

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

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### **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



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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



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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 ■

*Interviewed by: Chandima Gayan & Janith Iddawala*