

A NEW JOURNEY FOR SRI LANKA

Posted on

The tourism industry is an essential income generating sector of the Sri Lankan economy. It is evident that this sector would be the most severely impacted after the recent events. The hospitality industry consists of not only large hotels or restaurant operators but also the small and medium-size businesses. They are generally the first to bounce back with a positive approach and can-do attitude. Lords Restaurant Complex in Negombo is one such establishment. With a unique concept, it has reshaped the Negombo beach road resort and welcomes several hundred customers every day throughout the year regardless of the season. Martin Fullerton, Chairman of Lords Restaurant Complex, speaks about reopening his restaurant after the incidents in April and the importance of rethinking the country's strategy by focusing on positive change as Sri Lanka begins a new journey of recovery.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe.| Assisted by Swetha Rathnajothi. Photography Mahesh Bandara.



As a British national, why did you decide to make Sri Lanka your home and establish your business in Negombo?

First of all, my first visit to Sri Lanka was 28 years ago, back in 1991 as a tourist. At that time, the country was impacted by the 30-year conflict. I remember, although there were many checkpoints in Colombo, in Negombo and in most of the tourist zones in the southern parts of the country we felt a sense of normality and safety.

Astral Leisure Group was incorporated in Sri Lanka in June 2003, and Lords Restaurant Complex was registered as a brand name. It is a project approved by the Board of Investment, and the Tourist Board.

Lords was officially opened by the previous President of Sri Lanka, Mahinda Rajapaksa in May 2004. We are now celebrating 15 years of operations in the country. Lords, being named after the famous cricket ground in the UK, has five different outlets under one roof. This includes Bowlers, the family restaurant; The Batsman, which is the romantic restaurant; a garden restaurant outlet called The Boundaries; lounge style dining restaurant named The Oval and finally the LBW cocktail and wine bar, all serving the same sumptuous food menu.

Although There Were Many Checkpoints... We Felt A Sense Of Normality And Safety.

At the time we started Lords, it was a pioneering project with nothing else similar in the country. We wanted to offer our customers flexibility and variety so they could enter Lords and first have drinks at the bar, then a meal and end the night with some live entertainment. It was a dining concept where people could come in for several hours and experience various different unique styles in one evening or a day. We even have a free hand and foot fish spa to enjoy before or after their meals. This concept was also extremely popular with Sri Lankans and every weekend the Negombo beach road would come alive with hundreds of locals and foreigners visiting Lords to discover the difference.

When building Lords we opted to use local suppliers where ever possible and to this day we have always looked to source fresh ingredients from the local community. The attack has now had a huge impact on supporting businesses of the tourist industry, therefore deeply affecting all families within this area.

At the forefront of our business, we wanted to operate an ethical business while supporting the local community with respect to their culture and with honest values, in giving back instead of taking from them. We started our CSR program in October 2003, called The Hope Foundation by using a share of company profits and customers' kind donations to save the lives of thousands of street dogs and cats and also to help the local communities with various different projects. We currently have 49 street dogs and four cats in our care. I am a trustee on the board of the

Dogstar Foundation, which is a registered charity in the UK and Australia. They are also an NGO registered in Sri Lanka with offices situated at Lords Restaurant Complex. It was through this organization that we have successfully sterilized over 32,000 dogs and 3,000 cats after starting the program in Sri Lanka in 2006, and in 2018 we stepped up our program in Negombo and completed a total of 10,000 sterilizations within one year. British founders of this remarkable program, Samantha and Mark Green, are also very proud to employ 25 Sri Lankans for this project.

At Lords, we have successfully trained over 2,000 Sri Lankans during the 15 years of operations. We have recruited from less advantaged areas and especially areas that were directly affected by the 30-year conflict. This has allowed our team to learn English, Sinhala, and Tamil languages while being effectively trained in the hospitality industry. They earn excellent salaries and can help their families rebuild their lives. We encourage all companies within the hospitality industry sector to give something back to the country and the Sri Lankan people by sharing their profits in worthwhile projects within their local communities. This also sends a positive message to visiting tourists who want to engage and also help wherever possible with these projects. Everyone gains by just simply caring for the community. During this very challenging time, profits from Lords and donations for our projects drastically reduce, which therefore does not allow us to complete everything we like to do, especially during times of great hardships for the Sri Lankan people.

Dealing with global terrorism, I have noticed a completely different procedure of security checks. On my daily journey from home to Lords, which is about eight kilometers, I am now checked by the Armed Forces and Police several times with my bags and vehicle fully inspected. This, of course, is very welcome as I know the Armed Forces and Police are making Sri Lanka safe again to enable all its citizens to have the freedom to travel without fear or prejudice. Yet, we cannot expect visiting tourists who do not understand a country to come here when the acts of violence against other religions and communities are stopping every Sri Lankan citizen from going about their daily life

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Drawing from your experience where we have recovered from the Tsunami and also the conflict, what is the way forward for Sri Lanka after the recent incidents?

At the time of the Tsunami in Sri Lanka, we had a workforce of nearly 400 employees at Lords. During the subsequent two-year period from Tsunami and also when the conflict intensified in November 2005, we had to down-size our operations where we were forced to reduce our workforce to just four employees. I am no stranger to doing business in challenging times because of our history in Sri Lanka, but like most, I never thought we would have to use all these experiences from the past again to survive. What I have been doing now since the Easter attack in April, is obviously using the skills that I learned in that process of being able to quickly take action to identify the areas we need to make changes in the organization, to effectively give leadership to my management team and Lords' team, to go forward. The company that I had before the Easter attack is not the same company we have now; we have been reshaping our concept and organization, but without affecting our core values. We remain positive about the future. We will definitely be looking at operational costs and how we can identify the change that is needed in the process.

Putting our customers first is the crucial factor, and doing something different. We are proud of our contemporary uniqueness and our passionate style of service delivery to our customers. We focus on training our teams and giving them a passion for learning, for developing themselves and thinking forward, which in turn has a positive impact for our customers' experiences. Due to the recent terrorist attacks in the Negombo area, there has been a devastating impact on tourist arrivals and also locals on day and weekend visits here.

I have dedicated 28 years of my life to this country in various shapes and forms, but it has always been in the tourism sector, initially visiting this country for many years and eventually becoming an investor in Sri Lanka. I believe that there are many people, hospitality leaders who should have a voice in this industry to make their observations and communicate their point of view to the Government, to the media and to share information on how we can recover from this disaster.

I believe that at the moment, all the Government leaders from all parties should join in unity to find a way through this and to unite all of the people together through this challenging period of the country. We need to join hands in solidarity within the industry in Negombo and throughout Sri Lanka. We need to regain con-

fidence from the fear that is now present. Once we can feel that safety, it is only then that we should actually promote Sri Lanka as a tourist destination.

I Have Dedicated 28 Years Of My Life To This Country In Various Shapes And Forms, But It Has Always Been In The Tourism Sector...I Believe That There Are Many People, Hospitality Leaders Who Should Have A Voice In This Industry...

What should the Government focus on?

At the time I started back in 2004, there was a shortage in the workforce. Due to the 30-year conflict, many people within the industry migrated abroad to earn money and to gain knowledge. It is within the last five years that we have seen the trained and professional human resources returning to the country. What I see now is that because of this challenging period in the country, first of all, many of the operators in the hospitality industry are releasing their teams because there is no business. These trained employees will either go abroad or find another industry sector to work in. My feeling is now the Government should work with the hotel schools and the hotel industry to provide training for staff for six months instead of releasing them from their employment. Food and accommodation could be provided during the intense training period so that their skills are improved and greater opportunities are provided through this process of change. If we ignore this, then the experienced human resources in the sector would simply move out of the industry, and it would take years to recover.

My suggestion to the Tourist Board is to set up a platform so that all Tourist Board-registered industry providers can first display all their promotions. Everyone in the industry is doing promotions, and it is a confusing market for locals and visitors to actually identify which areas to go to. If there is a platform with the Tourist Board, where everyone can register their company and also the promotions that they are offering during the next six-month period, it would be clear for visitors and locals on what is available, and the information can be accessed from one place.

By registering all hospitality businesses with the Tourist Board, the Government will be receiving much needed tax revenue. With the industry being severely affected, the Government will not be earning the income from taxes. The first step should be to create a platform where people can input their information and the necessary

authorities to welcome their applications and ensure in future these small and medium sized businesses correctly follow yearly registration and their tax duties to the country. The government could also take a firmer action on tourist related businesses that continue to avoid their tax duties and do not correctly register their establishments within the tourist industry. This would also give professionals a clearer picture of how many rooms are available in the country and the number of different restaurants and bars operating in each tourist resort location.

Financial institutions were lending money very quickly during the last four-five-year period. However, if the banking sector is affected by the recent calamity and resultant loss in economic activity, and there is a meltdown, it will affect every single industry in Sri Lanka. So all industries must unite together to support the hospitality industry in this challenging period to ensure the economy is stabilized both short and long-term for all sectors.

Through SriLankan Airlines, especially with FlySmiLes, we can encourage repeat visitors to come to the country. Over many years of doing business, I have noticed that we get many repeat customers who return year upon year, sometimes multiple visits in a year. By reaching out to that community to come back now, they can send a positive message. This segment of visitors is not going to have much of a fear factor than someone who has never been to the country before. They understand the country, so they can also promote Sri Lanka to the outer world.

Reducing the prices of airline tickets during the next six-month period would be essential to build confidence. The first market that the Government should be targeting is university students throughout Europe. That is a huge community, who travel on budget. They are mostly travel bloggers active on social media who will definitely share their experiences. This segment of visitors would go back and encourage their family and friends to visit Sri Lanka as well. It is a substantially younger market that is not affluent as the market that the Sri Lankan tourism industry was used to. However, they will have less fear to travel in the country over the next six month period. We need to identify such new market segments and tailor-make our promotions to attract them.

In terms of the political climate in the country, I believe that over the next few months, the Government will continue in what they are doing, keeping the people calm, and creating a safe environment. We appreciate the excellent work carried out by the armed forces and police in all these areas.

There is a perception in the industry that 456 million rupee investment will be made for a promotion campaign. Now I fear that they will spend the next few months marketing to the world with this campaign and then there will be elections at the end of the year. Even in times of normalcy all Governments around the world voice caution and advise their citizens while traveling during the election period in Sri Lanka. I feel under this present climate, travel advisories will be lifted only after the country has elected a new President and Government into power. If the Government could look at holding some form of elections in July-August months, this will give September-October to market Sri Lanka to the world, which will then bring people into the country at the end of the year. If they don't do that and have elections in December 2019, the industry is going to lose the next main season and will have to wait till late 2020 for a recovery. The industry can adapt their businesses during a six month down period but if they have to wait for another one and half years this will then impact the whole industry, and it would take years to recover from that process causing many tourist related businesses to close their doors.

The Sri Lankan Tourist Board promoted a new campaign called SO Sri Lanka. I believe the same campaign could be used with a few alterations. They can use the large S and O to form SOport Sri Lanka, thus keeping the branding in place. This will give an immediate start to the campaign and can be shared immediately with the media as well.

There needs to be a dramatic change in the actual industry itself to encourage people to visit Sri Lanka, and we all have to learn lessons on what has actually happened especially when it comes to the safety of our citizens and visitors to our establishments. The whole sector really needs to look at regulating itself in far more detail. There are small and medium Sri Lankan and foreign businesses that will continue to evolve. The Government and Sri Lanka Tourist Board should encourage them to enter the system so that required standards are adhered to. They can then register these businesses to bring in more income through taxation back into the Government and therefore creating an equal platform for all businesses within this sector.

I Have Noticed That We Get Many Repeat Customers Who Return Year Upon Year, Sometimes Multiple Visits In A Year. By Reaching Out To That Community To Come Back Now, They Can Send A Positive Message.

We have to focus on maintaining and improving service standards during this time so that we provide the best service to the customers who are patronizing the various establishments even now, so that they get the best experience, which at Lords is our core principle.

Foreign Investors will be hesitant for a while to come to Sri Lanka. During this time, the Government could look at removing the law against foreigners purchasing land throughout 2020. This would then enable investors to make a significant investment for small to medium sized businesses and also for homeowners purchasing land to build properties, which will also give a much needed boost to the construction industry during next year. The BOI only enters large investments. At the moment, many smaller foreign investors are coming into the country to make an investment. But as the authorities do not support them, they are forced to operate businesses without entering into the system. If the industry is regulated, then small local and foreign enterprises should be processed by the BOI and Tourist Board as well, thereby bringing much needed tax revenue into the economy. During these six months of recovery, the Government should look at providing tax concessions for the entire tourism sector, not only for hotels but for all businesses that make up the tourism ecosystem.

The industry needs to invest in modern technology. If you want to visit one of the famous sites, such as Sigiriya, you cannot pre-purchase the tickets. We should use this time to inject some consumer-friendly ways that we can improve the tourist experience when they do come back. Another example is that we have some beautiful train journeys in the country, but again visitors cannot buy tickets online, they have to physically go and purchase the tickets, which is extremely confusing. Modern technology is essential to boost the tourism sector, we have time to do that now so we should focus on this as a priority area.

Sri Lankan tourism is based on our natural countries beautiful landscapes and various wildlife that can be seen across the country. Every person in Sri Lanka has a duty to protect our environment and the oceans that surround us. We all have an important part to play in the reduction of plastic and recycle our waste instead of sending most garbage to land fill which has a dramatic effect on our eco systems. I also encourage the Government to provide suitable recycling solutions to ensure there is a change in attitudes towards this and to protect our motherland for many more generations to come for its people and visitors to appreciate and enjoy. At Lords we took the positive change last year and launched our “Don’t be a Sucker” campaign and stopped serving plastic straws with all our beverages. We offer on

sale bamboo straws which can then be used by customers when travelling throughout Sri Lanka educating other hospitality providers.

Regulation in terms of the tour operators, guides, taxi drivers, and three-wheelers operating in tourist zones should be put in place. There is a lack of foreign language speaking tour guides and drivers that can actually support people when they come to Sri Lanka, so more focus should be placed on training and education in these areas.

Immigration at the airport should be made more efficient. I recently had to wait for a long time because only three people were operating the counters. Visitors were getting frustrated and upset. We should rectify these issues because immigration is the first point of contact when a visitor arrives in Sri Lanka. The first impressions should be a positive one.

There should be more flexibility on the issuance of Tourist arrival visas. Before the incidents, the Government had decided to issue visa on arrival for six months. However, this has now been revoked creating confusion as well as negativity when tourists arrive in the country. We also need to look at education, especially politicians. They should be representing the people who put them into power and not merely focus on personal gain. They have to provide a stable environment for growth for all industries.

If we do not have a stable Government, freedom to travel without fear or prejudice, then this will be a long-term recovery process. If the elections can be called peacefully and quickly, where the people can vote with safety and without fear of prejudice and a stable Government is placed in power, then we can really begin the recovery process. This will allow us to promote to the outer world, and say that we are ready to do business again.

We Should Use This Time To Inject Some Consumer-Friendly Ways That We Can Improve The Tourist Experience When They Do Come Back.

Lordsburg in Negombo opened its doors a few days after the incidents. What motivated you to move on?

Firstly, what we did was, we closed for a period of mourning and respect for the

victims and their families for ten days. This allowed me to send my 50 employees back to their homes in a safe environment. I used that time as a business owner to reflect and understand what was going on. It gave me a calm and peaceful time to consider the options available to me. After the ten days, we reopened and, we actually had quite a few people coming in during the first week of opening. The main reason was that there were still people traveling around the country and using Negombo as their gateway to finish their holidays before leaving for the international airport.

We are now lucky to get even four-five people at the restaurant. Many of the other restaurants have closed their doors. I believe that we still have to send out that positive message that this kind of attack cannot alter our way of life. We need to show that we can survive through this. That is why I decided to stay open to at least provide a service to the customers who are coming in, to give a positive message through social media that we are not giving up. A positive message that people can travel and feel safe.

Everyone has a role to play in creating a positive image of the country. What are your thoughts on this?

In terms of all political parties, we need to first remove the fear from the people. I have noticed since October last year, with the conflict within the Government, there is a change of attitude coming from the Sri Lankan people, towards positive. Previously, there was an acceptance of how things were. But now the view of the people is changing. They have to change the attitude towards the political situation, and then politicians have to change their perspective on being able to provide a new environment that is safe and free for all citizens. It should also be a healthy environment for investors that are coming to Sri Lanka and all local businesses to flourish.

...I Decided To Stay Open To At Least Provide A Service To The Customers Who Are Coming In, Give A Positive Message Through Social Media That We Are Not Giving Up. A Positive Message That People Can Travel And Feel Safe.

The business community, politicians, media, and the entire population in Sri Lanka need to send out that positive message of change. At the moment we are hearing

only negativity. The world is seeing this negativity. We need to turn this negativity into a positive attitude, and say that this is a new journey, a new journey for Sri Lanka and its people and approach that with positive change. When you have visitors coming into your establishments, whether it is a restaurant, guesthouse or hotel or a travel agency, and if you are just feeding them only negativity, it makes them feel insecure. They are on holiday and coming to enjoy themselves and to discover this beautiful island. We all have a duty to promote positive change and make our visitors feel safe and enjoy their visit to Sri Lanka, therefore also spreading the word to others to come and visit us.

We have to focus on the local market, which are the citizens of Sri Lanka and the expatriates who are living here. My suggestion over the next six-month period is to set up a campaign to promote Sri Lankan road trips. All companies from all sectors and the government should encourage this. Travelling around the country, it is also imperative to buy Sri Lankan products and stop buying imports in order to support the industries that are the backbone of the country and also help stabilize imports. We are promoting Sri Lanka to the people in the country, and we will generate income within the country during this challenging period. This will also allow the hospitality industry to share these visitors' experiences on social media sending out a very positive message to the world – that we are ready for tourist business.

We should use the passion of the people instead of wasting large sums on campaigns. We combine together like before promoting 'We are Sri Lankan.' Cricketers and artists, both past and present, can create a positive image of the country. We can promote Sri Lankan culture, national costumes from all areas of society and combine it with music and dance to create a music video. This could be shared during the cricket world cup, which will capture the world media and uplift the peoples' mood.

There will be no negative images of the attacks, it will only feature the passions of the people, food, nature, wildlife, cricket, music, dance, culture and of course a win by the Sri Lankan team to bring home the World Cup. There are no quick solutions to this problem. There has to be positive attitude towards changes required to regulate the tourist industry and promote peaceful harmony throughout all religions and cultures. This stability will attract visitors back to Sri Lanka who will all feel in their hearts that they also will not be deterred by global terror and will want to support Sri Lanka back to recovery. This is the time for a change, the whole industry has to pull together and constructively use this period. This will take time for recovery, so we all have time on our hands to be able to actually focus on the

industry and improve it for our customers' experiences and safety.

Sri Lanka is a destination for the entire year, not merely for a season or two. Do you agree?

At the moment, the Government, from since I came to Sri Lanka, has typically said high season and low season. For me, we have a land of sunshine, smiles and open arms to welcome visitors 365 days a year. I think what we have to do is completely remarket the whole campaign, to stop these attitudes of the past focus- ing on seasons. It should be all year as high season.

In terms of experience, do you think guests curating their own holiday by making reservations online as opposed to using travel opera- tors is more customer friendly?

The travel industry around the world is now an online market. Gone are the days of someone in Europe going to a travel agent and booking their holiday. What they are doing now is booking their travel experiences online, so a higher proportion of people coming to Lords would have identified where to go for one night or two nights in Negombo. They would have already pre-booked online through our website, and they know where they are going even before they arrive at their destination.

Do you have confidence in Sri Lanka?

As a foreign investor, the Government has got to provide an environment, where first of all we can do business without being disturbed in any way; we need to feel safe within our environment. The recovery period will take some time, and there has to be some change with our attitudes to build up and develop our country again.

This Is The Time For A Change, The Whole Industry Has To Pull Together And Constructively Use This Period... We Should Be Calm, Be Positive, And Keep It Simple Through This Period Of Recovery Of Change.

I was due to travel to the UK this month and with the current events, I have decided to cancel that. One of the main reasons was that I believe that all Sri Lankans and

all expatriates should now be traveling around the country, on road trips. For the next six months, people should not fly out of the country. I can now use this money to travel around Sri Lanka and put the money back to the hospitality industry and economy. We are dealing with something completely different.

We are dealing with global terror, and not with a terrorist group. This situation is entirely different. Global terror affects every person in the world and no borders are safe from this. I believe that anywhere we travel around the world, we should all travel with responsibility, caution and care.

We should be calm, be positive, and keep it simple through this period of recovery of change. The leaders in the industry, not just hoteliers, but all hospitality providers and tour companies should all join hands together with marketing, and campaign to promote our country. At the moment, they are talking about using an outside agency, but is this outside agency going to understand Sri Lanka? No. I think what we need to do is use leaders within the hospitality industry that have faced these challenges before, who understand the context and reach out to them to raise the voice. That is why I decided to do this interview today. We can all come together to be proud of the recovery process in sending out a positive message to the world that we are ready to do business again.

One of the reasons why I selected Negombo as a foreign investor is because it is a multicultural community. In Negombo, we have a very close community of Christians, Buddhists, Hindu, and Muslims. That is what really drew me to the area. We are facing a very challenging period. We all need to take a step back and be calm. We all have to understand that it was terrorist extremists who carried out the attacks and not one particular community. It is time to stop blaming each other and look into the future to rebuild our nation. Through challenging times we should all unite together and become stronger.