A Journey Of Strength



Having embarked on a long and successful career in tourism with the appointment as an Assistant Director of the Ceylon Tourist Board in 1966, Nihal C B Perera is not only exemplary in his contributions to the establishment of tourism in Sri Lanka, but is also the proud owner of Sparklink Travels, his brainchild that has progressed from strength to strength in the travel and tourism sector of the country.

By Kamalika Jayathilaka

“Subsequent to the formation of the Ceylon Tourist Board I left the private sector to serve the country in whatever way possible. I joined the Tourist Board in 1966 becoming a part of the efforts made at laying the foundation of the tourism industry in Sri Lanka,” explained Nihal Perera, Chairman of Sparklink Travels. He thus

revived his memory of the era in which travel and tourism was founded as an industry in the country, where suitable properties were selected and the foremost holiday resorts were constructed in the Western and Southern coasts.

It was during this time that Perera was amongst the first at the Tourist Board to be selected for specialised training in Japan in the field of tourism, conducted under the Technical Cooperation Programme of the Government of Japan. After the programme he came back armed with fresh knowledge to continue building the travel and tourism industry. “1970 to 1977 were the initial stages in which development took place in tourism where all the hotels and resorts in the South were built,” added Perera. Soon afterwards having been awarded a UN Fellowship for Training in Development and Planning Tourism, Nihal Perera was provided the rare opportunity to visit Spain, Mexico, Honolulu, Fiji, Italy and Indonesia to study Development and Planning over a period of three months.

With the wealth of experience gathered from his international tour, Perera returned to the Tourist Board to take up duties as Director of Planning and Development. “During this period I served as Director of Planning and Development, I managed to encourage several large business establishments to enter the tourism industry,” stated Nihal Perera, explaining how plantation companies such as John Keells and Aitken Spence initially ventured into tourism.

Nihal Perera also explained that during the 1970s the Government offered special tax concessions, a five year full tax holiday and a 15 year partial tax holiday as well as duty free equipment for constructions and operations, while offering land with infrastructure for various resorts on long term lease, which had helped the private sector to embark on investing in the hotel sector. “This was the time when many holiday resorts and rest houses in areas such as Bandarawela, Bentota, Polonnaruwa, Giritale, Kataragama, and Sigiriya were constructed flourishing domestic tourism in Sri Lanka. I was part of this development that took place, which I can look back upon today with satisfaction.” He also stated that the establishment of resorts helped the development of the surrounding areas providing an opportunity for the locals of the respective areas to obtain employment and develop the local arts and crafts. “It opened the doors for the rural sector to obtain gainful employment, which indeed was most satisfying to witness,” explained Perera.

It was in 1979 that Nihal Perera with his undying enthusiasm and keen interest in tourism resigned from the Tourist Board to set up his own company Sparklink Travels facilitating outbound travel for Sri Lankan travel enthusiasts. With the

support of his wife Noble Perera, contributing as a Director and his sons Praki Perera and Navein Perera taking on the reigns as Managing Directors with the backing of their brother Ranil Perera, the company has reached new heights during the past 32 years.

Today the company has grown to be a market leader in outbound travel, and has won several awards including the Champion of Champion Award from Singapore Airline while operating as Top Agent for three consecutive years. The company has also won awards from various other airlines for their exceptional travel performance.

Sparklink Travel's latest achievement however, is the strategic partnership made with Thomas Cook Holidays, which was spearheaded by Praki Perera, Managing Director. With this partnership global holiday products customised by Thomas Cook with the local expertise of Sparklink Travels will be offered to Sri Lankan holiday makers enabling Sparklink Travels with the opportunity of playing the role of a travel consultant to offer multiple product options across the world under one roof. "Thomas Cook venturing into Sri Lanka provides so much of scope for Sri Lankans to travel out with the assistance of a well organised internationally renowned travel company," said Nihal Perera. "We are lucky to have been appointed as the Sri Lankan representative and consider it an honour to launch Thomas Cook holiday products to destinations around the world," he added.

With this partnership Thomas Cook Tour Packages to countries like the USA, Canada, Europe, UK, Asia, South America, Australia, New Zealand, Africa, Egypt and several others will be offered, covering a wide spectrum of travel interests with Customised Holidays (FIT), Group Series Departures (GIT), Ad-hoc Groups, Sports Holidays, Indian Holidays, Leisure Travel, Cruises, Rail Tickets, Club Med and Coach Tours.

During his extended career spanning over 45 years in the public and private sector Nihal Perera has served the travel, tourism and leisure sector through a chain of positions held, which includes the position of Chairman – Airline Services, GSA British Airways, Subsidiary of Ceylon Hotels Corporation from 1990 – 1994 appointed by the Minister of Tourism. Apart from having been a past president of Travel Agents' Association of Sri Lanka, the IATA Agents Association and Sri Lanka Norway Society, Perera has also served as a Board Member of the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority and had been appointed as a Member of the National Vocational Training Council for the Hotel, Travel and Tourism Trade. The veteran

businessman is currently a Council Member of the Sri Lanka China Society and the Deputy President of the Sri Lanka Belgium Association while steering his company Sparklink Travels to greater strengths.

In appreciation of the immense contribution made towards establishing the tourism trade in Sri Lanka, Nihal Perera was recognised and awarded as ‘Pioneer’ at the Sri Lanka Tourism Awards 2010. Furthermore, at the First Ever IATA –AASL Legends Award he was awarded as “Legend” in recognition of his role in steering the Travel Associations towards achieving positive results.

“It gives me great satisfaction today to witness the tremendous growth in the travel and tourism industry of which I was also a part of as a pioneer, and I believe there is greater potential for this sector to develop under the leadership of the Minister of Economic Development. Tourism is presently growing in leaps and bounds and will no doubt help further improve the economy, taking Sri Lanka towards a prosperous future,” concluded Nihal Perera.

