



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 its self.

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



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

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

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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.

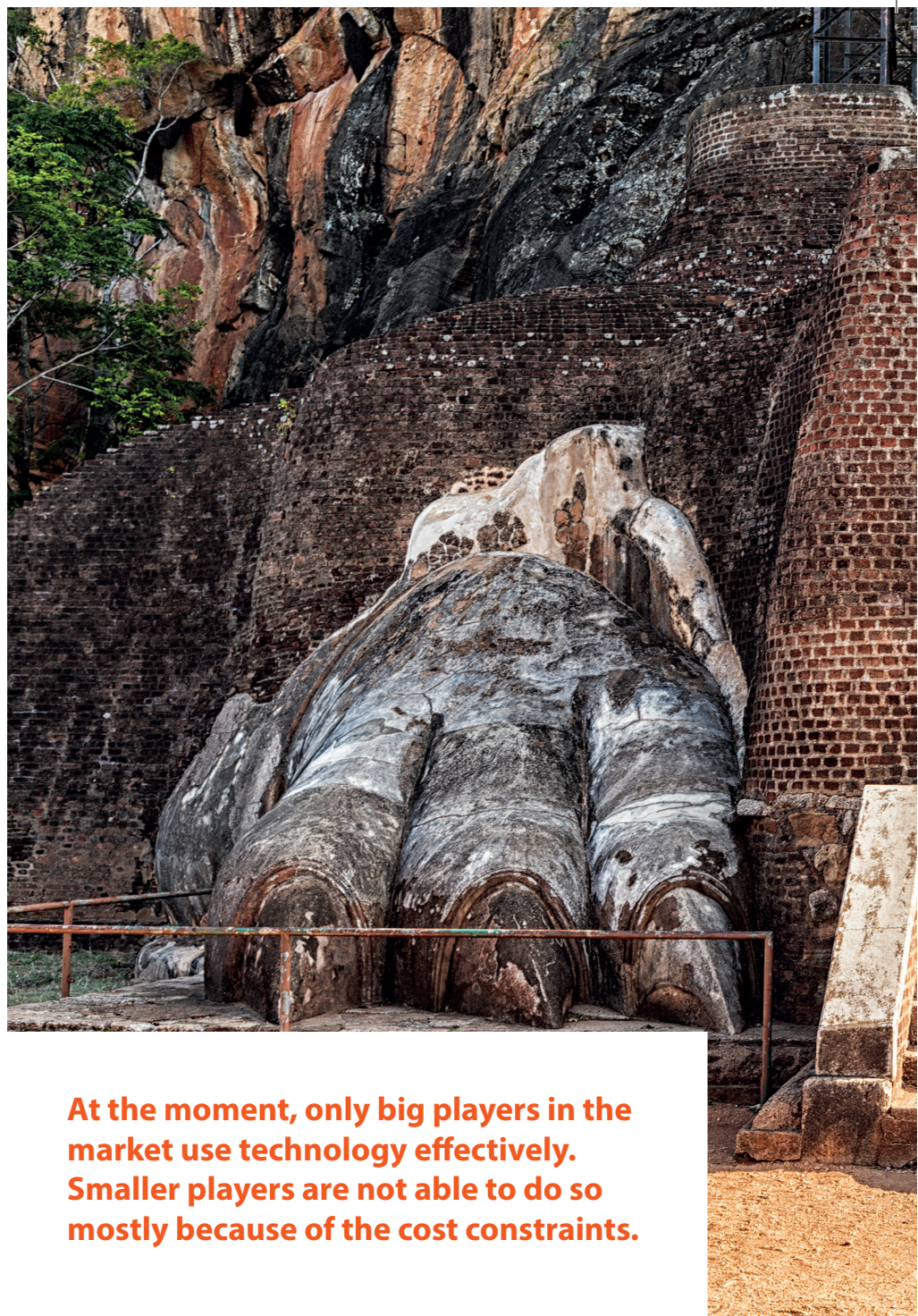
We see that there are many lands that have been distributed among locals for farming and agricultural activities; but most of these lands are being misused. Due to these land issues big organizations and investors are hesitant to invest in Sri Lanka, creating many lost opportunities for the country. 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.



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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 ■

Interviewed by: Janith Iddawala and Chandima Gayan