



## Navigating the Disruptions in Travel and Tourism with **MADUBHANI PERERA**

**We spoke with the Acting Managing Director of the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau (SLTPB), Madubhani Perera, about the expanse of the recent predicaments in the tourism industry. We also got her perspective on the forthcoming developments and their impacts.**

**Indisputably the impact on Sri Lanka tourism over the past few years has been catastrophic. What are your perspectives of these impacts and how are we coping?**

The year 2018 recorded the highest number of tourist arrivals in the country, constituting a total of 2.3 million. However, the following year, during the Easter attacks in 2019, it fell to 1.9 million. With the pandemic in 2020, we had only about 500,000, who came in during the first quarter of the year. As this is a global pandemic, the industry was afflicted beyond expectations.

Nonetheless, the borders for international tourists were opened on 21 January this year. It was reviving gradually, where around 15,000-16,000 tourists arrived in Sri Lanka before restrictions were imposed. These were Level 1 arrivals - those who had obtained visas and those with dual passports. This started with the pilot project with charter flights that operated from Ukraine, along with the bio bubble system and since this was successful, it was extended to other countries as well. We were able to attract good numbers, however, due to the sudden spike in the number of patients reported in the country, we had to re-enforce restrictions.

With regards to hotels, only about 200 hotels are registered as Level 1 hotels at this point. Passengers visiting Sri Lanka under the tourist route are required to stay in Level 1 hotels for up to a maximum of 14 days and can travel to approved sites within the bio bubble. Currently, fully vaccinated guests can be released to the community after a negative PCR and they can be accommodated in a Level 2 hotel for accommodation for the rest of the stay.

Domestic tourism is an area other hotels could look into. Unfortunately, even that could not be pursued due to the severity of the pandemic and covid clusters.

**Can you please share some insights on how the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau has supported the industry?**

Regardless of the pandemic, we have been carrying out promotional activities right throughout. However, our traditional methods of promoting tourism have changed remarkably. We generally take part in about 40-50 travel shows in different countries, but not since the pandemic. Our officers, along with other authorities in the travel industry usually travel overseas to showcase Sri Lanka and to promote tourism and this was, in fact, the main form of promotion. Due to travel restrictions and other limitations we could not do much physically.

However, we facilitated the industry with some virtual shows. We arranged numerous virtual travel shows and webinars with Sri Lankan co-operators along with co-operators from other countries. We have already carried out webinars in China, France, Germany, India, the Netherlands, the UK and many others. This was done to keep the overseas tour operators informed of Sri Lanka's situation and to keep them connected with our tour operators.

The Mattala airport was open for tourists and charter flights from Ukraine and Kazakhstan with free landing, where both landing and handling charges were waived.

Overall, aggressive promotions have been actioned. However, there is fierce competition globally.

**Are you able to share some information on activities that are in the pipeline?**

With the new Government, we had a good 5-year plan, but unfortunately, this collapsed due to the pandemic. Nonetheless, we are intending to execute a global communication campaign from next year in major

countries and we are currently in the process of tendering for different appointments. This would include a creative agency, a digital agency and a campaign management unit.

Apart from these local agencies, we are hoping to appoint 8 destination representation companies in major markets such as Australia, China, France, Germany, India, the Middle East, Russia and the UK. In secondary markets like Japan, Korea, Poland, Scandinavia, Spain, and the USA, we are in the process of appointing a PR agency. We are also preparing the required documents for those tenders and are aiming to start rolling out the campaign by next year hopefully when the situation becomes normal.

**Who were the top 5 markets over the last 5 years and do you expect this list to change in the next 5 years?**

During the last 5 years, India was leading followed by China, UK, Germany, and France.

Looking at the present circumstances, Australia and China are still closed for travel. Hence, I think in time, we can anticipate numbers from Eastern European countries like Kazakhstan, Russia and Ukraine, as people from those countries are more likely to travel. Even during the Easter attacks, Russia was the only country that contributed to our potential growth market. We had almost 90% growth from Russia, whereas all the other countries had negative growth rates.

Sri Lanka has banned travel from India at present considering the current spread of COVID in India, while the UK has still not removed Sri Lanka from its red list.

**The concept of homestays with platforms such as Airbnb has grown in popularity lately. What are your thoughts on their impacts on hotels?**

A lot of bookings are now done through online platforms. Homestays, at this moment in time, are not very popular and are not attracting as many customers. However, there is scope for things to change in the future where they will also be able to come to the

mainstream and continue as before. The Government is also keen to promote entrepreneurs of this segment as it acts as a means of aiding grass-roots-level people.

**As an industry expert, what are your thoughts on tourism trends for the next 5 years?**

Tourists will look more into experiential tourism in the future. For example, this could be a stay at any accommodation where meditation and yoga sessions are included. Wellness is a novel tourism product identified that could smoothen the industry in the long term. In our proposed global campaign, our plan for the first year is to focus more on wellness tourism.

Secondly, nature-related or wildlife tours and solo travelling are other upcoming demands. These were also substantiated in live streaming events that were held in December, where we covered 4 national parks. These were indeed successful and the feedback was positive.

So I think we should predominantly focus on promoting the aforementioned rather than holding on to cultural methods of promoting tourism.

**The development of the Colombo Port City has been a headline-grabbing topic over the past few months. What are your views on this development?**

Although there are various debates ongoing, I think with an appropriate legal framework and strategic incentives to attract investments, it should generate positive impacts.

As the Port City would enable varied projects to be undertaken, including casinos, golf clubs, hotels, restaurants and many others, I envision it as a good opportunity for Sri Lanka. This project has the potential to make Sri Lanka more renowned and make people view our nation with a fresh vision.