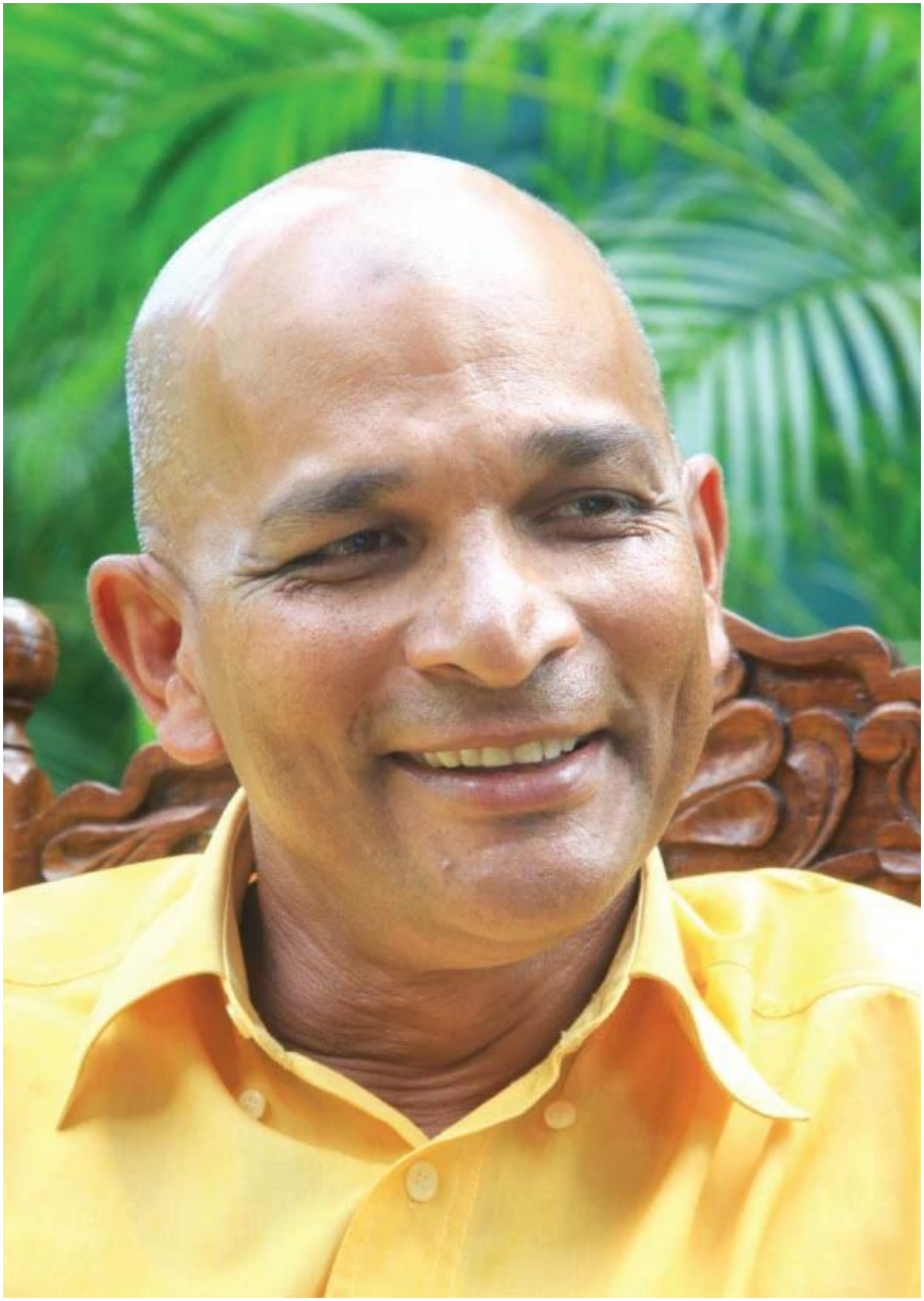
Outlook



Ivor Van Cuylenburg, a Tour Manager, Leader and Guide of Riser Welt, based in Germany, has led many tourists to Sri Lanka and various other countries. With more than 20 years of experience in the travel industry, he shared his views on the tourism industry of Sri Lanka and what we can do to improve our chances to forge ahead in this highly competitive industry.

By Krishani Peiris

Van Cuylenburg started his career as a tour operator in Germany in the late 1980s. Since then, he has travelled to more than 60 countries guiding tourists to gain new experiences. As such he has been able to witness first hand how tourism operates in other countries. “In tourism you cannot group all countries together,” said Van Cuylenburg revealing his thoughts on how tourism may differ from country to country. “Tourism in developed nations are vastly different from that of developing nations and it mainly differs based on travel opportunities.”

Travel prospects of countries depend on the number of flights coming in, climate, distinctive features of the country, cost, investment opportunities and ease of travel, among many other factors. Sri Lanka is a country enriched with ideal factors to pave the way for a thriving tourism industry. As a result, now the industry is picking up momentum with the conclusion of the 30-year-long conflict. However, Van Cuylenburg believes that Sri Lanka should be at a much higher position, when it comes to tourism, as there are records demonstrating tourists coming into the country via the ocean many years ago. “We did not improve the tourism industry and due to the conflict we lagged behind other countries such as Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia who progressed in tourism at a rapid pace. The reason for their improvement is that they developed their national carriers and encouraged tourists to come,” affirmed Van Cuylenburg. He further stressed that being well organised in terms of transportation and other infrastructure could also play a major role in furthering the development of the industry as is the case in the developed nations.

Sri Lanka is currently dedicating many of its resources to improve the tourism industry with the aim of attracting two million visitors by 2016. As such new infrastructure such as highways, airports and hotels are being built. The government is taking many steps to facilitate these actions having understood the benefits that could be gained by advancing Sri Lanka as a foremost tourist destination. Van Cuylenburg commends the government on the progress that they have achieved so far, but ensures that there is much to be done. “I am sure we can reach the goal of two million visitors by 2016. From all the countries I have visited, I have never seen elsewhere the opportunities present here.”

Through development activities that are taking place in Sri Lanka, the country has been able to retain some of the aspects that differentiates it from other destinations. A certain degree of flexibility in travelling, warmth and hospitality being the most notable. He emphasised on the importance of the government and the younger generation becoming increasingly involved to present the same attractions or even newly accessible localities in a more attractive manner. “One important thing we can do is to declare the country as a child friendly nation,” he further added. The idea behind this concept being to draw up schemes to have either free or reduced prices for children below the age of 12 or 18. “By implementing such actions we can get young couples with children to come to Sri Lanka. At the moment I feel that we are looking more towards luxury tourism. By doing so we are neglecting tourists from hard working families. We are losing much because of that.”

According to Van Cuylenberg, unsteady and high prices also causes an issue for tourists and tour operators. Tour operators plan a year ahead and present the schedule and pricing to clients to find that the prices have changed, making it necessary to increase the itinerary price. “Maintaining steady prices that are not too exorbitant is necessary to develop tourism. One good example is Thailand where rich and poor alike can tour.”

Tourism is imperative for the economy of a country as it generates many employment opportunities and increases the revenue in terms of foreign currency. A country and its people start benefiting from the moment a tourists steps into the country; from banks to telecommunication centres to vendors – all are beneficiaries of the industry. “The opportunities in the tourism industry are bigger than in any

other industry. Therefore, developing tourism is developing Sri Lanka and it has to be done without losing our identity," Van Cuylenberg affirmed.

He further added, "in order to accomplish the necessary growth in the industry, the hoteliers, tour operators, the government, airlines and other related parties of the travel industry should discuss the prevalent issues." Instilling the importance of the industry, in school children, to progress without losing the warmth and hospitality that characterises our country as unique will help to ready the future generation to better accommodate the growing tourism industry of Sri Lanka.