

Priority To Nature



Baladurage Chandrasiri, Managing Director of Palm Garden Village Hotel, Anuradhapura understands the need for any tourism endeavour to succeed it should be done while protecting the surrounding environment. He outlines the need for the tourism industry in the country to be focused so that ancient cities such as Anuradhapura are maintained and developed while preserving their identity. It is the country's natural simplistic beauty and heritage that the discerning tourist appreciates. Having entered the industry during challenging times, Chandrasiri has persevered to attain success with Palm Garden Village Hotel. He has been approached by large hotel chains, whom he has graciously declined. A philanthropist and entrepreneur, Chandrasiri spoke to Business Today on his fifteen-year journey and his thoughts on the development of tourism in Sri Lanka while giving priority to nature.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe
Photography by Mahesh Bandara

Your hotels are based on the concept of maintaining the balance with the environment and recognising the importance of the ancient city of Anuradhapura. What was the thinking behind this?

Palm Garden Hotel was opened in Anuradhapura on August 10, 1996. This is a 100 percent foreign investment. The initial estimate for the project was 350 million. My father had purchased this land while I was residing in Italy. I was satisfied with the extent of the land but when I first came to see the place I found that it was a piece of bare and abandoned plot except for a few trees along the border. Thus we were faced with the question of whether we could use this land for something like tourism. But, we went ahead facing whatever challenges that came our way with the thought that we can do it and began the project. Work on the hotel began in 1994 and within two years we completed the work and Palm Garden Village Hotel was declared open in 1996. However, this was a time when investors were moving away from Sri Lanka, no one was willing to especially invest in an area like Anuradhapura. Since the conflict was at its height during that time investors were being discouraged. However, my understanding was that if everyone started to

move away from these areas it would make things easier for the warring parties. Therefore when everyone was backing out and even the Government institutes was discouraging investors; we decided to go ahead with it. That was my first challenge.

My second challenge was to create an environment conducive for tourism. Now if we take Anuradhapura, it is home to natural forests. We had the advantage of these forests, which has now become an essential component when it comes to tourism. Tourists from Europe for instance travel in search of such areas. The other aspect is that foreign and even Sri Lankan investors from abroad often believe that when it comes to tourism they should go to beachside areas. They believe that a beach is the best place for a hotel. I believe that we can successfully market the ancient city of Anuradhapura. Most have not realised this. In comparison to other countries we have not given this city due recognition. What I mean to say is that we need to protect and preserve our archeological sites. But this is not happening. We can learn a lot from ancient cities like Polonnaruwa and Anuradhapura, not only us but also the whole world. For instance ancient technology has influenced our construction as well as irrigation. Anuradhapura is considered a city that fed the entire country. This is why I felt that Anuradhapura was suitable for tourism. This was my beginning.

We Have To Identify What We Can Market To Other Countries. We Have The Required Facilities In Sri Lanka. Today's Trend Is For Wildlife, Forests And Activities Such As Yoga And Meditation.

There is one thing that saddens me, we built a hotel and moved forward, but what I feel is that the ancient city is moving backwards. We have been moving forward for 15 years now. There should be an equal amount of development in Anuradhapura as well. The hotel's existence depends on the ancient city and we market the ancient city through our hotel. But if we do not preserve and protect the ancient city properly we would not be able to have hotels in this area because then there will be nothing to market. The ancient city is our basis so we have to give it the recognition and significance that it deserves.

The ancient city is not systematically developed. We have to maintain archeologically significant places within the cultural triangle. If we compare with other Buddhist countries like Thailand, they place great significance on their

heritage sites. We have far more important ruins than what they have, we have a rich cultural history. But, we see during election time posters being pasted on the ruins. Thus, if we want to develop sustainable tourism we need to identify these factors and systematically develop the ancient sites. From the very beginning I had to create and maintain this environment within the hotel. We have to identify what we can market to other countries. We have the required facilities in Sri Lanka. Today's trend is for wildlife, forests and activities such as yoga and meditation. These are what tourists want and look for; they want to come and relax. Earlier when people came on holidays they looked for excitement, parties and clubs but this is not so today. Therefore if we want to maintain something like this in Anuradhapura we first have to create a favourable environment.

You mentioned that the attractions in this country are not marketed properly. How can we market the attractions in the area?

At the moment we are being auto marketed. We cannot market a country by distributing a single magazine or a poster. It is a continuous process. When people in other countries, even my friends, see a nice photograph of a hotel or an elephant or a wildlife photograph, they admire it but they do not go beyond that. Therefore, first we have to identify places and we have to realise that in countries like Italy there are travel agents. We have to first market our places to those travel agents. In many countries, new travel agents enter the market every year, and we need to make contact with them from the initial stages. Sri Lanka is not sufficiently promoted by the respective embassies in those countries. Therefore, we must find ways to promote tourism through the embassies. Also, we must start marketing the attractions in the country at least two months prior to the beginning of the seasons, whether it is summer or winter, by participating or featuring Sri Lanka in the various educational programmes of other countries. We cannot go directly to the people it will not work. We will only be spending the money. I market the hotel through the product. That is why I maintain and ensure the quality of the hotel at all times and often try to initiate change so that there is a difference.

As I mentioned previously, during the time when everyone else including Government factories and hotels were moving out of Anuradhapura, I stayed behind with my staff of about 40 people. At that time other countries identified Anuradhapura as the LTTE border. Foreign embassies had stated that this is the

LTTE border. As such, Anuradhapura was a prohibited area for tourism. During this challenging time we moved forward with difficulty. We had the strength to stay on, we did not leave everything and go, and therefore, we endured the difficulties and were able to face the challenges. We are thankful to President Mahinda Rajapaksa for having the courageous leadership to eradicate terrorism and bring peace to this country. Therefore, now there is a clear difference, we have tourists coming to the country. But, we have to promote sustainable tourism in each hotel. When tourist inflow increases and there is no room in hotels the guests are then sent to guesthouses by the travel agents. Sometimes these clients have paid for three star or four star hotels but they do not get the services they have paid for. Thus we are not ready for an influx of tourists. As a result this will involuntarily damage the trade. This is something that even our guests sometimes tell us; that when the travel agents cannot get the rooms for the tourists and cannot manage the process the hoteliers have to arrange rooms in ordinary hotels. Travel agents want to bring more tourists and at times all they want to do is to somehow accommodate these people. This becomes a problem for the guests. Recently a few of our guests complained that they had to stay in guesthouses because of the lack of space in hotels. But they had to pay hotel prices. Half of the group stayed in good hotel rooms and others had to stay in guesthouses. Furthermore, if we want to develop tourism, it is not only the hotels that we have to think about but also infrastructure like access to the ancient city have to be developed.

It is not only the ancient city that the tourists want to see. After spending four or five hours in the ancient city tourists should be able to also visit our town, because they like to see how we live our day to day lives; how we go to the market and buy produce. Some arrive in the country to study these things, and others come to relax. We have to identify these needs in order to market the various locations in the country. If we do not do that the industry will crumble. If we do this properly we can make tourism the main income in the country since we have all the resources.

As you mentioned, tourists prefer to see the unspoilt culture and nature of the country, but with the rapid development this may not be possible. How can we encourage development and at the same time preserve the identity and culture of Sri Lanka?

This is exactly why we have a Tourist Board. We expect them to give the proper

direction in relation to this. There are many different people involved in tourism. For instance, people with money think that they can build a hotel and market it, but the person may not have any experience or knowledge in relation to tourism or the environment. Therefore, if we have such an idea there should be a base where we could go for support and advice. Foreign investors never harm the environment when building a hotel or any other project. But some Sri Lankans do. Before doing any kind of construction they will first bring bulldozers and clear the land. Then they construct the building and only then will they decide what tree is suitable after cutting down the trees that have been there for years. That is why we need an institution that will give us proper direction so that we can avoid the damage. These days there are many hotels being opened under the banner of eco-tourism but they have no comfort at all. We cannot market something like that. There are hotels that provide the relevant experience; eco-tourism is where there is a connection with the environment but inside the guests have to be offered maximum comforts. The services inside should have all the comforts but it has to be done while protecting the environment. What most people do when they say they are into eco-tourism is they even build the structure using wood. But they take the wood by cutting down the trees in the surrounding areas. Thus, it will never become an eco friendly project. Many guesthouses that come up are such projects.

We Are Thankful To President Mahinda Rajapaksa For Having The Courageous Leadership To Eradicate Terrorism And Bring Peace To This Country... We NOW Have Tourists Coming To The Country.

You have been successful in maintaining a balance with the environment. Can you tell us how you have been successful in doing that?

This was not made easier for me because I developed a land without any trees. From day one I have been planting trees and creating a conducive environment. Many countries do not have these resources or this environment that is why tourists come here. We have to market this environment. Since I had to create an environment from the start I understand its value.

On the other hand, this hotel currently has 50 rooms and I am planning to increase it to 60. I am not planning to go beyond that in this 50-acre land. No matter how many tourists come I have to stop at this level. I believe priority should be given to

nature and the environment. Thus, I hope to move forward with a maximum of 60 rooms. The most important thing is, whether we get tourists or not we have to maintain the place. That is how I market the hotel. It is not sufficient to repair and maintain just before the tourist season begins. A person who stays with us will go and give a positive message about the place that is the only type of marketing I do. I have so far not used any leaflets or brochures or even stepped into a travel agency to promote the place. I try to maintain what is already there. Throughout the year I undertake repairs and restructuring. I have been doing this from the start. That must be the reason why some people tell me that my hotel does not look 15 years old.

From Day One I Have Been Planting Trees And Creating A Conducive Environment. Many Countries Do Not Have These Resources Or This Environment That Is Why Tourists Come Here. We Have To Market This Environment.

You mentioned that you mainly market the hotel through the good words of satisfied customers. You have stood strong for 15years. How have you done this?

Usually when people get involved in such a large investment they want quick returns. I along with my two Italian partners invested on the basis that we do not want quick returns. If we go into business wanting to earn what we invested in a year or two then things might go wrong. One opportunity we had in this sense is that my partners did not force us and therefore we were able to utilise the funds appropriately. During the first six months we had only two or three customers. However, we had to keep the staff. We did what we had to do and we did it right.

My hotel has come overall first in the island when it comes to the facilities provided for the chauffeurs. This is another thing that I use to market my product. We have a restaurant dedicated to chauffeurs who come with the guests; and this is the first and only hotel in Sri Lanka, which has a restaurant only for chauffeurs. They have accommodation very similar to that of the guests. This is something I like to market; the kind of publicity we get through people who come here, stay and experience our facilities and pass the message. Since we started the project without the intention

of getting immediate returns, we have stood strong for 15 years.

It Will Be Beneficial If We Can Introduce Standard Rates In Hotels Around The Country Like They Did In Colombo. When It Comes To The Travel Trade We Have To Come Up With A Minimum Rate Beyond Which You Are Not Allowed To Go.

You explained how you succeeded amidst difficulties after making such a large investment. What lesson do you think that would be for new investors?

Today when you make an investment there is a foundation, but those days we did not get the right direction. We did not have anyone to tell us how to plan our rooms, what kind of space is needed and to tell us to look 15 years ahead before doing so. If you look at all the hotels built around ten or 15 years back you will see that the space in the rooms is less. The bathrooms are different. Those days, en suite rooms with attached bathroom were enough to market a hotel but nowadays to market a hotel you need a separate living area or kitchenette or a private pool. All these have come to Sri Lanka. About 15 years ago all we expected was a room and a bathroom, air conditioning or a fan but now things are different. Now when you invest you have to think 15 years ahead. Especially when it comes to the travel trade both the inside and the outside should be equally attractive. The other thing is the environment. Thus I have to say that in Sri Lanka if we create that connection with the environment that would be a benefit when it comes to marketing. This would be my advice to investors.

There is good competition now among hotels. Every hotel tries to offer something unique to their customers. Therefore, as a result of this the hotels that are being built are of a high standard. However, upcoming hotels should also respect their surrounding environment, it is only then that they can be successful. Further, hotels should also be easy to maintain.

The Tourist Board Should Have A Vision That The Hotels In Sri Lanka Should Be In A Certain Way... They Should Be There To Give Us The Proper Advice And Guide Us. They Should Also Encourage Us.

We need to guide the new comers; this can be done by looking at other hotels and their experiences and by identifying what tourists want. It is not only hotels that need to be developed. Hotels are constructed based on something special. This base has to be properly maintained with proper facilities. We also have to introduce new things. If we take Rome, the ancient city is surrounded by water; it is the same in Anuradhapura. Malwathu Oya encircles the city. If the Malwathu Oya was widened before the floods Anuradhapura would not have been flooded during the recent rains. That is why ancient kings have built tanks in Anuradhapura. In the hills it is easy to drain the water. Here you cannot do that; that is why the water has to be collected and made use of. The water is managed by draining the rainwater from one tank to another and then subsequently for agriculture. This is why there are many tanks in Anuradhapura. It is not only for agriculture but also to properly manage the drainage of water. Actually during the recent rains the ancient city was not flooded, it is our modern city that was flooded. This proves how much our forefathers had planned before constructing the city. Therefore, if we develop the Malwathu Oya it will be beneficial to tourism. In Paris, you can go on a tour around the city by boat. Even in Anuradhapura you can access the historical sites by boat. Though this was discussed five years ago, nothing has been done as yet.

The Government has planned high-end tourism. Do you think this will be successful?

It can be successful. According to my experience we only have a few hotels that accommodate the top market. You need more than just hotels for the up market like roads and other facilities. We need to understand that when we target the upmarket more elderly people will come to Sri Lanka. We should have internal flights and helicopters to go from place to place. We cannot have only hotels and not roads and vice versa. We should balance the development. Then again, the up market also has categories. The expectations of the upmarket tourists are high and we should be ready to meet these needs. We must also strive to attract the younger crowd, they have minimal expectations, and they travel a lot. The message they take out to the world about Sri Lanka is also very important as that would help the country attract more tourists and develop further.

In the lower market I see undercutting among the travel agents trying to take someone else's market. I know this as a hotelier. With the rates that they are

requesting and the markets, we can understand what they are trying to do. As such, it will be beneficial if we can introduce standard rates in hotels around the country like they did in Colombo. When it comes to the travel trade we have to come up with a minimum rate beyond which you are not allowed to go. We should then identify the type of guests who like to come and spend in a country like Sri Lanka. Far eastern tourists spend less in our country; it is the Europeans who spend more. If on the other hand we take the Asian market, they do not spend much in Sri Lanka. I am sure there are markets even in India with a good clientele but in general, it is the Russian market and the European market that enjoy Sri Lanka. If you take tourists, for instance, from Thailand they cannot be included in the up market category. They do not come here to stay in top hotels but they come to visit temples. Large groups come from Thailand, but these tours are organised by the temples themselves. Sometimes up to 40 or 50 people come to Anuradhapura, they even stay with us but they do not expect any special treatment when it comes to food. They want to quickly finish eating and go to the temple and spend most of their time there. We have to take all these things into consideration when developing the tourist industry. Thus we must be able to cater to each of these markets. If we want to cater to the up market we have to then give an opportunity to develop hotels that fulfill the relevant requirements.

The next important thing is we have to have proper guidance. Not everyone with the money has the expertise or the ideas so we have to come up with guidelines with regards to the number of rooms and other such hotels.

We have to understand the fact that there are people who are after quick money and want to earn fast after an investment. They want to earn back the invested money in a year or two. This is very difficult to achieve. I am telling this through my experience. When we made this investment we did not expect any returns within a year or two. That is why I understand the difference. Many places that have expected quick returns have failed. I have seen this happen.

We are not a hotel chain. We made an investment in Sri Lanka and earn an income and have some satisfaction. That was our main aim. We are the only three-star hotel in Anuradhapura. We are the only leading hotel here. If more hotels are developed in Anuradhapura it will be a strength to us. If we take Habarana for instance, since many hotels were built around the area, that itself became a base

for development. Earlier, Anuradhapura was the base. One thing that I have noticed is that individual hoteliers are not given assistance. I have never seen a hotel in the eco tourism trade that has been built and developed with such dedication and commitment. There is no hotel in Sri Lanka where a 50-acre bare land was first turned into a forest and then completely converted to a hotel. Every hotel I have visited had trees before construction and they had constructed the hotel after cutting down at least a tree or two. But what we did here is unique. We even planted trees not found in this district, ones that are going extinct and we managed to maintain the 50 acres. One year we were awarded for the best landscaping. But such initiatives are not sufficiently encouraged. Like I said before, the Tourist Board should have a vision that the hotels in Sri Lanka should be in a certain way where the ones in Anuradhapura are different from those of the beach-side hotels. So when we want to initiate tourism related projects they will know the requirement in the country. They should be there to give us the proper advice and guide us. They should also encourage us.

If we take some other areas in the Anuradhapura district, if we take an area like Dambulla for instance there are many single hoteliers who contribute to the national income. They create employment and are a strength to the national economy. They give strength to the tourism industry. We cannot develop the tourist industry in the country without a proper system of hotels. Maldives is today developed because they have a good hotel system. These hotels can meet the requirements of the guests that go there. That is not so in Sri Lanka. So when we develop, we have to have a system to encourage those who are involved. We have to pay TDL every year and I am sad to say this but you will be surprised if you see the license issued to us by the Tourist Board. They just print it on an A4 size paper and post it to us, and by the time we receive it is crushed and unusable so that I have to take another colour printout and laminate it for display. It is of such poor quality. Usually when we receive the license we feel strengthened. An ordinary place will issue a better certificate than this. Evaluation of hotels also should be done. We maintain our standards and we move forward.

One thing that I need to mention is that the star ratings in Sri Lanka and those in other countries are not the same. Usually in Sri Lanka the star rating is based on the number of rooms, whereas in many other countries from which tourists arrive to Sri Lanka, truly rate the rooms according to the standard of the facilities. A three star

hotel in Sri Lanka is a very high level hotel, but in a European country it is a small hotel with a limited number of rooms. Therefore, it would be good if our ratings system could be at a standard, in line with the international norm, as this would clear any confusions and would make it easier for the tourism sector to market the hotels. Furthermore, with the development of technology, tourists do not rely on star ratings but look at guest comments on the website before booking a hotel. Even if they find a place through the travel agent or a promotional booklet they will always check the hotel website and other travel websites to see what the guest comments are. Websites are a great opportunity to create an image of the country and is a great marketing tool. We actually get more direct bookings via email than any other way as the potential visitor checks the website and makes the booking.

Another aspect that needs to be addressed is that certain standards need to be put in place for all hotels to ensure the quality of service as well as protect the environment. For example, certain hotels are expected to maintain the environment, have water treatment plants and garbage disposal mechanisms put in place but we find that smaller hotels and guesthouses are not required the same. If we are to ensure quality and upgrade the standard of our industry then there has to be an overall set of rules for all hotels. Just as these are applicable to private businesses it should be the same for Government institutions as well.

Guests Come To Sri Lanka To Travel. We Have To Create An Environment Conducive For That. We Have To Give Value To These Places Like Temples And Protect The Environment As Well.

As a successful private businessman who has maintained a certain status, what do you think are ways that either the Tourist Board or the BOI or such institutes can encourage those involved in the industry?

They should develop a good understanding and connection with those involved. It is not sufficient to build hotels we must also think about giving hotel staff a good start. In order to do that we have to develop the hotel schools in the country. We need good equipment for hotels schools. The equipment that we find in hotels should also be available in the hotel schools. The Anuradhapura hotel school is not up to the required standard. We need Government support to maintain a good staff.

Sometimes staff who have been dishonorably discharged are recruited by another hotel without any background checks; but we can not always do that. Once I suggested of having a job card so that hoteliers could see the person's employment history. When we get new staff from a hotel school and when they move to a different hotel they only take their certificates with them, but we should have some kind of a book to state what the person had been doing in the previous place. This should come into effect as a rule.

We have many people who work in our hotels. I have initiated many training programmes for them. Therefore, it would be really helpful if the Government extends support when it comes to training and development of staff. For instance I coordinated with the Italian Embassy and brought down Italian chefs to train our chefs. They conducted some courses at a few hotels including ours. All we did was arrange the accommodation and sometimes traveling and the Italian Embassy did everything else. The Sri Lankan Embassies around the world can also organise activities such as this.

The other thing is, when we develop tourism we need to think about the street vendors and those near temples and other such places. We have to make sure that they behave within a certain frame and they should be taught what tourists like. This may not have a short-term effect but it will certainly have a positive impact in the long run. Even these small-scale sellers should be included when developing tourism. There are some tourists who will stay inside for three to four days and do not like to go out. They say that the hotel is a paradise and that they want to stay in here and listen to the birds rather than going to see the ancient city where the environment may not be very clean. Guests come to Sri Lanka to travel. We have to create an environment conducive for that. We have to give value to these places like temples and protect the environment as well. If people pay for a ticket at the entrance, the place should be maintained appropriately but currently we do not see this happening.

Guests Come To Sri Lanka To Travel. We Have To Create An Environment Conducive For That. We Have To Give Value To These Places Like Temples And Protect The Environment As Well.

If we talk a little about your projects; now you have this hotel and another one is being constructed, there are so many different kinds of trees even in this hotel and a tank where wildlife frequent to quench their thirst. Can you tell us about this aspect of your work?

The Kahapathvilla tank had been abandoned and at the time I started developing the land it did not even look like a tank. Therefore, I reconstructed the tank and developed it. There are more than 3,000 trees planted here consisting of more than 300 varieties, so not only tourists but also even school students come to see the forest arboretum. Many of the plants are endemic to the Anuradhapura area. There are certain species that are going extinct. For instance we can take Weera and Palu. Even though Palu is there Weera is very rare. Then, there are many plants that are used for Ayurvedic medicines. Sometimes people like Ayurvedic doctors come in search of certain rare plants. I have a certain satisfaction that I have developed this land to this extent from a bare plot of land.

What is the relationship between the hotel and the surrounding villages?

We have been maintaining a close relationship with the community from the very beginning. That is what the other two partners also wanted; to develop this and at least create employment opportunities for the villagers. That was the foundation of our project.

The positive aspects are there for both sides. If we take the village, the hotel sources their produce. We have built houses and provided electricity for a number of people in the village. The village was not able to obtain water facilities for the past 12 years, but we have provided water facilities to them. This was done with the assistance provided by Hon Minister S M Chandrasena. The project is sending a good message to the people. Many of the village people are working in the hotel. Some of the people in the village who were previously not employed, but are now working with us, have now built houses, bought motorbikes and are now living well. Some of those people are still working with me.

As the hotel develops I can clearly see the village developing as well. A message has gone to the village. Cutting of trees and the killing of animals have been

stopped. We work together with the village temple. We have given three-year scholarships to fifteen of the poorest families in the village. We provide everything for these children, even medicine. Therefore, we work very closely with the people and do not hesitate to assist them when required.

When we first came here, it was difficult to find even water bottles or a packet of liquid milk in the district. When hotels are built and when tourists start coming, these are things that are necessary for tourists, so indirectly the people in the area have access to these things as well.

Can you tell us about your new project?

We plan to start the new project with the experience we have gained. We have asked for land for the new project and permission has been granted. We are planning to use our past 15 years experience to build the new project in an even better way than this one.

We Must Develop The Hotel Industry With Respect To The Environment. When Building A Hotel We Must Think 15 To 20 Years Ahead And Study The Place.

What is your message to new investors and hoteliers?

The message I have for hoteliers is that they should protect the environment. Foreign countries often talk about the resources we have, the environment and the sea. These are things that other countries do not have. We should be able to bring this environment close to them. We must develop the hotel industry with respect to the environment. When building a hotel we must think 15 to 20 years ahead and study the place. Anyone investing now should think carefully and take proper advice.

We can do many things with the resources that we have. When we were investing we could not even buy bathroom fittings. Even the tiles and certain furniture were

brought from Italy. But now, these things are available in Sri Lanka.

Even wood can be used but it is important to do simply things without wasting wood. We should pay attention to these things. Even if we do not cut trees in Sri Lanka, if we cut trees here or in another country it is still a forest and trees. In other countries, for example, like Malaysia, they grow trees. 99 percent of the wood in this hotel was brought from abroad. Usually the people who are building cut trees in Sri Lanka. It is easy to work with wood like teak and kumbuk. But kumbuk is rapidly disappearing because it is not planted in Sri Lanka. Kumbuk is used for floors in many hotels, but kumbuk is not grown to replace the trees that have been cut. There should be a replanting programme so that the kumbuk tree does not disappear from Sri Lanka.

That is the message I have to give. The tourism industry must be developed in harmony with the environment and this will make it easy to market to the tourists as well.

How did you enter the hotel industry?

My elder brother was in the travel industry. One main reason that I entered the hotel industry is that I like buildings. I did an architecture course when I was in Italy. I want to create things. In Sri Lanka those days, it was usually the hotels that were beautiful, with landscaping and everything. I wanted to make use of what I learned that is why I entered the hotel industry. That is why even now I keep breaking the buildings and rebuilding to make a difference.

I Am A Small Businessman Who Has Overcome Many Challenges And Gained Much Experience During My Journey To Be Where I Am Today And I Hope That What I Have Shared Will Be Of Benefit To Others.

You did everything on your own. What can you say about your success?

The first reason for the success is the environment and we get the most praise for

the setting and the garden. Then we get good comments about the staff.

Another reason for my success is that I maintain the hotel. I have targets. Every year I clean all the roofs. I plan and maintain everything. Even some of the food that we use, I purchase from Italy. Every year we usually bring down Italian food. This year I could not do that because of the cost. We try to meet all the costs, because we do not want to compromise on quality. Some of the staff have been here for a long time. They know how things have to be maintained.

In certain instances when you try too much, it cannot be done, so I do what I can. In our forest arboretum we have large trees. What I want to do with the hotel is to protect the place. I like the forest and the natural environment very much. Sometimes it rains only at our hotel. Even recently that happened. There must be something special about this place.

I receive blessings from many people. There are those who go to the temple. They come here and appreciate the peace and freedom and shower blessings on me. They say that they feel a sense of freedom at the hotel.

Sri Lankans who come to the hotel, are able to see what has been done here. They get inspired by it and want to do the same thing. Sometimes I help my friends with their landscaping. When I do landscaping at homes I tell the owners to plant the trees. Some people pay others to do the landscaping but then do not look after the garden. There is no point in that. There is a pleasure in planting something and seeing it grow. Some of the plants we have planted are now taller than us. That is very nice to see.

My wife is Italian. We came to Sri Lanka when my son was one year old. When we first bought this land, our accommodation was in the most difficult area. There were times when neighbours were dumping garbage on to the land.

My son completed his primary and secondary education in Anuradhapura and he subsequently completed a course in hotel management. My wife has been a big

support to me. It was a great support to me that I was able to stay with my wife and son, as a family in Anuradhapura. When I first bought this land, even though nothing was built, I had my drawings with me. What I imagined has been created now.

I am thankful to Business Today for giving me this opportunity to share my experiences. This magazine goes to a large section of the upper echelon of the business community but this message needs to go to those who are young in the business. There are many businessmen who are veterans in the tourism industry, but usually we do not get the opportunity to learn from their experiences. I am a small businessman who has overcome many challenges and gained much experience during my journey to be where I am today and I hope that what I have shared will be of benefit to others. All high profile visitors to Anuradhapura including Ambassadors, Ministers and also the President while he was the Prime Minister stayed at Palm Garden Village Hotel. This brings me great pride









