

Spreading Wings In New Skies



Findmyfare is an integrated online travel service company, the brainchild of Abishek Sithampalam and Thushan Shanmugarajah, Co-Founders and Directors. The young duo started their business with nothing but complete faith in Sri Lanka and its people. After having traversed a challenging path, today they dominate the market as Sri Lanka's first and largest online travel company. They insist that more young people as them should enter this sphere. They say, 'If Abishek and Thushan can, so can anyone'.

Compiled by Archana Balakumar

What was the thinking behind the inception of findmyfare?

TS: The concept of findmyfare started when both of us came back to Sri Lanka after finishing our studies in the UK. The e-commerce industry was booming everywhere else and we observed that there was a huge gap in the Sri Lankan market and nobody was capitalising on that space. Though there were experienced travel agents in the country, no one had thought of an online travel portal. We thought that was a great opportunity for us.

What were the challenges faced?

AS: There are roadblocks to enter the travel industry. Obtaining licenses and hiring trained staff was quite a task, which is why it took us nearly two years to stabilise the company. We had no idea about business then. We left the country as students and became businessmen within a very short span after our return. The transition was sudden. Yet we took that courageous step forward. We believed strongly in Sri Lanka and Sri Lankans.

TS: Challenges were more from the supplier side. To our surprise, when we were all set to launch the site, the suppliers were reluctant to collaborate with us. Our greatest challenge as young entrepreneurs in the country was making people believe in us. Our growth was slow in the initial days because people were reluctant to use an online mode of payment for such high prices.

Our Greatest Challenge As Young Entrepreneurs In The Country Was Making People Believe In Us

AS: It did take a lot of effort to convince other travel agents and offline service providers that we could co-exist in the system together, without being a threat to them. And eventually we partnered and amalgamated with the current offline business models as well. There were difficult days; no bank was willing to give a payment gateway for a small startup.

There are immense opportunities in this country but so are the barriers. If one has the patience to cross the initial roadblocks, the potential of the market could be realised.

Findmyfare is Sri Lanka's largest online ticket booking company today, how has the company achieved this?

AS: Sri Lankan customers were waiting for an online ticketing service. Before findmyfare, customers had to rely on travel agents completely. Now, the scenario has changed entirely, after the launch of findmyfare. Today, customers have the facility to look up online and charter their travel plans accordingly. They can confidently bargain with travel agents, based on the information they collect from our site. What we have done here essentially is empower the customer. And that is our vision too.

TS: What really helped us capture the market, were the conveniences that came with online booking.

Customers can purchase air tickets at anytime since our service is offered 24 hours. One other factor was transparency. Everyone is weighed equally, and no two people are quoted different prices. Abishek and I pay the same fare as our customers.

AS: Our customers have been superb; we have been here for just three years and we have become one of the top ten among the 140 agents in the country. This could not have happened but for our customers.

Findmyfare offers an array of travel oriented services, could you talk about them?

AS: We want to cover all spheres and take care of customer requirements completely. We can't exist in an online-based travel business without providing a certain level of offline service, which is why we offer visa services, travel insurance and hotel bookings as well.

Online travel booking is new to Sri Lanka; do you see many players venturing into this sector?

AS: We expect a lot of competition from foreign companies but we don't think there would be new local players; primarily because of the brain drain happening in the country. The youngsters are more keen on moving abroad. Our thought behind starting a business in Sri Lanka was to show that one doesn't have to go abroad to make a better living. Opportunities are plentiful to exploit here.

Could you elaborate on the Flynow Pay Monthly scheme and other such initiatives?

TS: The Flynow PayMonthly facilitates ticket payment in installments with a zero percent interest. Customers can now fly with just Rs 1,500 per month. Findmyfare was the first in Sri Lanka, which enabled customers to make use of an online EMI. When you purchase through the EMI gateway, the payment is converted into monthly installments at that very instant and we don't charge on credit card payments.

AS: We are also working on a mobile app. The mobile app will be easier,

facilitating customers to buy airline tickets from anywhere.

What are the future plans for findmyfare?

AS: We plan to venture into Australia, England and India. We are also looking at other spheres in e-commerce such as retail and insurance. Our vision is to create a complete platform where the offline retailer can sell to the customers through us.

Final thoughts?

AS: We would like youngsters to venture into business. Entrepreneurship is not about attitude, style or making money. Its about identifying a customer problem and providing a solution.And there has to be love for the country. Youngsters today should work towards elevating the economy of our country and contributing to society