

INTERVIEW WITH

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Many people in the West and around the world still think that Sri Lanka is an unsettled country with daily protests due to international news headlines from April to July this year. What can be done to dispel these images and portray a more peaceful image of the Island in the eyes of the international media ?

Yes, we had a difficult time mostly propelled in the months of April, May, June and July. The events which were present during that period (especially in the days in which the social unrest took place on a large scale) were headline news on many popular international news channels. This was also a favourite topic for media personnel to enhance 'media sensationalism' which was a good topic for the whole nation to talk about.

Currently, Sri Lanka has reached a staff level agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a bailout worth USD 2.9 billion, which is a good sign as a country to resist against negative forces.

As a part of our bi-lateral and cultural ties with India, we ventured into a series of Road-Shows which were held in Delhi, Hyderabad and Mumbai. These were a huge success as the main purpose was to promote Sri Lanka as an attractive tourism destination. India is one of the largest source markets for tourism and also has been supportive for the country to regain the lost momentum in both post pandemic and the recent economic crisis which Sri Lanka faced. Aligning with this, there were some hard efforts taken in boosting Public Relations and Media, with interviews conducted on Indian media such as NDTV where the Minister of Tourism explained the country's present situation.

It will take some time to rectify this situation of negative media about the country. Our short term plan to rectify this issue is to show the whole world where the country is positioned



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at present and the current situation. I would like to quote a saying made by the Tourism Minister - "seeing is believing". The only way a person can realise the real situation is by seeing it. You have to come to Sri Lanka and see what the country has got to offer. The way forward would be to address key source markets for Sri Lanka and align a better public relations strategy. The paperwork required to appoint a global PR organisation to implement this has already been done.

Has the type of tourism that Sri Lanka currently attracts changed in terms of source markets and the type (backpackers, hotels, luxury) ?

We welcome every type of tourist. Don't forget that we have a huge small to medium size business segment apart from the luxurious segment, which we have to support in regaining lost momentum after consistent hits since the Easter attack. We welcomed the first Aeroflot flight after a six month period where it was surprising that the flights carried passengers with full capacity and 80%-90% were families. Once the Chinese market opens up it would give the country a huge boost.

What can we expect in the next 2-3 years in terms of the type of tourists that will visit Sri Lanka ?

I see Sri Lanka as an All-in-One Capsule. Whoever lands in Sri Lanka can go to Negombo the next day, enjoy the beaches and clubs and on the following day, dive in Ella in one of the picturesque waterfalls. Next could be surfing in 'Arugam Bay' and from there to the next town of 'Kumana' to see the biggest bird migration in the world and also a herd of leopards. Those who want something different could go to Colombo for some fun filled nightlife. One can make all these events happen in just a few days' time. One can travel from the warmest area to the coldest area in a matter of hours. Therefore, any type of tourist would be welcome in Sri Lanka where it has all its flavours embedded to cater to everyone.

With the recent currency devaluation, the advantage that tourists have is the ability to enjoy luxurious space in this country at a very reasonable price. My duty here is to create the DNA for this

industry. We have to firstly focus on the major categories which we are known for. When I mean categories, it would be cultural, sports, wildlife, romance and many others that we offer. Especially identifying these categories at a much closer range and focusing on them separately would allow us to align our strategy with much more clarity.

A target of one million tourists has been set for 2022. How close can we get to this target despite all the challenges ?

From a practical point of view, it would close at around 750000 for this year. With the current hype of the ongoing FIFA World Cup we have established a fan zone in the Negombo beach strip where the tourists get the opportunity to watch the matches in the giant screens which are set up in the zone. In addition, there are various entertainment activities happening around engaging the spectators complimenting the carnival atmosphere. These are some of the short term goals which we look at which could lead to better prospects on taking our country's tourism to a higher level this year.

At present, all countries have relaxed travel advisories. Among the countries which had travel advisories to Sri Lanka earlier were UK, France, Italy, Canada, Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, Scandinavia, Australia, and New Zealand. Also, most of the flights including Aeroflot, Air France, Edelweiss (Swiss), Azur Air, and Jazeera Airways commence their operations, which will be greatly beneficial for the upcoming winter season.

Do you have a forecast for the number of tourists expected in the next 2-3 years ?

The target set in terms of the number of tourists by the end of 2023 is about 1.5 million and by 2025 our expected target is 3 million tourists. I don't say it's an impossible target, but we need tools to do that. Due to the current forex issues it is really hard to convert the LKR to the USD. We need to do this conversion somehow because the major part of our spending to boost the country's tourism relies on our expenditure in numerous marketing campaigns in other countries. We

are in discussion and efforts are being made on building up a case to the authorities to somehow enable these tools in order to get ready for the next year.

How successful was your participation at this year's World Travel Market ?

WTM travel fair in London concluded on a positive note with the participation of 57 local Destination Management Companies and Hoteliers from Sri Lanka. There was a significant level of Tour Operator and Media interaction with constructive one to one interviews with international media and reputable TV channels including CNN and BBC. The press conference arranged by the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau was attended by over 70 media personnel and SLTPB had the opportunity to give a clear and positive message to European travellers through the media.

Also, we will be participating in ITB Berlin which will be held in March next year (2023), in Germany.

The Chairman of the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau (SLTPB) is in a difficult and challenging job in the current environment. What skills and experience do you bring on board to this job and how do you expect to navigate the strategy of this industry?

That's the main reason I took on this role. I have previously been in the private sector and this is my first appointment in the government sector. I come from a background of marketing communications and media with over 25 years experience. I have been part of four to five Multinational Companies (MNCs) in Sri Lanka. My team and I are in a game of taking a fireball into our hands and turning it into a snowball. It's just a matter of seeing the results and then speaking about how we got there. Therefore, hold your horses until the results are seen. It will, eventually, with the efforts we make.