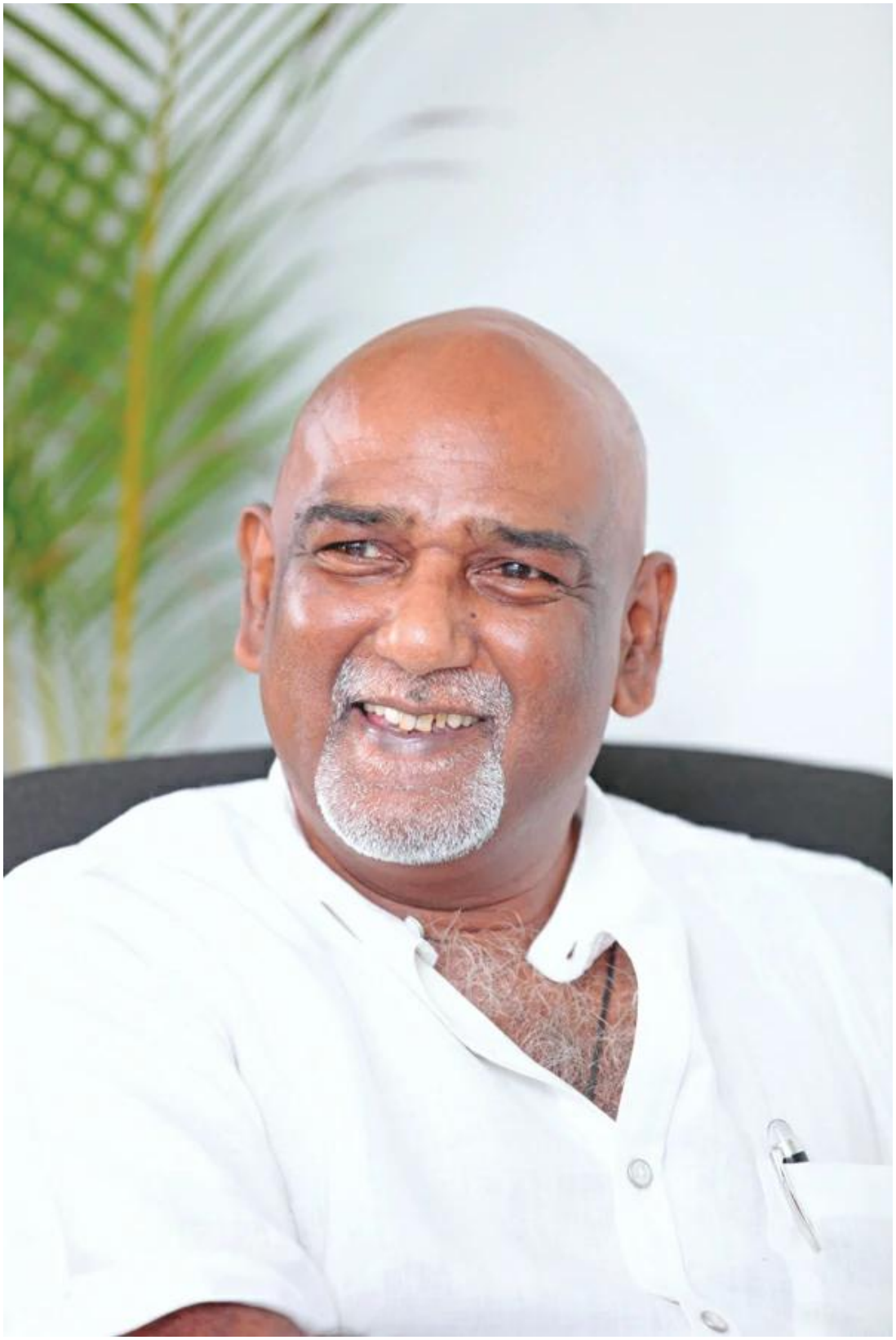
ISA: Specialist Company



Successfully merging corporate success with social responsibility, Tima Lazarus, CEO of Investor Services Asia (ISA) and Travel Development Lanka, believes that tourism must be meaningful both to the tourists as well as to the places and people they visit. Having left Sri Lanka 37 years ago, he returned in 2003 to establish these organisations, which today spearhead several exciting projects that will play an indelible part in the progress of the nation.

By Ayesha Inoon

ISA was first established by Lazarus 14 years ago in Lyon, France to assist French investors to invest in Sri Lanka and South India. “At the moment, ISA along with its partners caters to 100 to 150 French tourists each week to Sri Lanka,” he says, “most of whom are corporate clients.” In a groundbreaking move, a partner, Antipodes Voyages in France has signed an agreement with SriLankan Airlines to bring down 5500 tourists to Sri Lanka during the 2010/2011 seasons – a huge risk, he points out, so soon in the aftermath of the war, but however one that he feels will be – and is even now being – justified.

Among these tourists, interestingly, are a few groups of visually impaired persons from the French organisation, UNADEV. “This is a huge thing for us,” says Lazarus enthusiastically, explaining that to cater to their very specialised needs took immense thought and preparation. For instance, they made sure that all the menu sheets, both onboard and at the hotels in which they would be staying, were available in Braille, as well as leaflets with information about Sri Lanka. “These people were also accompanied by their own exceptionally qualified guides. As a matter of fact, all of us involved in Sri Lanka, were inspired and honoured by their presence.”

“We are learning and improving, as we go along – for example, after one young man had an epileptic fit on a bus, we now make sure that all our buses are equipped with foldable stretchers, wheelchairs and CDMA telephones,” Lazarus

explained.

The first group of visually impaired tourists arrived in January, this year, and greatly enjoyed their stay. “We arranged a tour of a rainforest for them, where they could hear the birds and smell the fresh flowers,” he says, adding that due to this venture they now also work closely with the Blind Council of Sri Lanka, and have organised a chess tournament in June, where 60 visually challenged persons are expected to participate.

Every one of his clients participate in planting a special tree in the rainforest in the Baddegama area. “We work very closely with Rainforest Rescue International,” he says, adding that at the end of their tour each person is given a certificate to take with them when they leave the country. “They then have a sense of fulfilment in having planted a tree in this country.”

“We’re also trying to showcase the diverse riches of this country – from November this year, all the tour buses will take a detour in Kurunegala to visit a ten acre organic farm where the to urists can have a cup of tea or thambili, and get a look at the richness of fruit and vegetable species of Sri Lanka,” said Lazarus.

One group of tourists wished to help schools in the hill country – therefore visits to these schools were arranged, and thereafter they donated Roneo machines to print examination papers as well as stationery items. Another group whose participants specialised in reading glasses, ventured to donate glasses to elderly persons in the Beruwala area.

This, he explains, is not tourism in the mere sense of arriving, looking at a beach or artifact, and leaving – it is tourism in the sense of making a difference, of leaving your mark.

Another one of ISA’s pilot projects, in partnership with Almayuda Foundation involves building and renovating toilets for 19 schools in the Kolonnawa district. These schools are also being given three recycling bins each, for children to discard their papers, bottles and plastics, which would then be collected by a wholesaler

once a week. “Along with Rainforest Rescue International, space has been made in the school compounds to grow herbs and plants, as well as two trees. We hope to expand this project to include the nine provinces, starting with the cultural triangle and the Kandy district – then, we can take tourists there to show them some of the programmes, which are rather unique to Sri Lanka.”

“We are very conscious of the need to constantly improve our services, and also that we in the private sector have to actively participate, in the re-construction of this Island without expecting the Government to babysit us.”

He explains that while ISA and Travel Development promote three areas – Sri Lanka, South India and Maldives, they want to promote Sri Lanka as the hub and ensure that the money stays here. “For instance, they will use SriLankan Airlines to travel from here to Male, Chennai or Trivandrum – half the cost of the tour is in the airline ticket.”

“We would like to be known as a specialist company,” he says, “and show people that we are giving them something new. Whether they are visually or otherwise disadvantaged, or school children interested in educational travel, we will be able to arrange for them to visit Sri Lanka.” To this effect, the company works with partners such as SriLankan Airlines, Ceylon Tours and Rainforest Rescue International for programmes linked to the environment and recycling. “Our desire is to get the best of Sri Lanka – the best of these partners and their specialities.”

In the following year – October 2011-2012 ISA and Travel Development Lanka plan to receive more visitors with special needs to Sri Lanka and are in negotiations with various organisations in Southern Europe. At the same time they are hoping to branch out into Educational Tourism, for High Schools, negotiating with schools, the airline and hotels to see how this can be facilitated.

“In order to welcome these different groups of tourists, Sri Lanka must be ready and be humble enough to learn and upgrade facilities constantly,” he muses, pointing out that this, as in anything else, must be a team effort. The success thus far, of his ventures, Lazarus attributes to the combined efforts and support of a range of people, from France and Sri Lanka, Embassies in Paris and Colombo, to the staff at

SriLankan Airlines both in France and in Sri Lanka and numerous partners in the private, and public sectors. “There are no superstars or prima donnas involved in this game,” he added. From the time a French tourist sets foot into a SriLankan aircraft in Paris and till he gets off the flight after his or her visit to our Island, he is being looked after by many Sri Lankans, either in an airport, plane, bus, hotel, restaurant, tuk tuk, train or a beach. Success or failure would depend on many Sri Lankans involved in their different services – from passport control, customs, guides, drivers, waiters and receptionists.

A very close friend, business associate and co-founder of the Franco-Sri Lankan Business Council in Lyon and passionate racing car driver, Jean Marc Menahem, has volunteered to ‘Race for Sri Lanka’ in the 24 Hour Le Mans races, the world’s oldest sports car race in endurance racing, held annually near the town of Le Mans, France. His Ferrari 430 GT2 will carry the words ‘Racing for Sri Lanka’ – a promotion that would usually cost millions of Rupees. “This guy and his wife Isabelle, have been great friends to our country for so many years promoting us, during some of our darkest periods.” Last year Jean Marc promoted Sri Lanka in the Formula 3 series in Spain and France.

Asked why social involvement is important, “for me, CSR is linked to my own life, not a recent fashion,” he says, reiterating his belief that in whatever we do we have a responsibility to our neighbours, towards people who are less privileged than ourselves, and most importantly to the next generation. “This is where my heart is. I’ve had wonderful opportunities and I would like to pass on some of this to the next generation.”

Change, he points out, is not by an individual, but a collective responsibility. “In the private sector, whether it’s tourism or any other aspect, while we have to make sure that our fellow employees, shareholders and companies, make money and are successful, we also have a social responsibility – this responsibility is not just that of the politicians, it is all of our responsibilities.”

“There was a time in this country,” he reflects, “when trees flourished, life was less complex, boundaries were blurred and one man was as good as the other. Now is the time, to bring back those simple joys and the beauty of this land before it was

touched by tragedy, to rethink our values and to rediscover our essence.”