

# 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).





# 2023 BUSINESS DIALOGUE

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## 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?**

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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***