

Sri Lanka's Tourism: 30 Years of Silence Finished

In an interview with the Daily News, Tourism Promotion Minister Faizer Musthapha speaks about the development taking place within the country's tourism sector under Mahinda Chintana.

What are the plans drawn up to turn Sri Lanka into one of the most sought after tourist destinations in Asia?

Sri Lanka is a foremost tourist destination which has diverse attractions along with beauty, culture and warm and hospitable people. The only negative factor which caused a setback was LTTE terrorism. During the past 30 years, we could not gear ourselves because a few tourists came to our country due to this threat.



The fascist terrorism led by Prabhakaran over the past three decades has been wiped out by President Mahinda Rajapaksa and Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa. The tourism industry suffered the most due to terrorism and the industry which would benefit the most due to its eradication is also tourism. Today, we have to invest to our products.

During the past 30 years, hoteliers found it difficult even to pay salaries to their employees and new hotels did not come up because nobody wanted to invest as there was no growth in the tourism sector.

Nearly two thirds of our coastal line was subject to some sort of terrorism. So we could not develop tourism in the North and East either. Today, things have changed for the better.

We could promote tourism in difficult times as well. At present, the Tourism Ministry and the private

sector have joined hands to take tourism forward. We managed to get nearly 500,000 tourists to Sri Lanka even during difficult times.

Today, two million Sri Lankans are living abroad . If part of them come to Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka will take an upturn in tourism. When we look at the July figures, there is 28 percent growth in the tourism sector. When we catered to the Middle East market, many laughed at us. I am proud to say, we had a mammoth growth of 104 percent in the Middle East market during July this year.



No market in Sri Lanka has recorded such a high growth. Today, we have looked at Eastern Europe, Middle East, China, India and other SAARC countries. We are not looking at the traditional market in Europe. We have diversified the other key markets as well. Keeping in line with the President's mission, we are aggressively promoting our tourism with the Middle East and India. So we are geared very well to promote Sri Lanka. Tourism sector contribution to the GDP is one to two percent. In future, there will be a major upturn due to the growth of the tourism sector.

What are the steps taken by the Ministry to develop the tourism industry in the Northern and Eastern provinces?

First we have to educate people on the current situation in Sri Lanka. The Ministry in collaboration with the Defence Ministry organized special charter flights during the Nallur Festival time.

We intended to attract the Tamil Diaspora to visit Nallur during that Festival time. We are working closely with president of the Tharnuyata Hetak Foundation Namal Rajapaksa to provide the opportunity to the youth who were unable to visit the North and East areas over the past three decades due to terrorism. Sri Lankans are very interested in visiting those areas. Once that starts, we will focus on promoting domestic tourism.

At present, there is a certain number of foreigners visiting the Eastern Province. We could never market the North as a tourist destination internationally during the past 30 years. Today, we have to showcase the North and the East, a hidden treasure of Sri Lanka not only to the foreign tourists but also to the Sri Lankans. Investors may also be interested to start new hotels in these provinces. I am very confident that Sri Lankan tourism under the guidance of President would be a key economic driver. We are also trying to develop the commercial activities carried out by the Ministry.

What are the relief measures given to those engaged in tourism industry to promote their industries?

Even during Tsunami, special concessionary loans were given to hoteliers to rebuild their industries while the Budget also offered special concessions. I don't think Sri Lanka today needs concessions.



Sri Lanka tourism has good products. Everybody, wants to invest in the tourism sector and also with the upsurge in tourism. I don't think concession is a key driver in getting the people to invest in the tourism sector. The key driver is people who are keen on investing in the tourism sector.

Can you see any major development in the tourism industry under the Mahinda Chintana?

Of course, a series of major development activities are taking place in Kalpitiya the North and East. As whole there will be a major development in the Sri Lankan tourism sector.

During the past 30 years, Sri Lanka tourism could not move due to terrorism. During the past we took lot of efforts to tell the world that Sri Lanka is safe. Today, people want to come and the interest they have shown in Sri Lanka is unbelievable. Some of our regional countries could not benefit because of the situation in Sri Lanka.

With regard to tourism, the President has instructed to give the minimum rates and provide a better service charge to employees in the hotel sector. We are bringing the minimum rates to the Colombo Five Star hotels as well. Under the leadership of the President, we can take forward Sri Lanka. We have also declared the next year "Sri Lanka Year". The President has given us a target to attract 2.5 million tourists. I am very confident that the Ministry can deliver the results.

What are the major countries which you have laid emphasis on to attract more tourists?

Our identified key markets are the UK, India, Middle East, China, France, Germany and Eastern Europe. These are the major countries from which most tourists come to Sri Lanka. Therefore, we will make use of our mission to take Sri Lanka tourism to a higher level.

Tourism industry was severely affected due to tsunami. What kind of relief measures have been given by the Government to hoteliers to rebuild their industries?

There was a soft loan scheme to rebuild the hotels destroyed by tsunami. The Government has taken every possible measure to assist them. Tsunami affected hotels have been offered concessionary loans by the Government.

Photos: TR, Flickr

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