

GOVERNMENT ATTITUDES THREATEN SRI LANKAN TOURISM



Looking at Sri Lanka with first impressions, there are enough positive points regarding its prosperity and tourism revenue to initially be optimistic. The country is enjoying an economic boom, they are slowly working to improve the infrastructure that was in such a mess following the Civil War and visitor numbers have tripled since 2009. On the surface, the massive influx of tourists of the coastal resorts and the fact that the prized Yala National Park is full of tourists hoping to see the leopards and elephants can only be a good thing; the problem is that when looking a little deeper at the underlying problems, some worrying attitudes and approaches to the tourism industry are uncovered that lead to questions over its future as a desirable and prosperous island destination.

Tourism is vital to the island but government attitudes to revenue and foundations means it could be in trouble.

Tourism is apparently viewed by Sri Lanka's government as a key factor in national socio-economical development, yet there is no separate Tourism Ministry, the field instead seen as the problem of the Economic Development Ministry. To make matters worse, controversy over expensive plans and possible corruption are getting in the way of necessary change and could potentially scare away foreign investors. The best example of this is the set of casinos proposed by an Australian gambling magnate, a plan which was discarded because locals supposedly feared they would lead to prostitution and was then replaced with a \$850 million Sri Lankan based casino venture. There seems to be too much focus on the business side and increasing revenue than developing a strong tourism industry and there are fears that what still remains of the island natural charm could crumble under the pressure of overpopulated resorts and the desire for money.

Going back to the issue of infrastructure, while improvements have been made, there is still work to do to restore the foundations of the cities and improve the island's tourist potential. Roads, ports and airports have all been built in recent years, which should all mean better access for tourists and increased desirability as a destination, but it is notable that the port of Hambantota is currently dominated by a Chinese silk route. It is important not to throw money into the wrong areas to simply make a profit, like questionable casinos, and to maintain development through continued efforts. Unchecked development in Bali led to poor refuse collection spoiling the beaches, the neon lights smothering Phuket became an eyesore rather than a welcoming beacon to tourists and there have also been traffic issues in Jakarta and floods in Manila.

Maintaining the desirability of Sri Lanka and improving tourism.

The island has its problems but there is no denying that its natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage are still massive draws. Asia's track record of over-development and spoiling resorts due to poor planning, poor infrastructure and too many tourists means that the potential for some of the proposed green tourism initiatives and the restoration of Colombo can easily be met with scepticism, especially when the old architecture being restored is being overshadowed by new 5 star hotels and international stores. It is important that Sri Lanka understands the need for a dedicated tourism ministry and restores the balance in progression, prosperity and protection for the sake of the resort's future.

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