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Whither Sri Lankan tourism



Year 2022 has been declared as the “Visit Sri Lanka Year “. The country’s tourism sector that had high hopes of moving forward carrying that slogan confronted a critical foreign exchange crisis towards the first quarter of the year. One of the main reasons behind this unfortunate situation was the Covid-19 pandemic that engulfed the whole world in early 2020, from which the world has still not recovered fully.

Besides, the unprecedented depletion of foreign exchange reserves due to poor fiscal planning and the loss of employment of Sri Lankan expatriates who remitted their earnings to the country have also been responsible for this situation. Upon viewing this situation in the light of the fate of Sri Lanka’s tourism industry which too has experienced the adverse effects of the ongoing crisis, it becomes apparent that it is the only sector that could be revived immediately along a dynamic rejuvenation program.

Let’s take the case of the local industrial sector. A lot of industries oriented in local trading and exports need certain imported raw materials in varying degrees, which have to be procured through fund transfers to their foreign suppliers. The severity of the ongoing foreign exchange crisis prohibits such transfers thus leaving the local industrial sector helpless. This situation negatively affects the country’s import substitution as well as export promotion endeavours. Re-employment of expatriate workers who lost their jobs in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic also is time consuming. Hence, the only beacon illuminating those avenues towards enhanced foreign exchange earnings is present in the tourism sector.

Comparison

Take the case of India, our closest neighbour. India had an encounter with the Covid-19 pandemic which compared to Sri Lanka was more paralyzing as far as her economic realms were concerned. But at present India’s recovery in all realms affected by the pandemic is remarkable. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, India’s tourism sector’s achievements were extraordinary in comparison to Sri Lanka. In 2019, India recorded 10.93 million tourist arrivals. That is almost half of Sri Lanka’s population. The other wonder is the Tamil Nadu State, the Indian region closest to Sri Lanka recording a figure of 6.87 million tourist arrivals in the same year. However, Sri Lanka’s performances in the tourism sector in the same year have been very low. The total tourist arrivals in the country in 2019 were 1.9 million. Let us see the reasons behind this contrast.

India is poised to stage several travel and tour fairs in 2022.i.e. SATTE Travel Expo, Mumbai, Travel and Tourism Fair, Poon, India International Travel Mart, New Delhi, Travel and Tourism Fair, Mumbai and the OTM, Mumbai. Also India is supposed to participate in several other tourism related International events this year.

In 2022, Sri Lanka is expected to participate in a number of International Tourism Promotion events scheduled to be held in India, Belgium, Israel, Italy, Czechoslovakia,

China, Denmark, Philippines, Germany, France , Russia Ukraine and Saudi Arabia. This is a thoughtful step towards boosting the country’s image overseas. Still, can the country’s tourism industry derive the same benefits it derives by conducting tourism promotion events locally, by participating in such fairs conducted far away from her home base?

According to a report published on May 7 in a daily, a mega program to promote Sri Lanka’s rich tourism is in the offing. That report says that it is the first such mega promotional effort launched since the end of the conflict in 2009.

Thus, no effective campaign oriented in promoting Sri Lanka among the global community as a tourist destination has been launched for 13 years. This by itself shows the poor performance of the local tourism sector in the global scenario.

The report said that four agencies, namely the creative agency, digital agency, campaign management agency and research agency would come into being under this campaign mooted by the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA). These agencies are expected to function under the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau. Also the proposals include the appointment of eight Destination Representative Companies (DRCs) and eight Public Relations Companies (PRCs)subject to Cabinet approval.

This campaign will be designed to cover 25 markets in 16 regions with DRCs in the UK, Germany, France, India, China, Australia, Russia and the Middle East and PRCs in the USA, Japan, Korea, Italy, Spain, Benelux, Scandinavia and Poland.

It is evident that this mega campaign would serve the purpose of linking Sri Lanka to many overseas destinations from which tourists could be

THERE IS HARDLY ANY OTHER DESTINATION POSSESSING THE RESOURCES SRI LANKA HAS AS AN ATTRACTIVE TOURIST DESTINATION. THUS, THIS TINY ISLAND COULD DEFINITELY BE TRANSFORMED INTO A LEADING TOURIST PARADISE. MORE FLIGHTS LINKING THE ISLAND TO FARAWAY DESTINATIONS LIKE THE AMERICAN CONTINENT IS ALSO ESSENTIAL AS A PART OF THE TOURISM PROMOTION PROGRAM

attracted. Still the question as to what the “appropriate time“ for its launch remains unanswered. Anyone viewing the sad state of affairs the local tourism industry is currently confronting could visualise the fact that there is no other “appropriate time“ than the present for the proposed campaign’s launch.

Difficult situation

Already the local tourism industry is confronting a difficult situation amid Sri Lanka’s social unrest, poor economic conditions, unavailability of essential items such as fuel and gas and the power cuts. Another report titled “Industry fears other tour operators will follow TUI“ in a recent daily warns Sri Lanka of the possibility of TUI, one of the world’s largest tour companies severing its ties with Sri Lanka, which may eventually lead to other global tour operators following suit. According to the Sri Lanka Association of Inbound Tour Operators (SLAITO), this is a dangerous situation which may even lead to a 50 percent drop of tourist arrivals in Sri Lanka.

All these are the after effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, Sri Lanka’s economic and foreign exchange crises and poor planning by authorities responsible for steering the country towards growth and prosperity.

At the same time let us view Sri Lanka’s potentials as a tourist destination with vast untapped resources.

The length of the island from the South to the Northern tip could be traversed by land within 12 hours. This is a very short time duration in exploratory travel, compared to most other tourist habitats scattered around the globe. Air travel, in addition to surface travel covering long distances and much fatiguing is imperative in explorations endeavoured by foreign tourists at most of the popular tourist destinations. e.g. the American, Australian and African continent and India. But in Sri Lanka’s case the situation is different. Sri Lanka is a much smaller destination.

Let us compare Sri Lanka and India. Sri Lanka has almost every climatic condition found in India. India’s fame as a tourist Paradise lies in her historical and cultural realms and her natural beauty. Her territorial waters are grounds for many water sports. Isn’t Sri Lanka in a superior position than India when all these are concerned, solely on grounds of all such attractions being concentrated within a smaller land area?

Those embarking on leisure travel prefer shorter travel durations between their destinations. They expect minimum fatigue except in certain adventure travel embarkations. Also, Sri Lanka is an ideal location for travel due to her climatic conditions free from seasonal variations.

The island is rich in wildlife and environmental conditions attractive to tourists seeking experiences in the

tropics. Bundala, Horton Plains, Galya, Kaudulla, Kumana, Minneriya and the Yala and Wilpattu sanctuaries are the wildlife reserves where plenty of experiences in the natural habitats of many species could be had. This amounts to living amid the beats.

The Sinharaja rain forest, Kaudulla, Kumana, the Bundala National Sanctuary and the Anavilundawa and Kalametiya bird sanctuaries are places ideally suited for bird watching and ornithological studies. Both, Bundala and Anavilundawa are Ramsar zones.

There are large numbers of tourists whose principal area of interest is bird watching. It has been found that there are 197, 150 (including 54 migratory species) and 255 bird species in the Bundala, Kalametiya and Kumana bird sanctuaries. Among them the Kalametiya sanctuary is famous for weaver birds.

The seas around Sri Lanka and the Gregory Lake, the inland reservoir at Nuwara Eliya are famous for 20 water sports. The Arugambay beach is world famous for many ocean related tourist activities.

Shipwrecks

Another factor enhancing the importance of the Sri Lankan territorial waters is the multiplicity of the shipwrecks lying buried there.

Searches conducted up to now have revealed that there are 120 such wrecks while the actual number could be in the region of 200. Sir Arthur C. Clarke in his article titled “Ceylon and the underwater archeologist“ said, “Ceylon where I have lived since 1956, is almost a virgin territory for underwater archeologists.

Whale watching is another popular pastime among tourists. Opportunities for whale watching are plentiful

in Sri Lanka at Mirissa, Kalpitiya and Trincomalee.

The country’s rich culture is not second to any other nation’s. The large tourist groups arriving at local perahera sites at the Kandy Esala pageant and other similar festivals speak of the importance tourists attach to ancient cultures.

Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Kandy, Sigiriya, Dambulla, Galle and the Sinharaja rain forest are UNESCO heritage sites. Such tourist attractions are projected in other popular tour destinations through more innovative devices than in Sri Lanka. Although a trend towards using such innovative devices is visible in the Sri Lankan tourism promotion sector, the common practice is for tourist guides to give brief explanations about the backgrounds of such sites, which may be boring and dull from the visitors’ viewpoint. If Sri Lanka could follow the systems adopted in India, Egypt, Rome and other such historical sites, in giving dynamism to the tourist education component, the outcome would be much more heartening.

Wellness tourism

Wellness tourism is another area Sri Lanka could promote promptly. In a recent study, it was found that the fastest growth in the wellness tourism sector is recorded in the Asia Pacific region. According to a recent report in the *Daily News*, Sri Lanka occupies a position among the first five countries in the global wellness tourism sector. China, India, Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia have recorded a 20 percent annual growth in the wellness tourism sector. It has been estimated that the earnings in this sector would grow from US\$ 137 billion in 2017 to US\$ 252 billion in 2023. Cannot Sri Lanka clinch a one percent share of this? Sri Lanka could achieve well in the orthopaedic branch of the wellness sector.

However, all endeavours towards tourism promotion in foreign destinations need foreign exchange. This is what Sri Lanka lacks at the present juncture. Thus, promotional endeavours at foreign destinations is only a dream now. A solution to this problem is the establishment of links with tour and travel companies established abroad by Sri Lankans and join with them to promote Sri Lanka.

The Vancouver Travel Expo scheduled to be held in September 2022 would be a good platform to promote Sri Lanka in the North American region. According to statistics, 1,863,891 American and Canadian tourists visited India in 2019 . But only 117,561 set foot upon the Sri Lankan soil. This shows that there are serious lapses in the promotional aspect in that region.

There is hardly any other destination possessing the resources Sri Lanka has as an attractive tourist destination. Thus, this tiny island could definitely be transformed into a leading tourist paradise. More flights linking the island to faraway destinations like the American continent is also essential as a part of the tourism promotion program. A recent report revealed that certain airlines are enthusiastically working towards such an end. It is a good sign indicating some positive thinking in the airlines sector towards rejuvenating the tourism sector.