



Fostering Travel Experiences

What are the key challenges facing the Sri Lankan tourism sector after the COVID-19 pandemic, and how is your organization/government addressing these challenges?

The pandemic brought forth several challenges for our company, specially being a startup that began operations 6 months before the

pandemic. The obvious key challenge was the absence of tourists.

To combat this, we embraced creativity, offering online Sri Lankan experiences that garnered positive responses despite the lack of physical visitors. For example, we hosted a Sri Lankan cooking class online, where the chef will teach you how to cook a delicious Sri Lankan meal in 90 minutes. We loved seeing the world connect and come together to enjoy something that's authentic Sri Lankan but being at the comfort

of their own homes, wherever in the world.

However, securing funding remained difficult due to our startup status and cash flow constraints, despite attempts to access the Saubhagya loan scheme. Brain drain became an issue post-pandemic as talent migrated for better opportunities, resulting in a shortage of skilled personnel and negative impacts on service quality and reputation. Balancing high operational costs, negative press, and ingredient



Mr. Udaya Wickramage

Chief Visionary Officer
Sensory Indulgences



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scarcity due to import restrictions further complicated recovery efforts. Overcoming these multifaceted obstacles is essential for revitalizing the \$5 billion tourism industry and elevating Sri Lanka's position in comparison to other regional destinations that are already leagues ahead of us.

Our company offers unique tourism experiences in Sri Lanka, departing from traditional sites. We emphasize

storytelling to engage global travellers by reimagining historical narratives akin to Game of Thrones, we ensure memorable interactions. This interactive approach has enabled us to thrive, even during challenging times. Our success is attributed to a focused investment in product development, avoiding unnecessary expenses. This strategy, coupled with branching out across the island, has propelled our company forward amidst difficulties.

How do you see tourism contributing to the overall economic growth of Sri Lanka, and what role can the private sector play in this?

Approximately 95% of tourism promotions are spearheaded by the private sector, an undeniable reality. The standout year, 2018, reaped a \$5 billion USD revenue from tourism. About 90% of this can be attributed to the private sector's involvement. Their vital role involves tracking the evolving trends and keeping up with them. This sector excels in adapting to these trends, building relationships with foreign stakeholders. On the contrary, governmental support falls short in these areas. Though private sector efforts shine during



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promotional tours, there's a lack of unity in collaborative global campaigns. Pooling a fraction of each player's marketing budget could propel Sri Lanka's tourism. The current challenge lies in regaining prominence, as other destinations have outshone it recently. The way forward involves greater private sector cohesion, strategic planning, and perhaps being integrated into policy-making to synergize efforts for the industry's revival.

What strategies can be employed to enhance the tourism offerings in Sri Lanka and attract more visitors?

Our focus should be on attracting niche trades and the right visitors, rather than playing the numbers game. As seen with many destinations such as Bali and Thailand, the numbers game always results in over-tourism





issues and environmental concerns. To flourish sustainably, our small land's per capita spending requires high-income global visitors. A clear tourism identity, especially in the western markets, is crucial. In the short run, this involves building a destination identity, resolving site and experience issues, and addressing conflicts and pollution. While mid-term plans should entail gradual changes, implementation of a long-term national tourism policy is pivotal for consistent growth. To achieve superpower status like the Maldives' private sector-driven tourism, incorporating lessons from their transformation, is the key. Currently, repeat clientele in Sri Lanka stands at 15%, while the Maldives enjoys a repeat clientele between 30% - 40% which emphasizes the importance of quality over quantity.

How can Sri Lanka balance the need for tourism development with environmental sustainability and conservation?

It's about aligning the national tourism policy with sustainability

and conservation objectives that are essential for effective implementation. Both policies should complement each other to create a cohesive approach. The strategy we devise must seamlessly integrate with the nation's sustainability and conservation goals. A primary concern is crowd control, which has been exemplified by Bali's overcrowding issues. To avoid such scenarios, Sri Lanka must implement crowd management measures. The nation can learn from neighbouring countries, drawing on their successes. Modern tools like AI can be harnessed to identify areas of improvement and adopt effective strategies from other nations. Furthermore, emphasis on environmental sustainability and ecosystem balance is crucial. Various tourism sectors coexist, including mass markets, backpackers, digital, and influencer segments, along with ultra-high-end luxury. These segments need to complement each other, as they form an interconnected ecosystem. While luxury should gain prominence, maintaining equilibrium among segments is key. Achieving a balanced "tourism engine" is pivotal for Sri Lanka's sustainable growth. Addressing environmental concerns

involves educating locals, as they contribute significantly to pollution. Clear regulations are needed for tourism-related construction. The younger generation shows promise in adopting eco-friendly practices, driven by education and mentality change. Leveraging abundant natural resources like solar, kinetic, wind, and wave energy is essential to overcome challenges, including fuel issues and high costs of living. For the tourism sector, this applies to hotels and their energy consumption. The crux lies in implementation, as knowledge alone is insufficient. In this way, Sri Lanka can pave the path for a sustainable tourism future.

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?

As an experience-based system, our approach involves bringing lesser-known stories to life through thorough research and trend



analysis. Identifying the right themes, such as wellness, and translating them into unique value points, precedes marketing efforts. We emphasize building a storyline, engaging storytellers, and driving trends through resources like meta and AI. We propose an intentional shift, focusing on underexplored areas like the Ruhunu Kingdom, instead of conventional sites. Our forward-thinking strategy aims to create intentional buzz, envisioning places gaining prominence in the next few years. We recognize the need for fresh perspectives to address modern-day challenges rather than relying on outdated solutions. Embracing innovation and purposeful planning are key to reshaping tourism's trajectory and ensuring its success.

How can Sri Lanka leverage digital technology to enhance the tourism experience and improve visitor satisfaction?

The country's natural beauty is a gold mine, yet proactive measures are needed to capitalize on its potential. Sri Lanka can be a haven if properly managed.

The proposed course involves four distinct stages, particularly focusing on digital technology for digital marketing within the tourism industry. The first stage is about identifying and understanding travelers' inspiration to travel. This stage typically lasts around two weeks and involves triggers like seeing pictures of destinations on social media. The following planning stage, approximately one and a half months, entails in-depth research where various destination options are considered. In this phase, consistent and aggressive digital marketing efforts are vital to gain trust and confidence about Sri Lanka in the traveller's mind. The travel stage comes next, where visitors arrive in the destination country. At

this point, digital technology can enhance convenience, like faster immigration processes and digitized duty-free shopping.

The last stage, post-travel, represents 20% of the cycle. Gathering and leveraging feedback is crucial, as positive experiences shared by travellers can attract new clients. This cycle is interconnected; success in one stage supports the others. Utilizing digital technology is essential to streamline processes and create traveller convenience. This can contribute to a positive image of the destination as being easy and enjoyable to visit. Transforming the sector with digital solutions is within reach, requiring the contribution of the country's talented minds and



education systems. The effort to produce more exceptional minds and involve the private sector is praiseworthy and aligns with the necessary steps for the industry's enhancement.

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?

We have established a concept known as generational artisan industries to align with the sectors you mentioned. This uniquely Sri Lankan practice involves passing arts or industries from one generation to another, seen in endeavours like Biralu, Cinnamon, masks, and puppeteering. Our issue lies in fading industries and untapped potential like cinnamon. Foreign tourism could revitalize these traditions by spotlighting them at the high end, giving them international recognition. Linking renowned personalities to these industries promoting Sri Lankan cinnamon, will have a positive impact on this particular industry's

image. Government intervention is needed, viewing these industries as collaborative opportunities. Instead of simply funding them, let tourism expertise facilitate marketing, while academies nurture these crafts. Handlooms and traditional cuisine face a similar struggle; we haven't embraced and promoted our own, leading others to profit from Sri Lankan culture. Supporting initiatives by locals, such as Sri Lankan-owned restaurants abroad, can help us share our own heritage and keep it from falling into foreign hands. By fostering local talent, promoting authenticity, and engaging international exposure, tourism can safeguard these generational artisan industries from fading and leverage their economic potential.

What are the long-term goals for the Sri Lankan tourism sector, and how can these be achieved in a sustainable and inclusive manner?

A strategic plan is crucial to reclaim lost talent, as training and nurturing talent takes time. Incentivizing those who left can expedite their return, capitalizing on their enhanced experience. These seasoned professionals can boost the industry with their expertise.

It's important to acknowledge that this is a gradual process. The focus should shift towards smaller Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) to give confidence to larger players to follow with their investments. Achieving balance in the industry is paramount, addressing sustainability, conservation, and inclusivity. Becoming more inclusive in terms of gender, caste, and creed can attract a wider range of visitors. The younger generation is more accepting, indicating a positive shift in mentality. Sri Lanka's goal should be to become an aspirational destination, akin to Maldives or Japan. The country has missed past opportunities, including adversities like the Easter bombings and the COVID-19 pandemic, which should have prompted reflection and improvement. Presently, a last chance to rectify past missteps exists as recent violence threatens the industry. Avoiding becoming a "failed state" in tourism, like Pakistan, is imperative. The country's natural beauty is a gold mine, yet proactive measures are needed to capitalize on its potential. Sri Lanka can be a haven if properly managed. The emphasis should be on showing initiative, making positive changes, and inviting both locals and those abroad to partake in the nation's progress ■

Interviewed by: Thamodya Ediriweera & Naduni Madara