

Spa Ceylon Ayurveda Uniquely Sri Lankan



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Creating an identity that is uniquely Sri Lankan by bringing together elements of ancient Ceylon and the rich heritage of Ayurveda, Spa Ceylon Ayurveda is a brand that is crossing borders. Maintaining the Sri Lankan identity through its design, raw materials, formulations and presentation, Spa Ceylon Ayurveda does not compromise on quality and has proven that a truly Sri Lankan brand can go international. Directors of Spa Ceylon Ayurveda, Shiwantha Dias and Shalin Balasuriya, spoke to Business Today about the birth of the brand and its future plans.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe
Photography by Mahesh Prasantha

The Spa Ceylon brand was launched in May 2009. What was the thinking behind this?

Spa Ceylon as a brand was launched in May 2009 and the first spa was opened in March 2010. The product brand Spa Ceylon was launched in May at the Ayurveda 2010 exhibition, which was sponsored by us. Subsequently, the products were distributed to stores in July. We opened our first Spa Ceylon boutique at Crescat in December 2009, followed by openings at other venues.

As a company we wanted to grow our revenue streams and as part of our growth strategy we ventured into this market. Our parent company was already established in the field of Ayurveda and had the core competencies in manufacturing. Then, when we looked inwards at Sri Lanka itself – we have a beautiful country that has a heritage of Ayurveda. The knowledge and skills were here. Furthermore, with the conflict ending in 2009, there was an impending boom in tourism, as such there was a great opportunity in this sector.

Globally, spa culture is growing. The modern consumer is looking at leisure, lifestyle, pampering and indulgence in this very fast paced world. In Sri Lanka, there was a vacuum in the market for a high quality luxury spa brand or a spa lifestyle brand. Therefore, considering all these factors, we realised that we were in a very good position and we had very strong competitive advantages and specialisation in the field, a great position to enter the spa industry.

What can you tell us about the brand?

We needed to create something uniquely Sri Lankan. We brainstormed and looked backwards; tourism entails travelling from place to place where an individual wants to experience the local culture, traditions, food, sights and sounds in the country they visit. We kept that in mind when branding. Furthermore, Ceylon is the ancient name of Sri Lanka and the country is depicted as an exotic far away island famous for its spices, gems and tea. It is also a romantic beach getaway. The old Sri Lanka was looked at as completely different from the modern Sri Lanka and we found that many tourists still look for the romance essence of old Ceylon.

Therefore, we focused on capturing the essence of ancient Ceylon because Ayurveda is also a part of old Ceylon history. Unfortunately, up until then, Ayurveda was always positioned as a very rustic age-old tradition – a medicinal system with unpleasant odours and dark sticky oils. However, we found that the concept of Ayurveda – a life of health and natural wellbeing, and the romance of ancient Ceylon blended together perfectly. That is how the brand Spa Ceylon was born. Of course, we combined contemporary Sri Lankan design to make it relevant to the consumer of today.

The objectives of the brand are to position Ayurveda as also a luxury well-being indulgence – a “natural lifestyle” choice. Therefore, we are taking it forward from a rustic sense to a more luxurious pampering experience, because historically Ayurveda was not just therapeutic, it was a way of life and it was also associated with well-being. During ancient times the royalty of this country was pampered with luxurious Ayurveda treatments. We drew inspiration from all these aspects when creating an essentially luxury Ayurveda brand.

The other factor was that, when we did our background research, we observed that many great tourist destinations in Asia such as Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, had developed their very own national spa identities. From Indonesia, it is Jamu or traditional Indonesian medicine and based on that there were brands developed that were very distinctly Indonesian brands offering an Indonesian spa experience. Thailand has its Thai herbal medicine based on which unique Thai brands have come out. Similarly there was an opportunity in Sri Lanka and in the greater Indian subcontinent; we have Ayurveda, which is far more advanced than any of the other techniques. Therefore, we looked at creating an iconic spa brand from Sri Lanka. We are aiming at creating a luxury Ayurveda brand, which will ideally be a golden benchmark for everyone else, and we are looking at taking the brand internationally.

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Is there any particular reason why the product was launched in 2009, and the spas in 2010?

We had to first produce a product range as this is the backbone of the operation. It makes our treatment inimitable and very unique because of the products that we use, apart from the treatment techniques. Any brand needs to be developed; it is a step-by-step process. Our first step was to introduce the product range, secondly, we created our own retail concept, which we are looking at franchising internationally as a Spa Ceylon Spa Boutique and the third step was the spa operations, which again we are looking at going international as 'Spa Ceylon' Spas. It is an evolving, growing brand, in the sense it is a young brand.

Who would you say is your target market?

The Spa Ceylon brand, whether it is the product or the treatments, it is an experience. We target it as a luxury experience. Our target is mainly high-income individuals who travel extensively. The brand is targeted towards high-end tourists and accordingly we have positioned the brand.

Can you elaborate on your marketing and advertising strategy; initially people were not sure whether Spa Ceylon was only a product or whether there were actual spas?

Progression was always in the cards – from product to spas. We first wanted the product to be out there, to build a customer base with that and take it to the next level of experience where we provide the service and spa environment that goes with it.

With regards to the marketing of the brand, since the clientele is very niche the key was spreading the word through referrals. Furthermore, we are very selective of where the product is available. Therefore, we positioned the product in such a way that it captured our target audience.

At the moment, the product is only available at our spas & boutiques, select high-end retail stores and boutique hotels in Colombo, Negombo, Galle & Kandalama. We position our products and spas accordingly so it reaches our target market. Much thinking goes into the location of our stores. Our first boutique was opened at Crescat and our second spa and boutique at Park Street Mews – a 200 year old tea warehouse from old Ceylon, our third location at CASA Colombo is set in a restored

200 year-old Moorish mansion and our 4th location at the Paradise Road Villa, Bentota is set in what is Sri Lanka's 1st boutique hotel property designed by Geoffrey Bawa many decades ago – keeping in line with the feel of Ceylon, while again, maintaining the exclusiveness of the brand.

Though we have many inquiries from interested parties we are very selective. Even when it comes to advertising we have selected publications that will reach our target audience. We sponsor exclusive lifestyle events with the aim of creating the right buzz about the brand. We have a facebook page with a large number of fans. In such a way we have positioned our brand and ensured that our clientele and target market are kept informed and constantly engaging with the brand.

Spa Ceylon is a truly Sri Lankan brand. Can you elaborate on that?

The brand name Spa Ceylon Ayurveda was coined by incorporating the key terms 'Ceylon' – since we wanted to recreate the romance and charm of that period – and 'Ayurveda' as this is the key technology that will drive the brand and finally of course 'Spa' to signify the global spa lifestyle movement.

Ayurveda is native to the South Asian subcontinent. The ingredients we use are Sri Lankan and our services incorporate traditional treatments that we rework to make it our own so that we can deliver the luxurious pampering experience to our spa guests.

In terms of our packaging, we use green and black colours. Green for nature and black represents the earth. Our product range is possibly the only product range that is Dosha specific, which is according to Ayurveda. We use Sinhala script in all our packaging, and our branding incorporates motifs and designs from ancient Ceylon. Our designs are inspired by traditional Sri Lankan art. If you look at our Spa Ceylon motif it has been derived from the art of the royal court from the Kandyan era, which is at the Magul Maluwa in Kandy. Furthermore, the products are made in Sri Lanka. In such ways we have established our Sri Lankan identity.

We have a community trade programme, where we grow our own organic Aloe Vera through local farmers in Kalpitiya. The wooden trays and various packaging material are also sourced from the Kalutara district where our factory is located, so the

craftsmen are also from the area. If you look at our packaging though it is not overly ornate it is luxurious. We use albesia wood, which was traditionally used to make tea chests. Even for the fragrances, we mostly use essential oils from Sri Lanka. Furthermore, in terms of service Sri Lankan culture and hospitality is given priority. Spa guests are offered our special blends organic Ayurveda tea and we also serve a selection of native Sri Lankan fruits like biling, lovi and gaduguda. We are delivering a very Sri Lankan experience.

All our therapists are Sri Lankans and we are looking at even staffing our foreign spas, when they open, with Sri Lankan therapists. The whole idea is for you to experience Sri Lanka. When a tourist visits our country, we should be able to give them a totally local experience. We believe that to a large extent we have been successful in doing that. Of course we are constantly innovating, every month we have something extra that we add to the spas and our product range is also being constantly developed. We are adding new products such as a new home aroma range. We have a new line-up of ceramic home-ware products, again modern designs, but with a very Sri Lankan feel so that the consumer can experience the brand to the fullest, not only at the spa, but also at home.

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Do you think you will expand beyond spas?

Well, the brand has a life of its own and it is taking its course. We are a lifestyle brand, expanding into spas. We have the product range and the homeware range, there are certain other things that will be visible soon. Spa Ceylon is a brand that people are beginning to love and they can take it wherever they like.

Whether it is going beyond spas, in a sense – yes. Our area of business operation consists of spa, retail and we also produce hotel amenities; a complete personal care and aroma package for hotels, starting from room fresheners, candles and guest amenities. There is another area that we are involved in and that is the corporate gift industry, because we are a premium brand and we have a very

unique Sri Lankan identity, it is a great gift from Sri Lanka to give people. We are doing many corporate events now, with personalised gifts and also seasonal gifts. Our product is a great gift from Sri Lanka.

What makes Spa Ceylon different?

If you take the service side, the key is that we want every experience at Spa Ceylon to be unique and rewarding and it has to be unique. We spent a lot of time on ensuring this by paying attention to detail, making sure that every single experience is unique and that every guest leaves “wowed” by the Spa Ceylon boutiques or Spas.

The Spa Ceylon experience has to be something that you would not experience anywhere else in the world. Therefore, we take that into our design, treatments, refreshments, staff uniforms and even staff greeting. Every single detail has been looked into individually and we are constantly innovating to do the best we can and to provide a novel experience for the guests who keep coming back.

What were the challenges and how were those overcome?

The biggest challenge we faced was communicating to our target clientele that Ayurveda can be a high-end product. Therefore, we took the rich heritage of Ayurveda and revamped its presentation to highlight the science and also show that it is a good lifestyle product. We were able to prove that Sri Lankan products can be of international standard. We were successful in changing the Sri Lankan mindset.

In terms of exports, the greatest challenge we have is entering the European market. This is the personal care market and there are many non-tariff trade barriers such as various certifications and conformity requirements. These have been put in place to prevent non-European brands entering the market. It is a very expensive exercise to get the testing and conformity and meeting the various criteria to get into these markets. But we are progressively overcoming these obstacles.

Can you elaborate a bit more on your distribution?

Our distribution is very selective and we handpick where we want the product placed according to our audience. Even with our international partners, before we sign a contract we make sure that our products are represented properly. We work in several ways, we work through a franchise where they buy the franchise contract for the boutique and spa, in which case, everything from the design to the final product are approved by us, and we ensure that the product is presented in the way that we want it to be.

We are commencing duty free operations, in-flight as well as airport duty free. That is something we are looking at within Sri Lanka and Maldives region. We have been getting inquiries from the European countries for airport duty free because this is essentially a leisure, travel and lifestyle brand as such it is very attractive to high-end travellers. We find that tourists from all different nationalities find it very difficult to walk past our stores without picking something up. That is why we feel that airport duty free is going to be a great opportunity for us.

Our Distribution Is Very Selective And We Handpick Where We Want The Product Placed According To Our Audience. Even With Our International Partners, Before We Sign A Contract We Make Sure That Our Products Are Represented Properly...We Will Have Our First Overseas Spas In Operation As Soon As Mid Next Year.

What can you tell us about your international partners?

In Europe we are working with a few companies and we are also in the final stages of negotiation with a few more. We have already exported to Switzerland and Russia and we are currently, talking with Germany. We are looking at expanding our operations as well. We are about to open in two tourist hubs in South East Asia, and we are already in Saudi Arabia and Seychelles.

Again much of our time is spent on approvals and so forth. The response has been great so far. We've also taken the brand to India where we did something like a test market, at a trade exhibition and the response was overwhelming, so much so that we had to air-lift products to Delhi three times, in the course of 14 days. The next big thing will be the actual launch in India. Overall we are doing well and we are moving forward in several markets.

Our spas are being franchised internationally. We will have our first overseas spa locations in operation as soon as mid next year. What has been the response?

The response has been very good both locally and internationally. The boom in tourism has been good for us, because when people come here on holiday they purchase the products as gifts for their friends and business partners. On a daily basis we have inquiries from people from all over the world, wanting us to start a Spa Ceylon in their country or import the products. Of course, we are very selective about it.

Much has been happening since July last year. The brand is one and a half years old, our parent company itself is a 50-year-old company. We are very glad with the response and we are very glad with the support we are getting from the Sri Lankan business community and our target market, who, I'm proud to say, have taken ownership of Spa Ceylon as their own brand. Guests write in our comment books saying the brand makes them feel "proud to be Sri Lankan." It is a great feeling to know that and we are very honoured when we read such comments. We are getting this tremendous support because it is a Sri Lankan brand, and we have to thank them, and our associates and partners; from the media, to the retail industry to airlines, hotels, various business entities and individuals who have all been promoting the brand with great enthusiasm. People are proudly taking our products abroad for gifts, saying that it is a 'Sri Lankan, super brand. That acceptance itself has been very rewarding for us.

Many corporates bring their clients and foreign counterparts to our spas, so it is very motivating see people supporting us and the brand. They have been very supportive and we thank them all.

Future plans?

We hope to have 25 spas running by 2015. Our plan is to open a new spa every three months for which we are on track. There is a huge boom in Sri Lanka tourism and Spa Ceylon is in a superb position to optimise revenue streams in tourism. We are not looking at opening anymore city spas. We are now extremely focused on

expanding our spa operations to the Island's finest hotels and judging by the response we are receiving from the hotel industry, we expect rapid growth.

Internationally, we are looking at spa operations possibly in Delhi and Bombay and also Maldives. We are getting many queries for the Maldives because there is a demand for Ayurveda, since it is very unique. The Spa Ceylon brand has a very good strategic fit with the Maldives experience, because Maldives was also part of ancient Ceylon, so there has been a very good response from them too.

We have positioned Spa Ceylon as a luxury Ayurveda brand and it is possibly one of the first luxury Ayurveda brands in the world. We see a great opportunity to go global and create an iconic luxury spa brand with a uniquely Sri Lankan flavour. That is the ultimate goal.