ARUGAM BAY SURFING INTO THE FUTURE



Regarded as one of the best surfing destinations in the world, Arugam Bay is increasingly attracting both local and foreign visitors to its shores. Plans are now underway to develop a quaint village, located in Pottuvil in the Ampara District to offer enhanced services and facilities to the tourists. However, M H A Raheem, Chairman of the Arugam Bay Tourist Association, believes that such plans could have drastic consequences if they fail to take into account and protect the local community and the natural assets of Arugam Bay.

By Madhushala Senaratne | Photography by Mahesh Bandara

Could you tell us about the Arugam Bay Tourist Association? What is its role in promoting tourism in Arugam Bay?

The tourism industry was destroyed as a result of the tsunami and the community did not know what to do. Thus, we got together and formed a small team to work with the NGOs who were coming into support Arugam Bay. For example, when the USAID Mission Director came to Arugam Bay following the tsunami, they were committed to implement any major project in the area and inquired into our needs. Although many asked for funds, the Association had the foresight to request that they build roads, bridges and water schemes. Consequently, they constructed a bridge and a water tank for the area.

When we started this Association, we had only 15 members. Gradually, it has evolved into a larger umbrella organisation for tourism in Arugam Bay. Currently, we have nearly 16 societies working together, including the Farmer's Organisation, the women development societies, Pre-School societies and the Cattle Farm Association. In turn, we are working with all the government and local authorities, Tourism Ministry and NGOs.

WE WORK TOGETHER WITH OTHER SECTORS, FOR EXAMPLE, WE HAVE BUILT A RELATIONSHIP WITH THE THREE-WHEEL ASSOCIATION AND WHEN TOURISTS LOOK FOR TRANSPORT…

Arugam Bay has gained much popularity among local and foreign visitors. This increase in tourism has been welcomed and we are striving to improve the quality of our services to continue to attract more visitors. We have the resources to do this, however we need guidance on how to implement development programmes. One of our key roles is to source this information and support. The Association also acts as a crucial communication channel with tourism authorities such as the Ministry of Tourism and the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority to ensure sustainable development in the area. We welcome development but we do not want to merely construct buildings and destroy nature. We love nature, that is our plus point, but we want business as well. Therefore, our objective is to develop, while protecting, what we already have here.

We also work closely with the community, because they form the foundation of our business. When we receive funding, we share it with the community. We work together with other sectors, for example, we have built a relationship with the three-wheel association and when tourists look for transport we direct them to members of the three-wheel association. Thus, the three-wheel association is making an income. It’s a team effort.

The Association now consists of nearly 400 community members with 54 members directly engaged in the tourism sector and we also have nearly 100 youth who are waiting to participate in training programmes and hotel management courses. What’s more, Sinhalese, Muslims, Tamils and Christians, all work together in this Association.

Arugam Bay is regarded as one of the best surfing destinations in the world and is becoming increasingly popular among both local and foreign tourists. How do you see its future growth?

I have been in the hotel industry for nearly 12 years. When I first joined the business, there was little progress in the tourism industry. With the end of the war, there has been an increase in tourism. Here, we would like to thank our President Mahinda Rajapaksa who was instrumental in ending the conflict, and helping develop the area by promoting tourism. Last year, the occupancy levels in the high season reached 100% in Arugam Bay. Many local tourists also came during the off-season. This year, we’re seeing a further increase in tourists and occupancy is high.

Arugam Bay is already one of the most internationally recognised surfing destinations. Therefore, in addition we are promoting eco-tourism and we see huge potential in this. There are many attractions close to Arugam Bay such as the Pottuvil mangrove tour, Yala East National Park, wildlife watching, sand safaris in Panama and cultural attractions that will bring many people to the region. We also plan on conducting dolphin watching tours and boat safaris.

To operate all these, and to accommodate the additional visitors, we need the full support of the Tourist Board and the Tourism Ministry. We have asked for their support to help organise our resources. Once this is developed, the local community

will receive the benefit.

Arugam Bay is different to Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Hikkaduwa. Even though other beach resorts are closer to the Airport and can be easily reached, tourists will travel nearly nine hours just to view and be amidst Arugam Bay's natural beauty. They come here to enjoy nature and the beaches.

However with more tourists, inevitably, there will be more buildings. If we damage this beauty by putting up concrete blocks, we will lose our uniqueness. Therefore, when it comes to developing this area, we must ensure we do this in a sustainable manner, using local material and in keeping with the local surroundings and community.

What is the best time to visit Arugam Bay?

Arugam Bay's peak season is June, July and August. Last year, during this period, we received around 4,000 – 5,000 tourists. However, the nature and beauty of Arugam Bay is such that it is attracting tourists during the off-season as well.

Tourists mainly come from England. Surfers from the Pro-English competition came here. They give preference to Arugam Bay because it is Sri Lanka's number one surf point, South-East Asia's number four and is among the Top 10 best surfing destinations in the world.

How will the development of tourism help the community?

This is a small village and whatever we build or open for tourists we ensure that it benefits the community as well. For example, a new supermarket in the area would be used by both tourists and the local community and so both would gain better services. You don't hear of the war anymore, you hear more of development and about protecting the environment. Helping to create a better future for our children.

ARUGAM BAY IS ATTRACTIVE TO TOURISTS, BOTH LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL. IT RECEIVED THE AWARD FOR THE HIGHLY COMMENDED

BEST DESTINATION IN 2007. WE HAVE ALL THE BASIC FACILITIES TO MAKE A STAY CONVENIENT, INCLUDING ELECTRICITY, ROADS AND WATER.

For 30 years we suffered. However, since last year, a lot has changed. Tourists often tell us that Arugam Bay is becoming more independent; that we are becoming more self-sufficient, there is electricity, water, rooms and people are enjoying their lives. Much of this has been achieved through the money tourism brings. In turn this good publicity generates more interest in the area.

There is a very good system in place here. We do not buy everything in Colombo, we source as much as possible locally. Therefore with more tourists we buy more fish from our own fishermen, rice from the paddy farmers here and vegetables from our markets. Thus strengthening the local economy.

What measures are being taken to improve the quality and the standard of the services offered?

Arugam Bay is attractive to tourists, both local and international. It received the award for the Highly Commended Best Destination in 2007. We have all the basic facilities to make a stay convenient, including electricity, roads and water. However, the investment and the capacity of the hoteliers is small. Therefore, the two biggest challenges for the future are improving both the quality and quantity of the accommodation.

Currently there are 54 guesthouses operating, providing around 350 guest rooms. Several of these only offer basic facilities at present. Our current customers are generally happy with them as they meet their needs. However looking to the future we hope to develop these facilities to offer improved services to attract additional customers who expect a standard level of service.

To improve the level of our service, we need both funds and training. Recently, representatives from the Tourism Development Authority visited this area and they assured us that they will help to develop Arugam Bay, help hoteliers develop their skills and standardise or improve the quality of our services.

We have also discussed this issue with several NGOs, who would like to help us by giving us training. We maintain regular contact with the Tourism Board to discuss options for conducting programmes for hoteliers to develop our skills. We are hopeful that this will be implemented in the near future. In addition to this we are looking to attract more skilled workers, such as waitresses or housekeepers, to the area to improve the overall service.

According to a consultant from the Tourism Board, nearly 7,000 rooms are expected to be constructed by 2012. We want to do this through local people and in an eco-friendly way. Most of the people have land, but they do not have the financial support to develop it for use in the tourism industry. For example, they face difficulties when dealing with the banks and securing mortgages. That's why we're liaising with the Ministry and the Tourism Board to support the community through this.

We are also looking for solutions to other problems that we currently face. For example, there is no proper supermarket or luxury bus service currently operating from Arugam Bay to Colombo. The main aim of all this development is to attract more people. We are world renowned for being a top international surfing destination. However, the additional Arugam Bay attractions we have in operation are not publicised as well. In addition to this we also hope to establish a proper information centre to help visitors enjoy their stay and get the most out of the local area. We have requested that an information centre be set up in Pottuvil, because projects are being carried out there, especially those related to eco-tourism.

The area is relatively crime free and there are not many cases of drug abuse, because of our close ties and communication with all sections of the community. However, following the example of other beach resorts, we are lobbying for the presence of tourist police in the area to make sure the community continues to be protected and that the growing number of tourists doesn't attract trouble from other areas.

In Arugam Bay there are three key components to our community that go hand in hand: tourism, fisheries and agriculture. For the local area to strive, all these sectors need to be developed. If there are shortages in one component, that affects

the others. If all three sectors are developed properly, Arugam Bay will be like a little Singapore. Therefore we not only work to improve the services of the tourism industry, we also look to secure help and resources to develop our other key sectors.

Could you tell us about the fisheries and the agricultural sectors? What are the challenges faced in these sectors and how can they be addressed?

There are about 500 fishermen here, supporting about 1,500 families. The fishermen do not have access to proper information centres or to warehouses. For example, they do not know where they could park their boats, their engines or where they can rest. They know that their activities are disturbing tourism but they don't know what to do because there is no alternative. There is land available to help rectify these issues, such as providing a location for storage, but as of yet this has not been utilised. Therefore the fishermen have set up the Fisheries Federation, who are now part of our Association. We are working together to source and provide information for the fishermen and also to identify support groups who can come to the area to work with them.

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It is the same for agriculture. Half the community of Pottuvil is in the agricultural sector. Farmers get a good harvest but they do not know of alternative methods available to them that could increase yield. There is enough rain but we don't have a system in place to protect the water levels. If we had a proper irrigation system here, then paddy farmers could receive twice the harvest they get now, and thus generate a greater income. Therefore we are also working with the Farmers Association in the same way we do with the fishermen.

What are some of the areas that the Association expects the local authorities to address?

What we expect the authorities to address is first the cleanliness of the Bay, secondly the protection of the environment and thirdly the improvement of our services.

Also, as mentioned previously we need to have better transport links from the main cities, for example, from the South and the Hill Country. We expect the local authorities to address this. Luxury buses could be introduced to provide transport to and from these areas. In addition, we don't have proper bus services in operation from Arugam Bay itself. Our bus depot comes under the Akkaraipaththu depot, which is one of the main bus depots in this area. Years ago, buses were operating from cities such as Badulla, Haputhale, Hikkaduwa, Matara, Galle, Colombo and even from the Airport. Now, it's just from Arugam Bay to Akkaraipaththu and Kalmunai but we would be keen for the old transport links to be revived.

Also, there is no railway line. At one time there were plans to establish a coastal railway route from Batticaloa to Kataragama. If such a train route is set up, that will greatly benefit the area.

The President has plans to open a new airport in Hambantota, in Mattala. If this happens, it will be of huge benefit to the area. It currently takes nine hours to get to Colombo, but to Mattala it would be just three hours. The President has a very good plan and if it is successfully implemented, the people in the East will benefit greatly.

Tourism authorities are taking measures aimed at developing Arugam Bay. In addition, minimum room rates are to be introduced. What are your thoughts on this?

The proposed minimum charge of US$ 40 for accommodation is an issue that could affect us negatively. We mainly target middle-class tourists, such as surfers. They do not spend much because they travel widely. We know exactly how much surfers would spend. We do not want to lose them. They are very friendly with the local people and also provide a significant amount of income for the area. We also do not have the facilities to target big spenders.

If package tourism or tour groups start coming in, tourists will spend all their money at the hotels and at the end of their trip, they will pack up and leave. There will be no interaction between the guests and the community and as a result local income will be lost. Arugam Bay is currently a commission free zone, we do not pay commission to tour operators, therefore, tourism income is shared throughout the community.

We are concerned that the plans for a minimum room charge would also result in the building of concrete jungles. For example, near Arugam Bay Point there is a jungle area that is part of our surroundings. If a building is constructed there, this will destroy the Bay. Or, if something is built on the sand dunes, without any proper environmental assessment, this will lead to sea erosion. When the tsunami struck, the sand dunes protected us to a great extent.

People want to come to Arugam Bay to enjoy the nature and also to surf. Therefore, mass tourism would not benefit the area. When you charge too much money or ruin the natural beauty both surfers and nature lovers will leave. Even if local materials are used and buildings are displayed nicely the prices will still be too high for Arugam Bay, even locals would not pay that much. Those who come to Arugam Bay are not rich, they are ordinary people who just want to enjoy the beach and the nature.

The numerous activities of Arugam Bay are attracting more tourists than we expected. As Chairman of the Tourist Association, we are making plans to develop eco-tourism, similar to what has been successful in Thailand and India. Arugam Bay is very small and so would not benefit from the building of large hotels as it would be lost to buildings and wouldn’t be able to differentiate itself from other beach resorts.

During the conflict period, we sold our rooms for Rs 500-800. However, with the end of the war, we now sell our rooms for around Rs 2,000-3,000. We have to increase our prices on a gradual basis to ensure our visitors keep on returning. By doing this we are securing our future and our children’s futures.

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SPECIALISTS WHO CAN ADVISE US IN THIS AREA, FOR EXAMPLE, TO INTRODUCE A RECYCLING SYSTEM.

What are some of the other challenges faced in developing tourism?

When development takes place, other issues will arise. One of our key issues is garbage disposal. Therefore, we need specialists who can advise us in this area, for example, to introduce a recycling system. UNOPS supported us to collect garbage and recycle in the Pottuvil area, but there is no proper plan in place for Arugam Bay. Awareness needs to be created amongst the community. Through our association we are already tackling this and trying to reduce wastage.

Another key problem is the lack of street lights in the area. This is something that needs to be looked into, because it will help ensure safety at night.

What are the future plans of the Association?

Our future plans are to develop the skills of the local hoteliers on a proper basis, to promote the area more effectively and to provide more accommodation and facilities for the guests. As a result we will be able to target tourists off-season as well. If we only target seasonal business, and there are no tourists at other times, we are at risk of losing businesses because of the cost of electricity and water. By bringing tourists off season as well we will be able to maintain our businesses.

For now we receive mostly surfing tourists, but we want to expand this. It is one of the reasons why we are looking at promoting eco-tourism as well. We have the resources, but we have no means of utilising them. For example we currently have 12 guides who are trained by the Tourism Board in eco-tourism. Also tourists have told us that they have seen lots of different kinds of birds at the Yala East National Park and they have put forth the idea that we could organise a bird watching festival in Yala. We plan to source an expert from the Tourism Bureau to help organise us and to train us on how we can earn money from eco-tourism. We see nature as our future.

Also, there is no profile about the tsunami effect and we don’t have any documentation on the threat for Arugam Bay. We see this as an essential task of the Association in order to protect our future generations.

Any final thoughts?

If the authorities support us, the local hoteliers, to develop our skills this will benefit us greatly in the future. Most of the hotels are locally owned however outsiders do come and buy our land, and they often have superior skills and develop fast. This is very unfortunate for the local people as they don’t have a chance to compete. In addition they don’t know the true value of their lands and often sell it for lower prices. The risk of this is that outsiders can come in and build large establishments that aren’t in keeping with the community’s goal of a small and sustainable tourist destination. When foreigners invest here, they take the money back to their countries, and our community doesn’t get anything. We want to do it in a way that will benefit our community.

I am involved in the tourism sector 24 hours a day, I run my guest house and I know the tourists. I have received training courses in the USA, after being selected by the Embassy to be trained there. I have worked in the industry for a long time and have gained a lot of experience. But there are outsiders, who do not know about Arugam Bay, who come here and try to take charge. We are cautious about outside interference. If we target a high-end tourism market, we are in danger of losing our individuality and independence. Why would people need to spend nine hours coming all the way from Colombo just to see concrete blocks? Arugam Bay is very beautiful. Development needs to take place, but we do not want to destroy Arugams Bay’s beauty in the process.



