

Taj: We Chose To Stay

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Sarabjeet Singh, Area Director Sri Lanka and Maldives and General Manager, Taj Samudra Colombo is no stranger to the country. He spoke about the Group's commitment to Sri Lanka having been here for over 35 years. With great potential in tourism he says that the country is poised to take-off. Taj has been with the island-nation through good times and challenging periods, but as Sarabjeet Singh says, they chose to stay.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe

Photography Mahesh Bandara and Menaka Aravinda

What has been the main focus of Taj in Sri Lanka as well as the Maldives, since your appointment as General Manager and Area Director?

Taj has been in Sri Lanka and the Maldives for over 35 years. In our attempt to integrate tourism with the hospitality industry, we want to focus on the Indian subcontinent along with the traditional European market. Given that India has a population of over a billion people we can link up tourism with our sector with the focus on India alone. The benefit that these two areas can get from India is huge and we have been trying to determine how best to drive the Indian market so that it benefits Sri Lanka. During my earlier stint in Sri Lanka when we opened Taj Exotica there was a debate on whether people from India will come to Bentota because Goa was an alternative for them. The question that any Indian would ask was "why should I visit Sri Lanka?" since the war was on at that time and there was a concern about safety as well. Over a period of time, especially in the present day with the end of the conflict, Sri Lanka is opening up and we see that Indian tourists are the largest segment visiting the country. They are amongst the highest paying segments.

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The same is also happening in the Maldives. The Taj Exotica and Coral Reef in the

Maldives are attracting some of the highest paying segments of Indian tourists. In the long-run our strategy is proving right. We strongly feel that Indian tourists are going to be very beneficial for Sri Lanka and the Maldives therefore we need to focus and develop tourism and the MICE segment in such a manner that we can derive benefits for the country.

What are your thoughts on the changing face of Colombo?

Colombo's skyline is changing completely and there is massive scale construction taking place in the sea front near the Taj Samudra. There was a time when Taj Samudra was the highest building in this area, but today it's been dwarfed by massive structures that are coming up in the vicinity.

According to recent projections, we can expect thousands of new hotel rooms and apartments coming up in the next two years. There is going to be a massive boom in the sector and this is without the Port City as that is a totally separate segment. Colombo is going to be a future destination that is between Singapore and Dubai and this development will create a new entity in itself.

The new landscape, which is being shaped with plans for modern malls, such as Shangri La Colombo and Cinnamon Life, will have entertainment complexes as well. Indians have a high propensity to visit such places for shopping and such developments will surely drive traffic to the country. I believe that the way things are happening right now and the way things will eventually turn out if everything goes according to plan, then it will impact Colombo positively. The way the country has developed, in terms of cleanliness and the discipline that has emerged, compared to what it was, is a big change. Sri Lanka will be a completely different country, if we can sustain the cleanliness and discipline together with infrastructure development being allowed to reach maturity.

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Today visitors to Sri Lanka look at the entire experience provided rather than just the accommodation per se. How is Taj catering to these requirement?

Taj Group has three hotels in Sri Lanka. The Airport Garden Hotel, which primarily targets the airport transit traveller and airline Crew. We have Taj Exotica that caters to the tourist traveller; with the beach, sun and the ocean to relax and enjoy. The Taj Samudra in Colombo, which is our flagship property and caters to the corporate sector.

The Taj Samudra was built in 1983. Keeping in mind the requirements of the business traveller, we have spent about USD 20 million to refurbish this property and we are continuing to inject more funds to make sure we live up to what Colombo is becoming today. We do not want to be outdated where the city is concerned, as we want to be at the top when the city is trying to reach the top but at the same time we want to be part of the heritage of the city. We don't want the hotel to be a modern glass and steel structure. We want to retain the colonial character and the Sri Lankan touches of its architecture. For example, if you look at the lobby we have still maintained the Sri Lankan architecture, even in terms of the deco there are touches of Sri Lanka. We have the Crystal Room, the heritage block in the lawn, which was built in the 1820s and is considered one of the oldest British era structures. We want to refurbish the Crystal Room in order to bring back its old glory and character.

We are committed to retaining the charm of Colombo in the hotel while also ensuring that we take it to the next super deluxe level. This is how we plan to blend our hotel with the city and continue to keep it attractive. We also want to have flavours of Sri Lanka in our food as well as in other areas of all our hotels. Having been in Sri Lanka through the most challenging of all times and not leaving, we consider ourselves to be integral to this country.

How important is a good choice of food and beverages when considering the tourism sector in Sri Lanka?

Food and beverages are very important in terms of projecting what you want to give to the tourists as well as in catering to the Sri Lankan palette. Colombo is more like a melting pot for the country, as various nationalities come here from all across the world. Everyone comes to Colombo and then fan out to the rest of the country. Therefore, we have to cater to all taste buds when guests come to the hotel given that we have many nationalities visiting us, but at the same time we cannot have a restaurant for every region in the world.

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We have an all-day dining area, which caters to all the needs and at the same time, we focus on the four main cuisines that we specialise at the Taj Samudra. Being an Indian chain our strength is food from the sub continent and Navratna has been our showcase restaurant serving the best Indian food in the city. We have recently refurbished and renovated our Chinese restaurant, the Golden Dragon where we have a chef from China serving delicious Chinese food. We strongly believe that if we are in this country, the food in this country must be showcased by a Sri Lankan chef. The Executive Chef in our hotel today is a Sri Lankan. One of the high points of our achievements was winning the trophy for the Most Outstanding Hotel for the first time at the recently concluded Culinary Art 2017. It was also the first time a hotel in Colombo won this trophy since 2006. We were able to achieve this because the team at Taj Samudra is completely dedicated and committed to excellence.

In terms of staff at the hotel, Taj has been very clear in maintaining high standards and exceptional guest relations. What can you tell us about this aspect?

Our expat staff in this hotel is minimal and mostly limited to technical staff in the kitchens. We have only a few in the management who are expats.

Sri Lankans are educated here but a lot of them are working overseas. Our Executive Chef looked for Sri Lankan chefs who are employed in the Middle East and we found that many of them were working in places such as Doha and Muscat. We have convinced some of them to return and have employed them in our hotels and found them to be excellent in their work.

The Taj Group has a global presence and we have our own Learning and Development Department where we drive careers within the Taj. Whenever we recruit a new employee, for the first 15 days they are not assigned to any particular department. Every recruit has to undergo systematic training on the organisation and understand it completely. Training is our main focus as this helps them to understand their tasks before they actually start serving customers. The knowledge a new recruit acquires at the end of the training is not less than the employee

already working in the restaurant. So the guest who comes to the restaurant will not experience a difference in service between the new comer and the experienced employee.

We take each customer feedback extremely seriously, wherever it comes from, be it through social media or directly, we have our own in-house feedback system. Every single feedback from the guest is discussed and replied to by me personally. That sense of responsibility filters down to the staff. I also tell the staff that their job is to take care of the guests and my job is to take care of them. Taj Samudra became the only hotel in Sri Lanka to be among the top 25 organisations in the 'Great Place to Work' ranking for the fifth consecutive year and being judged as a Laureate Company. I believe if the staff are happy the guests will be happy as well.

Could you elaborate on the other properties by Taj in Sri Lanka? What are your plans concerning these properties?

Airport Garden Hotel is a 250 room property near the airport. The hotel is also a place for 'leisure movement', where there is traffic coming from abroad, stay overnight to travel the following day to either Nuwara Eliya or Kandy or drive down to Hambantota or Galle. The overnight stay also includes guests who come back a day prior to their flight on the following day. Therefore, though Airport Garden is a large property it is a transit hotel. We also have business traffic from those who have offices and factories in Katunayake, especially the Free Trade Zone.

I was involved in the opening of Vivanta by Taj Bentota back in January 1998, a 160 room resort. I must say it is still the best resort along that section of the coastline. The hotel is doing quite well and we have made plans to renovate and refurbish the property. Taj Bentota is becoming a destination for weddings and it attracts many Indians who intend to have their weddings at the venue. New flights from India, namely from Coimbatore, Hyderabad and Vishakapatnam are a good indicator that business will pick up in the days ahead.

What are your thoughts on Colombo as a tourist destination? What more can be done?

The country needs to do a great deal to be prominent in the tourism sector. It is important to ensure that Sri Lanka has a digital presence across the world as a

tourist destination. We need to loosen up and market Sri Lanka much more. We need to use social media platforms across the board especially in countries like India and China that are very big markets as well as Europe and USA. It is essential to be present on social media. Then people will take notice.

Sri Lanka is still catering to the same segment, which it was catering to 20 years ago. We are still looking at the European markets with the addition of India and China. But the profile of tourists who are visiting Sri Lanka today has changed. The French, Germans and the British still come to see the historic and colonial country. But the age group that is visiting Sri Lanka is changing. We need to understand as to who the travellers are today. They are the millennials. The travellers of today are mostly below 30 years. The travellers today seek excitement. We need to cater to the needs of the new kind of traveller visiting Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka needs to have nature trails, cycling tracks, para-gliding and camping sites in the middle of the jungle; Sri Lanka must introduce tourism that is exciting. Heritage tourism is fine for the more mature tourist but not for young adults who are looking for an experience. We must evolve; we must create excitement for this new segment of travellers.

The Most Important Aspect To Bear In Mind Is That Sri Lanka Today Is Probably One Of The Only Countries Which Is Termed As Safe.

Today, there are 'single lady' travellers, women who are getting together as small groups, quite often former classmates or collegemates, who go on holiday leaving their family behind. What do they want? They want to do something exciting, like bungee jumping together or go on a boat ride, scuba diving or go to a place like Udawalawe to drive along dirt tracks in a jeep. These ladies want to do something exciting.

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As Area Director for Maldives, what can you tell us about the two vastly different markets?

The Sri Lankan market and the Maldivian market are very different from each other. They are two markets that have evolved differently. The Maldives is a very high-end

market where rates start from USD 450. The highest room rate in Sri Lanka is USD 250. We need to have some platform of rates to have sustainability of business in Sri Lanka.

The Maldives has become a very exclusive market and it caters to a very different segment. However, one cannot compare the two markets. Maldives today is one of the most expensive destinations in the world. The rates at super deluxe hotels like Taj Exotica in the Maldives starts at a base rate of USD 1,000 per night and goes up to USD 5,000 per night. That is a market that attracts a very different clientele. The four star hotels in the Maldives charge USD 500 to USD 800 per night.

It is unfair to compare Sri Lanka with the Maldives. Sri Lanka is just as beautiful as the Maldives and has great diversity. It is not possible to draw a comparison in terms of beauty, but Maldives by virtue of its location, coral reefs, being isolated and the fact that everything has to be airlifted and air freighted makes it a super expensive destination. The Maldives has no choice but to be very high in price. On the other hand, being expensive attracts people and clientele who are willing to pay that high price. On the other hand Sri Lanka has much to offer that Maldives cannot and that is what we need to encash on. The biodiversity that we have and the ecosystem that we have is beautiful. We need to market it well.

What are the future plans for Taj in Sri Lanka?

We want to expand in Sri Lanka. We are very keen to have more properties but we are looking for the right hotels. We would like to be on the east coast as well as the hill country. We are looking to manage properties with the right partner and the right size. We intend to open a deluxe property and it needs to be in line with our philosophy. We want to represent Sri Lanka and we want to represent luxury and Sri Lanka in ethos and that's what we are looking for in our next venture.

Sri Lanka Is A Great Country And It Has A Great Future...It Is Definitely Poised For Take-Off.

Could you tell us about yourself and your journey with Taj?

I will be completing 29 years with the Taj Group having joined in 1988. I started my career with Taj Bombay, where I worked for ten years. Then I came to Sri Lanka in

January 1998 to open Taj Exotica. I worked at Taj Exotica for three years and returned to India to work as General Manager at Fisherman's Cove in Chennai. Subsequently I was stationed as the General Manager at Taj Lake Palace Hotel in Udaipur. I was at Taj Palace in New Delhi for five years as General Manager. I was in Hyderabad as Area Director for six years after which I returned to Sri Lanka as Area Director for Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

Message to the readers?

Sri Lanka is a great country and it has a great future. As far as tourism is concerned the country has great potential and it is definitely poised for take-off. With the new developments happening and the tourism growing I can only see positive signs for Sri Lanka in the coming years and how.