

# Opening The Country

Posted on



Udayanga Weeratunga, former Ambassador of Sri Lanka to Russia.

Udayanga Weeratunga, former Ambassador of Sri Lanka to Russia was able to achieve the unimaginable when he implemented a special project to revive the tourism industry in Sri Lanka. It showed that even during these challenging times it is possible to engage in

tourism with a clear and practical plan. Udayanga Weeratunga took the risk to do something that would benefit the country. He utilized the experience, connections and relationships that he had formed over the years especially in Russia, Ukraine and other CIS countries to formulate a plan that none thought was possible. There were many challenges but he persevered through them all. Through his initiative, Sri Lanka was yet again opened to the world.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe.

Photography Menaka Aravinda.

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### **Who is Udayanga Weeratunga?**

I was born in Matara and I started my education at the Medamulana Maha Vidyalaya. Mahinda Rajapaksa, who was the youngest MP at that time, decided to send me to Nalanda College in Colombo and I entered the school in 1972 to Grade 3. I continued my studies at Nalanda College, and I left in 1983 upon completion. Thereafter, I worked at the Survey Department for about seven months, where I was selected to the Colombo University to study Physical Science, and at the same time I was selected to work in Diyatalawa as a Surveyor. But, more than anything my dream was to go to the Soviet Union. During the same year, I received the opportunity to follow my studies at the university and to also join the Soviet-Sri Lanka Friendship Society through which I traveled to Moscow on August 22, 1985. At that time, Russia was part of the Soviet Union (USSR), and after I arrived in Moscow, the students were separated according to the region they were going to attend university. I was assigned to Kiev, which today is the capital of Ukraine. During the first year we studied the Russian language, and thereafter we were assigned the university according to the specialty we were to study. Once I learnt the language, I pursued my studies to become a mechanical engineer at the Light Industries University in Kiev.

I completed both my BSc and MSc from 1986 to 1993. It was during this time that the USSR was dissolved into independent nations. The previous regions of USSR started to gain independence and become individual countries. Ukraine too gained Independence in 1991-92. During that time an opportunity arose to engage in trade because up until then the USSR did not trade with other countries. During the last few days of the Union, they gave the opportunity for small companies known as cooperatives to engage in business. As foreign nationals we received the opportunity to engage in trade, which is something that no one else would ever get again. Russians were not able to travel overseas and there were

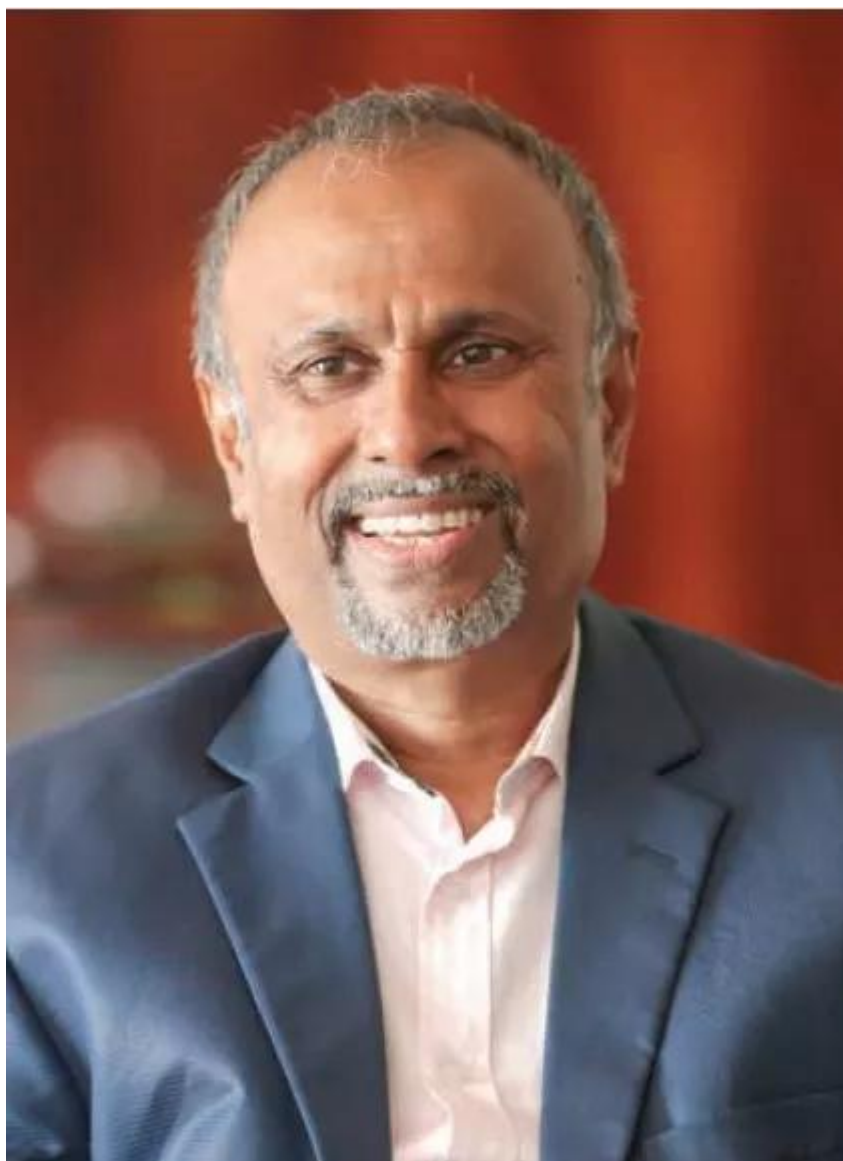
restrictions on bringing technology such as computers into the country. We intervened and we were able to trade.

Once I completed my studies I applied for my permanent residency and thereafter, I stayed in Kiev and engaged in my businesses. My first business was importing computers and electronics. Thereafter I entered the tourism industry in 1996, and was also involved in Ceylon Tea and construction. To this day I have my own tea brand, Randy Tea, in Ukraine. With those businesses I decided to reside in Kiev. I was able to build a network and build relationships with many people including politicians and Presidents.

Before the dissolution of the Soviet Union there was only one Sri Lankan Embassy, which was based in Moscow. The embassy was established in 1957 and the first Ambassador was Gunapala Piyasena Malalasekera. Once the USSR dissolved into individual countries, Sri Lanka did not have the capacity or the ability to establish embassies in every single country. Therefore, Honorary Consuls were appointed to most of the countries. Hon Lakshman Kadiragamar as the then Foreign Minister appointed me as the Honorary Consul for Ukraine in 1999, during President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga's time. However, Ukraine did not finalize my appointment saying that I had to obtain citizenship of Ukraine because according to the agreement we had signed with them the Honorary Consul should be a national of the country, and it was the same in Sri Lanka as well. I always maintained my permanent residency but never applied for citizenship. Therefore, though they did not legally appoint me to the post, I worked as the Honorary Consul.

That is the reason I was involved with the military. From 1993, the Sri Lankan Army, Navy and Air Force visited Ukraine. After the dissolution of the USSR, independent nations started engaging in their own military contracts. However, they did not have the experience or knowledge in negotiating agreements. During the USSR era everything was controlled by Moscow. After the breakup the responsibility was assigned to Kiev but as they lacked the experience, we were able to secure military contracts at a reduced price. The first purchase by Sri Lanka from Kiev was the AN 32 for the Air Force. Thereafter a large quantity of RPN and tanks were purchased from Ukraine. Though Sri Lanka also looked at purchasing vessels for the Navy, it was not successful. During this period many officers of the Army visited Ukraine and their main issue was the language. Ukrainians do not speak English. Therefore, I used to assist the Sri Lankan military in these matters.

It was for this reason that I was appointed as the Honorary Consul and I had to represent the country officially at times as well. Though I provided my assistance to the military, I was never an intermediate or part of the negotiation process or the agreements that were made for the purchase of military equipment.



When you take the role of the translator, he can either bring both parties together or ensure that both parties never get together. At that time, the Sri Lankan delegation would come with their own mindset and the Ukraine team would have their own thinking. It is the translator that brings both parties together. I have the ability to understand both sides and win their trust. I would follow the middle path to solve a problem. Sri Lanka purchased eight AN 32 planes, and it was a Singaporean company that was the intermediary. At that time the Antonov factory was not doing well, this was the situation in the entire former USSR. The master plan at that time was for Russia to benefit and if the USSR dissolved then the individual countries would be at a disadvantage. The various parts of the plane were manufactured in different areas and the sales was done by another. Therefore, when the

USSR split this whole mechanism was disabled. The split was not a planned one. Therefore, the industries faced a very difficult situation. Thus, the Antonov factory had lost its business and the workers did not have any work. The Antonov factory itself is like a village with buses running through. It is that big and there is a runway within the factory. To this date the largest plane has been produced by the Antonov factory, known as Antonov An-225 Mriya. It was built in the 1980s to carry the space shuttle with six turbofan engines and is the heaviest aircraft ever built, with a maximum takeoff weight of 640 tonnes.

When Sri Lanka placed the order, the workers were really happy and they loved us because they finally had work and was receiving a salary with old arrears. The people used to share their meals with us thinking that it was because of us that they were receiving a salary. We were merely coordinating the process. Towards the latter part of the project a few problems arose with customs where Sri Lankans had over purchased. The Singapore company could not sort it out, neither could the Antonov factory. Sri Lanka was waiting for the planes. I was able to sort it out in half an hour and the two flights were able to proceed to Sri Lanka.

Another interesting example is that just before the Tsunami there were two overhauled flights carrying Air Force equipment. It was the responsibility of the Sri Lankan Embassy in Moscow to obtain the approval for the flight route from the various countries. From Russia they would fly to Baku in Azerbaijan and thereafter via Pakistan to Sri Lanka. Before the flight left Kiev, I was informed that we did not have permission to fly over Azerbaijan. I spoke to the Commander and said to stay another day and to start traveling once permission was received. They assured me that everything was in order. The two flights left and as they neared Azerbaijan they were issued a warning saying to not enter the airspace as permission had not been granted. They could not journey back to Ukraine because they did not have enough fuel, so they landed in Rostov, Russia. When they were getting ready to leave Rostov when the Russian military came to check, even though it was a civil flight, it was registered as an Air Force plane as such it was considered as defense related and had to obtain special permission to fly over Russia. I was not the Sri Lankan Ambassador at that time and our Embassy did not know that such permission had to be obtained. The Ambassador was also not involved in this issue at that time but I was able to discuss with the Russian officials over two days and ensure that the two planes were released without any issues. These are real incidents. It is because I was able to build relationships and able to engage in discussions and get things done that I was later appointed as the Ambassador to Russia. I was appointed as the Ambassador to Russia during President Mahinda Rajapaksa's time, by Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera.

It is because of this reason too that I had to face many challenges during the previous Government. I was never an intermediary but I always participated in the meetings and

discussions. Whenever there is a delegation, I am the first to meet them. I had good relationships with the former Presidents of Ukraine. Even today I can speak to them. Since I had these connections, the Government should use them for the betterment of the country.

### **How did you enter the tourism sector?**

I started Ceylon Tour, Ukraine Branch for tourism. The first charter flight from Ukraine to Sri Lanka was arranged by me in 1998. During that time, it was not even heard of Ukraine tourists coming to Sri Lanka. Similar to the risk that I took recently, even in the past I took the risk and organized a charter flight to bring tourists to Sri Lanka. Therefore, I have experience in working with Ukraine Airlines.

When I think back even I am surprised at the risks I have taken. It was an old plane but it was completely overhauled, it was a flight known as IL-18. It was similar to the plane that was used by a former USSR President to fly to the US. The plane was completely repaired, and the tourists were brought in that plane. According to the number of passengers we would have had to transit in two locations. However, in the center there was a place called Bandar Abbas in Iran. It was a military airport and the location of the main base of the Iranian Navy, but I had connections with them. If the flight stopped there, we would be able to reach Sri Lanka with only one transit. It was only when we reached the airport did the passengers know that we were stopping at Bandar Abbas. They were scared but we provided them with unlimited beverages and they forgot everything. I was also on the flight but the passengers did not know that I was the organizer of the trip. We arrived in Sri Lanka. Later on, Sri Lanka purchased the plane to be used for the Jaffna flights by Expo Air. This is how I started my business in the tourism sector.

I have the knowledge and also a passion for this industry. I engaged in my business continuously until 2004, thereafter I was not able to focus on the tourism business as much but gave priority to the tea business.

### **Can you tell us about your tenure as the Sri Lankan Ambassador to Russia?**

Following my appointment as the Ambassador to Russia, I moved to Moscow in 2006. Thereafter, I was not able to engage in either my tourism or tea business. But I engaged in tourism promotion activities because I am well-versed in the subject and have the passion for the industry. I was the Ambassador for Russia and another seven countries; Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Armenia, Moldova and Georgia. When there were political issues between Russia and Ukraine, it is not allowed for both countries to be covered by the same Ambassador, but I am the only exception. Therefore, the present Ambassador is

overlooking only four countries, but I was in charge of eight countries. There were no political tensions between Sri Lanka and these countries, and they had very strong friendships. During those days we needed Russia's help to face the challenges from the UN in Geneva, and the Security Council in New York. On all these instances Russia stood by Sri Lanka.

I looked at ways in which we could strengthen economic ties between Sri Lanka and these countries. Sri Lanka was very strong in the tea industry and Russia continuously purchases about 25 percent of Ceylon Tea. Russia is one of our main markets. However, when I looked at the number of tourists that visited Sri Lanka from Russia and the former USSR, it was less than 4,400 tourists. During my tenure as Ambassador, I increased the number by 28 times to 120,000. Previously we did not have flights from Moscow to Colombo. Using my own abilities, I was able to launch SriLankan Airlines to fly from Colombo to Moscow therefore, making history. At the same time, we had not ever thought about flights from Kiev to Colombo. Only about 450 visitors had arrived from Ukraine, and this could be possibly for defense purposes. I focused on developing the tourism sector, I did not receive any support from Sri Lanka Tourism initially.

The main issue was the language. Russian travel agencies did not have information on Sri Lanka in the Russian language. Usually, the English brochures are given but the staff cannot understand that. They would only look at the photographs. There might have been a leaflet distributed by the Embassy but there was no comprehensive guidebook on Sri Lanka in Russian. During my tenure, we published eight books in Russian. We have very few Sri Lankan guides who can speak Russian. And those that we have now mostly are those who have studied medicine. As such they have a limited vocabulary and are unable to describe history and culture in Russian. For example, if they go to Sigiriya, the guide would not be able to describe the history because they have studied medicine, they do not have the required words in their vocabulary. They have not learnt the complete language. But during the time of Soviet Russia there were people who had studied history, geography and other such subjects.

We have a Buddhist priest by the name of Ven Dr Pallekande Rathanasara Thero. I brought him to Russia and we did a recording with embassy staff, Anna Korolkova, that could be used as an audio guide for tourists. We corrected all the information and recorded the audio and produced two CDs that covered 56 historical sites. Therefore, even today any Russian speaking person can visit these locations with the audio guide. I distributed the CDs to all the guides and tourist drivers in Sri Lanka. They do not have to know Russian, because the CD has it in Sinhala as well. When they reach a destination, they need to simply switch on the audio. If we focus only on the beach and bring tourists to Sri Lanka, they can visit

countries that are closer such as Turkey or Egypt for that experience. If we show them our history and culture, then we would have repeat visitors.

In this manner, we promoted the destinations and we gradually increased the number of tourists to Sri Lanka. We made the CD and also printed the book, which had 312 pages and became very popular among travel agencies. The book included the historical and tourist sites, and also the available hotels nearby. I do not think a similar book has been produced since then. We first did the book in Russian and later in English. Such work had not been done previously. We made the CD, tourism guide books and a book about President Mahinda Rajapaksa, and thereafter I also made a video documentary of the same CD, which is four and a half hours long. To this date, my video is available on YouTube.

In Russia, it is the tour operators that formulate the package for the tourists. This includes the ticket, tour and other expenses. It is the travel agent who sells these packages and there are many travel agents in Russia. The travel agent needs only the license and the tour operators had to keep a USD one million as guarantee during that time. The travel agent sells the package and receives a certain percentage for the sale. But if we do not educate the travel agent about our country, the country would not be promoted by them. The travel agent has packages from various countries, and it is only when he knows about a particular country that he would promote that to the traveler. Therefore, I held seminars for the travel agents. We used to have about two seminars a month and we would invite about 50-100 travel agents to my residence at the Embassy. We would invite them for lunch and thereafter have a seminar for about an hour. They like to attend these functions because it was at the embassy. Thereafter we focused on cities that had more than one million inhabitants. We visited 25 cities in 85 days. We took a cultural troupe as well and did promotions in those cities. Furthermore, in 2011, I arranged for SriLankan Airlines to fly to Moscow, which was a first for the airline. Though Aeroflot had been flying between the countries since 1960, SriLankan Airlines had never flown to Moscow. It is through all these initiatives that I was able to promote tourism to Russia and the other countries.

**You achieved the unthinkable by bringing tourists during the current environment. How was this achieved?**

I had formed a good relationship and trust with the tourism industry during my tenure of eight years as Ambassador. It was these connections that I utilized during this time as well. I am able to speak to the largest tour operators because of the relationship that I have built with them. It is not as a business but through personal contacts that I had formed during the time we did promotions, tours, and by helping them.



I discussed with Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa and explained to him that I have all these connections and that we should use them to re-establish tourism in Sri Lanka. I read an article about Antalya in Turkey, which is a beachside resort town similar to Bentota in Sri Lanka. While the country was on lockdown about one million tourists had arrived in Antalya during the period of August 1-19, 2020. According to the article from the total about 299,967 tourists had been from Ukraine, then around 281,398 had been Russian, and thereafter 221,151 from Germany and there were also tourists from Belorussia and Kazakhstan. When I read this article, I realized that about 60 percent of tourists had come from countries where I had worked as the Ambassador. Furthermore, the main attraction in Antalya is the beach and they have many hotels as well. I wondered why we could not replicate this in Sri Lanka. I went to see hotels, I started from Tangalle and I looked at beach areas, which could be blocked so that we could bring tourists to those hotels. Then I thought we could bring the tourists via Mattala Airport because regular flights were not arriving to the airport and again, we could block the area. Thereafter I looked at the flights that could come from Ukraine and I explained the project to the Prime Minister.

Firstly, on September 9th, 2020, I wrote an official letter to the Prime Minister regarding my project to restart Sri Lankan tourism then, on September 16th, the Cabinet Paper on the project was submitted to the Cabinet by the Prime Minister and the Finance Minister together with the Tourism Minister. On September 19th we had to provide some additional information. And, it was on September 28th that the Prime Minister received approval to bring 44,000 tourists from Russia and CIS countries in 159 flights. Thereafter, the second COVID-19 wave hit Sri Lanka. The project was halted and thereafter, the President appointed a high-powered working group for Strategic Management of Tourism Industry Revival in Sri Lanka, which is headed by the former Minister Basil Rajapaksa as the Chairman. But the project was not initiated at that time since Sri Lanka was experiencing the second wave. Thereafter, it was only on December 9th, 2020 that the committee met again. That is when I presented this proposal again and said that we should go ahead with the project. This crucial decision to reopen the airport was made by the chairman of the committee, Basil Rajapaksa, to facilitate the possible flights that could arrive in Sri Lanka within a month, which involved trusting me and challenging me to bring tourists. It was on December 9th that we got partial permission to commence the project. I was able to bring the first flight on December 28th, and thereafter the flights started to come in as planned. At the moment, 13 flights have arrived, and 1,926 tourists were brought to Sri Lanka.

My concept was to bring tourist groups to larger hotels where there is more space and the number of rooms are higher. We wanted to form a tourist bubble of all the hotels that are located in one stretch. That is why I selected Bentota beach, which was coincidentally the first

beach resort designated by President J R Jayewardene for tourists only. We selected five hotels with a total of 1,800 rooms. I am not saying that my thinking is correct, but from the experience and knowledge I have gained over the years, I can say that this is the way to encourage tourism to Sri Lanka.



There was an airline by the name of Aerosvit Airlines in Ukraine, and it later became part of Ukraine International Airline. I was able to bring that airline to Sri Lanka. They never thought of coming to Sri Lanka because they did not know much about the country. I arranged everything for them and they started flying to Sri Lanka. At that time, they gave me a Gold Card and later, I found out that I could travel to anywhere in the world free of charge where I had to only pay the airport tax. When I later met the President of the Airline again, I asked him why he gave me such a card. He said it was the first time that an official had worked hard, arranged everything and given them a business, and that is why he had given the card to me, which was also used by their directors. What I am trying to say is how much they appreciated what I had done for them. Therefore, when I have fostered such a relationship, it is not difficult for me to speak to them and ask them to help us and arrange a

flight to bring tourists to Sri Lanka. The second flight that came to Sri Lanka recently was from UIA, but they were the first airline to agree to this project. They agreed because they trusted me. Thereafter, once the airlines agreed it was the tour operators that needed to sell the tickets. I approached three of the largest tour operators, one tour operator, TPG, is the one I worked with in 1998 to bring the first charter flight to Sri Lanka. Therefore, they trusted me. Then the other two tour operators had also been part of the promotions that we had conducted through the embassy. It is through the connections that I had made in the past that I was able to organize and arrange the tourist groups to Sri Lanka even during this COVID-19 period because we need to restart the tourism industry.

I am very disappointed to say that Sri Lanka does not know the value of the initiative we made. They do not understand how difficult it is to bring tourists to a country at this time.

I had to face a lot of criticism, even from our own Government. But I said I made a promise to the Prime Minister and I will somehow make this a success. The perception of the Sri Lankans also changed gradually with the arrival of the tourists. If Sri Lankans do not accept the arrival of tourists then we cannot make the tourism industry a success. When we first landed in Mattala, all the small shop owners and the people were thrilled to see the tourist buses. Even in other areas people were becoming open to the arrival of tourists. We visited Sigiriya, Polonnaruwa, Kandy, Yala, Anuradhapura and Dambulla. Unfortunately, it is still prohibited for tourists to visit Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage.

The Sri Lanka Army helped us greatly but they cannot do so for everyone. This was a pilot project that we did to reopen tourism in Sri Lanka.

The media has a great responsibility to ensure that they do not instigate people. An entire image was created in Sri Lanka about the arrival of the tourists to such an extent that in Polonnaruwa there was not a single place to buy a mask, then in Pinnawala none of the souvenir shops were open. I was worried that a situation would be created when the tourists were traveling. Sri Lankans were scared because they thought that they would be quarantined for 14-days if they associated with the tourists. A very negative image was created. But the damage is not for me, but to the country and our tourism industry. However, with the most recent arrivals it was apparent that the Sri Lankan people too are gradually becoming open and welcoming the tourists to Sri Lanka.

At this moment the most important countries for Sri Lanka are Russia and CIS countries. During the first two weeks of January, Maldives had received about 40,000 tourists out of which 10,000 was from Russia. Aeroflot is flying to Maldives eight times a week. Each flight is bringing about 400 tourists and they are requesting for a further five more flights.

Therefore, I believe Sri Lanka has immense potential.

### **What were the challenges?**

I am saddened that due to personal views and agendas, projects that are of benefit to Sri Lanka are at times curtailed. The main flight that we were planning to bring to Sri Lanka was Aeroflot, we had given them the schedule to fly three times a week to Sri Lanka. I know them personally as well since I had worked with them previously while I was the Ambassador. They had almost completed the initial process required for the sale of the air-tickets, and we had agreed on terms and conditions. However, the health guidelines were translated into Russian from the Sri Lankan Embassy and distributed with the Embassy covering letter to a large number of travel agents without our knowledge. The document mentioned that for two weeks the visitor cannot leave their room, similar to being quarantined. Our agreement with Aeroflot was that the tourists would do one PCR test and thereafter, they can come and have a holiday in Sri Lanka. Once they received the translated health guidelines, Aeroflot informed us that all the tour operators and travel agents had pulled out. They wanted us to send the Sri Lankan health guidelines officially, which I knew if we did the tourists would definitely not come to Sri Lanka. 16 flights from Russia were cancelled as a result. Kazakhstan also stepped back after the Russians. However, Ukraine because of the close relationship I have with them they agreed to come. 12 flights from Ukraine came to Sri Lanka

I believe that as officials such things should not be done. Look at the tourism industry how many lives depend on it? If you take the safari drivers in Yala, they were happy when the tourists arrived. Because for almost a year they had not had any income. We cannot close this industry. Prior to the war it was possible because Sri Lanka was receiving only about 400,000 tourists at that time but after 2009 there are large number of rooms and hotels where an entire ecosystem of people is being employed by the industry. Tourism is a massive industry in Sri Lanka. COVID-19 is going to be prevalent for some time, and though it is not easy to curtail it I do not believe it is as bad as the media portrays it to be. COVID-19 is a flu so we have to learn to live with it. My personal view is that some countries were able to develop because of COVID-19 and some other countries do not want to accept that the decisions they made were wrong. Look at China, they are progressing, then many European countries even though they do have lockdown are proceeding with their economic activity. As an island, Sri Lanka cannot afford to be a closed country. We have to re-energize the tourism industry. I believe that the decision taken by the Government is the right one but the guidelines have to be changed.

The airport opened but Sri Lanka Tourism cannot say what are the procedures for tourist

arrivals. They stress on the certificate, which is not practical. When a hotel cannot afford to even function, how can they obtain another certificate? Furthermore, in Sri Lanka there are over 3,000 hotels but only 150 have the certificate. Sri Lanka Tourism says only those with the certificate can accommodate tourists. How unreasonable is this? These are done because of personal opinion and I do not believe it is right.

Then, there is the categorization of hotels as 'level 1', that means tourists can come to the hotel but Sri Lankans cannot. Then, the staff have to remain in the hotel so they cannot go home. The staff will have to work for about two to three weeks, and they can go home after two weeks of quarantine. That means the hotel needs to have three sets of staff to work accordingly. Currently the staff are paid only 40 percent so then how can a hotel afford to pay two more sets of staff? Hotel staff have to be trained staff as well. Therefore, when regulations are made, they should be practical. I suggested the alternative where staff work and they do a PCR before they go home and then they quarantine for two weeks at home, which fulfills both requirements.

Furthermore, as a 'level 1' hotel, 25 percent of the rooms have to be closed and only 75 percent can function. If you are level 1, rooms have to be provided for the military and police and also for the medical staff. How practical is this?

The role of Sri Lanka Tourism is not to make life difficult for the hotel or the travel agent, but to see with appropriate guidelines from the Ministry of Health how to reopen the tourism industry. Thereafter, to provide the requirements of the tourists. Generally, a tourist would stay for maximum two weeks. Those who stay longer are coming for work or other reasons. What we need today is not the numbers but the investment or spending power of the tourist. The risk we are taking and the amount of work we need to do to welcome them results in expenditure, therefore the tourist should be able to spend in Sri Lanka so that an income is generated within the country. I proposed that we bring groups because it is easier to handle. Thereafter we can look at FITs.

We need to accept that the tourists who come to the country are not patients. Once they have done a PCR test and it is confirmed as negative they are not patients. From the 1,926 tourists that I brought to Sri Lanka only four were confirmed as positive. Those who showed symptoms had to stay in the room. The reason why the Maldives removed the PCR test is because there is no other option. When a group travels together, they come on the same flight, they go on tours together, eat together and socialize. They are like one family.

Once a PCR test is done and confirmed as negative you cannot think of the tourist as a patient. If we have that thinking, we can never revive the tourism industry. It is for this

reason that I welcomed the Ukrainian tourists warmly on their arrival, I hugged them and spoke to them in the Russian language, which made them very comfortable. Furthermore, it gave a sense of security for the airport staff as well because they were initially scared of the tourists. But they are no longer so. They are doing their work while maintaining the necessary precautions. For the first time in the history of Mattala, they experienced 100 percent tourist flights back-to-back. When such a massive task is being done and no one is supporting it, it does not affect me but all of those in the tourism industry.

The tourists arriving in the country feel too restricted. They cannot go anywhere to purchase goods; at times the bus would not even stop on the way if they want to go to the washroom. Furthermore, places would agree to provide accommodation or meals but once the authorities go and check the place they pull back. Therefore, we have to change the system. The first thing to do is to revise the number of days of quarantine.

We have to first decide whether we are going to live with COVID-19. In Dubai, there are many who had the infection and have now recovered. Then 85 percent who live there are expatriates. Dubai has given priority to the tourism industry. They have welcomed tourists to come and have a holiday and go. If a person gets ill then they are given a wrist band and they have to stay at their accommodation and if they venture out, they are fined. Once the ten days are over, they go to the clinic and the band is removed. There is no PCR test. Even if they have to do one at the airport it is done free of charge. However, in Sri Lanka, the authorities charge USD 40 per PCR test and the tourists are required to take three tests and they pay USD 30 more than the market price. This resulted in less than 100 tourists arriving to Sri Lanka by the first week after reopening the airport. Comparatively, the tourist going to Dubai as well as Maldives, do a PCR in their home country and they arrive in Dubai/ Maldives, enjoy their holiday and go back.

We need to solve the PCR issues; it should be maximum one and thereafter that too should be removed, this is for groups. But you have to be strict with individual tourists who travel on their own. I do not believe tourists who are staying for more than two weeks are needed for Sri Lanka. The groups that we are bringing are staying in five-star, four-star and one three-star hotel, and who have the capacity to spend. Additionally, the payment for the PCR test should be directly given to the hospital from the tour operator, without the Government authorities being involved in the payment.

Sri Lanka Tourism should be on the side of the private sector, because they are there to provide a service for you. Not to punish or cancel licenses. There has to be a connection between the Government and the private sector. There has to be people with knowledge and experience managing the tourism industry. It would not be practical to have those who

simply look at statistics and make decisions according to personal views. We have to change the entire system because by March this year, we need to have tourists arriving in Sri Lanka.

### **Are you happy after initiating this tourism project?**

I am very happy that the airport was opened. For five years, during the Yahapalana government, I was considered as a very bad person to Sri Lanka. But today people love me. Wherever I travel today they welcome me and treat me with great respect. This is very important, especially for my son because for a time he too believed in the allegations that were levelled against me. There were times he used to ask his mother whether he could take her surname and not have my name as he were scared to use the name Weeratunga. Today, this has changed. Everyone agrees that what I accomplished by bringing the tourists was not an easy task. I disclosed the three tour operators and the two airlines from the beginning. So once all the information was provided it is each person's responsibility to do their business. I never interfered. Everyone who has the required knowledge of the market could work with these companies. We will be soon be bringing tourists from Russia and starting from February 6th, we will bring tourists from Kazakhstan through Air Astana and then SCAT Airline. All the hotels and tour agents have been working with these organizations previously as well. Even the last five years these companies worked with everyone. Why is it that no one else was able to achieve such a feat? It is because I took the risk.

The Russian market is different; they will travel under any circumstances. Even after the Tsunami, they traveled to Thailand. If there is a holiday, they will travel. A lockdown was imposed on Ukraine, but the flight that arrived in Sri Lanka the next day was full.

Yes, the Rajapaksas are my relations and I have their blessings. But I was born into the family and I cannot change that. If you take the tourism industry, it is 100 percent governed by the private sector. The Opposition is slinging mud at me as if the tourists were brought by the Government. The Government gets a revenue only from the Visa. The people have been misled in many ways. There are those who cannot understand how I am involved in this and why I am doing this, that I am in fact promoting tourism. But those who have been in Russia and worked with me during my tenure as Ambassador do not say anything bad about my work.



I explained to the Prime Minister to use the skills, knowledge and connections that we have. I am sure there are other Ambassadors similar to me from other countries who can provide a similar service.

I am happy that the airport is opened. And, we have to bring groups soon. The tourism that Maldives is experiencing including private jets during the past few months are all from Russia, CIS countries and India. That is the same market that we can attract as well. Since China is closed, we will not be able to get tourists from there as yet.

What I did was not simply bring Ukraine tourists to Sri Lanka, what I did was open the country to the outside world. It is because I took that step that others opened their eyes as well. The target markets that we can focus right now is Russia, CIS countries and India.

I have no financial interest in this project as well. I bring everyone together that is the tour operators, agents, airlines and hotels; doing business is their responsibility. My only requirement is that my concept should be implemented. There is no financial benefit to me at all. However, the happiness I receive from working for the country and the love I got from Sri Lankans cannot be bought by any amount of money. Through this endeavor the country has already earned a significant amount of revenue. Why are we trying to stop this?



## **Your name is always controversial?**

I like it that way. It was actually during the previous Government that my name was brought into the limelight and made controversial. While I was the Ambassador of Russia, I did not receive such publicity. The previous Government was targeting someone else through me. I knew that if I came to Sri Lanka I would be confined and forced to do what they want. I was also confident that they would not be able to bring me to Sri Lanka. They created many stories, and their allegations could not be confirmed even by Interpol. Interpol believed what I had to say. The previous Government had no basis in their allegations against me. But by that time, the Government had seized the container that had all my personal belongings. To this date my family does not even have a single wedding photograph. Everything was confiscated. Even for this interview my friend told me to wear a nice suit as I used to have many suits. I told him that I no longer have anything. We came back to Sri Lanka with only a 40kg suitcase.

We lived abroad for about 35 years. It was only recently that we decided to come to Sri Lanka because of our children's education. I felt that if the children grow up overseas, they will get used to that culture and leave us soon. Therefore, I wanted them learn the Sri Lankan ways as well. We planned to live in Sri Lanka from 2015. An Ambassador is provided with a container to take their personal belongings to the assigned country, and when they return, they are given another container to bring their personal belongings back. It is a 40ft container, I ended up using only 20ft. I had many of my personal belongings from the time I had gone to USSR to study in 1985. Some of the people who gave me autographs are now ministers and in high positions. Furthermore, mementos from my children's infant days are very important to us, even if it is not for others. Then I had worked with 12 Presidents during my tenure. Each President has sent at least one souvenir per year. My thesis was there, and my notebooks, which are things that I would like to share with my son and daughter when they are doing their degrees. I was awarded as a Honorary Professor from KSMU in 2013 due to my contributions to diplomatic services and I would like to share the knowledge I gained with my children. These are special things to me. All of it was confiscated. I requested from the former President, to return all my personal belongings and that they can take anything that they feel are commercially valuable.

Life is more than just money. There is much more happiness in life. When you take former President Mahinda Rajapaksa he didn't earn money, but he has the love of the people. Even we grew up under his guidance.

## **What is next for you?**

I have another project in the pipeline, which is taking SriLankan Airlines to Moscow. Currently, due to the COVID-19 situation, over 50 percent of the aircrafts are on ground and are at a loss of money daily. I have assured them that the airline will be filled with tourists and they trust me to start the project now. This will too will be a marvel.

There is a saying in Russian that even a challenging situation can be converted into an opportunity. During this period, the tourism industry has a great opportunity. Because just as we do not have tourists, they too have no place to go. Many of the tourist destinations are closed and there are only limited countries such as Turkey, Egypt, Dominican Republic, Zanzibar, and Maldives. Therefore, Sri Lanka has a great opportunity. When you take the Maldives, it was Sri Lanka that built the airport, the hotels and taught them how to do everything in the tourism industry, see how far they have progressed and where they are today. Let's forget Singapore, even Maldives has gone ahead of us. Those days Russians did not even travel to the Maldives, Aeroflot used to come to Sri Lanka. I believe that our Government system is being controlled by the bureaucracy for the last few decades.

I always believe that I can do something for the country and that I should do something for the country. My father used to say that one should earn their wealth by the age of 35, so I had that idea from a young age. Therefore, by the age of 30, I felt that I had earned enough to live a comfortable life, and to support my family. Thereafter I wanted to retire. I want to do something for my country. I believe that former Minister Basil Rajapaksa has a good program that will be successful. He has a good knowledge of statistics, he has knowledge from the grassroot levels itself and he has expertise on various subjects. Technology has to be included in this as well.

We have to increase local production, because we have limited foreign exchange and all other countries are also focusing on local production. It is not easy but we have to persevere. We are looking at Pharmaceutical production but that will take a long time. Bangladesh has already established themselves in this industry. But the Sri Lankan name has more recognition around the world. We are well-known in the banking sector and tea. Our name is respected. Ports have to be developed as well. We will be able to develop this country and move forward.

We need to encourage and support each other while also being patriotic. We have to always focus on the best interests of the country.