

Dare To Be Different



Vasantha Perera, Chairman/Managing Director of Sunhill Group dares to be different. He believes that hard work and practical experience is essential to develop a business. Having entered the hotel and entertainment industry in 1992, he is the only person to consistently engage in the nightlife entertainment sector in Sri Lanka. He continues to overcome challenges and journey ahead while providing interesting insights on the tourism sector that needs to be developed to reach a higher level.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe. **Assisted by** Keshini de Silva **Photography** Mahesh Bandara and Menaka Aravinda

Sunhill is 25 years, can you tell us about how you started?

I started this business in 1988. After I completed my Ordinary Level examination I received a scholarship to travel to Japan to study at a hotel school and learn Japanese. I decided to take this opportunity. With the experience I gained I opened my first property, a two star 21 room hotel in Nuwara Eliya under the name Sunhill on January 16, 1992. Thus we are 25 years.

You have properties in Kandy, Mount Lavinia and Colombo. What was the thinking behind this?

Well when visitors go on tours, if they start from Nuwara Eliya, they will next travel to Kandy. In addition, there are those who visit Colombo to enjoy the nightlife, as such there is a need for hotels to cater to them as well. Sunhill Hotel, Katunayake is a transit hotel for travellers coming to the airport.

To Be On Par Internationally, It Is Essential To Provide Nightlife And Entertainment For Visitors To The Country.

All our hotels have their very own night club. In the Colpetty area in Colombo, we have three night clubs which have Sri Lankan, Indian and Thai themes. I was the first to start such entertainment centres in Sri Lanka.

Why did you think of entering the hotel and entertainment sector?

In any country, if you do not provide some form of entertainment, guests will not stay at that hotel. Therefore, I decided to venture into entertainment. I came to Colombo 16 years ago and established entertainment clubs. I have been travelling across the world since the age of 13 and especially during my years in Japan I received exposure on how night clubs operate.

Before I ventured into this industry my family too owned hotels, so it was also in my background. To be on par internationally, it is essential to provide nightlife and entertainment for visitors to the country.

Can you tell us about the state of the business landscape in the sectors that you are involved in?

There are 16 companies in our group including hospitality and property development. In terms of property development, we purchase land and after a lapse of a few years once the price has appreciated, we sell the lands. In addition, we are involved in constructing apartments and housing schemes, mainly focusing on the Colombo district.

I started my first car sale in Nuwara Eliya in 1994, then in Kandy. Currently I target the high-end luxury car market.

The land market is doing well, however the vehicle industry is facing a few challenges due to the fluctuations in taxes.

Tourism in Sri Lanka is at a sub-optimal level. We cannot be satisfied with the progress in this sector. The facilities and security available for tourists could be further improved.

The beaches in Sri Lanka are amongst the top beaches in the world. However, the Government has forgotten these destinations in their investment agenda. Even when foreign investors come to Sri Lanka, they have to go through a time consuming and exhausting process.

Tourists need 24-hour entertainment centres. As a tourism country, we are too restrictive, we should become more like Dubai, Singapore and Bangkok where they have been able to develop a vibrant tourism industry while respecting and maintaining their cultural and religious values.

Tourism In Sri Lanka Can Reach Great Heights Within The Next Three Years, If The Government And Hospitality Sector Work Together.

The Sri Lankan experience for a visitor begins at the airport, therefore infrastructure development should begin there. Some visitors have travelled for over 12 hours and once they arrive in Sri Lanka they need to spend an additional hour or so to leave the Katunayake Airport. The number of immigration counters should be increased to ensure a quick and efficient process. Furthermore, even for an emergency, tourists are not aware about the tourist police in the country. Every visitor should be provided with information that includes emergency contact details. There should be a tourist hotline.

Another important area is that we need to have an authorised taxi service that can provide the transport requirements of visitors to the country. Sri Lanka Tourism should take the initiative to work with five star hotels and provide affordable and hassle-free cab services. In Singapore or Dubai, the drivers are responsible for every guest. The driver's photo and personal details are displayed for the guest's reference. The taxi service in Sri Lanka should be regulated like in these countries.

We need to have 24-hour night clubs and taxi services. There was a law earlier to close at midnight, but establishments such as ours could pay a nominal fee and stay open past that time. Now it is 10,000 rupees per hour, which is very difficult to afford. We also pay double the rate for staff who work the late hour shifts. In countries such as Singapore you can have as much fun as you want at the establishment, however you cannot behave in a violent and indecent way on the roads or at public places. That is when authorities enforce the law.

We are not sure who we can speak to about these issues. We develop our

businesses with our own strength.

In Sri Lanka, in a matter of hours one can travel to the cold climes, ancient citadels and the beaches. The sun shines throughout the year. To say that attracting tourism to Sri Lanka is a difficult task is ridiculous because we have many resources in the country. Tourism in Sri Lanka can reach great heights within the next three years, if the Government and hospitality sector work together.

Despite the end of the war, nightlife in Colombo did not pick us as expected. Could you elaborate on what can be done?

After the war ended in 2009, there was a short boom in the industry. However, it is difficult to operate a nightlife establishment when the sector is over-regulated. We have to close at midnight, then guests and staff are harassed by the authorities, which make it very challenging. Staff are arrested and clubs are sealed for very unfair reasons. These are guests who spend a lot of money and they are not doing anything wrong. In any other country, they would say that such establishments can remain open till 4am. Whatever the closing time, a guest cannot be asked to leave until they have finished consuming what they have paid for.

In Sri Lanka, They Impose Many Rules For The Sake Of Culture. Sri Lanka Has To Decide How It Wants To Position Itself As A Destination.

If the Government wants to close tourism operations at midnight, then they should shut down the entire tourism industry. A couple, for example, would have dinner, go out for a cocktail and then party from around 11pm. Although in Sri Lanka married couples rarely go clubbing, when they go overseas, they will leave the children with a babysitter and the couple will enjoy themselves. But in Sri Lanka there is no entertainment at night. Take Dubai for example, it is a Muslim country but they have ensured that the tourism industry prospers, while maintain their cultural and religious values. If you want to establish a tourism industry, there are certain facilities that need to be provided. However, on the other hand, tourism is the industry that will bring in foreign exchange and create jobs for the youth. In Sri Lanka, they impose many rules for the sake of culture. Sri Lanka has to decide how it wants to position itself as a tourist destination. Currently, we are attracting low

spenders because we are not providing the facilities for a high-end market. Countries such as Maldives and Dubai capture the higher-end tourists who have a large spending power. For them spending 5000 USD for 14 days is nothing. In the world, they are among the most religious and strict countries, however they allow their tourism industry to flourish. Sri Lanka too can do this.

Beaches are not only available in Sri Lanka. If tourists are not able to enjoy their freedom, then they will obviously opt to visit another country. We must plan to ensure a boom in the tourism industry. In my view this is a great failure.

What are your plans for the future?

If permission is granted, I have a dream to bring Sri Lanka's nightlife to the standards similar to those of Singapore and Dubai. We are venturing into the aviation industry and will be launching our company next year. We have many other housing projects in the pipeline. We have several properties near scenic locations such as beaches and lakes, therefore we hope to develop these lands in line with our tourism initiatives.

Who is Vasantha Perera?

I am a person who is practical based and not theory-based. As I said, I completed my Ordinary Levels and went to Japan. Therefore, I do not have a business degree. I believe that in Sri Lanka there is only a small percentage of entrepreneurs who have, sans a family business legacy, operated a company for over 25 years. I am a 45-year-old who owns a business that has been in operation for 25 years, this defines who I am.

How do you manage your staff and retain them?

Work is work and I maintain strict discipline. Staff have to be efficient and dedicated in what they do. However, during all other times we are together, from the minor staff to the executive, we all sit at one table and have our meals. We have meetings together. We have a very friendly atmosphere, however within this atmosphere, there is mutual respect for each role. We cater to all the needs of our staff and provide all medical facilities to them. In return, our staff do not calculate hours, whether they work eight hours or 16 hours, they ensure a dedicated service.

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Every one at the executive level in my company are those who have been with me from the beginning and supported me in developing my business to this level. You will not find any relatives within these ranks. For the first time, my son took over the delivery arm of the group as deputy chairman in November 2016. However, before he was given this position, he too, just like me, worked at the very primary level of the hospitality industry at a five-star hotel in Colombo. It is after this experience that I appointed him to this position.

What is your message to up and coming entrepreneurs?

My theories in business and life are very different. My advice to them is they need to first have the practical experience. They must work from morning till evening and be engaged in every aspect of the business. They must work hand in hand with their employees. In addition, you must create an atmosphere where your staff can come to you with any problem. That is the environment you must create to ensure the development of your business.



