted their funds, so we implemented a people-based strategy.

From the owner's side and here at this hotel in the midst of COVID, we decided to use the downtime to invest in and revitalize the



**Sustainability implies the capacity to repeatedly perform an action. If an action can be executed only once, it is usually not sustainable. Sustainability can be assessed from various perspectives. Any endeavor lacking sustainability lacks merit. Sustainability, in fact, yields a return on investment greater than one.**

property. COVID began in March, and around May, we made the decision to invest in refurbishing the hotel's rooms. It was a risk we took at that time.

During that downtime, we also upgraded the elevators and the plant. Now, we are in the process of renovating the rooms. As a result, during post-COVID, we were reaping the dividends of these efforts. We also faced another challenge last year due to the economic crisis. Despite that, we managed to continue operations and further develop our assets for the benefit of the people. We maintained a positive outlook even during COVID. We even opened the DoubleTree during the pandemic. Additionally, we were constructing our other hotels during this time. The Hilton Yala property is set to open in September this year. Moreover, at the DoubleTree Negombo, the structural work is completed, and we are moving on to the next stage.

**How do you perceive the contribution of the tourism industry to the overall economic growth**

**of Sri Lanka, and what role can the private sector, government, or universities play in this?**

Hilton is a company with a 105-year history. We have been operating in Sri Lanka for the past 37 years.

Having experienced the spectrum of this country, we hold high hopes and expectations for its tourism future. Despite the challenges we are bound to encounter, as Hilton, we are committed to reaching all destinations. While Colombo stands as the prime destination, we aim to expand to other locations across the country. Much like a university, Hilton serves as a hub for hospitality training. Through this, individuals develop into industry leaders worldwide. We believe that this constitutes a significant contribution we are making to the country.

**What strategies can be employed to enhance tourism offerings in Sri Lanka and attract more visitors?**



When discussing about tourism products, the most crucial element is not the product itself or its features. Rather, it is the people who constitute the heart of this industry. Hence, it is imperative to recognize that individuals are drawn to this people-centric sector. Ensuring the well-being of visitors, providing attentive care, and encouraging repeat visits are paramount. While the initial cost of acquiring a customer is important, establishing a base of returning clients drives sustainable growth. Sri Lanka stands at a foundational level in this pursuit.

From the first-person travellers encounter upon disembarking at the aircraft boarding gate, such as the airport officer and attendants, to immigration officers, washroom attendants, taxi drivers, security personnel, receptionists, and breakfast attendants—all play a significant role. Everyone should understand the prominence of our main industry and the broader impact they have by creating positive connections. These minor interactions leave a lasting impression. Similarly, creating exceptional experiences relies on



this principle. It is easy to overlook this fact at times, but people are the key. Thus, enhancing training, communication skills, and the ability to create memorable moments for people are important.

We possess inherent strengths as a destination, showcasing the splendour of our country's natural beauty. It is crucial to preserve this environment for future generations rather than undermining it. Our distinctiveness should not be compromised by attempting to mimic others. Instead, we can draw inspiration from our neighbours while crafting our unique approach. Our array of unique products can be effectively brought to market by considering our marketing strategies and message conveyance. Ultimately, success lies in our people and in presenting the distinctiveness of our offerings.

## How can Sri Lanka balance the need for tourism development with environmental sustainability and conservation?

Sustainability implies the capacity to repeatedly perform an action. If an action can be executed only once, it is usually not sustainable. Sustainability can be assessed from various perspectives. Any endeavor lacking sustainability lacks merit. Sustainability, in fact, yields a return on investment greater than one. When actions are short-lived, how can they yield returns? Sustainability entails not only environmental aspects and energy considerations, but it encompasses every facet of life, including one's personal well-being. Leading a sustainable life is fundamental.

## What steps can be taken to promote Sri Lanka's lesser-known destinations and diversify the tourism product beyond the traditional beach and cultural attractions?

Even when considering well-known destinations like ancient ones, have we taken substantial action so far? How many people have actually visited them? Have we genuinely marketed them? I have my doubts. For instance, take Anuradhapura. Have we genuinely marketed it? Have we truly painted a vivid picture in people's minds of its historical significance, the number of people who lived there, and their way of life? It is all about storytelling. We can gaze at the ancient temple, the





**Environmental factors profoundly influence tourism. Considering the money spent versus the gains, it is arguable whether tourism deserves the status of a main industry. In my perspective, sectors like agriculture and its related components should be positioned as the paramount industries. Tourism ought to function as a complementary industry, rooted in these domains.**

pillars, and the rock formations. However, aside from Sigiriya, I do not believe we have portrayed these sites in their true historical context. In today's world, we possess virtual reality technology. We can recreate the past, and one can explore these places without needing a guide. We possess virtual reality software that allows you to witness Anuradhapura precisely as it existed 2500 years ago. Everything is there

Likewise, when discussing lesser-known places, their obscurity can be an attraction. Yet, it is vital that we safeguard these places from destruction. Too often, increased footfall results in devastation.



Observing this trend is disheartening. Have we truly showcased these destinations effectively? Look at Washington, America. It's a relatively young country. Observe how they have skillfully encapsulated their 300-400 years of history, creating an inspiring narrative. Unfortunately, I do not think we have yet achieved this as a country when it comes to luring tourists to our regions and cities.

### **How can Sri Lanka harness digital technology to elevate the tourism experience and enhance visitor satisfaction?**

From my understanding, there are plans underway to initiate our very own digital marketing program for Sri Lanka. It is important to remember that the current business owners are also independently engaging in these efforts. This raises the question of the most viable path forward. With the power of digital technology, the potential to target markets at a national or even a building level is substantial. Remarkable outcomes can be achieved with just a few thousand dollars.

### **How can the tourism sector in Sri Lanka collaborate with other industries, such as agriculture and handicrafts, to create more authentic and immersive experiences for visitors?**

I find this question intriguing. It is perplexing why people say tourism is the number one industry with significant potential at present. When examining the numerous challenges, the country has faced, the investment-to-return ratio is disproportionately high in tourism. If we disregard the COVID era, we notice a series of events stretching from its inception, through times of war, to political instabilities. Environmental factors profoundly influence tourism. Considering the money spent versus the gains, it is arguable whether tourism deserves the status of a main industry. In my perspective, sectors like agriculture and its related components should be positioned as the paramount industries. Tourism ought to function as a complementary industry, rooted in these domains. Given that we



are inherently an agrarian nation, it is crucial to devise a method to move up in the value chain. Can underutilized land be repurposed for tourism? For instance, coconut estates and tea plantations—some incorporating hotel operations—can be viewed as a cohesive unit, capitalizing on off-season periods for tourism and peak seasons for agriculture. Sri Lankan tourism remains seasonal, warranting innovative solutions. Industries like avocados, cocoa, and orchids flourish alongside tourism, serving as complementary industries to tourism. Think about establishments that combine vineyards with hotels, a concept well-established in Australia. How can we leverage these avenues to reduce the volatility in the earnings? It is essential to have a rigorous analysis and close observation. Ultimately, agriculture should retain its supremacy, irrespective of circumstances.

## **What are the long-term goals for the Sri Lankan tourism sector, and how**

### **can these be achieved in a sustainable and inclusive manner?**

My long-term goal is to identify how we can yield a better return on every investment we make. We contend with some of the highest hotel construction costs globally, or at least within Asia. Given this, the challenge becomes clear: How do we attain profitability? If the returns are lacking, then the viability of such ventures comes into question. So, we need to find a way to make something out of nothing: Now, we make something out of a lot.

Our resources currently remain underutilized. The key lies in the creativity of creating a tourism experience that is captivating but does not cost too much. Researching and utilizing local talents is paramount. Materials like bamboo or clay might hold potential. The objective is to ensure that every rupee and cent invested yields a meaningful outcome. This endeavor should encompass the entire

nation. Considering the substantial investments we are making, there is still a question mark on the prospective returns.

### **Any messages that you want to give to the younger generation in Sri Lanka?**

I would like to share a message with the younger generation. If you aspire to become an entrepreneur or engage in business, remember it is not an easy thing. It is undoubtedly a challenging journey that demands a lot of courage. But before you do anything, make sure it is sustainable. Focus on endeavors that benefit society and people while also making financial sense. Otherwise, you might find yourself facing difficulties. Living sustainably eliminates unnecessary worries. Strive to engage in endeavors that have a positive impact and do not harm anyone in society ■

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*Interviewed by: Chandima Gayan & Janith Iddawala*

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# BEST 10 HOTELS IN SRI LANKA

According to CN Traveller

Harriet Compston and Kate Lough



KURULU BAY

Overlooking peaceful Koggala Lake on Sri Lanka's southern coast, Kurulu Bay opened in December 2022 on a beautiful private jungle estate. Meaning 'bird' in Sinhala, Kurulu is a boutique retreat for those wanting to switch off and unwind from everyday life. Its 12 lodgings are spread across garden rooms, lakefront cottages and treehouse suites — great for honeymooners — and allow you to dip in and out of nearby Ahangama's magnetic scene. The latter are scattered around the pre-existing Kurulu House, where owner

Shahzad Malik lives, designed by Geoffrey Bawa protege Channa Daswatte and merges 1960s Florida architecture with tropical modernism. It's also the venue for the hotel's almost daily yoga classes, its shala teetering over the lake and scented by frangipani trees. Life here is slow and simple: start with Turkish eggs on the poolside terrace before gliding between sunlounger and spa —we recommend the body wrap — until dinner in the restaurant, where the menu runs the gamut from lobster tail curry to wood-fired pizzas.

**Address:** Gurunkanda, Kathaluwa, Ahangama, Sri Lanka

TREBARTHA EAST

**For architecture lovers**

A new opening for early 2023, Trebartha East The Roundhouse is an intimate boutique hotel with four bedrooms not far from the surfer hotspot of Ahangama. Set atop a working cinnamon plantation, its award-winning roundhouse design is the brainchild of Colombo-based architect Dr Ar. Narein Perrera. Inside, each corner is a



homage to Sri Lankan craftsmanship and artists, with locally sourced furniture, handwoven rugs, rattan ware and paintings adorning its handsome teak walls. Outside, you'll want to spend all day lounging by its curved infinity pool. Trebartha East feels like a private house rather than a hotel – especially when owners Benny and Patrick Latham reside – with family – style meals served around a communal table and evening drinks shared with fellow guests.

**Address:** NO.164/A MEEGAHAGODA, Ahangama 80650, Sri Lanka



## HALCYON

## MAWELLA

### For beach time

A 10-minute tuk-tuk ride from hip Hiriketiya, a surfer's paradise, is the wide sweep of Mawella Beach. Pristine and jungle-fringed, it's a working fishing village and home to the new boutique hotel, Halcyon Mawella. Four double-level beachfront cabanas, with Tallentire House-designed interiors that flit between Lamu, Indonesia and India, provide delicious sleeping quarters for lazy, pure holiday days. Fuelled by the hotel's signature cocktail, the heady Halcyon Spritz, lounge by the pool, paddle board on the nearby lagoon and jump in the waves as the sun sets. Co-owner Zander and his Rhodesian Ridgeback are usually on-site to keep you entertained and ensure you're well looked after.

**Address:** Kotuwaththawewatta Moraketiara Mawella, Sri Lanka



## TEKANDA

## LODGE

### For a jungle stay

Run with love by Richard and Charlotte Pembroke, Tekanda Lodge is a luxurious guest house (that can be hired exclusively) and a retreat venue on a jungle hilltop. While it's near to the buzzing beach town of Ahangama, it's surrounded by 10 tranquil acres of organic tea and coconut plantations that leave you feeling refreshed and restored. Handbuilt with Sri Lankan iluk, its four rooms and two cabanas melt into the surrounding nature while its symphony of jungle sounds (especially the peacocks) soothes the soul. When you're not relaxing by the palm-fringed pool or eating around the communal table, the lodge can organise several experiences to give you a glimpse of local life, from fishing on nearby Koggala Lake, visiting the food markets with their chef or learning to cook a dal. Surfers are well-positioned here, too, with breaks for all abilities within easy tuk-tuk reach.

**Address:** Koodalugodawatta, Alawathukissa, Ahangama 08650, Sri Lanka

## GAL OYA LODGE



### For remote adventures

Gal Oya National Park may be lesser known than Yala but the magic here is that the wildlife is thrillingly untouched. Spy crocodiles, turtles and swimming elephants on boat safaris. Walk through the forest guided by members of the indigenous Vedda community. Then bed down in remote Gal Oya Lodge. Scattered among the bush, there are nine teak bungalows and a family villa, constructed by village craftsmen, complete with grass roofs. Each has a kingsize bed and its own living room with a private veranda. An alfresco bathroom gets you ever closer to nature. The airy A-framed restaurant, with its panorama of Monkey Mountain (a hardcore trek but worth it), serves western and Sri Lankan cuisine. Each dish uses seasonal produce, some home-grown, others from local farmers – try the fish fillets cooked with lemongrass and local herbs in a banana leaf. For downtime, there's a swimming pool, board games and field guides to read plus nerd yourself out in the wildlife research station.

**Address:** Gal Oya Lodge, B527, Sri Lanka



### For serious style

People rave about this peaceful bolthole set on a 12-acre working tea estate, overlooking Koggala Lake. And for good reason. Once the private villa of owner George Cooper, a British interior designer, there are now 12 art and antique-filled villas (seven have pools) with four-poster beds, rattan couches, window seat daybeds, English china and piles of books. Book Hibiscus for the best views. The monotone-decorated dining pavilion is open to the elements. It serves an excellent daily changing menu of fusion food with a strong Thai influence, from tomato and basil galettes to Thai-inspired

## KAHANDA KANDA

chicken seasoned with kaffir limes and lemongrass and baked in a banana leaf. Keep yourself fit by being put through your paces by the hotel's personal trainer, flop in the spa or pluck a book from the library. The infinity pool drops off towards Koggala Lake – but the sister hotel KK Beach is five miles away and the perfect spot for swimming.

**Address:** Kahanda Kanda Galle, Angulugaha 80122, Sri Lanka

## FORT BAZAAR



### For Middle Eastern chic

Teardrop Hotels' Fort Bazaar, bang in the centre of town, has always been one of the leading lights in the 17th-century fort town of Galle. The former home of a spice merchant, they have drawn upon the fort's Moorish roots which means it's Middle Eastern-inspired interiors here, awash with handmade tiles, Moroccan lanterns, mosaic cushions and pouffes. Set around a pretty

cobbled courtyard, the 18 rooms are sleek and sophisticated (ask for one of the three upper-floor suites – much larger with fort-view terraces.). The Church Street Social is a buzzy local hangout. Smiley staff serve up superb tapas and sharing platters of traditional Moroccan, Turkish and Middle Eastern cuisine in between Sri Lankan food (they do an excellent lagoon crab salad). Work it off with a stroll around Galle (lovely both day and night). There’s an enticing Bali-inspired spa, using locally-made products, to unwind in, too.

**Address:** Fort Bazaar, 26 Church St, Galle, Sri Lanka

Inside, there are four-poster beds, campaign furniture and freestanding copper bathtubs. They’ve nailed the tech, too, with a sound system, fast WiFi, and even Netflix can stream seamlessly. The bamboo-ceiling bar serves up both a contemporary take on traditional Sri Lankan and international cuisine (they do a mean ribeye steak). Join one of the super-knowledgeable in-house naturalists on a drive to spot leopards, sloth ears and elephants. Back at base, tufted grey langur monkeys swing from tree to tree. Stay up late and see elephants trumpeting on the beach and perhaps dipping their trunks in one of the private plunge pools.

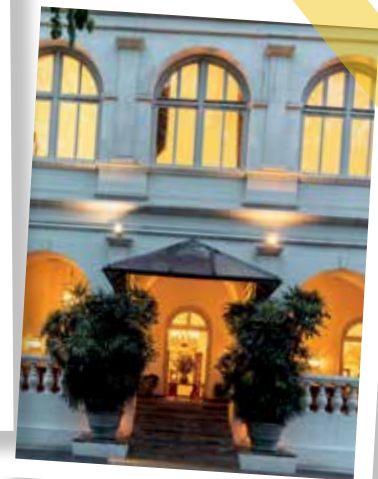
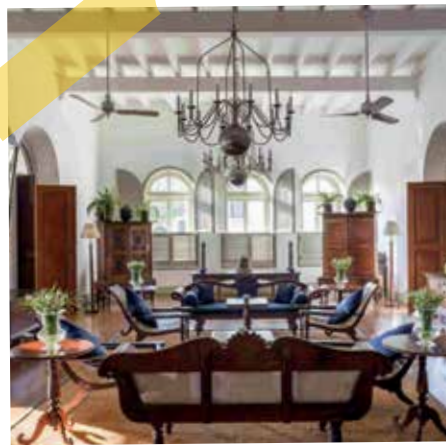
**Address:** Wild Coast Tented Lodge - Relais & Chateaux, Wild Coast Tented Lodge Palatupana, Yala, Sri Lanka



## WILD COAST TENTED LODGE

### For a wildlife fix

The leopard spotting in Yala National Park is guaranteed to thrill – but so is Resplendent Ceylon’s chic safari lodge on the fringes of the park, overlooking the Indian Ocean. Scattered among the bushland, there are 28 cocoon-like soaring canvas tents, some with private watering holes, others with plunge pools, plus eight urchin tents for little ones.



## AMANGALLA

### For stepping back in time

This 300-year-old grand dame is a Galle landmark. Formerly the New Oriental Hotel, which for over a century attracted steamship passengers from across the world, Amangalla has been sensitively updated, blending original features, rattan furniture and contemporary touches. There are 29 classically-beautiful bedrooms with original wooden floors, high-sash windows and four-poster beds. Book either Suite 8 or 14 in the Church Street Wing and enjoy spectacular sea views. The Baths Spa offers a soothing range of massages, reflexology and scrubs, personalised by the resident Ayurvedic physician. There’s also yoga in the luscious gardens and a lovely courtyard swimming pool. Restaurant Zaal, in the magnificent Great Hall with its vast antique mirrors, is formal but it’s worth donning your best for the exceptional food. They do a superb roast chicken with all the trimmings. The books in the library will give you all you need to know about Galle – alternatively, ask your butler for a personalised tour of the fort.

**Address:** Amangalla, 10 Church St, Galle 80000, Sri Lanka

## LUNUGANGA

### For a solid dose of history

Architect Geoffrey Bawa, the ‘father of Tropical Modernism’, transformed the design landscape of Sri Lanka. You can experience his genius at his own estate Lunuganga, just inland from the beach resort of Bentota. Set in 12 acres, deep in the forest, this white 1930s bungalow, which Bawa spent 40 years perfecting, is still pretty much as he left it. Now managed by Teardrop Hotels, in partnership with the Geoffrey Bawa Trust, there are nine spacious suites, some in ‘outdoor rooms’, built to house Bawa’s architectural assistants. Each is dotted around the property, showcasing the architect’s objets d’art collected from his travels (spot the sculpture of Roman emperor Augustus). Book Bawa’s own bedroom, with its dipping pool in a private courtyard. While away the days soaking up the glorious gardens, where butterfly-shaped ponds sit alongside emerald rice paddies and fragrant frangipani trees. Moss-covered Chinese Ming jars decorate the fields. The kitchen whips up a plethora of flavoursome plates. The rice and curry is particularly good, served outdoors on the terrace, with sweeping views of Dedduwa Lake.



**Address:** Lunuganga Geoffrey Bawa’s Country Estate, Dedduwa, Bentota 80500, Sri Lanka



## MALABAR HILL

### For knockout views

This ocean-facing hilltop wonder in Weligama only opened in November 2021 but it’s already making its mark. Formerly a cinnamon plantation, friends Dominic Scriven and Lawson Johnston have transformed it into a magical sanctuary, combining Indian-inspired architecture, Middle Eastern interiors and Sri Lankan craftsmanship. There are 14 freestanding villas tucked away in the jungle, featuring teak furniture, Rajasthani mirrors and private terraces with plunge pools and jaw-dropping views. Ornithophiles will love the Wetland Sanctuary Pool Villa with its conspiracy of birds to spot, in between

purple-faced langurs swinging through the trees. In panoramic restaurant Hill House, Cordon Bleu-trained chef Roshini’s splendid menu makes full use of local ingredients – breakfast on buffalo curd milked just a hop away, feast on fiery chickpea curry for lunch and savour a dinner of the morning’s line-caught catch straight from the sea. Brilliant beaches are a short drive away, although you can splash and sunbathe at the blissful infinity pool here.

**Address:** Malabar Hill Sri Lanka, Palalla - Borala Road, Weligama, Sri Lanka



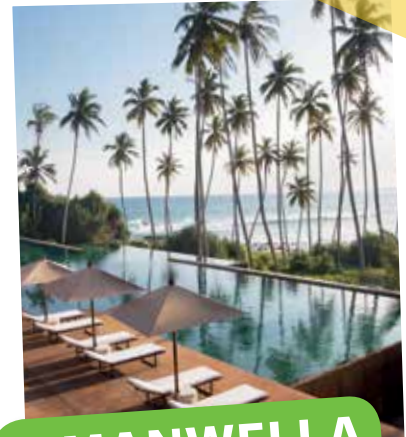


## NINE SKIES

### For outdoorsy types

Ella is arguably pretty much everyone's favourite Hill Country village. So, it's brilliant that Teardrop Hotels have a beautifully-refurbished tea bungalow nearby. Sitting on a working tea estate in the town of Demodara, it's a throwback to colonial days, mixed with a solid bit of mid-century and contemporary. The five spacious bedrooms have custom-designed four-poster beds, claw-foot baths, rattan tables (marked out for carrom – a form of finger billiards) and private verandas. Revel in the spellbinding views, including the famous Demodara Loop with its train chugging by. Families will love the interconnecting rooms Nine Skies and Hali-Ela. The service is also second to none. Days whizz by sunbathing beside the infinity pool, relaxing in the garden or playing board games in the library. There are plenty of walks – head to the iconic Nine Arches Bridges. Borrow wellies if it's muddy. In the evening, settle down for a sundowner beside the log fire, followed by a hearty meal of Sri Lankan plates.

**Address:** Nine Skies, Nine Skies Bungalow, Demodara 90080, Sri Lanka



## AMANWELLA

### For beach bunnies

It's the pristine beachfront setting here which steals the show and makes Amanwella one of the most spectacular hotels in Sri Lanka – expect a mesmerising swathe of silky sand, fringed with palm trees. But there's plenty else to fall in love with at this tropical modernist resort, near the seaside town of Tangalle. Dotted on a hillside, the 27 clean-lined, super spacious freestanding suites sing of contemporary cool. Each has a private pool and floor-to-ceiling sliding glass doors maxing out the views. Ask for Ocean Suites 110, 111 and 112 which are nearest to the beach. The pavilion-style restaurant makes full use of the panorama – basking in ocean vistas while relishing the Asian fusion cuisine, made with local produce such as just-caught barramundi. Or tuck into fresh salads at their feet-in-the-sand beach club. There's a beautiful library, filled with games and books, and a huge infinity pool. But most people gravitate to the idyllic beaches, with soft warm water.

**Address:** Amanwella, Bodhi Mawatha, Godellawela 82200, Sri Lanka



# THE SUCCESS MANTRA DURING THE PANDEMIC

**Mr. Kanishka Jayathunga**

Deputy Director General - Academic

Sri Lanka Institute of Tourism & Hotel Management



**Can we know about your professional journey and its milestone up until your current position?**

I started my journey by pursuing a Diploma in Management at SLITHM, which took four years to complete. Then I gained practical experience by working in various hotel during the training periods. Eventually, I graduated in 1998 and started working as a Food and Beverage Manager.

My career in the hospitality industry involved diverse roles, including housekeeping, room service, waiting, cooking, and receptionist duties. In 2002, I joined this prestigious institute as a lecturer and later progressed to become a Senior Lecturer and Head of Food and Beverage Operations. My dedication and hard work allowed me to further climb the ladder and take on the role of the Principal before finally becoming a Deputy Director General.

Throughout my career, I have gained valuable exposure to foreign training, having worked with professionals from about seven- eight different countries. Although I don't possess work experience from overseas, my training experience has enriched my knowledge and skills in the field.

To enhance my qualifications, I pursued a Master's Degree and Postgraduate studies. Moreover, I attained HRM CHE certification, further strengthening my academic credentials. These qualifications have been instrumental in shaping my career and enabling me to succeed in various leadership positions.

**What are the key challenges faced by the Sri Lankan tourism sector after the COVID-19 pandemic, and how is your organization/ government/ university addressing these challenges?**

I believe that the COVID-19 pandemic had both positive and negative impacts. I see the pandemic as an opportunity for positive change, encouraging a shift in focus towards nature, human well-being, and addressing global crises. When it comes to the tourism sector, it is a very sensitive industry or rather unpredictable industry in the world. When a global pandemic or terror attack hits, it directly impacts the tourism and hospitality industry. The tourism industry depends on people's mobility. However, it has also significantly affected a decrease in students enrolling in schools. I remember that immediately after the pandemic, we didn't have many students. Students



**In my point of view, the pandemic has accelerated the adoption of virtual platforms, saving costs and time for businesses and institutions. The virtual platform was a blessing to businesses and institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic.**



were reluctant to join the Tourism and Hospitality field due to the uncertainty that prevailed at that time. Now, again this might improve because when people tend to travel, then automatically the tourism sector will come to a normal state. Ultimately employment, especially foreign employment opportunities will rise again.

In my point of view, the pandemic has accelerated the adoption of virtual platforms, saving costs and time for businesses and institutions. The virtual platform was a blessing to businesses and institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. In our institute, we have meetings online. This has a positive impact on saving costs and time. So, this is what I think that we have to focus on the positive aspects.

I believe despite the challenges we encounter, we should take a positive approach, and thinking differently can lead to advantageous outcomes in dealing with the impact of COVID-19.

## **How do you see tourism contributing to the overall economic growth of Sri Lanka, and what role can the private sector/ government/ universities play in this?**

So now, what I mean by tourism is not bound by any specific destination, place, or person. In my view, the simplest answer to a successful tourism experience is a genuine smile. If anyone has a sincere smile and human connection, they can excel in tourism. There are various types of tourism, including high spenders, low spenders, high-end markets, low-end markets, and different interests like agritourism, health tourism, wildlife tourism, and business tourism. Sri Lanka, being a naturally scenic country, can promote any of these tourism segments with its attractions.

To achieve successful promotion, it is essential to educate people about sustainable tourism practices. We can

promote tourism anywhere in the country if we approach it positively and responsibly. Though marketing networks may currently focus on a few selected places, there are many places in rural areas that can be developed as tourist destinations. By planning and marketing effectively, we can benefit both the tourism industry and the rural communities. This can create a cascading effect, leading to increased income and development in rural areas.

### **What strategies can be employed to enhance the tourism offerings in Sri Lanka and attract more visitors?**

Actually speaking, I believe that the key to develop successful tourism is by nurturing positive attitudes among people, especially the warmth of a smile. Alongside this, we must consider the well-being of our citizens. Sri Lanka is blessed with natural attractions, and to capitalize on them, we need to focus on developing the right human attitude.

As an example, we are taking strategic steps to implement a Tuk-tuk driver training program with recognition. However, it's crucial to monitor the process carefully to prevent any potential misuse of these licenses once they are officially granted. Proper monitoring ensures that the training and licensing lead to responsible and safe driving practices.

I don't believe that short-term training alone can change people's attitudes within just one or two days. It's essential to have a monitoring mechanism in place as a part of our strategic plan. Simply showing a license does not guarantee that everything will be done responsibly,



so we need to focus on effective monitoring and evaluation strategies.

In any business or industry, success depends on human behavior and attitudes. Therefore, we must strategically address these issues. I recently came across a video on social media where a foreign lady was circulating misinformation about a wildlife area, leading to conflicts within the community. These issues are related to attitudes and personal businesses, which can significantly impact the long-term prospects of the tourism sector.

### **How can Sri Lanka balance the need for tourism development with environmental sustainability and conservation?**

In terms of environmental sustainability, I believe that focusing on eco-friendly and biodegradable products is essential. However, sustainability encompasses more

than just products. For instance, when we aim to develop tourism in rural communities, we must ensure sustainability in every aspect. Take home stays as an example, where the sustainability factor should be 100% is embedded in that particular area.

Environmental sustainability also involves human behavior, such as educating youngsters and community members about appropriate conduct in places like temples. It's about how we maintain our surroundings and how it affects the environment. In hotels, we see efforts like segregating waste with different bins, but that's just one component. We need to address various aspects, from the grassroots level to elderly people.

These days, dengue fever is spreading all over the country, isn't it? It is a great issue to the country. We have a systematic way of addressing this issue. Dengue fever spreads due to the lack of maintenance and population density, tourism also has various components

that need systematic attention. By identifying and addressing these components, we can sustain and successfully run tourism even in rural areas. A great example is the Kandalama Hotel, which emphasizes eco-friendly practices like using natural products and reusable materials. By ensuring that we meet a checklist of sustainable practices, we can achieve overall sustainability and success in tourism, even within rural communities.

## **What steps can be taken to promote Sri Lanka's lesser-known destinations and diversify the tourism product beyond the traditional beach and cultural attractions?**

Now, that's a very good question. In our current setup, we have the Tourism Development Authority and the Ministry of Tourism and Promotion Bureau centrally handling marketing and policymaking.

Additionally, each of the nine provinces has its own tourism ministries. From my perspective, while the Tourism Development Authority takes care of broader promotion, it's vital to identify specific attractions in each province and empower their respective provincial councils. These councils have their own tourism ministries and can systematically work on identifying and marketing the unique attractions in their areas.

I strongly believe that the marketing strategy should extend to the provincial level, allowing each province to promote their lesser-known attractions. This approach should cover different countries and leverage various social media platforms and marketing forums. Although budget constraints may be a challenge, it's crucial to allocate sufficient funds to ensure effective marketing in these regions.

Moreover, besides the centralized marketing efforts by SLTPB and private organizations promoting their packages, it's equally important

to shine a spotlight on the lesser-known places. By strategically marketing all these attractions simultaneously, we can witness a multiplying effect. Hotels will receive more recommendations, and rural communities will benefit, leading to greater sustainability.

I agree wholeheartedly that marketing plays a pivotal role, and we should not concentrate solely on a few popular places. We must prioritize strengthening the provincial councils and the private sector to effectively market these lesser-known destinations throughout the entire country. With the right strategic approach, we can successfully market tourism in every corner of Sri Lanka.

## **How can Sri Lanka leverage digital technology to enhance the tourism experience and improve visitor satisfaction?**



I think the younger generation, especially millennials, are more familiar with digital marketing and technology. However, when it comes to rural communities and small businesses like homestays, guest houses, and small accommodations in Sri Lanka, there seems to be a gap in their knowledge and expertise in digital marketing. These small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) play a significant role in the tourism industry, as almost half of the tourists are attracted to these options.

My concern is that we need to educate and empower the rural community in the SME sector, particularly in digital marketing. There should also be a filtering mechanism to ensure that they market their offerings appropriately without causing any misrepresentation. To accomplish this, we could establish an authority or department that standardizes the way destinations are marketed worldwide, especially focusing on the SME sector.



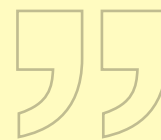
Moreover, while heavy marketing is being done, we need to ensure that the facilities and services at these places meet certain standards. A monitoring mechanism should be in place to regularly assess and review the physical evidence of these accommodations. By analyzing these reports, we can address any issues and take corrective actions proactively. Instead of waiting for complaints to come, we should visit these places regularly and monitor them systematically. This way, we can ensure that the marketing for small places is authentic and trustworthy.

**How can the tourism sector in Sri Lanka collaborate with other industries, such as agriculture and handicrafts, to create more authentic and immersive experiences for visitors?**

Yeah, that's also a great question to consider. Just like everyone has their own hobbies and interests, tourism is similar, offering a wide range of experiences beyond business and education. People travel based on their unique enthusiasm and interests. Some tourists are drawn to mining experiences, observing nature, reimagining historical moments, or exploring archaeological sites. Sri Lanka has various departments, such as politics, agriculture, and others, which we should collaborate with to tap into the benefits of their expertise and market those places for tourism.

For instance, tourists who have an interest in tea leaves might want to experience plucking tea leaves,

**I don't believe that short-term training alone can change people's attitudes within just one or two days. It's essential to have a monitoring mechanism in place as a part of our strategic plan.**



and we can cater to their specific interests with the help of the private sector's involvement. We need to align our offerings according to these specific interests and attractions, be it in lesser-known places or within the SME sector. To achieve this, effective marketing is essential. All government sectors should collaborate with tourism to ensure a cohesive approach.

By linking all these attractions to tourism authorities, we can systematically promote our country's wonders and attract more visitors. It's crucial to recognize the potential of aligning various interests with tourism and leveraging the expertise of different sectors to enhance the overall travel experience in Sri Lanka.

**What are the long-term goals for the Sri Lankan tourism sector, and how**



## can these be achieved in a sustainable and inclusive manner?

As part of our long-term goals, we need to focus on increasing financial gains and the number of tourist arrivals. Looking at future forecasts, our target is to attract around 4,000,000 tourists to the country, generating a substantial amount of foreign exchange. To achieve this target, we must plan strategically and analyze the statistics for different types of accommodations, such as star-category hotels, boutique hotels, homestays, or even unique options like cave stays.

In the long term, we also need to develop our infrastructure based on the expected influx of 4,000,000 tourists. This includes considering the number of hotel rooms required, improving road networks and highways, and ensuring efficient domestic airline operations. Developing human resources is also crucial, and we should consider integrating tourism and hospitality subjects into school syllabuses to educate children from an early age

about the potential of the industry.

I firmly believe that with our attractive tourism offerings, Sri Lanka has the potential to become a top foreign exchange earner in the future, despite occasional challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic or security issues. For a successful long-term plan, we must carefully assess the required number of human resources, including the need for hotel schools and training institutes to meet the demands of the industry.

To achieve our long-term goals, we need a massive planning effort that goes beyond just accommodation and transportation. We should gather a team and work collaboratively with the Tourism Development Authority to meet all the required standards and create various job opportunities related to the tourism sector.

While looking at the long term, we should also break down our plan into short-term strategies that we can achieve incrementally. By aligning our long-term vision with achievable short-term milestones, we can make steady progress towards our ultimate goals.

## Any messages that you want to give to the younger generation in Sri Lanka?

I believe that tourism is a rapidly developing and everlasting sector. Its growth is directly linked to the population, as the higher the population, the more tourists are likely to come. Moreover, tourism is not a monotonous field like many traditional office jobs; it offers diverse and dynamic experiences. Every day brings new things to learn and explore, whether it's trying out new dishes or interacting with different clients.

Working in tourism brings immense satisfaction, and it has been one of the best sectors that I have experienced. I often encourage students to consider a career in tourism, as it provides a unique and fulfilling experience. Meeting and interacting with diverse clientele add to the excitement and diversity of the job.

While there might be some risks involved, such as handling different attitudes and behavior patterns, it's essential to maintain a positive outlook. By focusing on the positive aspects, one can navigate the industry successfully and move forward with confidence. The key to success is performance-driven, and within a relatively short time, say five years, one can achieve significant career growth, potentially becoming a general manager of a property based on their performance and dedication ■

*Interviewed by: Dinusha Weerasekera & Binari Willaddara*



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# Exploring the Unexplored: Sri Lanka's journey in revitalizing the Tourism Sector

## Mr. Charith De Alwis

**General Manager for Tangerine Tours  
and Secretary, Sri Lanka Association of  
Inbound Tour Operators (SLAITO)**

### **Can we know about your professional journey and its milestones up until your current position?**

I joined Jetwing Travels as a Trainee Executive soon after my A/Ls as I always had the passion to represent my country, promote my country, meet new people and get exposed to the world. During my tenure as a Trainee Executive, I fell in love with what I did and identified that I am in an industry in which I fit in. Later on I joined the Tangerine group and currently I am serving the group in the capacity of the General Manager for Tangerine Tours (Pvt) Ltd.

I completed my master's degree in Tourism Economics and Hospitality Management from the University of Colombo and currently, I'm serving as the Assistant Treasurer of the Alumni Association of Tourism Economics & Hospitality Management.

Another key milestone is being appointed as the Secretary of the Sri Lanka Association of Inbound Tour Operators (SLAITO).





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Our industry mainly depends on natural attractions, therefore, it's of paramount importance all developments are carried out in a sustainable manner that protects the environment and natural resources stops over-exploiting, and protects future generations



## What are the key challenges faced by the Sri Lankan tourism sector after the COVID-19 pandemic, and how is your organization addressing these challenges?

With Covid-19 the country was closed down for the majority of the time during the next two years due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the travel restrictions imposed by governments all over the world which reduced the number of guests.

The whole ecosystem of the tourism sector suffered due to the reduction of the guests and the hotels suffered without visitors which eventually led to many people leaving the trade.

Despite, the severity of the pandemic reducing and the country returning to normalcy after Covid-19 the year 2022 was a difficult year for the sector due to the Economic Crisis in the country and the civilian protests which damaged the reputation of the



country which reduced the number of tourist arrivals to Sri Lanka which has hindered the tourism sector of the country.

Further, the tourism service providers are faced with the crippling problems of inflation which interrupts the costing and pricing of the tourism services, and brain drain which has resulted in qualified and trained hotel staff leaving the country resulting in a staff shortage that has impacted the ability of the hoteliers in maintaining the required standards. Finally, all these negative impacts have resulted in an adverse effect on the cash flows of organizations.

We as an entity have taken measures to ensure the job safety of our employees and we are proud of the fact that we have managed to retain our staff members. Further, we have employed students reading for Tourism Degrees from Universities (Leading state and non-state universities), and we have conducted virtual sessions to educate students who are studying in the field of tourism and hospitality.

### **How do you see tourism contributing to the overall economic growth of Sri Lanka, and what role can the private sector/government/universities play in this?**

Tourism is the third largest foreign exchange earner for our country and the best Year for the sector was 2018 when there were 2.3 Mn Tourist Arrivals and the sector earned Rs 4.3 Bn revenue which contributed to 4.9% of the GDP and created about 3 Mn Direct and Indirect Employment opportunities

As stated earlier the sector is economically important to the country and I believe that the Sri Lankan government should contribute through promotional campaigns to improve awareness about Sri Lanka in foreign nations, taking active measures to protect natural attractions, creating a safe and secure environment for tourists, and deploying a professional tourist police with a friendly uniform to the tourist attractions.

Further, it's my belief that private sector organizations should take measures to promote Sri Lanka as a tourist destination by organizing events to bring foreign content providers and influencers to the country to promote tourism and participate in foreign trade fairs.

When the role of universities is considered, I believe that the Sri Lankan universities should offer more tourism programs and the curriculum of the existing programs should also be continuously revised to meet the changes in the industry needs.

### **What strategies can be employed to enhance the tourism offerings in Sri Lanka and attract more visitors?**

Mainly we can focus on improving the infrastructure: This includes upgrading roads, airports, and public transport systems to make it easier for tourists to get around the country.



The next should be promoting the cultural heritage. Sri Lanka has a rich cultural heritage, including ancient temples, ruins, and traditional arts and crafts. Promoting and preserving these cultural attractions can attract tourists interested in history and cultural experiences.

Further, we can develop niche tourism products. Sri Lanka has diverse ecosystems, including rainforests, tea plantations, and beautiful beaches. Developing niche tourism products such as eco-tourism, adventure tourism, and wellness tourism can attract specific segments of tourists.

Increasing marketing efforts is also very important: Sri Lanka should increase its marketing efforts to target potential tourists in key source markets. This can be done through social media campaigns, collaborations with travel influencers, and participation in international tourism events.

Collaborating with neighboring countries would also matter. Sri Lanka can collaborate with neighboring countries to promote multi-destination tourism packages. This can provide visitors with a wider range of attractions and experiences and increase the length of their stay in Sri Lanka.

At last, we can focus on Enhancing the accommodation options: Improving the quality and variety of accommodation options, including budget-friendly options and boutique hotels.

## **How can Sri Lanka balance the need for tourism development with environmental sustainability and conservation?**

Our industry mainly depends on natural attractions, therefore, it's of paramount importance all



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**By leveraging digital technology, Sri Lanka can enhance the tourism experience and improve visitor satisfaction. This can be done by providing real-time information on attractions, maps, weather updates, and local services through mobile applications**



developments are carried out in a sustainable manner that protects the environment and natural resources stops over-exploiting and protects for future generations. Swift legal action should be taken against the people who are breaking the law. Also, Single use of plastic should be banned. The industry should embrace renewable energy such as Solar and wind.

### **What steps can be taken to promote Sri Lanka's lesser-known destinations and diversify the tourism product beyond the traditional beach and cultural attractions?**

We are a diverse compact island nation. We have 26 natural parks, 8 UNESCO Heritage sites, and 34 Biodiversity hotspots in Sri Lanka. 33% of our land is forest and we have

the highest density of Waterfalls in the world.

Gen Z is looking for experiences and we have untapped opportunities for our gastronomy, lesser known destinations with natural beauty including Alien Rock, Nildiya Pokuna, Eco Trails, and Kalpitiya, lesser explored locations with rich culture including Jaffna, and our wellness products.

Sri Lanka could offer adventure-based familiarization tourist packages where the visitors are given a chance to experience the authentic Sri Lankan culture, gastronomy, beaches, traditional wellness, and the natural beauty of Sri Lanka. We are listed in the top 5 countries for wellness tourism. We have a sea area of 8 ½ times (550,000 km<sup>2</sup>) its land mass (65610 km<sup>2</sup>). So we can do many marine activities such as diving, snorkeling, shipwrecks, and water sports with the year-round destination with amazing weather.

Further, we could bring down bloggers and influencers from foreign nations to promote the authentic Sri Lankan culture, and lifestyle to promote Sri Lanka's lesser-known destinations and diversify the tourism product beyond the traditional places of attractions.

### **How can Sri Lanka leverage digital technology to enhance the tourism experience and improve visitor satisfaction?**

Google Travel study shows 74% of travelers plan their trips on the Internet, while only 13% still use travel agencies to prepare them.

By leveraging digital technology, Sri Lanka can enhance the tourism experience and improve visitor satisfaction. This can be done by providing real-time information on attractions, maps, weather

updates, and local services through mobile applications. These apps can also facilitate ticket purchasing and language translation services. Additionally, incorporating Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) technologies can provide immersive experiences for tourists, such as virtual tours of historical sites and interactive maps with AR overlays.

Social media can be utilized to promote Sri Lanka as a desirable tourist destination. Collaborating with travel influencers and content creators can showcase the beauty and culture of the country. Encouraging tourists to share their experiences using dedicated hashtags can create a sense of community among travelers. Moreover, providing widespread

availability of free Wi-Fi in popular tourist areas allows tourists to stay connected, access online resources, and share their experiences in real time, further promoting Sri Lanka as a tourist-friendly destination.

## **How can the tourism sector in Sri Lanka collaborate with other industries, such as agriculture and handicrafts, to create more authentic and immersive experiences for visitors?**

There are several ways in which the tourism sector in Sri Lanka can collaborate with other industries, such as agriculture and handicrafts, to create more authentic and immersive experiences for visitors.

Farm-to-table experiences are one option. The tourism sector can collaborate with local farmers to offer farm visits and agritourism activities, where visitors can learn about traditional farming methods, participate in harvesting or planting, and even enjoy farm-fresh meals prepared using local produce.

Handicraft workshops and demonstrations can be promoted. By partnering with local artisans and craftspeople, the tourism sector can organize workshops and demonstrations where visitors can learn traditional handicraft techniques such as pottery, batik, wood carving, or weaving. This allows visitors to engage firsthand with the local culture and contribute to the preservation of traditional crafts.





Culinary tourism is another aspect. Sri Lanka's rich culinary heritage can be highlighted by collaborating with the agriculture industry to promote agrotourism experiences. This can include visits to spice gardens, tea estates, or even cooking classes conducted by local chefs using locally sourced ingredients.

Souvenir and local product promotions could be very important to us. The tourism sector can work closely with the handicraft industry to promote and sell locally-made products as souvenirs. This can be done by creating designated spaces or shops within tourist areas that exclusively feature what are the long-term goals for the Sri Lankan tourism sector, and how can these be achieved in a sustainable and inclusive manner.

### **What are the long-term goals for the Sri Lankan tourism sector, and how can these be achieved in a sustainable and inclusive manner?**

The long-term goals for the Sri Lankan tourism sector are to attract a greater number of high-spending international tourists, increase the length of their stay, and promote sustainable and inclusive practices. These goals can be achieved in the following ways in general.

First, diversification of tourism products. Sri Lanka should focus on developing niche tourism products such as adventure tourism, rural tourism, eco-tourism, cultural tourism, and wellness tourism. This will attract different types of travelers and extend their stay in the country.

Infrastructure development is another goal. Improving the overall

tourism infrastructure is crucial for attracting high-spending tourists. This includes developing and upgrading airports, roads, public transportation, and accommodation facilities to ensure better connectivity and convenience.

Thirdly, Conservation and sustainable practices. Sri Lanka's natural beauty and biodiversity should be preserved through sustainable practices. This includes promoting responsible tourism, reducing the carbon footprint, promoting waste management, and encouraging eco-friendly activities. Protected areas and wildlife conservation should be given priority.

Next should be community involvement and inclusive tourism: local communities should actively participate and benefit from tourism development. This can be achieved through community-based tourism initiatives, which involve local communities in tourism activities, providing them with income opportunities, training, and capacity building. This will ensure that the benefits of tourism are spread evenly.

### **Any messages that you want to give to the younger generation in Sri Lanka?**

To the younger generation in Sri Lanka, I want to pass on a few messages:

Embrace education. It is very important. Education is the key to success and personal growth. Take your studies seriously, pursue higher education, and constantly seek knowledge. It will open doors to new opportunities and empower them to make a positive impact in your life and community.



Embrace diversity: Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multicultural country. Embrace the diversity around you and celebrate it. Respect and appreciate different cultures, traditions, and opinions. By doing so, you can foster harmony, understanding, and unity among your peers and fellow citizens.

Be proud of your heritage: Sri Lanka has a rich history, culture, and heritage. Learn about your roots, traditions, and language. Be proud of your identity and share it with the world. By preserving and promoting your heritage, you contribute to the preservation of Sri Lankan culture for future generations.

Embrace innovation and entrepreneurship: Use your creativity, skills, and talents to fuel innovation and entrepreneurship. Sri Lanka needs young leaders who can think outside the box, come up with innovative solutions, and turn ideas into reality. Be proactive, take risks, and believe in your ability to make a difference ■

*Interviewed by: Tharani Sooriyaarachchi & Gishan Abhayagunaratna*

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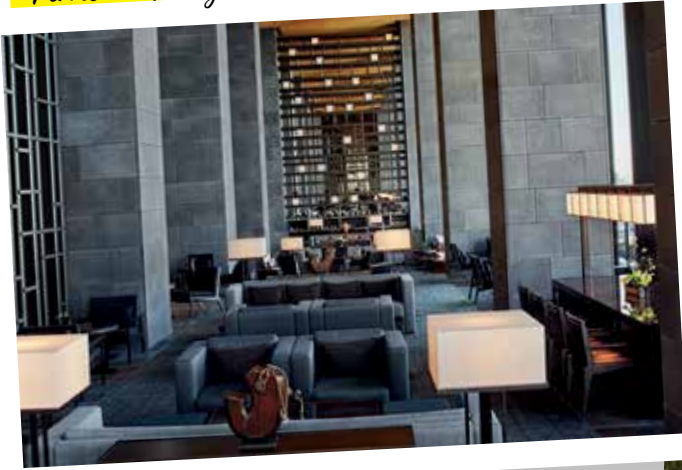


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# TOURISM FROM THE ACADEMIC LENS

## PROF. SURANGA SILVA

Professor in Tourism Economics  
Coordinator - Sustainable Tourism Unit  
University of Colombo

### Can we know about your professional journey and its milestones up until your current position?

I completed my PhD in 2002 on the topic of Sustainable Tourism Development in Sri Lanka: An Appraisal of International Inbound Tourism Demand, the Tourism Industry and National Tourism Policy at the Vrije University Amsterdam, the Netherlands. After completing my PhD, I came back to Sri Lanka although I was provided with an opportunity to join the same university as a contract-base researcher cum lecturer. But I felt that I should come back and it was time for us to serve the country, ever than before.

After I arrived, I conducted an industry market survey. My research revealed that the industry required a formal education from universities and higher educational institutes, but not necessarily degrees and master's programs; instead, diplomas and short courses in travel, tourism and hospitality studies are needed.

I completed my survey through approximately 500 interviews. Among the respondents, 95% expressed the need for university-level education. Interestingly, the several of them were qualified for postgraduate courses. These findings also clearly revealed that many industry employees did not successfully complete their A/Ls (Advanced Level examinations). Consequently, their primary option was to seek employment in the tourism







industry, often under their parental pressure. While they were passionate about their work and enjoyed benefits such as accommodation and meals, their formal education was lacking.

While it's true that operational roles within the industry may not require extensive and systematic higher education, but there was essential burning requirement to grasp the broader context. Academic knowledge provides the skill to conceptualize the industry's dynamics and valuable analytical skills to forecast them for market benefits. Recognizing this gap in tourism education within the tourism industry, the Department of Economics, University of Colombo introduced Diploma in Travel & Tourism Economics and Hotel Management (DTTEHM) Programme as a step in to fill this industry requirement.

Initially, there was no demand for postgraduate programmes as these professionals were already experts in practical aspects like four major areas of hotel management. However, they needed knowledge in areas such as revenue management, financial

analysis, marketing, forecasting and so on. In 2005, we initiated the DTTEHM Programme.

After a few successful batches of DTTEHM Programme, the students requested higher-level programmes. Consequently, we introduced Executive Diploma, Postgraduate Diploma, then Masters, and even PhD programmes in tourism education at the Department of Economics, Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo.

Understanding the evolving direction of tourism, it's essential to incorporate sustainable practices at the highest level. To achieve this, we introduced Certificate for Sustainable Tourism Destination Management (CSTDM) in collaboration with the Global Sustainable Tourism Council and UNDP.

I have been appointed as the lead trainer for sustainable tourism by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), and we were also working towards establishing a Sustainable Tourism Unit at the University of Colombo building partnerships with various entities to achieve this national endeavour. All these



**Nevertheless, despite these setbacks and economic crises, our industry has shown remarkable resilience. We have become adept at navigating crises and, despite setbacks, are making a comeback.**



initiatives have significantly elevated the status of the Faculty of Arts and have a direct impact on human resource development

Finally, 21st of August 2023, as a most probably my final contribution as the coordinator to the university education before the retirement, Sustainable Tourism Unit (STU) has been introduced at the Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo.

Establishing the University of Colombo Sustainable Tourism Unit (UOC-STU) at the Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo is to cater a dynamic and evidence-based knowledge platform incorporating different dimensions of sustainable tourism development applying through an interdisciplinary approach that engages different subject disciplines of not only the various departments belong to the Faculty of Arts but also all means of evidence-based knowledge contributions from different faculties of the University of Colombo. The

STU also aspires to establish a robust multistakeholder dialogue platform that effectively engages stakeholders for successful sustainable tourism practices and implementation in Sri Lanka.

The STU is to empower industry stakeholders by enhancing their knowledge, skills and competencies for fostering sustainable practices and successful implementation in the tourism industry.

The STU aims to forge partnerships with national bodies like SLTDA and other organizations/authorities and also with international organizations such as GSTC, UNWTO, WTTC, and the other related international organizations to ensure a productive knowledge partnership for sustainable tourism while offering learning opportunities for the students of the university to apply sustainable practices, expanding their professional networks.

With the tagline or the moto of UOC-STU - "Wisdom Enlightening

for Sustainable Tourism," the STU is developed under the vision of providing outcomes-based learning & research, knowledge-driven innovation and results-focused training to be the Center of Excellence in Asia for sustainable tourism development.

### **What are the key challenges faced by the Sri Lankan tourism sector after the COVID-19 pandemic, and how is your organization/ government/university addressing these challenges?**

COVID-19 has not been the only significant challenge for the Sri Lankan tourism sector. In fact, our industry has faced difficulties since its inception in 1967, a mere four years after my birth. Allow me to take you through our history. In 1971, we encountered significant challenges, and in 1983, the ethnic crisis struck, persisting until 2009 as we grappled with the ethnic war.

In 2010, I assumed the role of Director General at Sri Lanka Institute of Tourism and Hotel Management (SLITHM), Ministry of Economic Development, marking a turning point for me. We experienced remarkable growth, with arrivals surging by more than 275%, making it the highest growth rate in the world at that time. Sri Lanka gained recognition as the 'Best Island to Visit' by Lonely Planet. By 2013, we were lauded as the best in Asia and ranked among the top 13 destinations globally. We maintained this standing in 2019.





**In the current scenario, the tourism industry plays a pivotal role in generating foreign currency for Sri Lanka's economy, ranking third after remittances and apparel exports.**



However, 2019 brought new challenges. Just as we were poised for continued success, we were hit hard by the Easter Sunday attacks, COVID-19, and an economic crisis. While other countries were managing the COVID-19 pandemic, we faced unique difficulties compounded by pre-existing crises stemming from terrorist attacks. A recent survey revealed that over 70% of businesses in the SME sector within the travel industry had to close, and more than 60% of employees lost their jobs. This had a significant impact, affecting not only newcomers but also seasoned professionals.

Nevertheless, despite these setbacks and economic crises, our industry has shown remarkable resilience. We have become adept at navigating crises and, despite setbacks, are making a comeback. Currently, our industry attracts nearly a million visitors, although it's essential to note that not all of them are tourists; some

are immigrants or other types of visitors. We will delve into this aspect later.

In summary, this represents the most challenging scenario our industry has ever encountered. However, we are determined to recover and continue our growth. Our most pressing challenge at present is attracting tourists amid the ongoing pandemic. Without tourists, there is no way to promote tourism. While we have explored various avenues, such as virtual tourism, we acknowledge that these are not ideal solutions for making a meaningful contribution to the country. Fortunately, the situation is improving, and we must remain adaptable to address the evolving landscape.

**How do you see tourism contributing to the overall economic growth of Sri Lanka, and what role can the private**

**sector/government/universities play in this?**

In the current scenario, the tourism industry plays a pivotal role in generating foreign currency for Sri Lanka's economy, ranking third after remittances and apparel exports. Over the past three years, we've lost more than 10 billion USD in revenue due to various challenges. Had we retained this revenue; our economic situation would be far better today. The connection is clear: a thriving tourism industry can greatly enhance Sri Lanka's economic sector.

Tourism is a multifaceted industry that has far-reaching effects on economies and communities. Its impact can be categorized into three main dimensions: direct, indirect, and induced.

Direct Impact of tourism refers to the immediate economic activities generated by tourists' expenditures within a destination. These include spending on accommodation,





transportation, food, attractions, and souvenirs. Direct impact is often the most visible and quantifiable aspect of tourism's contribution to an economy. It includes revenues generated directly from tourists and is a key driver of the tourism sector.

Indirect Impact of tourism encompasses the secondary economic activities stimulated by the direct spending of tourists. These activities are associated with the supply chain that supports tourism. For example, when tourists visit a destination and spend money on accommodations, this creates demand for goods and services such as furniture, construction, and food supplies. These secondary businesses, in turn, hire employees, purchase goods and services, and contribute to the overall economic health of the region.

Induced Impact represents the tertiary economic effects resulting from the spending of those employed in the direct and indirect

sectors of tourism. As tourism-related businesses hire employees and pay wages, these employees, in turn, spend their incomes on various goods and services within the destination. This cycle of spending creates a ripple effect throughout the local economy, boosting sectors like retail, healthcare, education, and more. The induced impact demonstrates how tourism can have a broader and sustained influence on a community's economic well-being.

However, the key challenge exist in this context of our country is how much local industries can cater all these contributions competitively. This underscores the need for an integrated and interconnected approach between tourism and the related sectors.

The tourism industry is significant in terms of generating income, employment, and foreign exchange. A dollar invested to tourism industry in Sri Lanka has

the potential to generate more than 2 dollars through its direct, indirect, and induced impacts. It is because of Sri Lanka tourism industry's high backward and forward linkages, such potential must be realized by decision-makers if it requires effective implementation.

### **What strategies can be employed to enhance the tourism offerings in Sri Lanka and attract more visitors?**

Tourism is a unique industry; it's not like buying a shirt or a product where the experience isn't directly involved. In tourism, the experience is everything. If visitors have a memorable experience, they will not only return but also promote it to others. Tourism is all about creating memorable experiences.

To enhance tourism offerings in Sri Lanka and attract more visitors, we must focus on providing exceptional

experiences. This means that developing tourism activities and products should generate unique and memorable experience. For example, we can promote wellness tourism by organizing wellness retreats that offer a unique and life-enhancing experience.

We can also capitalize on Sri Lanka's beautiful beaches by combining them with our renowned hospitality. Sri Lankan cuisine, villas, agriculture, culture, and people are all essential elements that can enhance the overall experience for tourists.

In a competitive tourism landscape, we must create outstanding and memorable products driven by unique experiences. While our current offerings are doing relatively good, we have more untapped potential waiting to be explored.

For instance, consider Singapore, a small country with over 10 million tourists annually. In contrast, we are striving for just 2 million tourists. However, it's not merely about the number of tourists but the quality of their experience and their spending habits. We must maximize income

and ensure that it benefits all stakeholders of our economy, rather than concentrating wealth in the hands of a few. Fair distribution of income among various sectors is vital to sustainable tourism growth.

Therefore, in a nut shell, it's not just about increasing tourist numbers but providing them with exceptional and unique experiences that make Sri Lanka an attractive destination. We must focus on the quality of the tourist experience and how it contributes to our economy while ensuring a fair distribution of income among all stakeholders

## How can Sri Lanka balance the need for tourism development with environmental sustainability and conservation?

Balancing tourism development with environmental sustainability and conservation is essential, and fortunately, it's not a difficult task. The global tourism landscape has evolved, with travellers increasingly seeking socially and environmentally

friendly experiences. Many tourists visiting Sri Lanka already prioritize sustainable options.

To attract more visitors while preserving our environment, we must provide products and services that align with this demand for sustainability. Tourists from developed nations, in particular, actively seek sustainable products and experiences. Therefore, our responsibility is clear: we must offer products that meet these expectations. This requires innovation, research, and evidence-based decision-making.

Our academic institutions and researchers play a vital role in identifying sustainable tourism practices. They should provide the necessary evidence and recommendations to guide policymakers and industry stakeholders. The key is to provide a lifetime of quality experiences at the right price to the right customer.

However, we should be cautious about pricing. While it's essential to provide value for money, Sri Lanka should not overprice its offerings.





We must remain competitive in the global tourism market. For example, Singapore charges a premium at its airport but provides exceptional facilities and services. Our pricing should reflect the quality and value we offer.

Sri Lanka is an attractive destination, thanks to our natural beauty and the warmth of our people. Our friendliness is often praised by travellers. However, we must ensure that our marketing promises align with the actual experience visitors have. Minor issues, like stray dogs and traffic, can leave a negative impression.

Balancing tourism development with environmental sustainability is not difficult. It involves offering sustainable products and experiences that align with the expectations of modern travellers. Our academic institutions and researchers can play a crucial role in guiding sustainable practices. Pricing should reflect the value we offer, and marketing should be aligned with the reality of the visitor experience.

### **What steps can be taken to promote Sri Lanka's lesser-known destinations and diversify the tourism**

### **product beyond the traditional beach and cultural attractions?**

Firstly, it is essential to distinguish what is known from what is unknown. Promoting lesser-known destinations must be approached with caution. A destination alone, even if well-known, is not sufficient. Attractions must be thoughtfully connected with activities. Failure to link them with appropriate, verified activities and instead promoting obscure businesses or places can have detrimental long-term consequences. For example, some may boast Sri Lanka has many beautiful, nature-based locations. In such cases, when these places attract visitors without proper guidelines, they risk environmental degradation. Therefore, for the numerous lesser-known places we have, we should develop packages while simultaneously creating suitable guidelines to protect these treasures.

Take Ella as an example—a destination that initially lacked government planning but gained popularity through social media. It exemplifies a demand-driven destination. When promoting lesser-known tourist places, we must comprehensively understand these locations, the appropriate promotion strategies, and the potential

outcomes that can be generated.

There are also instances where we are aware of well-known places but are not effectively promoting them. Consider Sigiriya. Is it visitor-friendly? Does it operate sustainably? Next, look at Nelum Kuluna. Is it being marketed effectively? Established destinations should be marketed properly, integrating sustainability principles to introduce them to new audiences.

In pursuing this, we require a clear vision. We must decide how to promote these places, the methods to employ, and the activities to incorporate. Failure to achieve the desired results in promoting lesser-known places can lead to severe and painful consequences.

In my opinion, universities should take the lead in identifying lesser-known places and promoting them with specific guidelines tailored to target audiences.

### **How can Sri Lanka leverage digital technology to enhance the tourism experience and improve visitor satisfaction?**

Yes, recently I got to know that a couple of hotel chains also make use

of AI continuously and progressively and at times it feels unbelievable what it can do. It designs its plans, and gives marketing directions and pricing strategies. AI provides convenience for the tourism industry. For example, a package designer would prepare a package suitable for each customer with the help of AI after inputting the number of people, interests, and budget. Once suggested, the package designer could see how it best fits the pertaining situations and decide on it. Additionally, if you want to prepare a poster for a conference or any event, you just need to provide what you require, and it will be available in your fingertips. Likewise, digital technology can provide you ample number of benefits. Right now, we can ask the students to develop the best and the most feasible tour package and AI will possibly provide you the answer, but we must see how we can apply that answer into the reality. So, I think we need to capitalize this technology in the best way possible.

## How can the tourism sector in Sri Lanka collaborate with other industries to create more authentic and immersive experiences for visitors?

Yeah, basically, tourism industry is an interconnected industry. If you are asked what industry is not affected by tourism, there is probably no such industry in any country. Transport, agriculture, entertainment, banking, shopping, everything is connected. This is what makes tourism a beautiful industry, not only in Sri Lanka but all over the world. So basically, there are prime industries which should be connected; Environment Ministry, Agricultural

Ministry, Transport Ministry, Trade Ministry. As much as these industries are connected with the tourism industry, the service can be handled better. Otherwise, in getting approval from, for example, the beach authorities, railway authorities and other relevant authorities, the disturbances faced are going to be higher. Therefore, there is no doubt that the integrations and networks with the other industries is vital to provide an authentic experience.

In addition, integration between Sri Lanka's tourism sector and various industries can significantly enhance visitor experiences. This synergy can be achieved through partnerships with culinary experts, artists, and cultural institutions to offer diverse and authentic culinary and cultural experiences. Engaging with local farmers and eco-tourism initiatives enables tourists to participate in sustainable farming activities.

Adventure sports providers can create immersive adventures, while wellness retreats and Ayurvedic practitioners promote wellness tourism. Universities and educational institutions can offer workshops, language classes, and historical lectures. Heritage conservation organizations can restore historical sites, making them accessible to tourists. Collaboration with local communities facilitates homestays and cultural exchanges, enriching tourists' understanding of local life.

Environmental initiatives, in partnership with conservation organizations, promote responsible tourism. The transportation industry can improve connectivity to lesser-known destinations. Tech companies can develop innovative solutions like mobile apps and virtual reality experiences. Effective marketing and promotion, often involving



**Sri Lanka's long-term goals for its tourism sector should encompass sustainability, inclusivity, and economic growth. Achieving these objectives necessitates a multifaceted approach.**

influencers, spread the word about these partnerships. A coordinated effort among government agencies, tourism boards, industry associations, and local businesses is crucial for successful collaboration, benefiting both tourists and Sri Lanka's overall economic and social development.

## What are the long-term goals for the Sri Lankan tourism sector, and how can these be achieved in a sustainable and inclusive manner?

I envision Sri Lanka as the most eco-friendly and people-friendly destination in the region. For



instance, when I met a professor from another country, I asked, 'What do you need from Sri Lanka?' He replied, 'I don't need anything! Please give us free air, a clean environment, and a blue sky.' That's what I want because it's something unique to Sri Lanka. Our nation is endowed by nature with everything we need. To preserve this, we must promote sustainable tourism while ensuring profitability and value addition.

Contributors to sustainable tourism should receive a fair return, and the benefits should be distributed equitably. Sri Lanka should not merely focus on increasing visitor numbers but on maximizing income. When we consider the bigger picture, Sri Lanka should aim to attract at least 8 to 10 million tourists in the next five years, generating an income of more than 20 billion USD. Why? Because we have the potential to achieve higher earnings.

We must leverage our natural beauty combined with engaging activities. Take Madhu River as an example; a boat ride of over an hour to see only a few interesting sights won't suffice for sustaining tourism. The biggest challenge is to satisfy the customer, and this can be achieved by infusing more activities into these packages.

Wellness and spiritual experiences are some areas to explore, along with catering to senior tourists who seek peaceful destinations.

Retired individuals from countries like Germany, who spend around \$5000 per month on medicine and daily expenses, can find a more affordable and enjoyable life here for approximately \$3000. Sri Lanka's tourism sector can become an attractive destination and a significant income generator by offering this opportunity.

Another avenue is attracting tourists for weddings and major functions. Our unique cultural rituals, including those related to funerals, can pique the interest of travelers. We should harness the potential we possess in terms of nature, culture, friendliness, and the livelihoods of our people. These factors are pivotal in achieving our long-term goals.

In conclusion, our goals should not solely revolve around increasing tourist numbers but also focus on maximizing income and ensuring a fair distribution of benefits.

Sri Lanka's long-term goals for its tourism sector should encompass

sustainability, inclusivity, and economic growth. Achieving these objectives necessitates a multifaceted approach. Sustainable tourism development is paramount, involving environmental preservation, resource conservation, and eco-friendly practices. Diversifying offerings to include lesser-known destinations spreads tourist traffic, reduces overcrowding, and promotes inclusive growth.

Investment in infrastructure, including transportation and accommodations, enhances the accessibility and visitor experiences. Engaging local communities empowers them to benefit from tourism while preserving their heritage. Education and training programs must create a skilled tourism workforce, and technology integration improves the visitor experience.

Preserving and promoting cultural heritage should showcase the nation's identity. Environmental conservation, waste management, and responsible tourism practices ensure the protection of Sri Lanka's natural beauty.

Collaboration among government agencies, the private sector, local



communities, and international organizations is vital. Effective marketing strategies highlighting sustainability and cultural diversity can attract conscious travelers. A supportive policy framework reinforces sustainable practices, investment, and compliance with environmental and social standards. In sum, Sri Lanka aims to establish itself as a sustainable, inclusive, and economically prosperous tourism destination through a holistic and collaborative approach.

## **Any message that you want to give the younger generation of Sri Lanka?**

Certainly, the tourism industry is an ideal arena to implement your ideas. No tourist desires a repetitive experience; innovation is the driving force behind this industry. Innovation is rooted in knowledge, and knowledge is the foundation of innovation. It's crucial that our knowledge is derived from evidence-based research. Even academia plays a significant role in advancing tourism. If research is not

provided to the industry, knowledge will stagnate. Without updated knowledge, innovation is hampered. And with innovation, we can offer standout products.

Hence, I would like to emphasize that research-based knowledge and innovation are the driving forces behind Sri Lankan tourism. It's essential to recognize that political affiliations are less important than private-sector interactions. The private sector is pivotal, as it drives our tourism industry towards global excellence. For this to succeed, bolstered by evidence-based research and knowledge, we must ensure that we attract the right talent. This is precisely what Singapore does – they seek out and retain talented individuals.

However, the biggest challenge today is the migration of people from various industries, with the tourism sector being the hardest hit. A significant portion of many students currently pursuing tourism studies in Sri Lanka are also leaving the country. They find better opportunities abroad with attractive

internships, and retaining them is difficult in the current landscape. Developing a new generation passionate about this industry is a considerable challenge. Therefore, it's our duty and responsibility to cultivate a generation with a deep passion for tourism with loving and caring Sri Lanka Tourism. To achieve this, we must offer them the right opportunities and the necessary training to enhance their skills.

This should be the goal for institutions like NSBM and other universities. The aim, unlike in the Maldives, should not be to have a flourishing industry with minimal Sri Lankan manpower but to align the industry's needs with a sufficient workforce. Sri Lanka must, therefore, produce more skilled individuals for the industry. This must be a collective effort for our shared purpose that all of us must strive for the future shared benefits ensuring sustainable tourism development with our prosperous people involved with the industry directly or indirectly ■

*Interviewed by: Thisal Yatawara & Tharushi Hettiaarachchi*

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# Fostering Travel Experiences

**What are the key challenges facing the Sri Lankan tourism sector after the COVID-19 pandemic, and how is your organization/ government addressing these challenges?**

The pandemic brought forth several challenges for our company, specially being a startup that began operations 6 months before the

pandemic. The obvious key challenge was the absence of tourists.

To combat this, we embraced creativity, offering online Sri Lankan experiences that garnered positive responses despite the lack of physical visitors. For example, we hosted a Sri Lankan cooking class online, where the chef will teach you how to cook a delicious Sri Lankan meal in 90 minutes. We loved seeing the world connect and come together to enjoy something that's authentic Sri Lankan but being at the comfort

of their own homes, wherever in the world.

However, securing funding remained difficult due to our startup status and cash flow constraints, despite attempts to access the Saubhagya loan scheme. Brain drain became an issue post-pandemic as talent migrated for better opportunities, resulting in a shortage of skilled personnel and negative impacts on service quality and reputation. Balancing high operational costs, negative press, and ingredient



## Mr. Udaya Wickramage

Chief Visionary Officer  
Sensory Indulgences



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Approximately 95% of tourism promotions are spearheaded by the private sector, an undeniable reality. The standout year, 2018, reaped a \$5 billion USD revenue from tourism. About 90% of this can be attributed to the private sector's involvement

scarcity due to import restrictions further complicated recovery efforts. Overcoming these multifaceted obstacles is essential for revitalizing the \$5 billion tourism industry and elevating Sri Lanka's position in comparison to other regional destinations that are already leagues ahead of us.

Our company offers unique tourism experiences in Sri Lanka, departing from traditional sites. We emphasize

storytelling to engage global travellers by reimagining historical narratives akin to Game of Thrones, we ensure memorable interactions. This interactive approach has enabled us to thrive, even during challenging times. Our success is attributed to a focused investment in product development, avoiding unnecessary expenses. This strategy, coupled with branching out across the island, has propelled our company forward amidst difficulties.

## How do you see tourism contributing to the overall economic growth of Sri Lanka, and what role can the private sector play in this?

Approximately 95% of tourism promotions are spearheaded by the private sector, an undeniable reality. The standout year, 2018, reaped a \$5 billion USD revenue from tourism. About 90% of this can be attributed to the private sector's involvement. Their vital role involves tracking the evolving trends and keeping up with them. This sector excels in adapting to these trends, building relationships with foreign stakeholders. On the contrary, governmental support falls short in these areas. Though private sector efforts shine during



## As an experience-based system, our approach involves bringing lesser-known stories to life through thorough research and trend analysis

promotional tours, there's a lack of unity in collaborative global campaigns. Pooling a fraction of each player's marketing budget could propel Sri Lanka's tourism. The current challenge lies in regaining prominence, as other destinations have outshone it recently. The way forward involves greater private sector cohesion, strategic planning, and perhaps being integrated into policy-making to synergize efforts for the industry's revival.

## What strategies can be employed to enhance the tourism offerings in Sri Lanka and attract more visitors?

Our focus should be on attracting niche trades and the right visitors, rather than playing the numbers game. As seen with many destinations such as Bali and Thailand, the numbers game always results in over-tourism





issues and environmental concerns. To flourish sustainably, our small land's per capita spending requires high-income global visitors. A clear tourism identity, especially in the western markets, is crucial. In the short run, this involves building a destination identity, resolving site and experience issues, and addressing conflicts and pollution. While mid-term plans should entail gradual changes, implementation of a long-term national tourism policy is pivotal for consistent growth. To achieve superpower status like the Maldives' private sector-driven tourism, incorporating lessons from their transformation, is the key. Currently, repeat clientele in Sri Lanka stands at 15%, while the Maldives enjoys a repeat clientele between 30% - 40% which emphasizes the importance of quality over quantity.

### **How can Sri Lanka balance the need for tourism development with environmental sustainability and conservation?**

It's about aligning the national tourism policy with sustainability

and conservation objectives that are essential for effective implementation. Both policies should complement each other to create a cohesive approach. The strategy we devise must seamlessly integrate with the nation's sustainability and conservation goals. A primary concern is crowd control, which has been exemplified by Bali's overcrowding issues. To avoid such scenarios, Sri Lanka must implement crowd management measures. The nation can learn from neighbouring countries, drawing on their successes. Modern tools like AI can be harnessed to identify areas of improvement and adopt effective strategies from other nations. Furthermore, emphasis on environmental sustainability and ecosystem balance is crucial. Various tourism sectors coexist, including mass markets, backpackers, digital, and influencer segments, along with ultra-high-end luxury. These segments need to complement each other, as they form an interconnected ecosystem. While luxury should gain prominence, maintaining equilibrium among segments is key. Achieving a balanced "tourism engine" is pivotal for Sri Lanka's sustainable growth. Addressing environmental concerns

involves educating locals, as they contribute significantly to pollution. Clear regulations are needed for tourism-related construction. The younger generation shows promise in adopting eco-friendly practices, driven by education and mentality change. Leveraging abundant natural resources like solar, kinetic, wind, and wave energy is essential to overcome challenges, including fuel issues and high costs of living. For the tourism sector, this applies to hotels and their energy consumption. The crux lies in implementation, as knowledge alone is insufficient. In this way, Sri Lanka can pave the path for a sustainable tourism future.

### **What steps can be taken to promote Sri Lanka's lesser-known destinations and diversify the tourism product beyond the traditional beach and cultural attractions?**

As an experience-based system, our approach involves bringing lesser-known stories to life through thorough research and trend



analysis. Identifying the right themes, such as wellness, and translating them into unique value points, precedes marketing efforts. We emphasize building a storyline, engaging storytellers, and driving trends through resources like meta and AI. We propose an intentional shift, focusing on underexplored areas like the Ruhunu Kingdom, instead of conventional sites. Our forward-thinking strategy aims to create intentional buzz, envisioning places gaining prominence in the next few years. We recognize the need for fresh perspectives to address modern-day challenges rather than relying on outdated solutions. Embracing innovation and purposeful planning are key to reshaping tourism's trajectory and ensuring its success.

## How can Sri Lanka leverage digital technology to enhance the tourism experience and improve visitor satisfaction?

## The country's natural beauty is a gold mine, yet proactive measures are needed to capitalize on its potential. Sri Lanka can be a haven if properly managed.

The proposed course involves four distinct stages, particularly focusing on digital technology for digital marketing within the tourism industry. The first stage is about identifying and understanding travelers' inspiration to travel. This stage typically lasts around two weeks and involves triggers like seeing pictures of destinations on social media. The following planning stage, approximately one and a half months, entails in-depth research where various destination options are considered. In this phase, consistent and aggressive digital marketing efforts are vital to gain trust and confidence about Sri Lanka in the traveller's mind. The travel stage comes next, where visitors arrive in the destination country. At

this point, digital technology can enhance convenience, like faster immigration processes and digitized duty-free shopping.

The last stage, post-travel, represents 20% of the cycle. Gathering and leveraging feedback is crucial, as positive experiences shared by travellers can attract new clients. This cycle is interconnected; success in one stage supports the others. Utilizing digital technology is essential to streamline processes and create traveller convenience. This can contribute to a positive image of the destination as being easy and enjoyable to visit. Transforming the sector with digital solutions is within reach, requiring the contribution of the country's talented minds and



education systems. The effort to produce more exceptional minds and involve the private sector is praiseworthy and aligns with the necessary steps for the industry's enhancement.

### **How can the tourism sector in Sri Lanka collaborate with other industries, such as agriculture and handicrafts, to create more authentic and immersive experiences for visitors?**

We have established a concept known as generational artisan industries to align with the sectors you mentioned. This uniquely Sri Lankan practice involves passing arts or industries from one generation to another, seen in endeavours like Biralu, Cinnamon, masks, and puppeteering. Our issue lies in fading industries and untapped potential like cinnamon. Foreign tourism could revitalize these traditions by spotlighting them at the high end, giving them international recognition. Linking renowned personalities to these industries promoting Sri Lankan cinnamon, will have a positive impact on this particular industry's

image. Government intervention is needed, viewing these industries as collaborative opportunities. Instead of simply funding them, let tourism expertise facilitate marketing, while academies nurture these crafts. Handlooms and traditional cuisine face a similar struggle; we haven't embraced and promoted our own, leading others to profit from Sri Lankan culture. Supporting initiatives by locals, such as Sri Lankan-owned restaurants abroad, can help us share our own heritage and keep it from falling into foreign hands. By fostering local talent, promoting authenticity, and engaging international exposure, tourism can safeguard these generational artisan industries from fading and leverage their economic potential.

### **What are the long-term goals for the Sri Lankan tourism sector, and how can these be achieved in a sustainable and inclusive manner?**

A strategic plan is crucial to reclaim lost talent, as training and nurturing talent takes time. Incentivizing those who left can expedite their return, capitalizing on their enhanced experience. These seasoned professionals can boost the industry with their expertise.

It's important to acknowledge that this is a gradual process. The focus should shift towards smaller Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) to give confidence to larger players to follow with their investments. Achieving balance in the industry is paramount, addressing sustainability, conservation, and inclusivity. Becoming more inclusive in terms of gender, caste, and creed can attract a wider range of visitors. The younger generation is more accepting, indicating a positive shift in mentality. Sri Lanka's goal should be to become an aspirational destination, akin to Maldives or Japan. The country has missed past opportunities, including adversities like the Easter bombings and the COVID-19 pandemic, which should have prompted reflection and improvement. Presently, a last chance to rectify past missteps exists as recent violence threatens the industry. Avoiding becoming a "failed state" in tourism, like Pakistan, is imperative. The country's natural beauty is a gold mine, yet proactive measures are needed to capitalize on its potential. Sri Lanka can be a haven if properly managed. The emphasis should be on showing initiative, making positive changes, and inviting both locals and those abroad to partake in the nation's progress ■

*Interviewed by: **Thamodya Ediriweera & Naduni Madara***

# 10 Most Expensive

## Hotels in the World 2023



# 1

### Lover's Deep Luxury Submarine

Cruising and flying on a vacation seems normal, but what if you are to spend some time in a submarine privately. The Lover's Deep Luxury Submarine Hotel is not only unique but also the most expensive hotel in the world. Spending a lavish night here can cost you as high as \$292,000.

### The Palms Empathy Suite

# 2



Designed by renowned artist Damien Hirst, The Empathy Suite in Palms comes with 2 king bedrooms, a private pool and terrace with world-class features beyond imagination. The hotel provides an experience like no other but it may cost up to a whopping \$100,000 for you to enjoy this experience.

# 3



## Hotel President Wilson Royal Penthouse

This iconic Hotel President Wilson is one of the most expensive and elegant hotels in Geneva. Facing Lake Geneva, the Royal Penthouse Suite is located on the entire top floor of the hotel and offers the guests no less than 12 luxury bedrooms with modern furnishing. Cost for one night in this suite can be up to \$80,000.



## Hotel Martinez Penthouse Suite

The World of Hyatt presents the Penthouse Apartments in Hotel Martinez that offers a breathtaking view over the bay of Cannes. One of the largest and most expensive suite in Europe, you can book these apartments for any special event. The new décor of hotel is dedicated to French cinema.



# 5

# 4

## The Mark Hotel Penthouse

Located on 16th floor, the penthouse in The Mark Hotel comes with 3 King Bedrooms, 2 Queen Bedrooms, 6 Bathrooms, 1 Library Lounge, Dining Room for 12 and 2 Powder Rooms. Legendary French interior designer Jacques Grange designs the penthouse and reaches the pinnacle of modern luxury combined with maximum comfort.

# 6

## Four Seasons Ty Warner Penthouse



With the price of \$50,000 per night, the Four Seasons Ty Warner Penthouse is listed among the 10 most expensive hotels in the world. The hotel is an architectural and artistic masterpiece and offers the highest glass balconies in the world. The penthouse is 52 stories into the sky offering a magnificent view of the city.



## The Conrad Muraka Suite

The Muraka Suite in Hotel Conrad is an underwater luxurious suite that comes with two bedrooms and a bathroom with ocean-facing tub, outdoor deck with infinity pool and 24-hour private butler. The suite is simply but a private underwater aquarium with a dedicated tunnel viewing theater.

# 7



## Grand Resort Lagonissi Royal Villa

The Royal Villa of Grand Resort is a perfect getaway for those who wish to escape paradise and immerse in the luxury of the seaside. Designed for royal and prestigious guests, the villa has two master bedrooms, a living room with a fireplace and dining table, kitchen and grill along with outdoor BBQ facilities.

# 8



# 9



## Laucala Island Resort Hilltop Estate

The Laucala Island Resort Hilltop Estate is located in the South Pacific and features 25 residences in an Eden-like locale. With the perfect blend of nature and architecture, stay in the resort feels ultramodern but still in balance with the rainforests, white sand and cobalt reef. It costs about \$45,000 to enjoy a vacation here.



# 10

## The Plaza Hotel Royal Suite

For those seeking to entertain in grand style, The Royal Suite in Hotel Plaza offers the most extraordinary experience. With the cost of approx. \$40,000 per night, the Royal Suite ranks tenth in this list of 10 most expensive hotels in the world 2023. The lavish three-bedroom suite features private elevator direct access ■

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# ATTITUDE MATTERS

## Mr. Chandra Wickramasinghe

Founder and Chairman of Thema Collection and Connaissance De Ceylan

### Can we know about your professional journey and its milestone up until your current position?

It's a long journey. I left school in 1971 and it was a challenging time for the younger generation in the country. The country was, unfortunately, in political unrest. As a result of this, I could not enter a university, and even to do a job, people had to go behind politicians to seek help. During this time the government introduced a Diploma in Tourism at the Technical College in Maradana for young people who have A/L qualifications.

I would consider this as my stepping stone to the tourism industry. We had wonderful lecturers who shared their knowledge with us. I really liked the compulsory requirement of learning two foreign languages. I learned French and Japanese. Due to the Lecturer who conducted lectures for French Language, it was quite interesting



to learn French. As a result, I joined Alliance Française de Colombo. Further, I joined the Sri Lanka Hotel School to enroll in a crash course in Front Office Management and it was a fruitful experience to me as I learned so many new things about hotel operations through it.

It was a challenging period to find jobs and I started my first job at Taj Samudra as a trainee and I engaged in many activities. My first official job was at Neptune Hotel, Beruwala. After working there, I came to Colombo and joined a travel agency as a Travel Assistant and later I was promoted to a Travel Executive. Having good knowledge in French was an advantage to get this job and then I became a tour guide in 1980's. After a while I went to France and came back in 1982. When I came back, I saw a great opportunity which was to form a travel agency as the inbound travel market in Sri Lanka was

dominated by a few big companies. With three partners we started the Connaissance De Ceylan and I was in charge of marketing and business development. In 1983, the communal riots was the downfall of the whole country. We had to almost close down, as the country's inbound tourism came to a standstill. Despite all the bad publicity to Sri Lanka, I started promoting Sri Lanka as a sort after holiday destination for French Nationals. I personally spent 5 / 6 months per year in France promoting Sri Lanka. For 10 years we performed very well and decided to diversify in the hospitality industry itself.

We entered the Hotel business, by selecting an extraordinary location around the Kandalama Lake and building a hotel called culture club resorts. It became the newest trendy resort in the cultural triangle and was a huge success. During 1995/96 we embarked into building another hotel in Kandy called the Le Kandian.

In order to get funds, we decide on going for an IPO to raise Rs. 320 Million. The IPO was underwritten by a major bank. However, the 1996 terror attack on the Central bank, which lead to the closure of the share market made

the bank to pull out from the underwriting agreement. This ended up as a major legal battle. However, we won the legal case and the unsold shares were owned by the Seylan Bank and Seylan Merchant Bank.

Due to disagreements between the shareholders and myself, the shareholders tried to remove me from chairmanship. The banks who held the major shares did not support the other shareholders in this matter, helping me remain as the chairman of the company. As a result the founder shareholders sold their shares and somewhere in year 2000, Mr. Dhammika Perera became the major shareholder of the company. In 2008, we decided to delist Connaissance De Ceylan travel arm and became a private company 100% owned by myself. I remained as the deputy chairman of the two hotels Culture Club and Le Kandian which came under Amaya Leisure.

From then to now we developed Connaissance De Ceylan to greater heights and created our own hotel arm under the brand name Thema Collection. Maalu Maalu Passikudah was the first hotel under the new company.

## **What are the key challenges faced by the Sri Lankan tourism sector after the COVID-19 pandemic, and how is your organization addressing these challenges?**

Our issues started after the Easter Attacks in 2019. Until then, Sri Lanka was considered a tourism hotspot in the world. However, the Easter attacks had a great impact on Sri Lanka's tourism. Many visitors were afraid to visit Sri Lanka after that.

Our recovery was slow. However, some tourists were keen on showing their solidarity towards us and started traveling to Sri Lanka immediately. Unfortunately, it was the budget tourists that started traveling first. Hence all prices involving foreign guests (i.e. airfare, hotel costs etc.) had to be dropped to meet the demand.



**To enhance tourism offerings in Sri Lanka and attract more visitors, a multifaceted approach is essential. In order to do this, we should first conduct a proper study on Sri Lankan Tourism, identify our strengths & create a benchmark for ourselves, compared with other countries. It is imperative to identify what & how we deliver.**

It was only during this recovery period that Covid 19 spread across the globe. Even though the impact was universal, developed countries were able to recover faster than others.

I believe Covid 19 to be the greatest threat the Sri Lankan Tourism sector has ever faced. Industry stakeholders experienced unbearable losses.

Despite our difficulties we had to try our level best to sustain the



challenging times. All these helped us recover some of our losses.

### How do you see tourism contributing to the overall economic growth of Sri Lanka, and what role can the private sector play in this

Tourism holds immense potential as a catalyst for the overall economic growth of Sri Lanka. The sector has the power to generate foreign exchange earnings, create employment opportunities, and stimulate the development of related industries. It also contributes towards the infrastructural development and cultural exchange between countries.

The private sector plays a crucial role in maximizing the benefits of tourism for economic growth. This includes Investments in Infrastructure | Promotions and Marketing | Quality Service Delivery | Innovation and Product Development | Training and Skill Development etc.

Tourism can be a powerful engine for economic growth in Sri Lanka, and the private sector's active involvement is crucial for unlocking its full potential. Through strategic investments, marketing efforts, and a commitment to excellence, the private sector can drive sustainable and inclusive growth in the tourism industry.

### What strategies can be employed to enhance the tourism offerings in Sri Lanka and attract more visitors

To enhance tourism offerings in Sri Lanka and attract more visitors, a multifaceted approach is essential. In order to do this, we should first conduct a proper study on Sri Lankan Tourism, identify our strengths and create a benchmark for ourselves, compared with other countries. It is imperative to identify what and how we deliver.



company and its employees. We took various steps for survival. This included: constant communication with our overseas agents with updates and reports regarding the on-ground situations. We wanted them to be aware that we were active despite the challenging times. We liaised with the authorities and started on quarantine tourism. We focused on health and wellness tourism, showcasing our ayurvedha products and also proactively contributed towards sustainable tourism and even put up a hotel 'Wild Glamping Galoya' during the



Product diversification plays a critical role in enhancing the tourism offering. Different types of tourism such as wildlife tourism, cultural tourism, adventure tourism, health and wellness tourism should be promoted.

We should also look at product development. In addition to differentiation of product offering we should look at infrastructural development within the industry as well. Sustainable tourism practices should be utilized when doing this. New experiences should be developed and promoted. It is the new experiences that will attract guests our way. Product knowledge should be enhanced as well so that stakeholders as well as visitors alike will be aware of all what we have to offer.

Then we must look at rebranding Sri Lanka as a country. Sri Lanka should be branded as one of the worlds finest destinations to visit. I am not a marketing specialist; however, I firmly believe that there is more that can be done along the lines of rebranding and promoting the country than what is being done at present. There is a lot that can be offered. It could be the food or something else. But we should definitely do something extra rather than simply promoting the beaches as done for many years now.

We see the private sector doing many things to promote tourism. However, they are all doing it individually. No collaborative action is taken to promote the country as a whole. With proper leadership, private sector companies should be able to do more to promote and reposition Sri Lanka thereby helping attract more visitors.

## **How can Sri Lanka balance the need for tourism development with environmental sustainability and conservation?**

Tourism will never prosper when the environment is bad or when the conservation or the sustainability practices are bad.



**We should not compare our country with other countries. We should be unique at all times. We have a lot of inherited attractions hence we do not need to compare ourselves with others.**

Environment, conservation and sustainability all go hand in hand. We are not late to understand this and act accordingly. All key industry stakeholders should take necessary steps to develop tourism using sustainability and conservation. However, this is a very sensitive matter as it's all about balancing the industrial development of tourism. A proper road map should be created and required action to be taken.

Biodiversity plays a key role in tourism and even has a concept 'Wild Life Tourism' as well. Sri Lanka is recognized for its biodiversity and for the measures taken to safe guard same. However, despite the measures taken, there are instances, when we have to face issues related to the biodiversity. For an example; unfortunately, more than 1800 elephants have been killed in the recent past. In order to overcome this issue, we can seek assistance from organizations like the WWF to figure out ways to deal with this situation.

Sri Lankan elephants can be considered as a key element to attract tourists to Sri Lanka. However, 60% - 65% of the elephant population is lives close to villages. Ideally both elephants and humans should be conserved, however, with the way things are going in Sri Lanka, this is a big question mark.

### **What steps can be taken to promote Sri Lanka's lesser-known destinations and diversify the tourism product beyond the traditional beach and cultural attractions?**

When Thema Collection, branched out to put up 'Wild Glamping Galoya'; Galoya was a totally unknown destination. However, with the efforts of our team, we have been able to make it one of the greatest destinations in Sri Lanka.

Due to political red tape in Sri Lanka, it is close to impossible to obtain a proper



plot of land for economic activities. Despite this issue being raised at various forums by individuals, organizations and other industry stakeholders, it is yet to be addressed.

We see that there are many lands that have been distributed among locals for farming and agricultural activities; but most of these lands are being misused. Due to these land issues big organizations and investors are hesitant to invest in Sri Lanka, creating many lost opportunities for the country. I believe the government should intervene in this matter and pave way for sustainable tourism development activities, there by promoting lesser known destinations as tourism attractions.

## How can Sri Lanka leverage digital technology to enhance the tourism experience and improve visitor satisfaction?

As in any industry technology is a must for tourism development as well. We must use both Artificial intelligence (AI) and Emotional Intelligence (EI).

Digital technology should be utilized to market the products/services first. AI could be used in getting the message across. However, guests will not be satisfied with a fully artificial/robotic approach. They will need the human touch and an emotional approach to find satisfaction in their holidays overseas.

At the moment, only big players in the market use technology effectively. Smaller players are not able to do so mostly because of the cost constraints. Almost 70% of Sri Lankan hotels are run by small or medium scale hotel owners.



**At the moment, only big players in the market use technology effectively. Smaller players are not able to do so mostly because of the cost constraints.**

They might use trip advisor or booking.com to market their properties. But sometimes this is also too expensive, and they are not be able to afford same. These SMEs should be educated about the different options available for them to market their products/services through digital technology.

Further, I firmly believe that the government and universities should work together and find ways to use digital technology more effectively and efficiently in order to support the industry development.

**How can the tourism sector in Sri Lanka collaborate with other industries, such as agriculture and handicrafts, to create more authentic and immersive experiences for visitors**







At the end of the day, tourists are consumers. They consume goods and services, hence are quite linked to various other industries.

Let's assume we have a 20 million population and 4 million tourists, then it implies that we have a population of 24 million to look after. Today most tourists are into consumption of vegan food. In this case, in order to serve their needs, we have to make an impact through our agriculture industry.

Our masks industry, handicrafts industry and all other relevant industries play a significant role in tourism. However, my concern is do we add value to the products we offer. In other countries value addition takes place through initiatives such as packing. I firmly believe, that we too should 'value add' especially with our handicrafts. We have to provide an authentic value to our products.

Further in order to give our guests a more authentic and immersive experience we can utilize our language. Words like Ayubowan and Isthuthi are an option. In countries like France this is done really well. We can also incorporate the local music industry for tourism promotion as well. Good, classical Sri Lankan music can be played in vehicles, while in transit. This will make visitors happy. A happy guest will always be a brand ambassador

attracting the right clientele rather than the cheap visitor. They will share their experiences with others, and will thereby promote Sri Lanka through word of mouth.

## **What are the long-term goals for the Sri Lankan tourism sector, and how can these be achieved in a sustainable and inclusive manner**

We should not compare our country with other countries. We should be unique at all times. We have a lot of inherited attractions hence we do not need to compare ourselves with others. As an example, Sinharaja. It is a goldmine for us. But we keep it unheard. We must promote these in a sustainable way. We have to promote inclusiveness. Even the animals who are living there should be considered.

## **Any messages that you want to give to the younger generation in Sri Lanka**

As university students, they must have the right attitude. They should be trained in how to have the right attitude. When I went to France, I had to do everything at the hotel. It was a great experience for me. In today's context also, students should be given the opportunity to learn everything by doing them. Even a graduate should start their career at the entry level; as a room boy, waiter or some other entry level position. Then they will learn everything. They should have the right mentality or the attitude to accept challenges which arise in the market ■

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*Interviewed by: Janith Iddawala and Chandima Gayan*



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# STEPPING OUT FROM THE TRADITIONALISM

**Mr. Vickum Nawagamuwage**

Founder and CEO  
Santani Wellness Resort and Spa



**Can we know about your professional journey and its milestones up until your current position?**

I studied at Royal College, Colombo and completed my bachelor’s degree in biology from the University of Colombo. Thereafter I completed a Master of Business Administration at the University of Maryland, Robert H. Smith School of Business and I also hold a professional qualification in Management Accounting. For over 18 years I served in multiple strategic advisory roles covering a diverse spectrum of industries including tourism and travel, financial services, and the public sector. With the experience and interest, I had in the industry, I took the initial steps as an entrepreneur with Santani Wellness.

**What are the key challenges faced by the Sri Lankan tourism sector after the COVID-19 pandemic, and how is your organization addressing these challenges?**

The impact was massive and obvious. We did not have tourist arrivals for almost a year and even now, we are struggling with arrivals. We generated no revenue but had to bear and absorb a lot of costs in terms of salaries, maintenance, and utilities. A majority of hotels, restaurants and resorts had to shut down their operations permanently as they could not further absorb the costs of keeping employees

**We do have a lot of potential in terms of integrating our industries, agriculture, ayurveda, and traditional crafts to create unique experiences for tourists.**





**Tourism can have a significant impact on the overall economic growth of Sri Lanka, as it has the potential to contribute to various sectors and aspects of the economy. However, this can only be achieved if all market participants work collaboratively. But as an industry, whether we are repeating the full benefits of the potential is questionable.**



with them. At Santani we were able to navigate through this difficult phase during and post-Covid period strategically and in a sustainable manner.

**How do you see tourism contributing to the overall economic growth of Sri Lanka, and what**



### **role can the private sector play in this?**

Tourism can have a significant impact on the overall economic growth of Sri Lanka, as it has the potential to contribute to various sectors and aspects of the economy. However, this can only be achieved if all market participants work collaboratively. But as an industry, whether we are repeating the full benefits of the potential is questionable. One of the key reasons behind this is the inability to target the right category of tourists, who would like to luxuriously spend their vacations. We still rely on conventional aspects of the industry such as beaches and cultural heritage sites. However, a huge unexplored opportunity is available in the industry in terms of linking the Sri Lankan heritage of enriching individual wellness with the tourism industry. Sri Lanka has a centuries-old tradition of wellness practices, including Ayurveda, meditation, yoga, and natural therapies. Leveraging these traditions as part of wellness tourism can create a unique selling proposition that sets Sri Lanka apart from other

destinations. This would attract more high-end tourists with substantial purchasing power to our country and when they spend, such cashflows will automatically get added to the economy and contribute to economic development as Wellness tourists typically spend more on accommodations, spa treatments, wellness programs, healthy cuisine, and local experiences. Their high spending contributes significantly to the local economy.

**We can see that both the tourism industry and the government are actively engaged in reviving the tourism sector. What do you think we are missing or and what strategies can be employed to enhance the tourism offerings in Sri Lanka and attract more visitors?**

In terms of government involvement in reviving the tourism industry in Sri Lanka, they need to understand that they have a bigger role to play and



currently what they are focused on is purely marketing, which is in my opinion, something that the industry should focus on and can do on their own. Government officials need to come up with the required policies to alleviate the difficulties faced by the tourism industry in attracting foreign investors and in getting the required approvals – especially with the ownership of properties or investments by foreign investors.

### **How can Sri Lanka balance the need for tourism development with environmental sustainability and conservation?**

I think we practice sustainability without knowing what sustainability really is. The issue with most of the wellness resorts or places that advocate sustainability is that they do not have a clear idea of what wellness or sustainability is. And if we consider the modern-age tourist or traveler, they focus more on sustainability at grassroot levels. At Santani, we have ingrained the concept of wellness and

sustainability throughout and into everything we do and offer to our guests. For instance, at Santani we do not believe in using air conditioners. As a tropical country, we believe that our guests understand the climate and we have designed the landscapes and buildings to allow as much ventilation and wind as possible. This allows us to reduce electricity consumption and the need to provide unnecessary amounts of bed linen and that helps with the reduction of our carbon footprint.

### **What steps can be taken to promote Sri Lanka's lesser-known destinations and diversify the tourism product beyond the traditional beach and cultural attractions?**

This is an interesting question. As you mentioned, Santani offers a unique experience, and the idea is to create a feeling for guests that they have never felt before. This is done through the careful and well-thought-out combination of wellness, sustainability and Sri

Lankan hospitality. Similarly, the tourism and hospitality sector needs to put more effort in bringing the Sri Lankan core experiences to the tourists. So collaborate with the local communities to provide unique local experiences to the tourists. Also, the tourism ministry and other authorities have significant roles to play in helping the industry to recover and grow –especially in terms of providing infrastructure and the required approvals.

### **We can see that every sector or industry is embracing digital technology to provide better services and better products. How can Sri Lanka leverage digital technology to enhance the tourism experience and improve visitor satisfaction?**

Well, we obviously have no choice but to embrace digital technology. We live in an era where it is a part of our lives. The tourism and hospitality sector are no different when it comes to embracing digital



technology – from reservations to almost everything are done through digital platforms. For example, at Santani, we have a dedicated website to our resort where we accept reservations from guests and where they can learn more about what we do, who we are, and more.

**Sri Lanka is known for its crafts from mask making, hand-loomed, cane crafts, batik to jewelry making and many more. We are also well known for our rich agricultural heritage. Do you think the tourism sector in Sri Lanka can collaborate with these industries to create more authentic and immersive experiences for visitors?**

That's an interesting question. Yes, we can if we deviate from the traditional approaches we have relied upon for the past few decades. We do have a lot of potential in terms of integrating our industries,

agriculture, ayurveda, and traditional crafts to create unique experiences for tourists. Santani is a testament and a material extension of this concept where our traditional means of healing, our ancient Ayurvedic wisdom and sustainability are combined in such a way to provide guests with a luxurious, and blissful healing experience that the guests have never experienced before.

**What are the long-term goals for the Sri Lankan tourism sector, and how can these be achieved in a sustainable and inclusive manner?**

As I previously highlighted in Sri Lanka, we think we practice sustainability without knowing what sustainability really is. So key parties need to start to look at the broader picture of sustainability and inclusivity. I think the best thing the government can do to promote Sri Lankan tourism is to give autonomy to the industry participants to function and craft the long-term policy for tourism. The

government should take steps to invest in infrastructural facilities so that it would facilitate the industry participants to invest in the industry with confidence and offer incentives such as tax breaks or subsidies to businesses in the industry and associated infrastructure facilities.

**Any messages that you want to give to the younger generation in Sri Lanka?**

My message to the younger generation in Sri Lanka would be to enter this industry without any fear but step away from the conventional ways of hospitality and focus on creating something unique and valuable. Keep your eyes and minds open to new means and ways of educating yourself with the right education. Unfortunately, our education system is lagging compared to other nations, and we are desperately in need of updating our curricula to meet the modern world requirements ■

*Interviewed by: Janith Iddawala & Chandima Gayan*



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# PRESERVING HERITAGE AND CULTURE

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**MS. IRANDI WIJEGUNAWARDANE**

Hospitality Consultant and Treasurer of  
The Ceylon Hotel School Graduates Association

## Can we know about your professional journey and its milestones up until your current position?

I come from the charming town of Kandy, where I completed my schooling. At the young age of 18, I was determined to pursue my dream of entering the world of hospitality. The tourism and hospitality industry had always captivated me, although I do not exactly know where my passion stems from. My academic journey started as I enrolled at the Ceylon Hotel School & School of Tourism, even before my A/L results were released. I successfully obtained four fundamental certifications and continued my studies, culminating in a Commonwealth master's degree from the Open University of Nawala.

Professional journey started at the Bentota Beach Hotel, now known as the Cinnamon Bentota. Since then, I continued on a dynamic career path, never staying at one establishment for more than five years. This principle was instilled in by the late Dr. Ananda Tissa de Alwis, who advised us hoteliers at the graduation oration to constantly seek new experiences. I firmly

believed in that the initial year of employment familiarizes you with the hotel, while the next two to three years are for showcasing your skills. Beyond the fourth and fifth years reap the benefits of your inputs and afterwards professional blindness sets in and blocks any fresh perspectives. Therefore, I firmly believe that changing workplaces breathes new life into one's career, encouraging growth through diverse experiences. My career took me from Bentota Beach to the Grand Hotel in Nuwara Eliya, followed by a teaching role at the Swiss Asian School of Hotel Management in Negombo. From there, I moved to Citadel Kandy, and also realized my dream of working at the The Lanka Oberoi. I then took a turn in my career by venturing into hospital housekeeping at Nawaloka Hospitals for five years, before becoming a lecturer at the Sri Lanka Institute of Tourism & Hotel Management. Over the decade of my teaching career, I obtained the position of Senior Lecturer, and finally reached the pinnacle as the Principal at the SLITHM, Kandy, while playing a vital role in the planning, design, and construction of the state-of-the-art building at Kundasale, Kandy.



Following an invitation received from a colleague, I conducted due diligence for a hotel in India, finally resulting in an offer from Aitken Spence South India. I spent two years in India, working to open a new hotel; then I was invited to the head office to join the hotel management as the Vice President. My responsibilities extended to overseeing accommodation operations for all Aitken Spence owned and managed hotels in Maldives Islands, India, Sri Lanka, and Oman.

As a child, I had always thought of retiring by the age of 60 and the COVID-19 pandemic naturally brought a halt to my career just before my sixtieth birthday. Now, I work as a consultant on my own terms and timeline for the Asian Development Bank, lending my expertise from the tourism sector. I also engage in consultancy work related to the accommodation sector of tourism and actively participate





**The long-term goal is definitely to sustain without killing the golden goose. But to do this, we must first make sure that educated Sri Lankans remain in the country and work towards its development by ensuring that the top-rungs of the society don't abuse their power.**

in voluntary work with the Sri Lanka Hospitality Graduates Association.

**What are the key challenges faced by the Sri Lankan tourism sector after the COVID-19 pandemic, and as a consultant how do you think we must address these challenges?**

Yes, it's not just Covid-19 but we have been facing challenges since the Easter Attack in 2019.

It is sad to say that the biggest challenge we face is the lack of coordination. Different Ministries act independently without any coordination; leave aside ministries, even departments within the same ministry fail to collaborate in most instances. To get some work done, for example to open up a restaurant,

hotel, or teaching institute and get necessary certifications, investors will have to go to so many different offices over-and-over again. whereas in other countries, they have a properly coordinated plan for everything. Take Singapore for example; when I visited on a scholarship in 2007, I got to know that they had a thorough system to allocate accommodation spaces to individuals based on population percentages. Since Singapore has limited space for everything, the government established a well-coordinated pro rata-based plans to solve the many issues. Major problems can be solved with simple coordination, it is more than clear that any issue faced by a country can be solved with adequate planning, execution, and coordination. Political instability is another major problem. It is impossible to develop when certain politicians use poverty as a marketing strategy to gain more votes instead of looking to eradicate the problem entirely.

Apart from these, it is necessary to understand the importance of the English Language in a tourism-centered economy. I don't mean that we must speak "perfect" English. Rather, I think that we should all be able to make the message passed in English and use it as a link language. As a multi-ethnic community, many people in Sri Lanka learn to communicate in several languages: especially Tamil and Muslim ethnicity function in more than one language. It is important that all nationalities use multilingualism as an advantage; by using functional English. When I worked in India, I found no difficulty in communicating even with room attendants and bell boys because they could all function in English. We have to understand that for tourism to flourish, we must all be conversant in a global language.

The final challenge is the increase in the cost of living due to the economic crisis. When the cost of production is high, the cost of sales

will be high and therefore there will be no return of investment. When there is no ROI, people will be reluctant to start businesses; this is a vicious cycle. Some matters are addressed, but the efficiency is very low.

## How do you see tourism contributing to the overall economic growth of Sri Lanka?

Well, I would say that tourism is the only way forward both in the short and long term because it generates revenue and ensures the influx of foreign currency. Attracting FDIs has proven to be a long and strenuous process that depends on improving many other factors. However, in a naturally beautiful country like Sri Lanka, the tourism sector is bound to flourish with adequate planning and coordination. In other words, the tourism sector will manage to generate a satisfactory ROI within a short period of time.

Let's take an example from recent times; with the Russia-Ukraine war, many Russians moved to Sri Lanka and continue to live in houses for rent. Traditional tour guides and the DMC market are against this because of the lack of business for them; but we have to understand that even this novel development in the tourism sector generates an income for the country as a whole, at least on the short run. The DMC market is needed in the long run but what should be noted here are the major benefits of the tourism and hospitality industry in diverse situations.

## What strategies can be employed to attract more visitors to Sri Lanka?

That's a good question. When I started out in the industry, around forty years ago, our marketing strategy and tagline was 'Sun, Sea, and Sand'. The problem is that we have made little progress from there onwards. Then it moved to

'Nature, Culture, Adventure' Right now, we keep moving back and forth between promoting ourselves as an island paradise, and as country rich in its cultural heritage; we haven't done anything to perfection. The Civil War in Sri Lanka ended in 2009 but we still haven't been able to build an efficient infrastructure system from towns to major surfing destinations in Sri Lanka. We must first develop a proper identity, community, and infrastructural facilities to attract more tourists. We can create and market packages and special facilities like cruise tours, boat rides, night markets, etc. to locals as well. I've always noticed that although we initiate many grand projects, it is almost impossible to carry through; especially with Covid-19, many of the projects initiated collapsed almost naturally.

The biggest issue is that we are averse to change; we tend to live in our own little cocoons because of the islander mentality. We start new things but we don't see them



**The biggest issue is that we are averse to change; we tend to live in our own little cocoons because of the islander mentality. We start new things but we don't see them through, so it is impossible for us to expect to develop at the speed it is required to come out of any situation.**



through, so it is impossible for us to expect to develop at the speed it is required to come out of any situation. We need to think out of the box and create attractions. Take Munich for example; they've turned the old war zones into war museums. Elvis Presley's Graceland mansion has been turned into a tourist attraction that charges around \$100 per person; why can't we do the same with our classical legends like Amaradeva and Lionel Edirisinghe? We really don't make enough use of our resources, nor do we use enough out-of-the-box marketing strategies. Inventive and original ideas should be used to develop the tourism sector. For example, Mr. Hiran Cooray managed to change Jetwing Hotels entirely using his innovative boutique hotels by venturing out of the traditional ideas and surpassing other limitations. It is also important to understand that internal competition within the industry will not benefit the country as a whole. We have to support each other, not fight each other's concepts away.

Another important strategy is amalgamating sustainability and the tourism industry. It is important

to generate revenue, but it is an absolute necessity to ensure sustainable development and preservation of resources. Authorities must set their priorities straight; we must sustain the environment to support tourism in the long run. In most cases people fail to understand the importance of sustainable tourism and therefore fail to voluntarily take necessary measures; implementing rules and protocols is therefore necessary to push our people in the right direction. We should make sure not to kill the golden goose for a measly gain; instead of sacrificing our resources for short term profits, we should focus on the big picture by planning to sustain ourselves throughout the years to come by protecting the environment. For people to voluntarily take good care of the environment, I think that our education system should change as well. We must focus on developing children's social skills, manners, and etiquette from a very young age alongside the traditional education. Sustainable living is in fact a lifestyle that needs to be inculcated from early childhood education onwards.

### **How can Sri Lanka use digital technology as leverage to enhance the tourism experience and improve visitor satisfaction?**

In today's day and age, with a small device, you could have the entire world in your palm. We can do wonders with this advancement in technology. Right now, Sri Lanka uses e-business and e-marketing to a certain extent; however, it is not developed enough for B to B or B to C business transactions. If we want to rely on e-business, we must have strong policies that prevent customers from being scammed or cheated.

A good thing I noticed in Sri Lanka was the initiation of e-ticketing to book trains and buses. That was great, but there was absolutely no development from there onwards. We can book the ticket online, but we must go to the station an hour before the train departs to physically collect it because there is still no system to issue a digital ticket; isn't this a lost cause? Other countries

issue digital tickets, QR codes, and receipts, and process everything digitally from start to end reducing expenditure; digitalization is used to make life easier.

Technology is the key to improvement, but it has to be practically implemented so that everyone can use it without fear. There should be transparent laws that monitor the use of technology in order to minimize forgery and scamming. Also, we should strive to use technology not to overly complicate things but to make things more efficient and productive. The tourism sector in particular, can use technology to collaborate with other industries and boost the overall tourist experience. If we can digitally link tourism, agriculture, arts and crafts, cuisine, and transport systems, I believe that Sri Lanka would achieve wonders, all while developing as

a country. It is also important to develop transparent digital systems to ensure tourists aren't cheated out of their money because we can't fool people forever; genuineness goes a long way!

## **What are the long-term goals for the Sri Lankan tourism sector, and how can these be achieved in a sustainable and inclusive manner?**

The long-term goal is definitely to sustain without killing the golden goose. But to do this, we must first make sure that educated Sri Lankans remain in the country and work towards its development by ensuring that the top-rungs of the society don't abuse their power. Apart from this, we must also ensure the political stability and national security of

Sri Lanka to sustain a sensitive industry like tourism. Long-term plans need to be made for sustainable infrastructure, telecommunication, and education. When I say education, I don't just mean education in tourism and hospitality. Rather, the education system from pre-school itself needs to change to nurture individuals into those with imaginative and innovative thinking. I believe that we can significantly improve our country if we can bring about a positive change in the people's mindset; long-term goals on tourism heavily depend on this.

We must also utilize niche markets to promote our heritage. If we can build on ayurvedic tourism, we would be able to attract many tourists to our island nation. Unfortunately, at the moment we do not give enough recognition to ayurvedic doctors ourselves.

## **As someone who has dealt with so many students, do you have any messages or advice to give the younger Sri Lankans?**

Well, I would say the sky is the limit! Reach the top and be humble; make sure to hold on to humane values as you reach the pinnacle. Never ridicule others when you, one day, hold a position of power; treat everyone as an individual with respect; empathize, don't sympathize; you would be unbeatable! ■

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*Interviewed by: Kasun Dissanayake & Roshni Samarasinghe*





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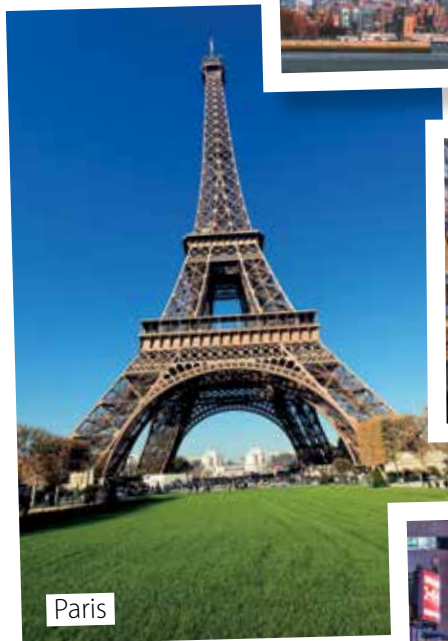
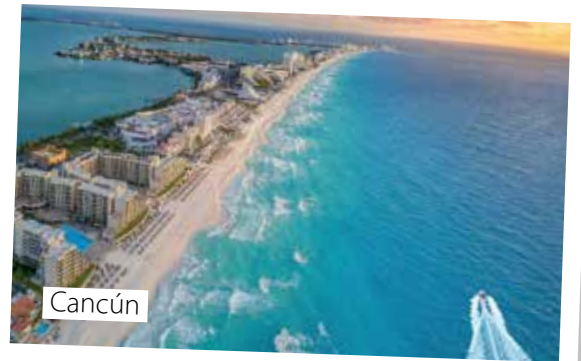
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**Mr. Nalin Jayasundera**

**Managing Director  
Aitken Spence Travels**

## **Can we know about your professional journey and its milestone up until your current position?**

I began my career at Aitken Spence Travels in 1983 as a Trainee Executive, primarily handling tour operations. During my tenure, I had the privilege of working with TUI, the world's largest integrated tourism company and many other prestigious/reputed companies. Aitken Spence Travels is the only DMC that has handled 200,000 tourist arrivals in a year. Aitken Spence Travels also continues to pay the highest TDL to Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau. .

At Aitken Spence Travels, the responsibilities are divided among the Heads of Departments (HODs) based on geographical areas

or markets. I managed markets such as the UK, Benelux, Spain, Portugal, India, China, Middle East, Far East and OTAs.

Over the years, I also became involved in the company's marketing activities by developing new markets and contributing to the success of the company. I spent a year working overseas before rejoining the company. I have completed 40 years in the field and a decade as the Managing Director of Aitken Spence Travels (Pvt.) Limited. During my career, I've been engaged in various industry activities, including serving as the Secretary and Vice President of SLAITO, a board member of the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotional Bureau, Sri Lanka Convention Bureau and also a representative of the Tourism Advisory Committee appointed

by the Minister, as well as the PATA Executive Committee. This summarizes my journey in the tourism industry thus far.

## **What are the key challenges faced by the Sri Lankan tourism sector after the COVID-19 pandemic, and how is your organization/government/university addressing these challenges?**

We have encountered three major challenges in recent times: the Easter Attacks, the COVID-19 pandemic, and an economic crisis. Despite these obstacles, we have



*Aitken Spence*  *Travels*

To unlock this potential, it is imperative that we effectively market and promote our country on the global stage. Increasing awareness about Sri Lanka as a tourist destination is essential.



upheld our commitment to our employees by not laying off any of our staff members for which we are truly grateful to the Chairman and the Main Board. Further, we have managed to maintain a break-even or profitable status through challenging times. Last year, in particular, was a success for us.

As we navigate the current year, our profitability is contingent on the prevailing situation in the country. Currently, we are witnessing a promising recovery, but what we truly require for sustained success is a peaceful environment without disruptions.

One key factor contributing to the positive outlook for our country is our strategy of expanding into new markets, as we have consistently done. We explored markets in the CIS region and even brought in charter flights from countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in addition to Russia. These markets were not our traditional markets, but our ability to adapt and explore new opportunities has been instrumental in successfully addressing these challenges.

## **How do you see tourism contributing to the overall economic growth of Sri Lanka, and what role can the private sector/government/universities play in this regard?**

The tourism sector in Sri Lanka has the potential to become the country's largest foreign exchange earner. Sri Lanka possesses an incredible wealth of natural beauty, historical sites, and cultural diversity, making it a unique and appealing destination. Despite being a small country in size, Sri Lanka is exceptionally rich in diversity.

To unlock this potential, it is imperative that we effectively market and promote our country on the global stage. Increasing awareness about Sri Lanka as a tourist destination is essential. With the right marketing strategies and promotional efforts, there is no doubt that the tourism sector can emerge as the top contributor to Sri Lanka's foreign exchange earnings.

## **What strategies can be employed to enhance the tourism offerings in Sri Lanka and attract more visitors?**

Sri Lanka has traditionally been known as a beach destination with a rich cultural and historical heritage. However, in recent times, the country has been diversifying its tourism offerings. It's now emerging as a wedding destination and an adventure hub. To thrive in the evolving tourism landscape, it's crucial to explore new segments embracing new and exciting opportunities.

Discerning Travellers seek more than just sightseeing; they crave for unique experiences. Sri Lanka should invest in creating novel experiences, activities, stories, and events that cater to this demand. The future of tourism lies in experiential travel. By prioritizing this approach, we can stay competitive in the global market.

Additionally, there are many less-promoted destinations within Sri



Lanka that have great potential. The East Coast, with its pristine beaches, Mannar, Kalpitiya for kitesurfing and whale watching and Jaffna known for its temples and islands, are such areas and activities that can be marketed effectively to enhance our tourism offerings.

For these efforts to succeed, it's essential to improve accessibility to these destinations. Extending the central highway to the East Coast or introducing domestic aircraft services can make it easier for tourists to explore these less-traveled regions, enriching their overall experience in Sri Lanka. This strategic approach will contribute to the continued growth of the tourism sector.

### **How can Sri Lanka balance the need for tourism development with environmental sustainability and conservation?**

Sustainability is a priority in the tourism industry, and it is vital

for both tour operators and their clients. The adoption of sustainable practices is not just about the future of tourism but also the future of our planet as a whole. Raising awareness about sustainability and best practices is crucial for all stakeholders.

In the field, sustainability issues can manifest as overutilization and over-visiting of certain destinations, such as Yala and Sigiriya, which occur regularly. These practices are detrimental to these sites, and it's imperative to establish mechanisms to control them. Additionally, maintaining the cleanliness of our beaches, protecting coral reefs, and preventing pollution of waterways are essential aspects of sustainable tourism.

Ultimately, the key is to increase awareness and ensure that tourism minimally impacts the environment. Sustainable practices are not just a choice but a necessity for the long-term viability of the tourism industry and our planet.

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## **What steps can be taken to promote Sri Lanka's lesser-known destinations and diversify the tourism product beyond the traditional beach and cultural attractions?**

Collaboration is essential for further development of tourism in Sri Lanka. With nine provinces and provincial councils, it makes sense for these provincial administrations to work closely with Sri Lanka Tourism. These provincial officials can play a crucial role in identifying lesser-known destinations within their respective regions in the generating markets and devising marketing plans to promote them. They should also actively engage with destination management companies to raise awareness about these sites.

To facilitate this, the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotional Bureau

should give greater prominence to these sites when marketing the destination.

At Aitken Spence, we have already implemented a similar strategy by identifying new destinations through our Research and Development Unit, creating specialized itineraries and promoting them. This collaborative effort should be replicated across the country with the active involvement of Sri Lanka Tourism and the nine provincial councils.

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## **How can Sri Lanka leverage digital technology to enhance the tourism experience and improve visitor satisfaction?**

Absolutely, technology is not just an option; it's a necessity in today's competitive landscape. Embracing technology is crucial for a Destination Management Company to gain



an edge over competitors locally and internationally. Leveraging technology, especially in the realms of social media and digital marketing, can yield significant benefits and help a DMC thrive in the industry.

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### **How can the tourism sector in Sri Lanka collaborate with other industries, such as agriculture and handicrafts, to create more authentic and immersive experiences for visitors?**

Indeed, tourism has the potential to become the highest foreign exchange earner in Sri Lanka, thanks to our unique and naturally created product. However, to realize this potential, effective marketing and the development of appropriate infrastructure is crucial.

Tourism cannot operate in isolation; it is intricately linked to various other industries. For example, agriculture can benefit from agri-tourism. The handicrafts industry can thrive by catering to tourists' needs. Archaeological and cultural sites can boost their revenue through ticket sales to visitors. And of course, the aviation industry plays a critical role by providing accessibility to places of interest in the island within a short span of time.

Recognizing these interconnections, the President has established a special committee involving various line ministries such as Aviation, Archaeology, and Wildlife to name a few. This collaborative approach aims to enhance efficiency and coordination among these industries, ultimately benefiting the entire



**It's evident that the tourism industry plays a significant role in Sri Lanka, providing direct or indirect livelihoods to over 3 million people. To ensure the growth and sustainability of this industry, it's crucial to set clear targets for tourist arrivals and income generation.**



country. When different sectors work together cohesively, it creates a win-win situation for every sector involved.

### **What are the long-term goals for the Sri Lankan tourism sector, and how can these be achieved in a sustainable and inclusive manner?**

It's evident that the tourism industry plays a significant role in Sri Lanka, providing direct or indirect livelihoods to over 3 million people. To ensure the growth and sustainability of this industry, it's crucial to set clear targets for tourist arrivals and income generation.

Over the next 3 - 5 years, a reasonable target would be to aim for 5 million tourist arrivals and \$10 billion in income. The current year's target of 1.5 million tourist arrivals seems achievable, and by 2027, with the collective effort of various ministries and stakeholders, reaching the goal of 5 million tourists is indeed attainable.

It's essential to accompany these targets with a well-planned marketing campaign. Fortunately, Sri Lanka currently has an adequate supply of hotel rooms to accommodate such numbers, making the revenue target of \$10 billion a feasible goal.

However, the key to success lies in launching an effective global marketing campaign. In addition, it is necessary to align all stakeholders by communicating and educating all stakeholders to achieve this goal. They need to understand these targets and work collaboratively to achieve them, as the benefits will be substantial for everyone involved in the tourism industry.

### **Any messages that you want to give to the younger generation in Sri Lanka?**

Tourism is a dynamic industry that revolves around meeting the needs and expectations of people. To excel in this field, it's essential to work efficiently and smartly, especially in today's technological era.

Working smart and swiftly is paramount, as merely working hard may not suffice. Precision and creativity are also key components of success in this competitive global arena. Passion for the industry and a genuine commitment to delivering value are fundamental aspects of achieving excellence. It's crucial to avoid actions driven solely by the need to appear busy; instead, every effort should be purposeful and geared towards enhancing the tourist experience.

Even a good plan is of no use if it is not implemented and executed on time, as we have to compete globally ■

*Interviewed by: Lasitha De Silva & Isuri Caldera*



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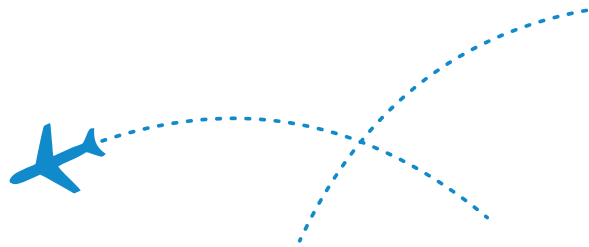
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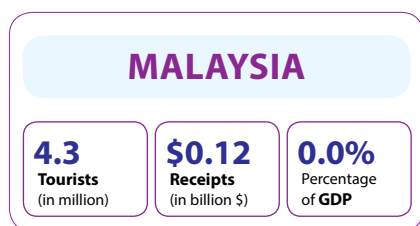
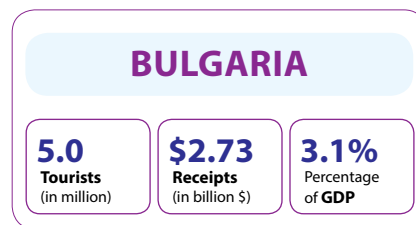
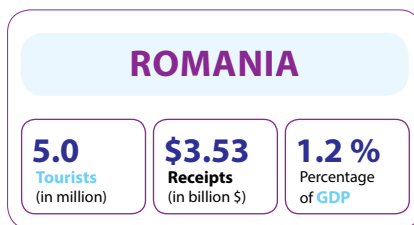
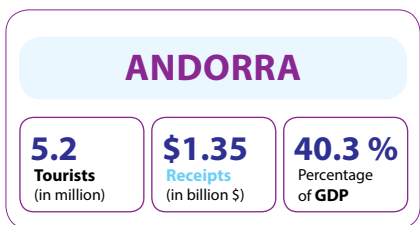
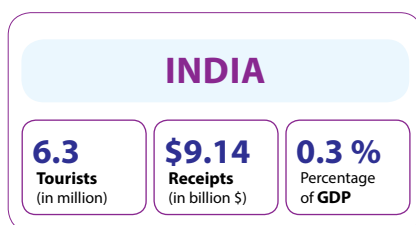
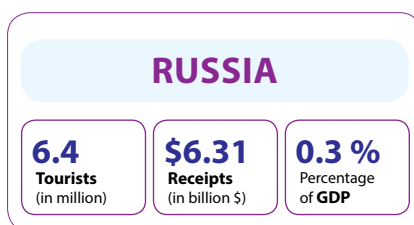
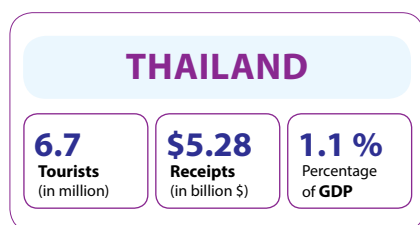
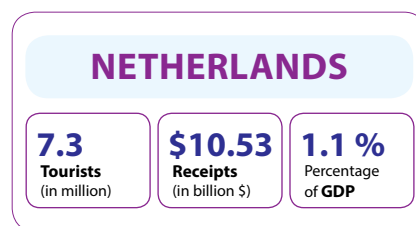
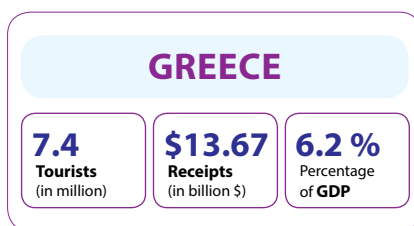
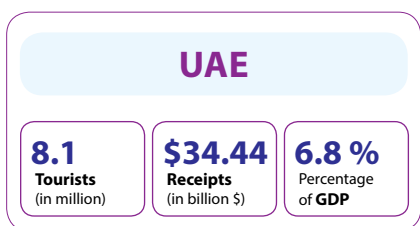
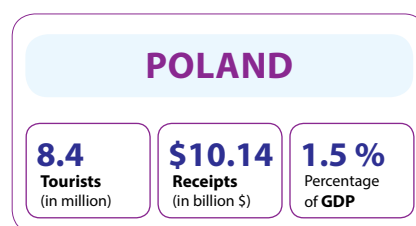
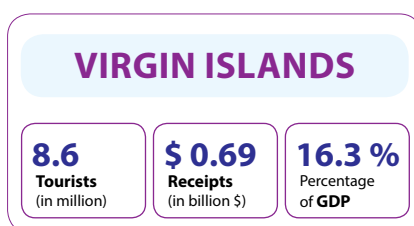
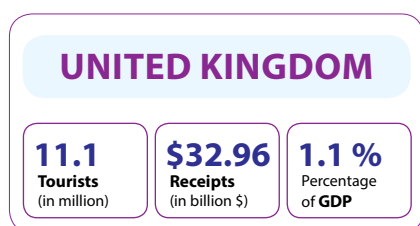
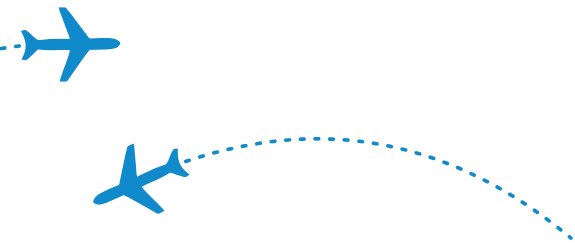
**2024 INTAKE**



# Most Visited Countries in the World

[www.worlddata.info](http://www.worlddata.info)

<p><b>FRANCE</b></p> <p><b>117.1</b> Tourists (in million)</p> <p><b>\$44.40</b> Receipts (in billion \$)</p> <p><b>1.6 %</b> Percentage of GDP</p>	<p><b>MEXICO</b></p> <p><b>51.1</b> Tourists (in million)</p> <p><b>\$20.55</b> Receipts (in billion \$)</p> <p><b>1.5 %</b> Percentage of GDP</p>	<p><b>UNITED STATES</b></p> <p><b>45.0</b> Tourists (in million)</p> <p><b>\$82.97</b> Receipts (in billion \$)</p> <p><b>0.3 %</b> Percentage of GDP</p>
<p><b>ITALY</b></p> <p><b>38.4</b> Tourists (in million)</p> <p><b>\$25.36</b> Receipts (in billion \$)</p> <p><b>1.3 %</b> Percentage of GDP</p>	<p><b>SPAIN</b></p> <p><b>36.4</b> Tourists (in million)</p> <p><b>\$34.18</b> Receipts (in billion \$)</p> <p><b>2.4 %</b> Percentage of GDP</p>	<p><b>HUNGARY</b></p> <p><b>31.6</b> Tourists (in million)</p> <p><b>\$5.78</b> Receipts (in billion \$)</p> <p><b>3.2 %</b> Percentage of GDP</p>
<p><b>CHINA</b></p> <p><b>30.4</b> Tourists (in million)</p> <p><b>\$11.33</b> Receipts (in billion \$)</p> <p><b>0.1 %</b> Percentage of GDP</p>	<p><b>CROATIA</b></p> <p><b>21.6</b> Tourists (in million)</p> <p><b>\$10.89</b> Receipts (in billion \$)</p> <p><b>15.3 %</b> Percentage of GDP</p>	<p><b>TURKEY</b></p> <p><b>16.0</b> Tourists (in million)</p> <p><b>\$27.90</b> Receipts (in billion \$)</p> <p><b>3.1 %</b> Percentage of GDP</p>
<p><b>DENMARK</b></p> <p><b>15.6</b> Tourists (in million)</p> <p><b>\$4.51</b> Receipts (in billion \$)</p> <p><b>1.1 %</b> Percentage of GDP</p>	<p><b>AUSTRIA</b></p> <p><b>15.1</b> Tourists (in million)</p> <p><b>\$11.41</b> Receipts (in billion \$)</p> <p><b>2.4 %</b> Percentage of GDP</p>	<p><b>GERMANY</b></p> <p><b>12.4</b> Tourists (in million)</p> <p><b>\$22.11</b> Receipts (in billion \$)</p> <p><b>0.5 %</b> Percentage of GDP</p>



# PhD

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN MANAGEMENT

## LEAD TOWARDS SUCCESS

The PhD in Management of NSBM Green University lifts you to the pinnacle of excellence whilst giving you the opportunity to work with leading academics and to be a part of a growing and vibrant community of doctoral candidates. We welcome applicants who want to undertake innovative and exciting research to build a new understanding of business and management.

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**2024 INTAKE**

### ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

- A Master of Philosophy Degree in Management or related field **or**
- A Master's Degree in Management or related field

### PROGRAMME TIMELINE

The programme is a three-year study programme and consists of the preparatory phase and the execution phase.  
Expected completion : July 2025

### APPLICATION PROCEDURE

The applicant should send the his/her Curriculum Vitae to [phd@nsbm.ac.lk](mailto:phd@nsbm.ac.lk) mentioning the interested field of study. (Marketing, Human Resource Management, Accounting and Finance, Operations Management, Logistic Management etc.) The shortlisted candidates will then be informed about the rest of the selection process.

### PREPARATORY PHASE

(YEAR 1 SEMESTER I – YEAR 2 SEMESTER I)

- Introductory Workshop and Taught Modules
- Appointment of Supervisors
- Thesis Proposal Preparation and Defense
- Laboratory Sessions on Data Analysis

### EXECUTION PHASE

(YEAR 2 SEMESTER II – YEAR 3 SEMESTER II)

- Conduct of the Doctoral Research
- Thesis Submission and Defense

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