





PRESERVING HERITAGE AND CULTURE

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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.

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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.