

WORK HARD, FAST & SMART

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



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.



Aitken Spence® Travels 



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?

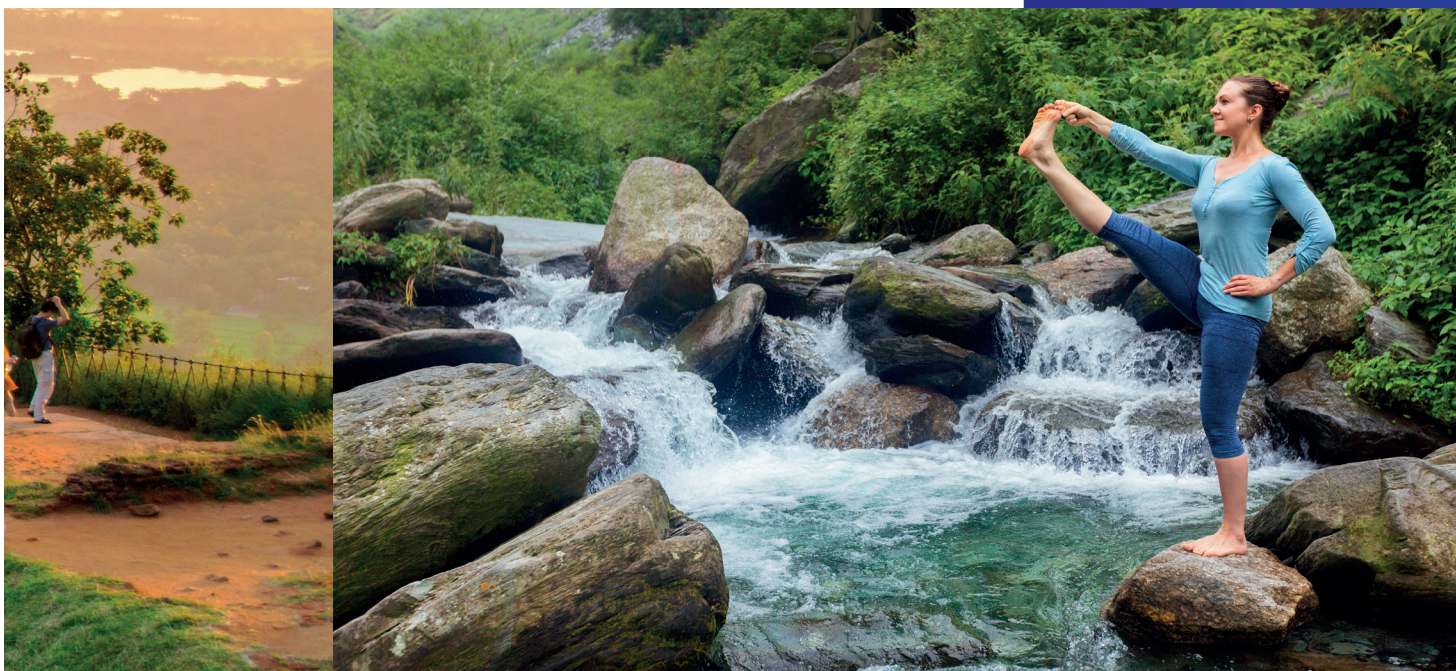
Sustainability is a priority in the tourism industry, and it is vital

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.

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.





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.



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.

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.

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

