

BRING THE VIBE BACK

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Arugambay and Hikkaduwa are two of the most popular tourist destinations in Sri Lanka, providing experiences throughout the year. Surfing is an international sport drawing visitors from around the world, and Sri Lanka has some of the best surfing points, especially in Arugambay, which is ranked in the top surf spots in the world. There are immense opportunities, which should be garnered for the tourism industry to reach its potential. The Government and the Tourism Board should understand the industry and also the respective areas to prepare policies accordingly. Too much restrictive regulations will hamper its growth, especially at a time like this. Mambo's has created a name with its unique offerings that combine surfing, good music, and hospitality. G P G Sandika Thushara, Owner of Mambo's has been in the industry for over 20 years in both Arugambay and Hikkaduwa. He is known for being one of the pioneers for surf hotels and surf schools in Sri Lanka and for also organizing the some of the best parties and events in the island thereby creating a carnival atmosphere in Arugambay and Hikkaduwa. He speaks about the importance of being united and working together to revive tourism, organizing international surfing competitions and other events to draw people to Sri Lanka. He is confident that the country can bring the vibe back.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe. | Assisted by Gayathri Kothalawala. Photography Menaka Aravinda.



Could you tell us about your journey so far?

It started with surfing. My house was on the beach in Hikkaduwa, and thus my childhood has always been connected to the ocean. There would be many foreigners surfing the waves in front of our house. I always wanted to bathe in the sea, but my parents would not allow me because the sea was rough. But somehow I learned how to surf and with that experience Mambo's came into being 20 years ago in Hikkaduwa. After that, I opened Mambo's in Arugambay, and we have been there for almost 16 years. I was able to start my business because of surfing. We knew how to take care and look after foreign surfers even at that time. There were no mobile phones, internet, Whatsapp or any such digital medium back then. But because of the experiences we provided, the tourists started to grow. The ones who stayed at Mambo's began to spread the word saying, if you are traveling to Sri Lanka, you have to stay at Mambo's.

Surfing was my hobby. I was placed first in the first-ever surfing competition in Sri Lanka. But after that, I was mistreated and I decided that I would not participate in surfing competitions. But I wanted to help the youth and the younger generation to continue surfing and to improve their techniques, which would also keep me young. That is how we are continuing to thrive as a team. We have a surf school, rooms, and restaurant. We opened the new place in Hikkaduwa, we have a Mambo's in Arugambay, and my brother Sababa has a property in Whisky Point.

They have a beach club and 12 rooms. It has been completed with full amenities. Our business grew on the needs and requirements of the guests who are frequently with us. Guests come in for a week or even longer, and they see that we are providing every- thing they need. That is how we grew.

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How did the name Mambo's come about?

There was an Australian couple who were living in Japan. And they came to Hikkaduwa to surf. One of their surfboards broke, and I helped them out by fixing it. The girl was very pleased, and she said, "You have a good future." She made a name board for my property with half a surfboard. She pasted the sticker with name Mambo's and placed it in front. That's how the name came to be.

You have been in the tourism industry in Hikkaduwa and Arugambay for many years. How would you utilize that experience in responding to the current situation in the country?

We all have to get together and work hard once more. Teamwork has to be there. I have discussed extensively with the Chairman of the Sri Lanka Surfing Federation, where I hold the position of Vice President & Events Director. We held three surf competitions around the country last year, and they were all supported by all the hotels in Hikkaduwa, and Arugambay. It is the time to return that favor to them by organizing surf competitions and inviting international surfers to participate. We do not need to give them valuable prizes, but we can host social gatherings.

Our aim is to have a competition on a small budget. This would be maximum for about three days. We want to bring together everyone involved in the tourism sector in Hikkaduwa and Arugambay together; that is the three-wheel drivers, transport providers, restaurants, and hotels to do something to rectify the situation. Everyone is supportive, and I have friends who are already contributing. I have people from both areas because both Hikkaduwa and Arugambay are my home.

We are thinking about having a night football match, and a beach volleyball match. We have to encourage Sri Lankans at least to travel and visit these areas, rather than trying to attract guests from overseas at this time. I have seen, in the past few days many Sri Lankans visiting Hikkaduwa on holiday. We had not seen such numbers before. We have to work as a team and do it as we did before. We have a very important responsibility to fulfill for the country.

Mambo's is a place known for having new concepts and fabulous parties. How did you achieve this?

We do have many parties. But as the owner of Mambo's, I decided that parties would be only one aspect of our establishment. The vibe within is upbeat and attractive so that it is also seen from the outside as well. We are known in that way. From a business point of view, I only see a party as an event happening once a week at Mambo's.

Each party, whether it is in Hikkaduwa or Arugambay, draws about 1,000 guests each. But, we have the party only once a week, because if we have it every day, it is too much for our staff and also to the guests. As the owner, I get involved. Guest start coming around ten in the night, and it gradually becomes crowded with people

drinking, dancing and having fun. It is around two or three in the morning when people start going home. Till then, we are all vigilant to ensure that everything is done well. We have set up the vibe to be that way, and we will continue in that way.

In Arugambay, we had parties even during the war. We did not encounter any problems at all. Being on the East Coast, no one caused us any issues. We do not party all week, we know our limits. We ensure security to the people who come the place, regardless whether they are Sri Lankan or foreign. If a guest has had too much to drink, we provide accommodation or transport. We have trained our staff with that kind of customer care because if we slip up even once, it is difficult to survive in this business. It all depends on the name we have and the confidence our clients have placed on us. If a guest comes in, we give them full security. There is no other secret to it, except giving confidence all our guests.

We ensure a safe environment for them to come in, be free, and have fun without any uncertainty.

We have to do what the young crowd wants, and also the older people because everyone patronizes our properties. We have seen how you work with everyone, and help people. You surf in Hikkaduwa and also Arugambay, one of the very firsts to do so. Today, Arugambay sees the most significant number of surfers. You are doing this genuinely and have all the surfers with you. What can you tell us about this?

I am happy that I can interact with so many young people. Usually young people living in beach areas get involved in various activities that shatter their lives. But as experienced people in the surfing community we can guide and educate them, because there is a good vibe in life when you can laugh with a young crowd, surf and travel around the country. That is a beautiful thing.

I have been surfing for about 20 years. Forming a federation for surfing has been something that we were unable to achieve for a very long time. It was affected by the changes in the political climate. It is only now that we have succeeded in establishing a surf federation in the country. There is a big journey ahead of us. I am happy that I am contributing to the surf federation and surfing. Of course, like many others, I have taken bank loans to expand my business, and my friends ask me how I manage everything. My response is that I do what makes me happy. In recent years, joining the federation has been the happiest period of my life. They are all my friends, and they are a young generation, so we talk and have fun.

No matter what anyone says, what you give to society is what you get back. That is how you earn respect. Respect is not something you can get by force. It is something that is freely given for the way you treat others. We must know to behave appropriately in front of anyone. Another thing is that you should never destroy anyone's dreams. They are just like you and me; they have dreams, and we must keep that in mind when we are interacting with them. You must put in the time, even when it may be hard or difficult to do so.

Surfing is an international sport. How can we promote surfing?

There are about 800 surfers who are experienced, but the pool gets smaller if you consider professionals only. Overall as a surfing community, we have about 4,000 in total. We have hosted three surfing competitions in Sri Lanka, and we received tremendous support from the hotels in Arugambay and Hikkaduwa. We did not receive any help from the Government or Tourism Board. But we have been able to show that surfing is active in Sri Lanka. Surfing is something that should go hand-in-hand with tourism like one unit. The Sports Ministry is the organization in charge of surfing as a sport. But if you look at in terms of drawing visitors to Sri Lanka, surfing has become increasingly popular, where beginners come to learn surfing in Sri Lanka. Individually we offer surfing lessons and surfing tours. Imagine if Sri Lanka Tourism recognizes the potential of this sport, how much can we do?

Volleyball competitions do not generally attract tourist to Sri Lanka, but this sport has been combined with tourism in the country. However, when you take surfing, foreign visitors come for competitions, to practice and also to learn. Professional or experienced surfers who come to practice are the ones who spend the most time in the country, they carry their own boards and do not spend much. In the past few years, we increasingly saw entire families coming to Arugambay, and they were learning to surf. That is how we increase our tourism by identifying potential and opportunities. The person who comes with a surfboard is looking to stay for a month or two.

In Sri Lanka the waves are great, and the water quality is very high. Indonesia also has excellent water quality, but they have big cities, and at night the waste is released to the ocean. In Sri Lanka, the Government controls that, water quality in Hikkaduwa is 80 percent better than in Colombo. In Mirissa it is 100 percent. That is why you can see dolphins in Mirissa. Even in Kalpitiya, dolphins are there because it's far from Colombo and the water quality is excellent. The seawater in Arugambay is absolutely clean.

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Surfing has been included for the first time at the 2020 Olympics. Your thoughts?

Sri Lanka has not been able to reach that stage yet. It has only been one and a half years since we established the Surfing Federation, and we could not qualify for the Olympic games, because there was a delay in receiving the relevant documents from the Sports Ministry and it takes time to provide all the required information. The next International surf competition is the ISA World Surfing Games in Miyazaki Japan in September 2019 and four top Sri Lankan surfers from the National pool (two from Arugambay, one from Weligama and one from Hikkaduwa) will travel to take part in this competition. We already participated in the competition in India, and four surfers from Arugambay were placed second, third, and fourth. We are proud of the achievements made so far, but we have much more to do. The hotels and the community in Arugambay sponsored the team to compete in India. We did not get the support of the Government. It was only after we won and came back that the Government presented a small monetary gift. It is the hotels in Arugambay that helped us to achieve this much. We should do something to promote tourism, for the youth in Arugambay and Hikkaduwa to support those who have helped us during this challenging time. They are always with us.

After you won the Indian competition, many have promised to do various things. But have they fulfilled their promises?

No, the surf federation was kept alive through the hotels, that is why I said that we need to show our gratitude and do something for them. We have to continue with them because the Government has not done anything to support. We may need to attract a few sponsors for our future activities.

The WQS 3,000 has now been confirmed to be held in Arugambay in September

2019. This is a big step for Sri Lankan surfing and tourism, we are very excited about this. Surfing Federation of Sri Lanka will be responsible of all the ground handling for this competition.

Can we hold annual surfing competitions in Sri Lanka?

Yes, we can. The Government has to invest a small amount for the competitions. But they should not expect to reap the benefits. That benefit is for the entire country. At present, even flights arriving in Sri Lanka are expected to give an advantage to the Government. That is not how it should happen, those coming to participate in the surfing competition should be offered opportunities to take any flight without having to pay tax so that they are encouraged to visit Sri Lanka.

We held an international surfing competition during President Mahinda Rajapaksa's time. That is why Australian, as well as world ranking surfers, continue to come to Sri Lanka. The word is spread to their friends and followers on social media, and they become interested in knowing where this country, Sri Lanka is. We are still riding on the publicity we received at that time. We have to continue to have international surfing competitions in Sri Lanka to remain relevant to the world. Then, within four to five years, Sri Lanka would be known worldwide without requiring any marketing or promotions.

As surfing can be done from the South coast to the East coast, there is no particular season for Sri Lanka. This can be promoted. Can you elaborate on this?

Yes, while India is a big country, they only have one season. Our country may be small, but we have two seasons in two coasts. Even when it is summer in Europe, Arugambay is full. We have seen that with our own eyes, especially last year and early this year. Guests usually come to Sri Lanka for the winter. We have the Russian and Israel market coming in big numbers.

If we understand the seasons, and the guests properly, we can develop tourism further. The Tourist Board has to pay better attention to surfing. They should support us and move forward, but at present, we have to move forward while helping them.

We are trying to register all the surfing schools in Sri Lanka and have a WhatsApp group so that we are all in the loop. We want to know how many people come to Sri

Lanka to learn surfing, how many come to rent surfboards and other such information. The surf school will record all the necessary information, and we will do a one-year survey throughout the island, and see how many tourists come for surfing.

We are trying to redirect one percent of the tax that the Government has imposed back to the federation. The Government charges tax on tourist hotels, and the surf schools cater to the hotels. If we want to develop this sector, the Government has to contribute. If they say no, we will then have facts and numbers to show the Government, indicating the number of tourists that we cater to.

With the experience gained from the previous challenges the country has experienced, how can we revive the country again?

We have faced every challenge in the past, but none of them have affected us as much as this recent attack. I am 44-years of age, and I have never seen anything like this before. Even when the LTTE bombed the Bandaranaike International Airport during the civil war, guests continued to come to the island. They didn't hesitate to go even when there were aerial attacks. I have never witnessed the tourism industry deteriorating to this extent. Expatriates living in Hikkaduwa and surrounding areas have returned to their countries. Generally, even if it is not the tourist season, the approximately 80 expatriate owners of the villas and hotel would come for dinner, and there would not be a single free table. Business is low as they too have left. We must do something to encourage visitors to come to Sri Lanka. We should try a new strategy and maybe focus on non-traditional markets. The Government has to lower the price of the air ticket and do something to encourage guests to come back. We can attract more of the Chinese and Indian segments as well.

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The President and the Government need to give confidence to the people. Yes, an attack happened, but they could have taken the right action afterward. Regardless of who is involved, they cannot neglect national security. The perpetrators have to be punished. We have to secure and protect our country for future generations. We

must elect a leader and Government that provides security to the nation. We can develop everything else and expand our business. The only thing we ask is for peace and security. We developed our businesses without government assistance. We can do it again. We could definitely see tourists returning in July and August, but this all depends on the positivity and stability provided by the Government and our leaders.

We have reservations for the months ahead. But tourists who are planning to come later are observing the situation. If things are not resolved, they will go elsewhere. If we proceed along the proper channels, at least by July or August, we would be able to revive the industry. The task is in the hands of the Government. They need to ensure that law and order are maintained and security is guaranteed. There should be no restriction or hesitation in taking legal action on anyone who is found guilty.

Some people do not understand the instability they are causing by creating unrest. They need to realize that the entire economy is affected and at the end of the day, it is the hardworking innocent people who have to suffer. As a country, we have to elect intelligent people to lead.

I have been doing business in Arugambay for about 15 – 20 years. I work with both the Tamil and Muslim communities. I have friends and also staff working with me. Though we may have experienced certain issues, which is normal when doing business, I have never come across extremists. This is only a small group of people. The Government has to take the necessary action to curtail them and prevent anything happening in the future. The Police and Security Forces have done a remarkable work to stabilize and secure the country. We are a country who finished a 30-year conflict. We can emerge from this as well. While those who carried out these deadly attacks wanted to destroy peace and harmony between communities, it has actually resulted in people coming together. They have forgotten past hostilities, all communities have united after this tragedy, and we must continue to move forward as a united country.

What is essential is that people are given the correct information. The media too, should be conscious of that. They should not create fear. Credible information has to be provided so that we can make decisions.

We Have To Continue With Determination, And Then Definitely We Will Be Able To Bring The Vibe Back.

How can we bring back the vibe?

During the last ten years, life was like a carnival. We played some music on the beach from the morning. That was how we did business. We are in the tourism industry, and it has to be like that. But the politicians cannot do that. They have been elected by the people to serve the country. They have to strengthen national security, provide water, electricity, infrastructure, and have a policy direction. But what is happening is that they are enjoying themselves more than us.

The Mambo's parties are well known, and tourists would organize their travel accordingly. For example, those in Ella or Nuwara Eliya would come to Arugambay in time for the party. It is the same as the party in Hikkaduwa. In this way, we have to create events and activities to interest foreign visitors to travel in Sri Lanka. It will take some effort, but we have to do that.

That's why hotels, travel agents, everyone in the industry must come together, make arrangements while ensuring our safety to market the area by organizing events. The name Arugambay must be familiar with travelers. We can organize surf competitions, beach volleyball, live music at sunset on the beach, there is so much we can do. Not as a business, but an open invitation, where whoever would like to come and perform, we will provide them the facilities to play. We have to attract artists and get them to go to Arugambay. From the side of the authorities, they need to support the industry without imposing regulations that impede the tourism sector. We have to encourage Sri Lankans and expatriates living here to travel around the country. Tourists love to visit Sri Lanka even more than Bali or Thailand because of our people warm and welcoming.

We have hospitality in us. Sri Lankans when you meet them would smile and greet you. Guests expect to come here and spend a beautiful vacation with their friends and family. Our tourism maintains quality. We have to continue with determination, and then definitely we will be able to bring the vibe back.