

# Habarana

all set to become

# Tourism Hub



A close encounter with elephants.

Pictures by Malan Karunaratne

ISHARA JAYAWARDANE

**H**abarana is the next tourism hot spot in Sri Lanka! And it is already happening! When tourists arrive in Sri Lanka, they will be explorers of a new world. Recently the Ministry of Tourism and the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority organised a media tour of Habarana in order to spread the word that Habarana has the potential to be the number 1 tourist destination on the list. The mission is to bring in as many tourists as possible. The vision is – Sri Lanka Forever!

Habarana is certainly a beautiful location in Sri Lanka where you can make your way to the Minneriya National Park, Hiriwadunna Village and Hiriwadunna Lake. One can immediately see that it has the potential to attract tourists in large numbers. Incidentally, Minneriya National Park is the place where there is the largest elephant gathering in the world.

**Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, Assistant Director, Palitha Hennayake**, pointed out that September 27 is World Tourism day and that has special significance to Sri Lanka, because Sri Lanka is a country that relies on the tourism industry.

"Basically we want to tell the whole world and the whole of Sri Lanka about Habarana because it is a place that has a huge potential when it comes to attracting tourists. It is a place that has impressive and beautiful natural scenery and this is one reason why we have chosen to draw attention to this region," said Hennayake.

Hennayake is spot on when he says that Habarana has natural beauty. The placid waters of the Hiriwadunna Lake is enough to put one's mind at ease. The tranquil surface of the water and the lush area has a soothing effect on the mind. No doubt this is why we encountered a foreign couple on their honeymoon, enjoying the moment that only a place like Habarana can create.

**Ministry of Tourism, Director Tourism and Planning, North Central Province, Krishantha Bopage**, added that the theme of World Tourism Day this time is *'Rethinking Tourism'*.

"In Sri Lanka, Tourism was one of the sectors most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This was a very serious setback to our tourism industry. However, there are tourist arrivals in Sri Lanka now. So right now in Sri Lanka, we have to focus on how to revitalize the tourism industry in the country. In other words, we need to *'rethink'* our approach. So right now, the Tourism Ministry and the SLTDA are doing just that. During the last two or three years, we saw a significant drop in foreign tourist arrivals. However, starting from 2022 we see that the situation is getting better. During the last few years, our tourism industry has been supported by local tourists. So



Tree House

that is why the theme, *'rethinking tourism'* is so important to us," said Bopage.

Seeing is believing they say, and on the Safari Tour to Minneriya National park, we saw a large number of tourists taking pictures of the elephants and enjoying themselves. Bopage pointed out that the North Central Province of Sri Lanka can play a crucial role in bringing in the tourists.

"The North Central Province is a region with cultural and historical significance. Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa were ancient kingdoms in Sri Lanka (Both cities are UNESCO world heritage sites). This is why this region needs attention. Because it can play a crucial role in bringing in tourists. We have found out that not enough foreign tourists visit the North Central Province. That is why a decision has been taken to concentrate on this region," added Bopage.

He further stated that Habarana is a unique location, with Sigiriya and Minneriya located close by. The entire region is vital when it comes to the progress of the Sri Lankan Tourism Industry. "This is why we have chosen to conduct a media tour of Habarana. It is synonymous with the theme – *'Rethinking Tourism'*."



Tourists in abundance.



Hiriwadunna Lake.



Discussing treatments with Dr. Ashika.

**Chairman Tour Operators Association, Anuradhapura, D.B. Sarath**, stated that his organisation is looking forward to supporting the tourism industry. The Tour Operators Association is also a stakeholder, which is why it is giving its fullest support to making the media tour a success as World Tourism Day is almost here.

"We also want the tourism industry in Sri Lanka to thrive. This is why we are doing our part to support and strengthen the tourism industry," said Sarath.

**Secretary Provincial Tour Guides Association, Roshan Karunaratna**, explained that the North Central Province has great historical significance and beauty. "We can be proud of our North Central Province. This is because it has so much to offer."

**Chairman, Habarana Hoteliers Association, Ruwan Gunawardhana**, explained that Habarana has to be a key destination because in a very short duration you can see so much. This is why it is so lucrative.

"Habarana can definitely become a tourism hub. You can visit three safari parks in a matter of

hours. There is also an excellent Ayurveda centre in Habarana. This is why I think celebrating World Tourism Day has to involve Habarana. It is a boon to the Sri Lankan Tourism industry."

**Habarana Hoteliers Association, Ajith Ranasinghe**, stated that he is delighted that Habarana is part of World Tourism Day.

"Habarana is a place that has always been looked at as a gold mine. That is why I feel that drawing attention to Habarana is so timely. Travelling in Habarana is a joy for foreign tourists because they can do so much in 24 hours. It won't take you a long time to visit Sigiriya (a world heritage), Dambulla and Ritigala from Habarana. You can also visit Minneriya and Eco Park in 20 minutes. From here, you can go to Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa in one hour. This is why Habarana has an advantage over the rest. I have great expectations for Habarana."

The *Daily News* managed to speak to a foreign guest named Clemence at the

AmbaSevana resort, and she was full of praise for Sri Lanka.

"This resort I am staying in is a great place and it is so beautiful. The rooms are really fantastic. I think your country Sri Lanka is a very beautiful country. It is really wonderful. The people I have met so far are so kind. I am really enjoying myself."

Habarana is the main location in the North Central Province. There is no shortage of accommodation in here. There are tree-houses and four star hotels. In other words, at Habarana you will get comfort and culture. Our visit to Minneriya National Park was a pleasant one. We did not encounter bears or leopards, but we did come very close to a herd of elephants. The thing with elephants is that you never tire of seeing one. They are majestic creatures. The tourists were all agog! For some it must have been the first time they were seeing elephants in touching distance.

And then the tour was over! We left the park at dusk, the woods were dark and the trees were like phantoms.

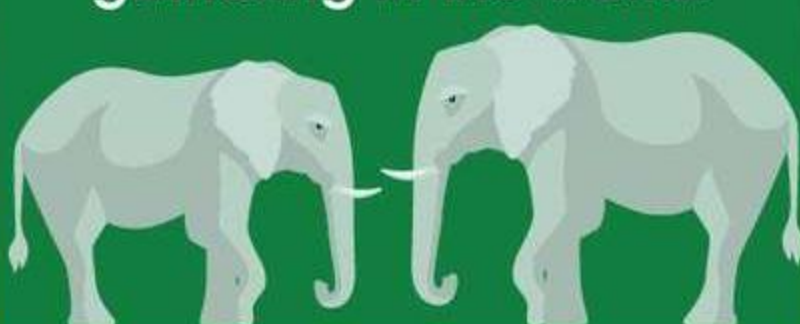
## ATTRACTIVE PACKAGE ON OFFER

Hiriwadunna Village, is a quaint little place full of activities for tourists. It is part of the package which costs Rs. 2,500. When the tourists come to the Hiriwadunna junction, they can get into a bullock cart and then the boat takes them to the village. There is a cooking demonstration. If they want, they can cook their own food with the assistance of the villager. For the tourists it is new and exciting experience. It is a chance to make village food, eat village food and experience village life!



Bullock Cart with foreigners.

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## THE AYURVEDA CENTRE WE VISITED

The owner is Mahinda Bandara. According to him, it is the largest Ayurveda centre in Sri Lanka. Every day they do around 120 – 200 treatments. There is a huge demand for these treatments. Around 200 treatments is the maximum they can do each day. Most are foreigners. They bring in around 5,000- 6,000 US dollars into Sri Lanka. There, Dr. Ashika and another doctor discuss the treatment with the client. The treatment for every client is tailor made. It is suited for the particular person. First medical issues and history are discussed. There are various packages. Everything is done carefully. Safety is top priority here.



Women preparing food at the Hiriwadunna village.