



# THE SUCCESS MANTRA DURING THE PANDEMIC

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## Can we know about your professional journey and its milestone up until your current position?

I started my journey by pursuing a Diploma in Management at SLITHM, which took four years to complete. Then I gained practical experience by working in various hotel during the training periods. Eventually, I graduated in 1998 and started working as a Food and Beverage Manager.

My career in the hospitality industry involved diverse roles, including housekeeping, room service, waiting, cooking, and receptionist duties. In 2002, I joined this prestigious institute as a lecturer and later progressed to become a Senior Lecturer and Head of Food and Beverage Operations. My dedication and hard work allowed me to further climb the ladder and take on the role of the Principal before finally becoming a Deputy Director General.

Throughout my career, I have gained valuable exposure to foreign training, having worked with professionals from about seven- eight different countries. Although I don't possess work experience from overseas, my training experience has enriched my knowledge and skills in the field.

To enhance my qualifications, I pursued a Master's Degree and Postgraduate studies. Moreover, I attained HRM CHE certification, further strengthening my academic credentials. These qualifications have been instrumental in shaping my career and enabling me to succeed in various leadership positions.

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

I believe that the COVID-19 pandemic had both positive and negative impacts. I see the pandemic as an opportunity for positive change, encouraging a shift in focus towards nature, human well-being, and addressing global crises. When it comes to the tourism sector, it is a very sensitive industry or rather unpredictable industry in the world. When a global pandemic or terror attack hits, it directly impacts the tourism and hospitality industry. The tourism industry depends on people's mobility. However, it has also significantly affected a decrease in students enrolling in schools. I remember that immediately after the pandemic, we didn't have many students. Students



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were reluctant to join the Tourism and Hospitality field due to the uncertainty that prevailed at that time. Now, again this might improve because when people tend to travel, then automatically the tourism sector will come to a normal state. Ultimately employment, especially foreign employment opportunities will rise again.

In my point of view, the pandemic has accelerated the adoption of virtual platforms, saving costs and time for businesses and institutions. The virtual platform was a blessing to businesses and institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. In our institute, we have meetings online. This has a positive impact on saving costs and time. So, this is what I think that we have to focus on the positive aspects.

I believe despite the challenges we encounter, we should take a positive approach, and thinking differently can lead to advantageous outcomes in dealing with the impact of COVID-19.

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

So now, what I mean by tourism is not bound by any specific destination, place, or person. In my view, the simplest answer to a successful tourism experience is a genuine smile. If anyone has a sincere smile and human connection, they can excel in tourism. There are various types of tourism, including high spenders, low spenders, high-end markets, low-end markets, and different interests like agritourism, health tourism, wildlife tourism, and business tourism. Sri Lanka, being a naturally scenic country, can promote any of these tourism segments with its attractions.

To achieve successful promotion, it is essential to educate people about sustainable tourism practices. We can

promote tourism anywhere in the country if we approach it positively and responsibly. Though marketing networks may currently focus on a few selected places, there are many places in rural areas that can be developed as tourist destinations. By planning and marketing effectively, we can benefit both the tourism industry and the rural communities. This can create a cascading effect, leading to increased income and development in rural areas.

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

Actually speaking, I believe that the key to develop successful tourism is by nurturing positive attitudes among people, especially the warmth of a smile. Alongside this, we must consider the well-being of our citizens. Sri Lanka is blessed with natural attractions, and to capitalize on them, we need to focus on developing the right human attitude.

As an example, we are taking strategic steps to implement a Tuk-tuk driver training program with recognition. However, it's crucial to monitor the process carefully to prevent any potential misuse of these licenses once they are officially granted. Proper monitoring ensures that the training and licensing lead to responsible and safe driving practices.

I don't believe that short-term training alone can change people's attitudes within just one or two days. It's essential to have a monitoring mechanism in place as a part of our strategic plan. Simply showing a license does not guarantee that everything will be done responsibly,



so we need to focus on effective monitoring and evaluation strategies.

In any business or industry, success depends on human behavior and attitudes. Therefore, we must strategically address these issues. I recently came across a video on social media where a foreign lady was circulating misinformation about a wildlife area, leading to conflicts within the community. These issues are related to attitudes and personal businesses, which can significantly impact the long-term prospects of the tourism sector.

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

In terms of environmental sustainability, I believe that focusing on eco-friendly and biodegradable products is essential. However, sustainability encompasses more

than just products. For instance, when we aim to develop tourism in rural communities, we must ensure sustainability in every aspect. Take home stays as an example, where the sustainability factor should be 100% is embedded in that particular area.

Environmental sustainability also involves human behavior, such as educating youngsters and community members about appropriate conduct in places like temples. It's about how we maintain our surroundings and how it affects the environment. In hotels, we see efforts like segregating waste with different bins, but that's just one component. We need to address various aspects, from the grassroots level to elderly people.

These days, dengue fever is spreading all over the country, isn't it? It is a great issue to the country. We have a systematic way of addressing this issue. Dengue fever spreads due to the lack of maintenance and population density, tourism also has various components

that need systematic attention. By identifying and addressing these components, we can sustain and successfully run tourism even in rural areas. A great example is the Kandalama Hotel, which emphasizes eco-friendly practices like using natural products and reusable materials. By ensuring that we meet a checklist of sustainable practices, we can achieve overall sustainability and success in tourism, even within rural communities.

## **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?**

Now, that's a very good question. In our current setup, we have the Tourism Development Authority and the Ministry of Tourism and Promotion Bureau centrally handling marketing and policymaking.

Additionally, each of the nine provinces has its own tourism ministries. From my perspective, while the Tourism Development Authority takes care of broader promotion, it's vital to identify specific attractions in each province and empower their respective provincial councils. These councils have their own tourism ministries and can systematically work on identifying and marketing the unique attractions in their areas.

I strongly believe that the marketing strategy should extend to the provincial level, allowing each province to promote their lesser-known attractions. This approach should cover different countries and leverage various social media platforms and marketing forums. Although budget constraints may be a challenge, it's crucial to allocate sufficient funds to ensure effective marketing in these regions.

Moreover, besides the centralized marketing efforts by SLTPB and private organizations promoting their packages, it's equally important

to shine a spotlight on the lesser-known places. By strategically marketing all these attractions simultaneously, we can witness a multiplying effect. Hotels will receive more recommendations, and rural communities will benefit, leading to greater sustainability.

I agree wholeheartedly that marketing plays a pivotal role, and we should not concentrate solely on a few popular places. We must prioritize strengthening the provincial councils and the private sector to effectively market these lesser-known destinations throughout the entire country. With the right strategic approach, we can successfully market tourism in every corner of Sri Lanka.

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



I think the younger generation, especially millennials, are more familiar with digital marketing and technology. However, when it comes to rural communities and small businesses like homestays, guest houses, and small accommodations in Sri Lanka, there seems to be a gap in their knowledge and expertise in digital marketing. These small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) play a significant role in the tourism industry, as almost half of the tourists are attracted to these options.

My concern is that we need to educate and empower the rural community in the SME sector, particularly in digital marketing. There should also be a filtering mechanism to ensure that they market their offerings appropriately without causing any misrepresentation. To accomplish this, we could establish an authority or department that standardizes the way destinations are marketed worldwide, especially focusing on the SME sector.



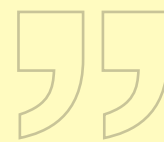
Moreover, while heavy marketing is being done, we need to ensure that the facilities and services at these places meet certain standards. A monitoring mechanism should be in place to regularly assess and review the physical evidence of these accommodations. By analyzing these reports, we can address any issues and take corrective actions proactively. Instead of waiting for complaints to come, we should visit these places regularly and monitor them systematically. This way, we can ensure that the marketing for small places is authentic and trustworthy.

### **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?**

Yeah, that's also a great question to consider. Just like everyone has their own hobbies and interests, tourism is similar, offering a wide range of experiences beyond business and education. People travel based on their unique enthusiasm and interests. Some tourists are drawn to mining experiences, observing nature, reimagining historical moments, or exploring archaeological sites. Sri Lanka has various departments, such as politics, agriculture, and others, which we should collaborate with to tap into the benefits of their expertise and market those places for tourism.

For instance, tourists who have an interest in tea leaves might want to experience plucking tea leaves,

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and we can cater to their specific interests with the help of the private sector's involvement. We need to align our offerings according to these specific interests and attractions, be it in lesser-known places or within the SME sector. To achieve this, effective marketing is essential. All government sectors should collaborate with tourism to ensure a cohesive approach.

By linking all these attractions to tourism authorities, we can systematically promote our country's wonders and attract more visitors. It's crucial to recognize the potential of aligning various interests with tourism and leveraging the expertise of different sectors to enhance the overall travel experience in Sri Lanka.

### **What are the long-term goals for the Sri Lankan tourism sector, and how**



## can these be achieved in a sustainable and inclusive manner?

As part of our long-term goals, we need to focus on increasing financial gains and the number of tourist arrivals. Looking at future forecasts, our target is to attract around 4,000,000 tourists to the country, generating a substantial amount of foreign exchange. To achieve this target, we must plan strategically and analyze the statistics for different types of accommodations, such as star-category hotels, boutique hotels, homestays, or even unique options like cave stays.

In the long term, we also need to develop our infrastructure based on the expected influx of 4,000,000 tourists. This includes considering the number of hotel rooms required, improving road networks and highways, and ensuring efficient domestic airline operations. Developing human resources is also crucial, and we should consider integrating tourism and hospitality subjects into school syllabuses to educate children from an early age

about the potential of the industry.

I firmly believe that with our attractive tourism offerings, Sri Lanka has the potential to become a top foreign exchange earner in the future, despite occasional challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic or security issues. For a successful long-term plan, we must carefully assess the required number of human resources, including the need for hotel schools and training institutes to meet the demands of the industry.

To achieve our long-term goals, we need a massive planning effort that goes beyond just accommodation and transportation. We should gather a team and work collaboratively with the Tourism Development Authority to meet all the required standards and create various job opportunities related to the tourism sector.

While looking at the long term, we should also break down our plan into short-term strategies that we can achieve incrementally. By aligning our long-term vision with achievable short-term milestones, we can make steady progress towards our ultimate goals.

## Any messages that you want to give to the younger generation in Sri Lanka?

I believe that tourism is a rapidly developing and everlasting sector. Its growth is directly linked to the population, as the higher the population, the more tourists are likely to come. Moreover, tourism is not a monotonous field like many traditional office jobs; it offers diverse and dynamic experiences. Every day brings new things to learn and explore, whether it's trying out new dishes or interacting with different clients.

Working in tourism brings immense satisfaction, and it has been one of the best sectors that I have experienced. I often encourage students to consider a career in tourism, as it provides a unique and fulfilling experience. Meeting and interacting with diverse clientele add to the excitement and diversity of the job.

While there might be some risks involved, such as handling different attitudes and behavior patterns, it's essential to maintain a positive outlook. By focusing on the positive aspects, one can navigate the industry successfully and move forward with confidence. The key to success is performance-driven, and within a relatively short time, say five years, one can achieve significant career growth, potentially becoming a general manager of a property based on their performance and dedication ■

*Interviewed by: Dinusha Weerasekera & Binari Willaddara*