
BE POSITIVE AND MOVE ON

Tourism in Sri Lanka is at a critical juncture. The industry has progressed with great promise over the past decade. In the face of recent events, the decisions taken and strategies chosen now will define the future landscape of the industry. Preshan Dissanayake, Managing Director of Thambapanni Leisure is a self-made entrepreneur who has maintained sole ownership of an impressive hospitality portfolio. He is confident that the Sri Lankan tourism industry will bounce back with vigor. In fact, to reaffirm his confidence in the country, Preshan Dissanayake made a significant investment for a new tourism project in partnership with Adhil Fouz in Galle Fort a few days just after the Easter bombing. He urges the industry and all Sri Lankans to unite to build a peaceful nation. While highlighting the responsibility of officials and authorities to strengthen the safety and security island wide, he stresses that we need to promote Sri Lanka and optimally utilize the opportunities available.

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Photography Mahesh Bandara.



Could you tell us about the beginnings of Thambapanni Leisure, which started in the 1990s, and how the company expanded?

It was during the early eighties that tourism started earnestly in Sri Lanka. There were very few accommodation, food, and service providing facilities in Unawatuna. Visitors would sleep on the ground and enjoy eating traditional jackfruit curry and rice. My grandparents used to offer their house to tourists. One of my uncles acquired a restaurant along the beach before he moved to Italy. My brother and I acquired this property, and after a few years, we switched our paths to individual ways. I launched my own tourist venture

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in 1999, which is Thaproban Beach House, with only three rooms and a restaurant. Later, I expanded to 14 rooms after four years. This is one of the busiest places in Unawatuna now where we patronize around 200 guests for most meals in any given day. The next logical step of course was Thambapanni Retreat, which expanded to a 22-room boutique hotel. Ten years later, we added our crown jewel, the Thaproban Pavilion Resort and Spa, and we opened the Thaproban Pavilion Waves in 2018. We have managed to employ nearly 200 employees under Thambapanni Leisure and facilitate 100 keys to Unawatuna. Plans for properties in Arugambay and another in Kalpitiya

are in the drawing board. We also have 18 acres in Anuradhapura, with paddy fields surrounding it; this will be a Bali-inspired property. Another land was acquired in Galle; currently we are reforesting it with an organic farm on the side and later turning it to a yoga retreat. It was inspired by Bali, and we hope to have a similar effect in Sri Lanka with yoga, detox and Ayurveda.

We have also embarked on a mission to protect the environment by using 50 percent of the solar energy for our properties.

We are also aware of the waste from the hotels. We manage our waste by making compost as a natural fertilizer for the soil. We cultivate our own vegetables and fruits in our gardens. Even with water, we mainly use glass bottles, wherever plastic is used, it is recycled.

Sri Lanka has always had ups and downs. But you have always kept your confidence and kept expanding. Can you elaborate on this?

The situation created by the recent incidents is very unfortunate, but we have experienced such before as well. We have faced natural calamities like the Tsunami, floods, drought, and land slides. We cannot avoid facing them as they are natural disasters but it is unfortunate we had to face conflicts and issues created by politicians like last October; these are our own creations. It is a sad situation, especially for a Buddhist country such as ours where we follow a religion which promotes peace and harmony to the whole world and pray for good health and well-being to even our enemy.

But this is our country. Whether we like it or not, we were born in this country, and we must face these situations. I am optimistic. I have been traveling extensively around the world so I have seen that we have more opportunities in Sri Lanka than developed countries. If you have intelligence, the right attitude, honesty and trust, you can be successful. During the initial days soon after the incidents, everyone including my staff was distressed and reluctant to do anything. My advice to them has been to learn to be happy and move forward. I assured my 200 plus staff that I would guarantee to continue their employment however much it would cost me.

Every cloud has a silver lining they say, so I looked for opportunities elsewhere too. I saw an opportunity in the share market, which is right now at the very bottom. Therefore I have started investing in the stock market, as I am confident that in six months, I will be able to earn 20 – 30

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percent profit. Without waiting for others to assist, we must find a way forward.

We should first normalize our lives. What must we do? Everyone has a task to do. Everyone has to contribute to the country's progress – children should go to school, people should go to work and normalize our lives as it was before April 21, 2019. It is not merely the responsibility of the President, Prime Minister, or other politicians. However, it must be emphasized that the country does need a good, strong leadership with a vision for the country and commitment to realize it.

The Police and three Armed Forces have been extremely professional. I met many foreigners who have commended their work as they have been very professional in restoring law and order. It is a great thing for the country that we can rely on the military and law enforcement. Before April 21st, Sri Lanka experienced one of the best few months in the tourism industry. There is now an uncertainty about the upcoming season. From May to mid July is the traditional off season in the south of the country. So there are a few months to make some recovery efforts.

This year we had issues with electricity. However, whenever we want to build a new power plant, be it hydropower, diesel, coal, solar power, or wind power, the people protest. When there were issues with the garbage disposal, and when the Government decided on a scientific method to be implemented in Puttalam, there again people protested. Even if a highway is to be built, there are protests. People want 24-hour electricity, low prices, excellent infrastructure, and a good salary; however, they do not want to do the required work. We must change ourselves and focus on electing the correct leaders with the right vision for the country.

I believe that if we have a proper leadership, we could turn around in five years. Every few years we elect the President, Prime Minister and Members of Parliament and we leave our country in the hands of those who do not have the right experience, background, knowledge or leadership qualities; so what can we expect?

Could you tell us about your new project in Galle?

We commenced the project on April 29th. It took us about two and a half years to obtain approvals; that I should say is too long by any standard. Despite the circumstances, I am very optimistic. My business partner in Thaproban Galle Fort is Adhil Fouz who is a Muslim. It is a 350-million-rupee investment for a boutique

hotel. Although we have started construction, we now face issues from the authorities. Officials from the Archaeology Department or Galle Heritage Foundation request changes all the time, which is disappointing. We have to alter the design now after the plans were approved. It seems as if the authorities do not care about the risks that we are taking. Anyway, I hope to receive approval for the changes and commence construction soon. We aim to open the hotel in December 2019.

We have to change many things to move forward. What are your thoughts?

Firstly, we cannot invite tourists to come to Sri Lanka without ensuring 100 percent safety. There needs to be harmony between communities and religions. We also need to remove the emergency laws, because a country under emergency laws is a red flag for tourists. Meantime, we need to change our laws to suit the global security situation against anyone terrorizing the country, regardless of whether they are Sinhala, Tamil or Muslim, the Security Forces need the right tools like appropriate laws to intervene and bring the situation under control. Once the country is secure, we can ask foreign countries to lift their travel restrictions or advisories.

Moreover, everyone complains about the airport. Currently, there is a big chaos at the airport that we need to organize, so that the travelers are not inconvenienced and leave the airport feeling that they have met a group of friendly people. It is after all, the first and last impression the visitor receives of the country.

We also need to attract more airlines, especially budget airlines. Aeroflot came to Sri Lanka after 20 years, and they left after this incident. We need to encourage them to return to Sri Lanka. We should maintain the visa on arrival facility. Recently the Government has introduced free visa for 40 countries, which was removed after this incident, therefore we should re-implement this and offer it to countries that send large numbers of visitors.

The UNWTO Secretary-General announced to the world that people can commence travel to Sri Lanka. Hoteliers should send emails or letters to their contacts, as, in these situations, positive communication is vital. People trust what they experience, and word of mouth is essential. We must invite the BBC and CNN to report on the situation after another one or two weeks. Social media is also an essential part of the game.

Not only the Government, but Opposition politicians are also important in this scenario. They should also be mindful of what they say in press conferences and in public. Because of instant communication, everything is reported everywhere in the world and one bad comment can damage our reputation.

Advertisements, posts and comments go a long way to promote properties and the industry as a whole. Frequent suspension, unless it is extremely essential should not be done. Mainstream also has an important role. They need to act prudently and report events responsibly giving way to sensational news.

Not only the Government, but Opposition politicians are also important in this scenario. They should also be mindful of what they say in press conferences and in public. Because of instant communication, everything is reported everywhere in the world and one bad comment can damage our reputation considerably because the tourist industry world-wide is very sensitive and there are many similar destinations a potential tourist can select over one country.

Human resources, I must say is the backbone of our industry, which is something that has been forgotten. Currently, employees are losing their jobs due to poor occupancy. But we must remember that there are two things that we can do during this enforced leave patch. One is we should upgrade our properties and the second is giving preference to learning and development of staff. I am confident that in three months or six months, tourists will return. Then, what would happen if we have lost our human resources? There is no point in building hotels without considering the quality of human resources and the services.

It is commendable that the Government is providing a package for the hoteliers; however, I believe they should consider the small players as well. In the meantime, hotels that are approved by the Tourist Board have to pay taxes, VAT and CESS. But 85 percent of those involved in the industry do not obtain approvals or pay taxes. Some doesn't want to get approvals, while others have difficulty in obtaining approvals because of various red tapes, therefore the Government should be smart to help them get the proper approvals and pay their taxes accordingly. But today, they are asking, why do only the big players receive the benefits package. The Government can give them a similar package if they have registered with the system to receive compensation. Although for years there has been discussion around this, no one has got into actual action mode. We must take a step forward to do things in the right way.

In July, the Bangladesh cricket team is expected to tour Sri Lanka. They are now reluctant to visit Sri Lanka. But we need to persuade them to visit Sri Lanka, or it will generate negative publicity.

Things should change by July; in fact, I believe things will change by the end of May. The England cricket team is also supposed to tour Sri Lanka in 2020. They too have doubts traveling to Sri Lanka. This will generate a lot of money and publicity for the country. It is important to make sure that these events take place. It will take effort from Sri Lanka Cricket and Tourist Board to work out a strategy. We can create a lot of good publicity without any cost by merely announcing that the England Cricket team will tour Sri Lanka next year.

Has the Government done their part?

First of all, this terrorist attack should not have happened after receiving the intelligence reports as it is reported in the media. After the incident when the forces had the power, they took control of the situation quickly and normalized it within two – three weeks. Unfortunately after the riots the situation got complicated, which should not have happened at all. The riots however minor they may be, is as damaging as the April 21st incident because mob incidents indicate a breakdown of the law and order in the county, especially for the western tourists.

For any country, the most important aspect is the security. After ending a 30-year war, in the last ten years we forgot how important security of the country is. When the Government allocated highest amount through the budget for national security, people complained why do we have to spend so much money on security and not on health and education. However, now after this incident the tourism industry itself lost an estimate around 265 billion rupees. This year the defense budget was around 300 billion rupees.

Although the Government officials are here to help the people, and despite their salaries being paid by the people, they assume that it is their responsibility to discourage developmental projects and investments. We must change this attitude. That is the mentality of bureaucrats. They forget that they are in that position to help us and not impede us.

The tourism industry has progressed because of the private sector. The Government does not need to do much to improve tourism. If the country is clean and has a good infrastructure and people live in harmony, the tourist will come and they will be confident to travel to Sri Lanka, if all Sri Lankans live happily and in harmony.

After this incident it is predicted a three percent GDP growth, even Ethiopia has 8.5

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percent GDP growth – almost three times as us, this is depressing. To attain this growth we don't need a Government.

Sri Lanka is a destination for the entire year, do you agree?

Sri Lanka is a compact tropical destination. Why is it important? Most tourists have two – four weeks holidays. This is an ideal tropical destination for them. Although Thailand, India, and Malaysia offer extended stays, Sri Lanka provides biodiversity, vegetation and different climates within a short travel time. It is like a dream for someone in need of a tropical destination as they can stay a week on the beach and spend a week traveling through nature. There is a lot of potential in Sri Lanka and we need to market it correctly.

How is the focus on the next season?

It is some consolation that these cowardly attacks took place at the end of the season. We hope to have more than 50 percent occupancy for July–August (summer holidays). In September and October again it will be quiet, and then we expect things to pick up by November. But then again there could be issues arising with the Presidential elections in Sri Lanka. The political situation in October 2018 was worrying; however, we were fully booked in November–December, and we had a good season. The point is that everyone needs to think positively and not negatively.

Do you have confidence that Sri Lanka will bounce back?

Of course, after the experience of Tsunami and the 30-year war, this incident is a one-off and things will definitely bounce back.

Tourism is the most important and fastest growing industry in the world. Last year 1,200 million tourists traveled around the world, and Sri Lanka recorded 2.3 million tourist arrivals. People will continue to travel, and it's unstoppable. After the bombings in Paris, my family visited France, and the Security Forces were present on the streets of the city. This is the world today. It is not safe anywhere in the world yet, people are traveling. Exploring and visiting new places is the human nature. Attracting 2.5 million tourists from 1,200 million tourists is not a big task however, we need to look at different avenues to attract tourist arrivals. We have a good product that can be marketed. ☐