

WE WILL BOUNCE BACK

The tourism ecosystem consists of many sectors. Transport services is one of the essential categories that build trust among visitors. Safe and quality transport is a crucial element that reflects the development of a country. Kishan De Silva, Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer, Transcend Drive is confident that Sri Lanka will bounce back. With over 20 years of experience in the sector, Transcend Drive has elevated transport services by providing luxury vehicles and highly trained staff to their customers. Sri Lanka has to focus on communicating credible information so that the travelers feel confident to visit the country. As Kishan De Silva says, we need the people to believe in us.

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Can you speak about the beginning of Transcend Drive?

We have been in the transport business for 20 years. Initially, our focus was mainly on corporate transport. After the war ended, we felt that we needed to provide our services to the hospitality and tourism sector as well. It was an entirely new segment and we introduced a novel concept. We have literally been 'change agents' of sorts. We usually turn things around for the better, and we are quite innovative in our approach.

In 1999, I actually stumbled upon providing transport services. With Emirates acquiring SriLankan Airlines, we saw an opportunity and submitted a proposal to supply them with a superior transport product. I emphasized to the then management of the need to provide a superior transport facility, particularly to the cabin crew and to the tech crew as they are the front line or the face of the Airline. This included of new and comfortable vehicles with a door to door pickup/ drop off service before and after flight, which was not considered by the predecessor.

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We purchased a brand-new fleet at that time specifically for this purpose and the fleet comprised of the latest model Toyota coaster buses and we imported ten vehicles. The first such vehicle to run in Sri Lanka were ours. We also bought a new fleet of Toyota vans and other sedans, to deliver a high degree of service to the Srilankan Airlines crew, which definitely was 'A' grade by all accounts.

We continued for about five years, and due to the economic climate, we exited from the crew transport owing to many factors. After that, we focused more on corporate transport and, with the end of the conflict, we decided to join the hospitality industry with a completely new offering. We approached Cinnamon Hotels, even though JKH had their own transport arm, Walkers Tours. They found our proposal very attractive, and they were happy with the product we were offering. We were awarded the contract to operate their travel desks at Cinnamon Grand and Cinnamon Lakeside and to deploy a fleet of Audi cars and SUV's, this includes A6, A4 and Q3 models. It was a challenge, we took the risk and decided to invest in a fleet of 55 Audi's in 2016, taking the industry by storm so to speak, and being true to our testimony set before, of being 'the change agent'. When Audi received our order, they could not believe it. No one had imagined of the possibility of an order of 55 Audi's in one shipment to one customer in Asia. We are the single largest fleet owner in Sri Lanka and in this region as we know. It was the same with Jaguar and Land Rover. From then up to now, it has been one accolade after another; we have secured the contracts to operate travel desks and operate the luxury fleet to prestigious international brands such as Shangri-La hotels in Sri Lanka, The Marriot, Hilton Colombo and Anantara resorts who want to extend superior and reliable services to their discerning guests. We provide Jaguars and Land Rovers to Shangri-

La while Anantara and Marriot have Outlanders and Discovery vehicles. That is where we are right now.

It was a massive investment on our part. We had no tax benefits at all, and we did not run to anyone for any concessions. We literally paid full price.

We decided to up the game with the new hotels and international brands coming into Sri Lanka. It was our way of telling the world that Sri Lanka is not a third world destination any- more. That is one of the reasons for us to take our business to the next level. In May 2016, we first rolled out the Audis' and tied up with Cinnamon Grand and Cinnamon Lakeside. Previously they had Nissan vehicles. The tourists traveling to Europe will have the option of choosing between luxury vehicle and regular use vehicle. It is the same in Dubai and in Singapore. When our cars went to the airport, for the first couple of months, the guests were really very impressed and pleasantly surprised at the level of service and the quality of product. We have eight travel counters under our belt and consider ourselves to be a formidable player.

We are probably the number one and the single largest luxury travel and transport provider in Sri Lanka. Why I say that is because I perceive our chauffeurs to be top of the crop. Our fleet is the best. Without a doubt, we have the most experienced drivers in the industry. We call them chauffeurs because they are a notch higher than the usual drivers. They are constantly reminded of who they are and the superior service that is expected of them. We want our chauffeurs to offer the best of service. We have provided them with comprehensive training, and they know what we expect of them.

There is a zero-tolerance policy for the short-fall of service delivery. I firmly believe that the customer who sits in the passenger seat of my vehicle is king. Irrespective of whatever walk of life they may be from, if he sits in my vehicle, he is my customer. We want to look after that person like royalty. That, I know goes a long way.

**As A Country, We Need First To Reassure The Safety Aspect...
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Sri Lanka is yet again facing a challenging time, how are things going to change, and what is the way forward?

As a country, we need first to reassure the safety aspect. We need to communicate this message to the foreign visitors coming to Sri Lanka. As a company, we always maintain very high standards of safety and service. There are many checks and balances, even in terms of our staff. We have tracking systems and accountability systems. We have everything where Transcend Drive is concerned. The need of the hour is to ensure the peace of mind to visitors and provide security while traveling. I believe that is what everyone is looking for now.

These types of incidents can happen and has happened in other parts of the world, as well. I am sure that Sri Lanka will emerge from this in a couple of months. What we mainly need to look at is security on the ground. Hotels seem to be adopting all sorts of security measures in order to safe guard the occupants.

On the road and outside hotels are where the authorities need to give visitors assurance of the sense of security, and the Security Forces and Police are doing a great job in controlling the situation. It is just a matter of time.

Authorities need to communicate and keep updating the people on the security measures taken to mitigate such incidents from happening again. They need credible information because the traveler today is well informed. They know what's happening and they have the capacity to analyze information. We, too, need to have a proper communication mechanism, providing credible information, which will encourage them to make the decision to visit Sri Lanka. The incidents that happened in Sri Lanka on April 21st, did not occur in isolation. Such attacks are happening in other countries as well, be it Europe or other parts of Asia. They have all bounced back, and I believe they bounced back quickly due to credible assurances presented by the authorities to tourists/travelers.

Looking at the long term, we need to educate Sri Lankans, in general on the importance of tourism to Sri Lanka. This perhaps should even be included as a subject in the school syllabus. We need every single person to feel a part of the industry, including three-wheeler drivers, king coconut sellers, and other such people to understand the bigger picture and how they fit in to it. I have seen ad campaigns in the region, that promote behavioral change towards the foreign visitors, I believe such initiatives will be beneficial for us to educate the public. This is the way forward. From the top blue-chip companies down to the fruit seller or

the person who makes the flower garlands, they are all part of the tourism industry, and we need to convey it to them. This will result in a drastic attitude change that is very much needed for Sri Lanka to offer a long- lasting and an authentic experience.

If you take Sri Lanka in general, what are your thoughts of infrastructure and roads as it is an essential aspect for you as well?

We have come a long way from where we were perhaps ten years ago, but we have a long way to go as well. We desperately need more good roads to travel. When we take tourists, who have been to other parts of the world, going on a 200-kilometer journey, in their minds is one and a half hours. In Sri Lanka that will be a five-hour journey. We urgently require a better road net- work. Sri Lanka is positioned beautifully to make tourism the number one industry in the country and be the most sought after in this region. That is if we have our infrastructure in place. In fair- ness to the Government, it is a hard sell to our people who have to give up land to build these roads. But our people also need to be educated as to why we need it. There will be a benefit when you give up a couple of perches or acres, then the value of the rest of the land will increase. The supporting industries can be built around those areas, and eventually people themselves benefit from infrastructure development. As a trans- porter, I need roads so that the wear and tear are less on my vehicles and the drive is comfortable for my guest.

Very often, when we look at selling an excursion to Kandy or to Galle, between these two options, the popular choice is Galle. That is because there is so much development in the Galle Fort, which offers an array of activities from dining experiences to events due to the ease of access by using the Expressway. Why is Tangalle, Dickwella, and Matara developing so fast to serve the tourist industry? It is because of the Expressway. If we have an expressway to Kandy, and Dambulla/Sigiriya, we will definitely see massive development in those areas as well. An extensive network of expressways will encourage more tourist and corporate visitors to explore as many destinations as possible in the island in the shortest possible time.

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How can we give tourists the confidence to continue to visit Sri Lanka after the recent attacks?

What more can we offer to make Sri Lanka attractive after the recent attacks? We probably will see a marginal drop from April to August. Of course, this is subjective, to the fact that we do not mess this up further. I believe tourists will start to come to Sri Lanka from November onwards. We need to offer, more entertainment events and activities, Colombo being the metropolitan city, to become a buzzing, go to place, the authorities need to allow investors to set-up entertainment facilities. Of course, we need to have regulatory controls without being too restrictive.

In 2019, with our engagement with the hotels, we saw January, February and March with tumbling records, compared to the numbers in 2018. If we had continued in that manner, including the hotels, every related industry would have seen a record year. Indeed, we had significant boost with Lonely Planet and the bloggers rating us really high, it was all there for the taking. It is regrettable that we had this setback, but I am sure we can rise from this and we certainly will; given the fact that the right people are in the right place.

In terms of the transport sector, what more can we do?

We have many challenges. Many are still quite apprehensive when it comes to transport in Sri Lanka. I believe the industry needs regulation and proper monitoring. This gives an added sense of security to the traveler. This assures them that they will not be ripped off or be subjected to an unsavory situation.

First, if we look at the public transport sector, there is much that needs to be done. Let's face it, our public transport is not the best. We have to improve on it since this is the mode of transportation that budget and at times middle-end travelers use. Transcend Drive caters to the high-end tourist. The budget traveler however is unlikely to use our transport at the prices we quote for the product/service on offer. They probably have increased numbers, but their per capita spending will not be as high. But we can reach the number of arrivals that the country is capable of achieving by attracting these travelers.

For example, if they have a daily budget of say 100 dollars, and within that, they wouldn't want to spend 30-40 percent of that just on transport. They would want to spend their time profitably doing the most they can on the budget they have. A high transport cost would be unattractive. In other parts of the world, where you have an

efficient rail and road system that runs on a reliable time table, cost of commuting is quite affordable. If our public transport is standardized and well regulated, I'm sure we would have many tourists making use of them as well as making it an incentive for the tourist on a budget to travel to Sri Lanka thus making it attractive for the budget carriers also to fly into Sri Lanka. Achieving numbers would not be difficult if we see that infrastructure is developed as well. We have hotels ranging from 1,000 dollars a night to 50 dollars a night. Do we have the transport system to support this? It is a definite no. We can not only rely on tour groups or charter groups that come to Sri Lanka. FIT's want to explore the country using the available transport.

Have the authorities and financial institutes given their support considering that you are in the hospitality industry as well?

We are in discussion with the authorities to give us and our employees the same benefits that the hotels are being provided.

Whilst some financial institutions have come forward to help us, others are looking at available options apparently due to lack of direction from the authorities. Since we are directly impacted, our fleet has literally not been running after the attack. They have looked at our plans and our partnering hotels, and we are very positive that they will grant us a grace period.

My main issue is that the Government needs to be proactive than reactive. Because tourism can be a massive push for Sri Lanka. We are not an industrialized nation. We are way behind, even in our agricultural practices. Tea and garments are fading off. Tourism is the sector that can really boom. The authorities need to be proactive and also engage with investors and operators. They need to understand and actively support in what we want to do.

In this situation, we need to come up with a great marketing campaign. We have not seen a good marketing campaign for years. We need to emulate the marketing campaign that are successfully carried out in the region. That is what we need for Sri Lanka right now.

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Are you confident about future business in Sri Lanka?

I am very positive, and I believe this is a momentary setback. Of course, we could have been alert and prevented this from happening, but now things have happened. By God's grace we will bounce back. Afterall we have survived through a 30-year war as well. During the war, we performed except at the height of the con- flict. If we look at the progress of the country from the time of the end of the war to where we are now, it is a gradual increase yearly. People will continue to come to Sri Lanka once the present situation settles. My emphasis is on the fact that we should handle communica- tions properly and give credible information. People need to believe what we tell them. If they believe, then they will visit Sri Lanka.