

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM



Baladurage Chandrasiri, Managing Director, Palm Garden Village, Forest Rock Garden Resort, and Pifangama.

Baladurage Chandrasiri, Managing Sm Director of Palm Garden Village, Forest Rock Garden Resort and Puranagama in Anuradhapura has been a consistent voice for change in the tourism industry, promoting the concept of nature protection that demands ethical constructions, which he has aptly demonstrated in his hotel properties. His concepts are unique, always focusing on the culture and heritage of the country. Nature is given priority, where he has planted over a hundred thousand trees to ensure that the environment is always given priority. His love and respect for the country is apparent and his approach is driven by passion to showcase the best of Sri Lanka. His decision to have all three properties in one location, Anuradhapura, emphasizes his confidence in being able market each unique concept as well as the potential that the location offers. He continues to strive for the urgent need to develop the tourism industry through greater focus by the Government and its institutions. Chandrasiri

believes that Sri Lanka's abundance of natural resources, together with its heritage, if efficiently and systematically managed, can garner the desired attention of travelers.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe and Jennifer Paldano
Goonewardena. **Photography** Menaka Aravinda.

Your concepts are unique, focusing on Sri Lankan culture and heritage while respecting nature, and all your properties are in one area. Can you elaborate on the thinking behind this?

I entered the hotel industry in 1993 from Anuradhapura with Palm Garden Village, which is built on 50 acres of land. The hotel was built as chalets, which was the popular design trend at the time in Sri Lanka. With time, it occurred to me that the hotel industry in Sri Lanka had operated along a very uniform and undeviating path, which motivated me to do something exceptional by producing a creation that would allow us to promote the hotel extensively in foreign countries. The Forest Rock Garden Resort is a result of that new thinking.

The Forest Rock Garden is a boutique hotel constructed along the lines of Buddhist architecture. The menu is vegetarian. Forest Rock Garden is an exceptional hotel as it is the only hotel in Asia that has a kilometer long entrance consisting of three bridges. Beyond that is an architecture unique to the hotel. The buildings have been constructed to blend with nature. Forest Rock Garden is a hotel where a tourist can stay like royalty. It is a hotel that is ideal for people who are devoted to Buddhism, prayer, meditation, and yoga. Forest Rock Garden has won awards out of 115 countries for best architecture, and eco-friendliness and has won the Golden Award for International Star for Leadership in Quality in Paris presented by Business Initiative Directions.

My experience in the tourism industry has taught me that selling rooms with a television and a swimming pool alone do not suffice to attract and retain tourists. Hence, Puranagama - designed along the lines of an ancient Sri Lankan village is a result of my conviction that we need to introduce a fresh concept to attract tourists. I find that Puranagama, designed to represent the culture of the ancient village, has greater appeal and demand among local and foreign tourists over my other two hotels. Puranagama is the first hotel designed resembling a village, a

first not only in the area, but also in Sri Lanka.

Since every hotel needs to be designed according to a theme, Palm Garden Village is currently undergoing renovation and will be redesigned to take on the features of Buddhist architecture. I have been able to venture into other businesses on the strength of Palm Garden Village because it is a large property of 50 acres, built amidst a man-made forest and lake. Today, Palm Garden is one of the leading three-star hotels in Anuradhapura. Similarly, the Forest Rock Garden is also a leading boutique hotel in the country.

With Time, It Occurred To Me That The Hotel Industry In Sri Lanka Had Operated Along A Very Uniform And Undeviating Path, Which Motivated Me To Do Something Exceptional...

All your projects are connected with nature. Can you speak about the importance of preserving the environment and promoting it as a viable tourist attraction?

Our tourism industry originated along the coast. Coastal areas were promoted abroad as a tourist destination. However, with time, the Maldives, Seychelles, Bangladesh, India, and Singapore encroached the tourism space that Sri Lanka hitherto enjoyed and tourists who used to come here gravitated towards those coastlines because they developed their coastal tourism including the construction of hotels systematically. Unfortunately, Sri Lanka was sliding back. Subsequently, we shifted to showcase our heritage, and did so by attempting to improve temples, develop facilities and build more hotels, but today, it is evident that all those attempts have also failed. Next, we moved to wildlife tourism, which again has been unable to receive positive feedback from tourists because it was not done systematically. We are now at a juncture where everyone responsible for the tourism industry in this country, from the Minister to the Tourist Board, have to think differently and deeply on how best to promote all nine provinces in the country for tourism. We can use our Buddhist heritage and other resources to bring the tourism industry to an esteemed position it should be in. I believe that the industry has to change, keeping in mind even the vendor who sells king coconut and vadai along the road, because they are all part of the tourism industry. All these people are our assets. This is our best opportunity to rebuild the industry, and failure to respond positively will deprive us of attracting a

sizeable market of tourists. I believe that unlike other countries, Sri Lanka can manage its tourism industry around its natural resources, which depends on providing appropriate facilities and creating an environment that rectifies all the mistakes from the top of the hierarchy to the bottom

You have emphasized the need to protect our environment and our heritage while promoting tourism. In that sense, your properties are unique. Can you speak on that aspect?

Everything in Sri Lanka, including nature protection, is often limited to mere talk. But I have demonstrated my commitment to protect nature through action in 49 acres of land at Forest Rock Garden, where construction has been confined to 12 acres, and the rest of the forest area remains protected, for which I pay a tax while continuing to grow more trees. My effort has been very successful and the environment has been protected together with the wildlife. This property was saved from illegal felling of trees and stone quarrying, and nearly 28 acres of land is protected with taxes paid to the State by my company.

I believe that the country needs stringent rules on construction in forest areas, accompanied by guidelines for development, from a hotel to a two-bedroom house. It is time we regulated the freedom we have enjoyed in construction and in land management. If not, people will simply clear land and construct buildings without considering the environment. No one thinks of designing a building to suit the environment with the trees intact. We need guidance from the Government, because they have to provide the required leadership. There should be laws for housing construction as well: laws that stipulate the distance between the house and the road and the minimum garden space. There should be a ban on constructing a house covering the entire property. We must insist on at least 30 percent of land space even for a home. Only then can we emerge as people who love their environment.

Excavations have shown how people in our ancient civilization lived among trees, stones, and caves and even later constructions show the priority given to nature. For instance, Wilpattu, where it is believed that the Sri Lankan race started, and where Kuveni and her tribe lived, is a testament to the close connection with nature. Nature is a gift and destroying it for business purposes will not achieve the desired results, because in the end, it is we who will suffer. Therefore, any project must blend with nature. The builder in Sri Lanka has the freedom to use

any color on the property, whereas many countries have imposed limitations on the use of color. These limitations include the freedom to use any color in the interior but the exterior has a limited palette. There is a degree of control which radiates pleasantness to the outside. For instance, if sand dunes are what the Middle Eastern countries have, they ensure that their buildings blend in color with their natural surroundings. This way, the environment is not damaged, and it is soothing to the mind. Even countries in Europe have a color palette that blends with the natural surroundings.

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Mere talk on protecting the environment will not suffice as we need a robust program to ensure that it is done in practice. We must allow people to enjoy nature. We may pronounce our love for nature significantly, but our stance becomes futile unless individuals have the space to enjoy it. My hotels are unique because the visitor can enjoy the natural environment. The best thing that any person who patronizes my hotels takes back is the appeal of nature. The feedback from my guests is not about returning to enjoy the rooms and the suites, but to sit and relax under the trees. And that is what I market and not the facilities in the hotels. Their feedback also conveys a strong message to society. The human being who loves nature is flexible, and this is evident as ancient Sri Lankans lived with nature. Our ancestors too lived in small abodes surrounded by extensive gardens. Then life was leisurely and straightforward, but today people have become selfish, which I believe is a result of humans being deprived of the chance to relax amid nature, without which we are never at ease, always in a hurry and at a boiling point. As such, the natural environment is essential, and we must protect it.

The Government wants the industry to target and promote high-end tourism. What do you think our target market should be?

I believe it is a mistake to label ourselves, that is, Sri Lanka, as a high-end market for tourists. I disagree with this concept because I believe Sri Lanka must open itself to both high-end and lower-end tourists. Sometimes the largest segment of tourist arrivals are from the mid and low-end segments, and they travel to many

places, whereas what we describe as the high-end segment, often consists of senior citizens, a market which we as a country find hard to attract, owing to the lack of facilities when such tourists visit historical places in Anuradhapura such as the 'Atamasthana,' the eight sacred places of worship. The middle market, on the other hand, has a large group of young people, but my 24 years in the industry has shown that this young segment of tourists do not generally travel to Sri Lanka. Likewise, we do not attract a large number of families either. Of the tourists that visit Sri Lanka to enjoy its wildlife, nature parks, history, and the beaches, only about 10 percent consists of families. We lack adequate activities to attract I believe it is a mistake to label ourselves, that is, Sri Lanka, as a high-end market for tourists. I disagree with this concept because I believe Sri Lanka must open itself to both high-end and lower-end tourists. Sometimes the largest segment of tourist arrivals are from the mid and low-end segments, and they travel to many places, whereas what we describe as the high-end segment, often consists of senior citizens, a market which we as a country find hard to attract, owing to the lack of facilities when such tourists visit historical places in Anuradhapura such as the 'Atamasthana,' the eight sacred places of worship. The middle market, on the other hand, has a large group of young people, but my 24 years in the industry has shown that this young segment of tourists do not generally travel to Sri Lanka. Likewise, we do not attract a large number of families either. Of the tourists that visit Sri Lanka to enjoy its wildlife, nature parks, history, and the beaches, only about 10 percent consists of families. We lack adequate activities to attract young tourists. Even the high-end tourists who visit Sri Lanka confine themselves to one place for a week. But a young crowd will always stay longer, even up to two to three weeks and this is the market that we should target when developing the industry.

Rather than segmenting the tourism industry as high, mid and low-end, it would be more prudent to manage our hotels based on fixed room rates. The current crisis has prevented us from establishing a standard for the industry, and today some hotels have been forced to charge money only for the food, while providing rooms free. Most hotels today are selling their rooms at any price when faced with the impossibility of keeping them open. We urgently need a solution to stop hotels from opting to such an extreme measure and thereby save the tourism industry.

A comparison would show the vast dissimilarity in the tourism industry of Sri

Lanka and other countries. Others focus on creating new marketing strategies every five years to showcase different areas of the industry but our hotels have remained uniform in their operations. Apart from a country's identity and its natural resources, which are major tourist attractions, the tourism industry is promoted by hotels as well. For instance, there are countries where people travel, to merely spend a week or two in a hotel, and sometimes these countries may not have any natural resources to show, but the tourist visits that country simply to enjoy and relax in the luxury and the pleasant surroundings of the hotel. Sri Lanka is blessed with a large extent of natural resources and having been in the hotel industry for nearly 24 years, I have observed that some people who are keen to promote our natural resources, build hotels with the sole intention of making money. Therefore, I believe that the hotel industry needs to change according to the times because in the face of the current dip in tourist arrivals, the hotel industry is struggling. Many people employed in the industry have lost their jobs and to add to this, they are unable to maintain large properties.

I believe it will take sometime to revive the industry to what it was at the beginning of this year. The current situation will not shift even if there is a sudden spurt in the arrival of tourists to Sri Lanka, because the lack of development in the hotel industry has prevailed for a while. Having understood this set-up, I ensure that my hotels are revamped and remodeled every five years.

Rather Than Segmenting The Tourism Industry As High, Mid And Low-End, It Would Be More Prudent To Manage Our Hotels Based On Fixed Room Rates.

Your hotels are located in Anuradhapura, which was the site of an ancient kingdom. But in terms of facilities, are you happy with what is on offer at the moment in Anuradhapura ?

Tourists choose to travel to a country to enjoy a holiday having saved money for that purpose. The practice among Europeans is to generally work throughout the year and then take leave for an annual vacation. So these people choose to come here not to see heaps of garbage or confront our state of disorganization or our problems, they come here to enjoy our resources and facilities. We have to seriously consider whether the tourist who arrives at the BIA, experience those facilities upon disembarking. I reckon that the tourist who sets foot on our soil

does not receive the desired facilities that a tourist ought to receive. For that matter, even the historical places and religious places are not tourist-friendly. I cannot imagine how long it would take to clear the mess in our tourist sites given the disorganized and problematic nature in our institutions. The institutions responsible for managing these sites have failed to carry out their duty. No remedial action has been taken in this regard. Likewise, these places are not efficiently administered. For instance, the historic sites in Anuradhapura are one of the most revered places that a tourist would want to visit. But owing to lack of facilities, such as bad roads, inadequate toilets, and poor lighting in the night, the tourist is forced to visit these places during a specified time, thereby imposing a limitation on the mobility of the tourist. The tourist cannot visit these sites in the night, and he or she has to complete the visit by four in the evening. Most places in Sri Lanka do not provide the facilities for the tourist to enjoy at night. There aren't any parks for tourists to visit at night. These shortcomings must be remedied.

The people of Sri Lanka must consider every tourist as their guest, after all, we show great hospitality to any person who visits our homes. Outsiders described us as people with a smile, a characteristic that they see in us even to this day. But our level of hospitality has diminished, we are less friendly towards the tourist, which we have to nurture again. We have to look back to at least 50-60 years ago if we are to rethink a new strategy for the tourism industry. With the development of technology, we cannot afford to manage our tourism industry in the same way. It is bound to fail. Other countries offer a plethora of facilities to attract tourists. Tourism is foreign capital. Were a failed nation if we as a country, blessed with an abundance of natural resources, are unsuccessful in developing the industry. There is a large number of people who are involved in the tourist industry directly and indirectly, but sometimes we cannot even sell a souvenir because they are not designed appropriately and neither do we have any programs to foster such efforts. If the industry is rejuvenated and strengthened, we can begin programs aimed at improving the economy of the people in the lower strata who are involved in the industry, who can make a souvenir from their home. Other countries are way ahead in this regard. Sales take place only in large showrooms, where big business happens, whereas the poor artisan in the village cannot sell his or her creations and crafts to a tourist. The gap that has been created prevents the benefits of the tourism industry to trickle down to the bottom layers.

Do you think the Tourist Board and other relevant Government institutions have done their duty?

I will say very forthrightly that the Tourist Board and the Government operate without any sense of feeling or thoughtfulness for the tourism industry, because if they did, they would have strengthened the industry by now. The Tourist Board must function more efficiently. I sent a letter to the Tourist Board following the incidents in April, and I am yet to receive a response. We expect a response because we pay a monthly tax to the Board, and therefore, we have a connection with the Board. Some hotels are yet to receive their license from the Board despite it being mid-2019. All these issues are a result of poor planning and implementation. Italy, where I lived, had a stipulated period within which the license had to be obtained, and sometimes officials visit the property to check and issue the permit. In Sri Lanka, we have to travel all the way to Colombo to apply for a license and then we have to continuously go there until we get the document. Unfortunately, the industry is run by state institutions that fail to provide even the most fundamental requirement of a license to operate a hotel

Even If I Have The Confidence, If The People In Positions Of Power And Governance Lack Determination And Courage, Then Sadly, We Will Not Be Able To Maintain Our Businesses.

Moreover, we have failed to work in coordination. Officials have labeled us as 'big hoteliers' and show no respect. We manage our hotels on a clean slate with no room for any disreputable activities, but I say this with immense sadness that government officials look down on us as people involved in some despicable trade. If we acknowledge that the Government as well as the Tourist Board are responsible for steering the industry, then I say that they have a very loathsome mentality towards hoteliers. If officials in these institutions come out to work together with us, they can certainly be part of our day-to-day operations as well. When we plant trees, develop temples and other places of worship, and support conservation of parks, we do so with the betterment of the tourism industry in mind along with the benefits to the future generation. But despite all our best efforts, I have not seen the industry players being reciprocated through similar cooperation by government institutions. I believe the majority of hotel owners are isolated and alone on this journey to safeguard and promote the industry. They have no one suitable to guide them. Those who can afford it, obtain guidance from

outside the country, but the hotel owner at the village-level is all alone.

Do you feel confident that we can come out of the present crisis and move forward?

I began planning for my first hotel - Palm Garden Village in 1993 during the height of the country's conflict. I registered it as a BOI project, bringing with me the money that I had earned abroad, at a time when no foreign investors were coming into the country to invest. Everyone, from friends to officials, discouraged me from investing in a hotel at a time when tourist arrivals to the country were low. But I invested and went ahead with the project with a great deal of faith. And, today I employ more than 350 people. I have to be strong and confident if I am to support 350 families. The problem that the country is faced with today is different because, in the 1990s, we did not have quick access to the media. But today, the world has access to even the least important news. Therefore, even if I have confidence, if the people in positions of power and governance lack determination and courage, then sadly, we will not be able to maintain our businesses. We may manage to maintain them for a few more months. I am using the accumulated resources to manage these properties and feed 350 families by ensuring that they are paid at the end of the month. But to continue, I need to generate an income

I am currently using the income earned out of these properties to manage affairs, hoping that things will change in the next month or after, but I know that what I hope for is uncertain. The question that looms large before us is how many more months can we survive this way. Neither the Tourist Board nor the Government give any importance to this difficulty. The tourist season is such a sensitive time, and it so happens that inopportune events have to take place during the height of the tourist season. We have to blame ourselves for amplifying a little wind into a storm and then complain there are no tourists. Even an election is scheduled during the best tourist season.

I propose that we should establish separate tourist zones and tourist seasons in our nine provinces and accordingly develop the industry, which I believe will drastically reduce the wastage that is happening owing to haphazard investment. I can not point to any direct investment that the Government has made towards the tourism industry. The coastal areas are polluted with waste and hence are inaccessible. The institutions charged with protecting the coastline fail in their

role. Similarly, Sigiriya, which is at the forefront of our attractions, is treated and taken care of so poorly. What are the facilities that the tourist can enjoy? Having walked 1.5 kilometers to the location, the tourist has to ascend the rock. There is no service to transport the tourist up to the entrance

The Government has to assist us by intervening in such concerns. Relevant institutions seek our ideas and opinions, but do nothing beyond that. Therefore, I have a big question mark concerning this Government's support to uplift the tourism industry. I spend a large amount of money annually to maintain my hotels because tourism is not only about hotel buildings, it is about a hotel with a theme, which I continuously strive to offer. I have this great faith that someday our tourism industry will develop, and this is my fervent hope for the industry as well. But whatever I hope for will not give results if the people in decision making positions do not take the right direction.

What has inspired you to invest in theme hotels that focus on culture and heritage?

My advice to anyone intending to enter this industry is to first gain a wide-ranging knowledge of the industry. Some enter this industry because they have the money and assume that they will become a 'big hotelier' once they build a hotel with 200 rooms. While I diverge from this definition, I see the owner of a hotel with 25 rooms offering the best amenities, interior and pleasant surroundings as being way ahead than the hotelier who owns a hotel with 200 to 300 rooms.

I Have This Great Faith That Someday Our Tourism Industry Will Develop, And This Is My Fervent Hope For The Industry As Well.



Quality is not decided on the number of rooms in a hotel. We need to invest in a hotel where we can maintain the highest standards of quality. Hotels have popped up all over, and when they cannot retain them any longer, they are transformed into places of disgrace, and officials tend to group all of us in the same category. We need to correct this by encouraging the right people to invest and not allow large buildings to be constructed, which owing to the owner's inability to maintain are used for other activities.

In addition, the person who wishes to venture into this industry must be aware of the service standards required, especially be conscientious about conserving the environment. People are building large hotels at the expense of destruction to vegetation and trees and the environment. Sadly, I have been unjustly penalized despite engaging in business while protecting nature and the environment, but it also reflects the lack of focus of officials working in some of these institutions. They need to change their perspective. I believe that it is pointless demarcating and separating forests unless they are managed efficiently. Therefore, any person intending to invest in hotels must have the ability to manage and protect nature, and only then will the project be sustainable.