

# SPECTRUM

features.suo@lakehouse.lk / Tel: 011 2 429 429, 011 2 429 228 / Fax: 0112 429 227

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## World Tourism Day Rethinking Tourism

BY PRAMOD DE SILVA

The exploration of other countries and places on the planet is called tourism. It is obviously a big business, worth around US\$ 1.3 billion yearly globally. Tourism is one of the world's most important economic sectors. It employs one in every ten people on Earth and provides livelihoods to hundreds of millions more. For some countries, it can represent over 20 percent of their GDP.

Sri Lanka is one of the world's best-known tourism destinations and was a global hot spot for tourism until fairly recently, with publications such as CNN Travel and Lonely Planet declaring Sri Lanka as the world's top spot for travel. This gave a big boost for inbound tourism, with Sri Lanka earning around US\$ 5 billion from tourism receipts in 2018, the last "normal" year for tourism in Sri Lanka.

This is because the Easter attacks happened in April 2019, drastically halting the flow of tourists to the country. However, the tourism industry was making a rapid recovery after the tragic events of Easter 2019. Then another crisis manifested itself in the form of the Coronavirus pandemic. The only consolation is that this time, we were not alone. The entire world was affected by the contagion, with global tourism coming to a virtual standstill for close to two years. Sri Lanka too imposed a countrywide lockdown and closed its borders to international travellers.

### Issues

With the gradual easing of the pandemic (now in its third year), Sri Lanka too has opened its borders to all vaccinated travellers, like most other countries. But in the aftermath of the recent political events and the acute shortage of fuel and lengthy power cuts, the tourism sector suffered again. These issues have now been addressed to a great extent and tourists are coming in despite all the challenges. Most countries have also relaxed their travel advisories on Sri Lanka.

International tourist arrivals worldwide at the start of 2022 were double the level recorded in 2021. In some regions, arrivals are already at, or even above, pre-pandemic levels. The lifting of the remaining travel restrictions, alongside rising consumer confidence, will be important drivers for the sector's recovery, bringing hope and opportunity to many millions of people around the world. An end to Covid is probably in sight, though we cannot be certain about it.

This year, World Tourism Day will be celebrated on September 27 as the shift towards tourism is being recognised as a crucial pillar for development and as progress is well underway. May 2022 marked the first time the United Nations General Assembly

held a special debate on tourism, illustrating the historic relevance of the sector. Tourism is now on the agenda of Governments and of international organisations in every region.

The World Tourism Day will put people at the centre of key discussions. Where is tourism going? Where do we want to go? And how do we get there? This year's theme "Rethinking Tourism" will reflect these aspirations. It aims to inspire the debate around rethinking tourism for development, including through education and jobs, and tourism's impact on the planet and opportunities to grow more sustainably.

Sri Lanka too has to take these factors into consideration as it maps out a strategy for attracting more tourists from around the world. All facilities should be provided to tourists who choose to come here, knowing the difficulties they might have to face.

### Special offers

Since tourist hotels earn foreign exchange for the country, it would be prudent to grant them (and also "special tours" bus operators) duty free permits to import electric cars and buses for the transport of tourists on the condition that they also import DC superchargers or solar chargers. A duty concession can be granted for this as well. This also tallies with the environmental goals envisaged for global tourism.

Since it is also important to ensure an adequate supply of food for the tourists in the face of an impending global food crisis, all hotels with arable land must be encouraged to grow crops that can sustain their kitchens. We can look at other countries which have introduced new concepts such as rooftop and vertical farming as well as hydroponics, the technique of growing crops without soil. Most hotels can easily embrace these concepts. Hotels should also have a more robust relationship with the local farmers and suppliers so that they nurture the local economy.

On the part of the authorities, they should ensure an adequate supply of Jet Fuel, basically a variety of Kerosene, to all airlines calling at the Bandaranaike International Airport (BIA), Colombo. Some airlines have stopped their services or reduced their



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frequencies to Colombo citing fuel, insurance and political instability issues. This has adversely affected the inflow of tourists and quick action must be taken to resolve these matters.

Moreover, air tickets to and from Sri Lanka have become very expensive in recent times, which may also deter tourists from coming here. This issue too has to be resolved to some extent, though there are other global factors too at play here. If these issues can be resolved, more airlines are waiting in the wings to begin services to Colombo and also to increase their frequencies. The authorities should encourage more Indian airlines to use the new Palaly International Airport in Jaffna, given that Indian tourists top tourist arrivals here. Sri Lanka could also join hands with the Maldives for joint promotional campaigns, an idea mooted some time back as well.

### Hospitality

Sri Lankans are known the world over for their warmth, love and hos-

pitality. Most tourists cite our friendly people as one of their main reasons for visiting Sri Lanka. But of late, there have been some incidents that may have harmed this reputation. Things have to start from the BIA itself, where touts often harass tourists for everything from taxi rides to hotel stays. In fact, touts, beggars, unlicensed tour guides and brokers harass tourists at all major tourist attractions, which could put off some of them from coming here again. After all, repeat tourists are a big market for Sri Lanka.

Sri Lankan tourism authorities also have to rethink the admissions pricing policy at key tourism attractions, where tourists sometimes have to pay as much as 10 times the rate paid by local tourists.

This may adversely affect budget tourists and in today's context we need every Dollar. It is better to have one "middle of the road" pricing policy for both foreigners and locals. The Lotus Tower should be properly marketed abroad to attract more tourists.

It is also vital to have more Tourist Police stations near key attractions and also in the major cities visited by tourists. This way, tourists can get help quickly if they are harassed, fleeced, intimidated or robbed. All the personnel of Tourist Police must be encouraged to learn at least one more language in addition to English, such as French, German, Spanish and Russian. This will help them to communicate more easily with the tourists, some of whom cannot speak English well.

All steps must be taken to avoid another Covid-19 wave and a lock-

down in Sri Lanka, given that up to one million Sri Lankans are benefitting directly or indirectly from tourism related enterprises and activities, from waiters in hotels to souvenir sellers. Many of them lost their jobs due to the pandemic-related lockdowns but hotels have again stepped up recruitment as things are looking good again. For many of these individuals, tourism is their sole income avenue. One silver lining in this dark is that most tourism jobs are now back in demand.

### Promotional campaign

There is also an acute need for an international tourism promotional campaign through traditional and social media globally to highlight our gains and achievements in facing the pandemic and of course, our multitude of religious, cultural and natural attractions that are perhaps not found anywhere else on the planet. This campaign should also reassure any "on the fence" tourists that Sri Lanka is a safe destination to visit, both security and health-wise.

This should also highlight that most, if not all, difficulties faced by travellers in Sri Lanka have now been

resolved, with a stable Government in place after the recent political transition. Journalists from leading travel publications in our source markets as well as from new markets should be given familiarisation tours here so that they will inform their readers and viewers on the array of attractions here.

This "reset" will also be a good opportunity for travel and tourism planners to analyse shortcomings in the inbound travel industry and take corrective steps.

That will help the industry to realise the initial goal of 2.5 million tourists per year at least after 2024-25, giving a new sense of purpose and direction to the tourism industry, perhaps the most vital cog in the economic wheel in terms of attracting foreign exchange.

We must bear in mind that global travel is yet to recover to 2019 levels, so Sri Lanka should be in a position to do much better in terms of tourism next year and in 2024-25, when global air travel is predicted to return to normal levels. Our tourism planners must get ready for this uptick in tourism from now onwards to reap the full benefits.

