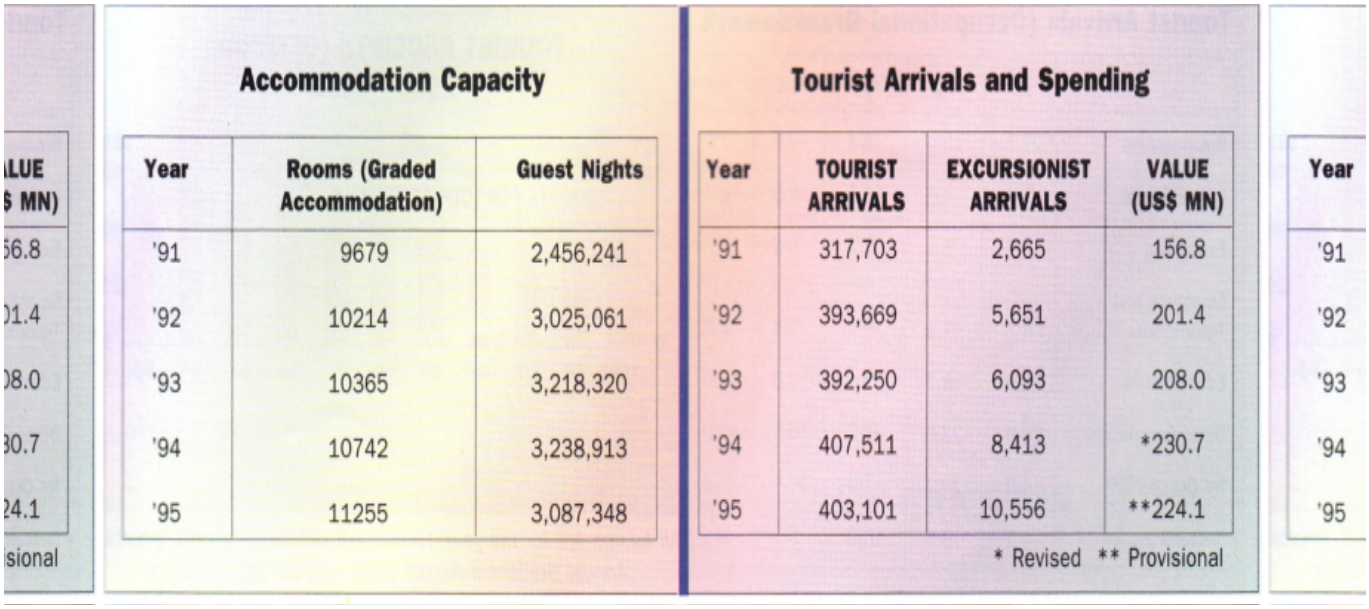


Accommodation Capacity

Year	Rooms (Graded Accommodation)	Guest Nights
'91	9679	2,456,241
'92	10214	3,025,061
'93	10365	3,218,320
'94	10742	3,238,913
'95	11255	3,087,348

Tourist Arrivals and Spending

Year	TOURIST ARRIVALS	EXCURSIONIST ARRIVALS	VALUE (US$ MN)
'91	317,703	2,665	156.8
'92	393,669	5,651	201.4
'93	392,250	6,093	208.0
'94	407,511	8,413	*230.7
'95	403,101	10,556	**224.1

* Revised ** Provisional

Paradise Lost?

Amantha Perera

‘Tourism, tourism, tourism,’ used to be the ng mantra. of late, the tourism arrival figures have gone down, come up, and are sort of dipping again. The pivotal question is, has the true potential- of Sri Lanka Tourism Industry been realized or are the relevant authorities just sitting on it?

Tourism has been one of Sri Lanka’s top-bracket forex- generators. During the period 1984-95 it channeled an estimated USS1367.2 million into the country. But between ’90-’96 the industry returns have fluctuated quite alarmingly. What is most disconcerting is that global and especially regional tourism are poised to be lucrative industries. In 1995, tourism in the South Asian region grew almost three times faster (nearly 21%) than the world average. In such a backdrop the local industry re- corded a 1.08% drop.

In Sri Lanka Tourism has recorded a continuous increase in volumes of available facilities. Even tourist arrivals can give a bogus impression of an expanding industry. But given the changing market scenario, is the Sri industry Lankan poised correctly and more importantly is the industry performing to its true potential?

The hotels and guest houses around the country still offer the age-old a la carte menu. Ilere and there an innovative concept creeps up. But, as a whole, the industry seems to be still stuek with the 70ish eoneept of room, pool, bar.

Entertainment-wise too the situation is no better. There seems to be an inert perception that entertainment equals discos. The local electronic media with their lackluster stitched there, stitched- there schedules rarely provide quality enjoyment fare. Foreign nationals in Colombo have become so bored that reportedly some have rummaged directories and dialed their own nationals just to have a chat simply because ‘there wasn’t anything else to do.’ No new golf courses have come up in Sri Lanka recently. Nobody

has made viable use of sports-tourism. Relaxation is restricted to hotel lobbies.

Public amenities are next to non-existent. Just as long as the way-side walls are there, relieving nature’s calls is nice and easy. In Sri Lanka, tourists are looked upon as walking gold mines. Everything from carfares to mango prices shoot beyond the milky way with the slightest scent of a tourist. Added to this, tourist purchases are compounded by the enormous commissions paid to the accompanying guides which ean sometimes be as high as 60%.

Another off-shoot of the same attitude is the gathering Of hangers-on around tourists, like flies around the rim of a honey pot. Lately, business-travel into Sri Lanka has been on the rise. What is a business traveler to do after he/she has finished the business for the day? If in Colombo browse through the many look-alike, taste- alike restaurants?

Of the total tourist volume into Sri Lanka only 0.1% comes through the Colombo Port. This figure has remained static for the past ten years. What is clear here is that only the economic possibilities of the port as a cargo port are being explored. The entire pleasure dimension of the harbors — Colombo, Galle, Trincomalee— is blatantly under-used.

Marketing and other trade policies have to be more aggressively and professionally implemented. Whoever wishes to fly in travelers into the country, charter or otherwise-should be encouraged to do so within the framework of an open air policy.

The age-old adage of Sri Lanka, as the island in the sun has be- come stale and

insipid. A much more innovative marketing plat- form that incorporates a more authentic national identity has to be implemented. The assorted attractions of Sri Lanka, the cultural sites, hill resorts... have to be given due prominence. A flexible promotion plan within which each market is separately evaluated and strategies adopted accordingly will be more in tune with the changing climes.

Tourism is expected to be one of the top 5 global industries. Today, the entire face of the industry is changing. Tomorrow will be a totally different ball game. Newer and newer trends like eco tourism, theme parks, specialty tours, night safaris, night markets are emerging. Sri Lanka lacks this variety and sparkle.

The average stay of a tourist in Sri Lanka is 10 nights. This figure has never exceeded 13. On average each tourist spends roughly US$ 555.9 (US$ 55.7 per day) during a visit. Sri Lanka's holding power on tourists is very feeble. It is considered more as an off-shot on tour itineraries, rather than as a prime destination. Whatever new hotels, tour packages that have come up, have not enticed the visitor to stay longer.

The Sri Lankan tourist industry suffers from a chronic lack of innovation and a contagious attitude of laisses faire. In the 70's, Maldives made overtures towards this end about cooperation in improving tourism in their islands. No worthwhile results came off it. Today, more than Sri Lanka, Maldives is attracting the potential sun-beach seeker.

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The mushrooming hotels and guest houses have not helped the trade at all. The bigoted belief that the sun and the beaches will at tract the tourist still persists. The

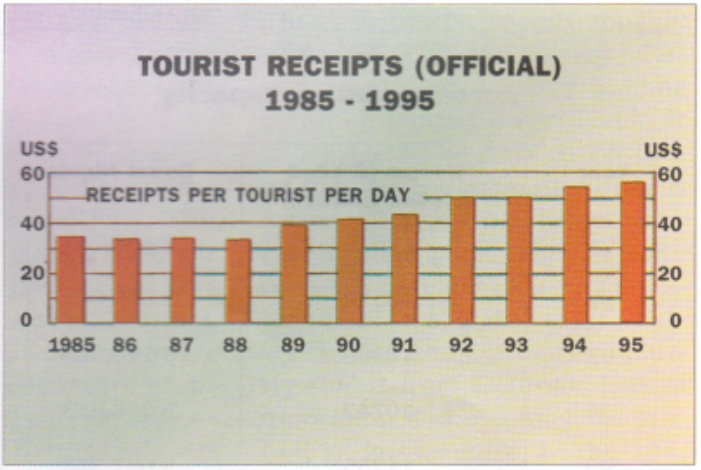
trade has to refocus itself before it chokes on its on stuffings. The huge potential of the emerging Asian markets (South Korea, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore…), of the 3.5 million outward bound Indian tourists Blaming every- thing and anything on the internal security situation is an over-used scape- goat. Anybody who is even minutely connected with trade are past-masters at buck and of the magnetic attraction of India to the traveler (Sri Lanka can be the next stop), is yet to be made use of. stale and insipid.

In today's market place anticipation is crucial. Whoever wants to reap the yields has to be two steps ahead of the rest of the ratpack. Sri Lanka, unfortunately is limping three steps behind, added to that, it is showing only faint signs of regrouping.

Terrorism is not a domestic problem, nor is it exclusively regional. It is a global phenomenon. Even if this problem were not present, is there any assurance that Sri Lanka would be the watering-hole of the globe- trotters? Going by 1995 results every 5 tourist arrivals created an employment opportunity. In the same year only 87,000 were employed in the trade. That works out to 0.47% of a population of 18.3 million. Any way one looks at it, the local tourist industry is badly in need of a total overhaul. A lot of perceptive thinking and planning has to go in if the migrant birds are to start flocking to Paradise again.

Tourist Arrivals (Occupational Breakdown)%

	'91	'92	'93	'94	'95
Businessmen	27.7	16.9	6.4	9.0	7.8
Professionals	1.4	4.0	4.4	5.0	6.4
Executives	7.9	5.2	4.2	5.1	7.7
Scientists and Technicians	8.3	7.1	4.0	3.8	2.8
Educationists	5.9	8.7	4.4	3.8	2.5
Other Occupation	29.8	23.6	39.2	38.4	43.0
No Occupation	14.9	26.2	27.3	26.7	21.8
Retired Persons	4.3	8.5	10.0	8.1	8.1



All figures are for the year 1995 if not otherwise stated. Source - Annual Statistical Report 1995, Ceylon Tourist Board.