RAISING THE LEVEL

TOURISM LEVELS MAY BE LOW NOW, BUT BIT BY BIT, VISITORS AND BUSINESS WILL RETURN TO SRI LANKA
The Crow and the Water Jar

A thirsty crow came upon a jar of water in a dry spell of weather. The water level was so low that the bird could not reach it with its beak. First, the crow tried to break the pot, then to overturn it, but the water jar was both too strong and too heavy for him. He thought he would die from thirst. Then the crow took a pebble in his beak and dropped it into the water. After dropping a great many pebbles into the water jar, the water level rose until the crow could reach it, drink and save his life.

This is one of Aesop’s fables that originates from ancient Greece, around 600 BCE. It relates to the ancient observation of the goal-directed behaviour of birds in the corvidae family (such as crows, ravens, magpies) whose tool-use and intelligence is well documented. Over the years, various morals have been ascribed to the tale, including ‘where there’s a will there’s a way’, ‘thoughtfulness over brute strength’ and ‘necessity is the mother of invention’.

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“In a survey conducted by Sunshine.co.uk, Sri Lanka was ranked ninth for destination weddings”

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Tourism's Long-Term Vision

It would be easy at a time like this to write an editor’s letter filled with optimism about the future: talking about ‘silver linings’ and the reasons why Sri Lanka tourism will bounce back stronger than ever.

But I know the reality facing many of you reading this is tough decisions on a daily basis: where to cut costs, whether to reduce staff numbers, or even deciding if you should keep your hotels open. There are no easy answers to these questions.

Yet, our cover story is one of long-term vision. This is not blind optimism, but recognising that, despite the challenges, Sri Lanka must continue to compete as a tourism industry on a global level and against destinations that have been in operation for much longer.

Our cover story illustration is based on the ancient fable of the crow and the water jar, a 2,500-year-old example of how perseverance and intelligent planning can save the day. ‘Necessity is the mother of invention’ is ascribed as one of the morals of the tale, and we asked what is necessary for the tourism industry in Sri Lanka: what can be done now to be better prepared for the future.

Many issues affecting the industry are evolving rapidly, and to address these, we are now publishing daily articles on our website. This includes industry news, statistics and interviews on issues that are too time-sensitive to feature in our print publication. Please visit HospitalityInsider.lk and subscribe to our newsletter to be kept up-to-date.

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ARRIVALS

Visa on arrival on hold

Amid growing security concerns, the visa on arrival programme that was scheduled to be implemented on 1 May 2019 has been put on hold indefinitely.

In April, the government made a decision to provide visa on arrival for citizens of 39 countries. However, owing to current security concerns around the country following the Easter Sunday terror attacks, the government has decided to delay the initiative until further notice.

The visa on arrival pilot programme was aimed at boosting inbound tourist numbers during the low season, from May to October.

TOURISM

Sri Lanka Tourism mulls travel insurance

Sri Lanka Tourism is considering including a travel insurance premium into airfares. At a press conference on 10 May, Minister of Tourism John Amaratumga spoke of plans to set up a $100 million insurance fund to pay travellers in the event that they suffer an injury or death during their stay in the country. At a more recent conference, the minister mentioned plans were still being discussed since advisories have been relaxed.

As a result of multiple countries issuing travel adversaries against Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks, travellers were not eligible to receive insurance from their countries if they decide to visit the island. The proposed compensation coverage for tourists under this insurance fund would vary from $100,000 to $250,000.

CONFERENCE

UFTAA steps up to boost Sri Lanka Tourism

The Universal Federation of Travel Agents Association (UFTAA), one of the largest agents and tour operators in the world, has partnered with Sri Lanka Tourism to boost the country’s efforts in repositioning its tourism sector.

The UFTAA is a 53-year-old organisation with a presence in 70 countries.

The organisation is an influential negotiating partner with leading travel and tourism organisations. It is renowned for helping countries like Turkey, who have faced similar situations in the past. They plan on holding their next annual general meeting in Sri Lanka as a sign of support towards the local tourism sector.

The President of UFTAA Sunil Kumar said that the association usually holds their AGM at the end of August, but on a request made by the Travel Agents Association of Sri Lanka (TAASL), they have decided to bring it forward. “There’s an urgent need for visibility for Sri Lanka tourism,” Kumar commented.

Stakeholders hope that by hosting the AGM of the leading organisation in tourism, it will send a strong message to the world that Sri Lanka is ready to welcome travellers again.

Organisers hope that the event will attract representatives from over 30 countries. The event is set to take place at one of the three hotels that were affected by the Easter Sunday attacks.

REOPENING

SHANGRI-LA, COLOMBO, REOPENED

The Shangri-La Hotel, Colombo, reopened its doors in June. The hotel was closed since the terror attacks that took place on 21 April 2019.

On Wednesday 12 June, F&B outlets including Sapphyr Lounge, Capital Bar & Grill and Kaema Sutra reopened for service. Chi, the spa, and rooms for guests stays became available from Saturday 15 June onwards.

The hotel closed after the deadly Easter Sunday attacks that fatally injured several guests and employees. Since the closure, Shangri-La Colombo has prioritised the well-being of its guests and staff who were affected by the traumatic event.

According to a spokesperson from Shangri-La, the hotel organised counselling sessions with the help of local and foreign mental health professionals for its staff members who are recuperating from injuries. The service has also been extended to guests who were affected.
Financial Relief for the Tourism Sector

The government has introduced several initiatives to provide relief to the struggling tourism sector.

State Minister of Finance Eran Wickramaratne said that the Central Bank will direct banks to provide a one-year debt moratorium and subsidised working capital for the sector. The moratorium period will be until 31 March 2020. However, the moratorium will be provided on a case-by-case basis. Large hotels, until 31 March 2020 for both capital and interest payments granted as of 18 April 2019.

The working capital loans will be based on the revenue of hotels and working capital debt. Interest will come under separate loans to be repaid from July 2020. The state minister added that up to 75% of the interest will be absorbed by the government from the effective interest rate until 31 March 2020. However, the moratorium will be provided on a case-by-case basis. Large hotels, smaller operations and tour operators are entitled to the debt relief scheme.

The concessions are also extended to over 500 small business owners who have collectively received a total of Rs15 billion through the Enterprise Sri Lanka initiative implemented by the Finance Ministry. Interest subsidies on tourism loans registered on or before 18 April 2019, and granted before 31 March 2020 under the loan scheme, will be borne by the government.

To provide further relief to the tourism sector, the government has decided to reduce the value-added tax on hotels and tour operators registered with the SLTDA by 1 April 2019. The VAT reduction will be in place until 21 May 2020.

The Finance Ministry also has plans to provide a financial relief programme for the informal sector, especially small hotels and homestays, which have been severely affected by the drop in tourists. To be eligible, unregistered businesses must apply for a three-month provisional registration with the SLTDA, obtain a recommendation letter and apply for financial assistance.

Informal accommodation providers can apply for an interest-free loan of up to Rs500,000 under the ‘Sancharaka Podda’ loan scheme, which will be given under Enterprise Sri Lanka credit. The loans will be provided by the Regional Development Bank. The Treasury will give the interest subsidy of around Rs1,500 million. The loan will have to be repaid in three years and borrowers are given a grace period of one year.

Impact on F&B outlets

Restaurants across Colombo city hotels have seen a 90% drop in business since the Easter Sunday attacks on 21 April.

In addition to widespread cancellations as far as July, the number of non-residents patronising restaurants has drastically declined owing to security concerns around the country.

Hotels report that footfall to restaurants that largely drew couples, families and older clientele has seen the biggest impact. Buffets in particular are seeing a drop in numbers. A few restaurants reported that they wait for enquiries/reservations to take a call on whether to host buffets, while some restaurants host it on alternative nights. Hotels are hopeful that they will see an increase in guests with special promotions catering to the Cricket World Cup season.

The SLTDB hosted several social media influencers from Japan, Italy, the US and Ukraine to let the world know Sri Lanka is ready to welcome travellers again.

Social media influencers to boost Sri Lanka’s brand image

The SLTDB hosted some well-known social media influencers from 7-19 May in an effort to let the world know that Sri Lanka is safe and ready to welcome travellers again. The group representing influencers from several countries including the US, Italy and Ukraine were introduced to Sri Lanka’s lesser-known attractions in Jaffna, Dambulla, Kandy and Nuwara Eliya. The influencers were expected to post daily updates, photographs and articles across multiple platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and Pinterest. The regulatory body is closely monitoring for reach, viewership and targeted market generated by these influencers, and predicted that the total reach would be around 1,600,000.

In addition, the SLTDB hosted a media familiarisation tour for six foreign journalists on 26 April 2019 to further promote a positive country image in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks. Their time in Sri Lanka included visits to Ella, Yala, Galle, Hikkaduwa, Bentota, Kandy and Kataragama.

Chairman of SLTDB Kishu Gomes is confident that the “country will collectively bounce back”. Despite tourist arrivals dropping to 70% immediately after the attacks, the SLTDB recorded 1,700 tourist arrivals per day.

While extending his gratitude to the team of bloggers and journalists, Gomes invited other global tourism industry stakeholders to visit the country and help Sri Lanka build its image as a preferred tourist destination as ranked by independent organisations.
AWARDS

VOTING OPENS FOR 2019 READERS’ CHOICE AWARDS

Condé Nast Traveler, the world’s leading luxury travel magazine, has opened voting polls for the 2019 Readers’ Choice Awards.

Currently in its 32nd year, this is the longest-running and most prestigious recognition of excellence in the travel industry. The annual awards rank the best countries, resorts, hotels, cities, islands, airlines, airports and cruise lines in the world.

Approximately 81 hotels and resorts in Sri Lanka are open for voting to receive this year’s awards. Sri Lanka has also been nominated under the ‘Best Country’ category.

At the Readers’ Choice Awards 2018, Sri Lanka was recognised as the 19th Best Country to Visit. Two resorts under Resplendent Ceylon, Cape Weligama and Wild Coast Tented Lodge, and Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort came in 8th, 19th and 16th place, respectively.

RENOVATE

REFURBISHMENT FOR JETWING LIGHTHOUSE

Jetwing Lighthouse, the iconic hotel located near Galle, closed in May 2019 for a full refurbishment. The refurb is scheduled to cost Rs450 million (£2.3 million).

In a disclosure notice issued to the Colombo Stock Exchange on May 10, the board has decided to phase the refurbishment and invest a sum of Rs200 million (£885,000) by August 2019 for the first stage. The remaining investment will be made in the future.

The hotel was designed by Geoffrey Bawa in 1996 and opened in 1997. During the renovations starting in May, 63 of the original rooms designed by Bawa will be revamped and a new pool will be installed along the first-floor rooms adjoining the ocean.

There are also plans to increase the 125kw solar energy and install a bio-gas plant, part of Jetwing’s ongoing sustainability initiatives.

Hiran Cooray is the chairman of The Lighthouse Hotel PLC, which also includes Jetwing Kuru-lubeda and Galle Heritage Villa by Jetwing.

PIPO NELPE

Nikki Beach to open in Sri Lanka

Nikki Beach Resort & Spa will be opening its first property in Sri Lanka in Balapitya.

The new development will have 200 rooms and suites. Four restaurants and bars are planned for the site, as well as a Nikki Spa, Tone Gym and Nikki Beach.

The Nikki Beach brand was founded in 1998 by Jack Penrod, who named the brand after his daughter Nicole.

Originally starting as a beach club, the concept of combining ‘music, dining, entertainment, fashion, film and art’ grew in popularity and gathered celebrity followers. Over 20 years, the company has grown and now boasts 14 beach clubs, and 4 hotels and resorts, as well as a lifestyle division and a non-profit charity.

The first beach resort was opened in Koh Samui, Thailand, in 2010. Forbes reports that a Nikki Beach Resort & Spa is also planned for Montenegro.

APPOINTMENTS

Pavan Kumar Chennam appointed Executive Chef

Weligama Bay Marriott Resort and Spa welcomed Pavan Kumar Chennam to the team in April as Executive Chef.
Sri Lanka’s Weligama Hotel Properties (WHPL) is being sold to Singapore’s Hotel Properties Limited (HPL) for $22.63 million, with the Central Bank-managed Employees’ Provident Fund (EPF) signing the deal, the buyer said.

WHPL owns the 198-room, 5-star Weligama Bay Marriott Resort & Spa, which is managed by the international hotel chain Marriott International.

WHPL disclosed on the Singapore Stock Exchange that its subsidiary HPL Properties (West Asia) Pte Ltd has entered into a purchase agreement with WHPL’s parent East West Properties Plc, Asia 2000 Investment Inc., and the Central Bank of Sri Lanka to purchase all 405.2 million issued shares of WHPL.

INVESTMENT

WELIGAMA HOTEL PROPERTIES SOLD

Anantara Peace Haven in Tangalle has promoted Sagara Abeykoon to the position of Chief Concierge and Assistant Manager of Travel and Tours. Sagara started his career in 2002 at the Royal Falcon Hotel in Dubai and worked in various properties in the Middle East before returning to Sri Lanka. Since then, he has worked at Taj Airport Garden, Colombo; Jetwing Lagoon, Negombo; and Ramada, Katunayake. He joined Anantara Peace Haven in July 2015 as Concierge Supervisor, bringing his global experience and exposure to the property. In 2017, he was accepted by Les Clefs d’Or, the elite concierge association, in recognition of his work excellence.

Abeykoon takes over the position of Chief Concierge from Duminda Boteju, who is also a Les Clefs d’Or member. There are only a handful of association members in Sri Lanka who are recognised by the famous crossed gold keys on the lapels of their uniforms.

INVESTMENT

FAIRWAY COLOMBO TO EXPAND ROOM INVENTORY

Fairway Colombo plans to add 110 rooms in an extension built on Chatham Street. This will increase the hotel’s room inventory to 290 in total. The move was made in confidence that business will pick up soon for the hotel, which is popular among patrons of the corporate and MICE sectors. The extension will include a conference hall that can accommodate up to 150 people, broadening the hotel’s MICE offerings to its clientele and making it a more attractive option.

At present, the leisure sector under Fairway Holdings offers several types of accommodation to guests. These include, Fairway Colombo, Fairway Sunset, Fairway Sunset Serviced Apartments in Galle, Lakeside Cottages in Nuwara Eliya and Go Outdoors, which has motorhomes and caravans.
April arrivals down 7.5%

Tourist arrivals declined by 7.5% versus April 2018, SLTDA data shows.

By April 2018, 180,429 tourists travelled to Sri Lanka. So far, the figure only reached 166,975 in 2019.

The industry is experiencing a steep decline in the number of tourists visiting Sri Lanka due to travel advisories issued by 37 countries, ranging from “of concern” to “essential travel only”, to “do not travel”.

Sri Lanka’s top three tourism source markets, India, China and the UK, make up 40% of annual arrivals. Due to the terrorist attacks, India and the UK advised citizens against all non-essential travel to the country, and China issued a ‘do not travel’ advisory.

The 7.5% decline in visitors in April 2019 only captures a part of the impact of the attacks that took place on 21st of the month. Early estimates for May show around 1,700 tourists arriving per day, equivalent to a 60% decline vs May 2018.

May and June traditionally have the lowest numbers of tourist arrivals for the year, averaging 124,000 since 2015.

Europe became the largest source region, providing 87,532 visitors (just over half all tourist arrivals) in April 2019. Asia & Pacific declined slightly to 38% from 40% in March, with a total of 63,753 tourist arrivals. The Americas region also declined from 8% in March to 6% in April.

Tourist arrivals by region

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Top ten source markets

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<th>Country</th>
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<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>14%</td>
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<td>Germany</td>
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<td>China</td>
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<td>Australia</td>
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<td>France</td>
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<td>Switzerland</td>
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<td>USA</td>
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<td>Maldives</td>
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<td>Canada</td>
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Almost all major source markets saw a decline in tourist arrivals. Visitor numbers from the UK were down 5.2% to 24,718. Despite this, the UK moved into top place as the largest source market in April 2019. Arrivals from India saw a heavier decline, down 21.5% to 23,431. Arrivals from China were down 18.3% to 14,263.

Two major markets recorded growth despite the attacks, perhaps due to strong performance in the earlier part of the month: Arrivals from Germany were up 56.7% to 16,930, making it the third-largest source market, and arrivals from France were up 23.4% to 9,148.

The Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) has approved the construction of 16 new hotels in Q1 2019. According to the SLTDA’s quarterly report, the number of new hotel projects has increased to 366 from 350 at the end of last year. With an investment of $2,958 million, this increases the number of hotel rooms granted approval to 18,947.

Out of the 366 projects, 22 are large hotels with over 200 keys. The vast majority of approved projects, 259, have 49 rooms or less.

The highest volume of rooms (5,353) are located in Colombo, as expected, while Galle has the greatest number of projects (68). Notably, Kilinochchi has a new project in the pipeline with 15 rooms.

There are 2,403 establishments registered with the SLTDA at end-March. Of these, 147 are classified as tourist hotels.

The total number of registered rooms has increased to 38,908. This is up 2% from Q4 2018, and up nearly 8% year on year.

The SLTDA requests all accommodation providers renting out rooms for commercial purposes to register with the regulatory body with immediate effect. This includes supplementary accommodation providers such as homestays and guesthouses.

Director General of the SLTDA Upali Rathnayake emphasised that even homestays with one room are legally required to register with the SLTDA. In August last year, the regulatory body formulated an enforcement unit to conduct comprehensive research on the number of accommodation providers available in the country.

Rathnayake added that those who don’t comply with the request will be issued a letter urging them to register immediately. If they continue to evade the legal requirement, the SLTDA has set up a legal team that will take up proceedings against these accommodations. Those found guilty will be subject to a fine and/or imprisonment.

**PIPEDLINE**

16 New Hotels Approved in Q1

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**INDUSTRY**

SLTDA calls for registration of accommodation providers

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**Did you know?**

Colombo city is the most popular attraction for tourists from India, Australia and the UAE, while visitors from the UK and Germany prefer Kandy.

Source: SLTDA’s self-service kiosks at BIA
Sri Lankan hotels the best in Asia?

Congratulations to Chena Huts and Casa Colombo Collection – Mirissa for their nominations in the Asia’s Best Boutique Resorts category at the World Travel Awards 2019.

Now in its 26th year, the World Travel Awards covers country, regional and global awards, culminating in the Grand Final, which will take place in November 2019 in Oman.

The following Sri Lankan hospitality companies have been nominated in the Asia category for 2019 – we wish them all the best!

- **Chena Huts** is nominated for Asia’s Leading Boutique Hotel (2018 Winner of Sri Lanka’s Leading Lodge)
- **Casa Colombo Collection** is nominated for Asia’s Leading Boutique Resort
- **Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort** is nominated for Asia’s Leading Luxury Beach Resort (2016 Winner of Sri Lanka’s Leading Resort)
- **Grand Hotel, Nuwara Eliya, and The Galle Face Hotel** are both in the running for Asia’s Leading Heritage Hotel
- **Taprobana Island** is nominated for Asia’s Leading Private Island Resort for the 5th Year Running
- **The Newly Opened Wattura Resort and Spa** is nominated for Asia’s Leading New Hotel
- **Master Campers Sri Lanka** is nominated for Asia’s Leading Luxury Camping Company, for the 4th Year Running

Sri Lanka is also in the running for the Asia’s Leading Destination and Leading Adventure Tourism Destination 2019 awards.

SLTPB continues with promotional activities

Against the backdrop of the current country situation, the SLTPB continues to promote Sri Lanka despite travel advisories issued by several countries.

Attending the 25th edition of the Arabian Travel Market (ATM), Chairman of SLTPB Kishu Gomes emphasised that they have not stopped any promotional activity and is committed to go ahead with planned activities for the rest of the year.

In the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks, widespread cancellations and travel warnings have destabilised the tourism sector that had recorded 7% year-on-year growth at the end of February.

ATM, the leading global event for the inbound and outbound travel industry in the Middle East, was held at the Dubai World Trade Centre on 29 April 2019. Sri Lanka has been a consistent attendee of ATM since 2003.

Gomes also attended a press conference at the event to update destination management companies (DMCs), international hoteliers and media about the situation in the country.

Sri Lanka Tourism is set to participate in 38 international travel fairs and 18 road shows in 2019.

JOHANNE JAYARATNE APPOINTED NEW CHAIRMAN OF SLTDA

Minister of Tourism John Amaratunga recently appointed Johanne Jayaratne as the new chairman of the Sri Lanka Development Authority (SLTDA).

A statement released by the tourism ministry stated that this decision was made to maximise the efforts implemented by both the SLTDA and the SLTPB. The two regulatory bodies have been tasked with the mammoth responsibility of repositioning Sri Lanka’s image as a preferred travel destination following the Easter Sunday attacks clouding the country’s standing globally.

Kishu Gomes, who was appointed as the chairman of the SLTDA and SLTPB in February, has stepped down from his position at the SLTDA to prioritise promotional campaigns and rebuild the country’s brand image in the global arena.

Prior to his role as the managing director of the SLTPB, to which he was appointed in February, Jayaratne served as the executive director of the Airport and Aviation Authority of Sri Lanka. His key responsibility as the new chairman will be to strengthen the domestic tourism sector.
Veteran hotelier Rohan Karr joined Amaya Leisure PLC and The Kingsbury as Executive Director/Managing Director with effect from 1 June 2019.

Karr has also been appointed to the board of Hayleys PLC as an executive director. Both Amaya Resorts and The Kingsbury are owned by Hayleys PLC.

Previously, Karr was the executive vice president of John Keells Holdings and sector head for Cinnamon Hotels & Resorts – City Hotels. A revered figure in the local hospitality sector, Karr played an instrumental role in the branding team that launched Cinnamon Hotels & Resorts in 2005. Asian Hotels & Properties PLC and Trans Asia Hotels PLC announced that Karr has resigned from his post as executive director of both companies as of 24 May.

Amaya Leisure has nine properties across Sri Lanka and one resort in the Maldives. In January, Hayleys Group sold its controlling 66.2% share of Hunas Falls Hotels PLC for Rs696.3 million to Serenity Lake Leisure Ltd.

Sri Lanka Tourism launched a campaign to attract tourists from India during June to September. In partnership with the national carrier SriLanka Airlines, Sri Lanka Tourism, SLAITO and THASL launched packages to stimulate the Indian market.

Speaking to Hospitality Insider, Chairman of SLTDA Johannes Jayaratne said they had identified India as the number one country to target for promotions due to its close proximity to Sri Lanka and strong travel connectivity.

In Q1 2019, tourist arrivals from India were up 5.6% year on year to 107,000. Since the terror attack, arrivals from India declined sharply. India issued a travel advisory against “all non-essential travel”, which was relaxed at the end of May to advise ‘caution and vigilance’.

The promotions will include five packages with a combination of stays in Colombo, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, Dambulla, Sigiriya and the south coast.

Minister of Tourism Development, Wildlife & Christian Religious Affairs John Amaratunga said similar offers for other key source markets, including China, would be considered.

According to data analytics specialists STR, hotel occupancy fell 5.5% versus the first quarter in 2018.

Occupancy declined with a fall in demand (-5.8%) combined with almost flat supply (-0.3%).

Despite this, room rates and revenue were up the previous year. ADR was up almost 20% to just under Rs24,000. RevPAR was up 13% to reach almost Rs16,500. Revenue was up 12.7% versus Q1 of last year.

These figures cover the first three months of 2019. It is expected that performance in the next quarter will be significantly down due to travel advisories in place following the April terror attack.

Source: STR. Their data sample for Sri Lanka comprises 147 hotels of 10 or more rooms.
Marriott International announced plans to stack the world’s largest modular hotel in New York City. The 360-foot tower will be erected over a 90-day period, with prefabricated and pre-furnished guestrooms. The company said the structure will be topped with a modular roof and modular rooftop bar. It is expected to open in 2020 as the AC Hotel New York NoMad, part of the AC Hotels brand that focuses on modern essentials with a European flavour.

In a statement, Eric Jacobs, Marriott International’s Chief Development Officer for North America, Select and Extended Stay Brands, said the project “will act as a game-changing symbol to ignite even greater interest in modular among the real estate and lending industries”.

The 168 guest rooms will arrive on-site fully furnished, inside and out, from beds to flooring, to toiletries. Prefabrication is attractive for its ability to reduce timelines, curb construction noise and waste, and produce a product with factory-level precision, said Marriott International. The company has been exploring modular construction since 2014 as a means to offset lengthening construction times. Since 2011, they report that the average time to build and open a hotel in North America has increased by as much as 50 percent.

At present, the largest Marriott-branded modular-built hotel is a 354-room property in California. This new property in New York will become the world’s tallest modular hotel.

Las Vegas Sands (LVS) has entered into an agreement with the Singapore Government to expand the Marina Bay Sands Integrated Resort. Key elements of development include a state-of-the-art 15,000-seat arena, a luxury hotel tower, and additional MICE (Meeting, Incentive, Convention and Exhibition) space.

LVS specialises in Integrated Resorts, which include a hotel with a casino, convention facilities, entertainment shows, theme parks, retail and fine dining. Located near the central business district in the heart of Singapore, Marina Bay Sands has attracted more than 330 million visitors since opening in 2010. The property has brought over 700 new MICE events to Singapore since it opened and hosted 3,680 events at the Sands Expo and Convention Centre in 2018 alone.

In a statement, Marina Bay Sands said the new arena will play a key role in bringing new and repeat visitors to Singapore, and will attract top entertainers who otherwise might not have been able to include Southeast Asia on their tours. Catering to leisure, business and ‘premium gaming’ customers, the hotel tower will feature approximately 1,000 all-suite rooms, and a sky roof with a swimming pool and restaurant. The projected budget for the expansion is approximately $3.3 billion. A timeline for completion is not yet available.

Hilton Worldwide is number 3 on the list, the highest ranking hospitality company. Hilton has a portfolio of 17 brands comprising over 5,600 properties worldwide. They employ 60,000 team members in Asia.

The next hospitality group in the Best Places to Work list is InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG), at number 6. In 2018, IHG reported 5,600 hotels worldwide, 271,000 rooms in the pipeline and total gross revenue of $27.4 billion.

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RIU OPENS TWO HOTELS IN THE MALDIVES

RIU Hotels & Resorts (RIU) opened two new hotels in the Dhaalu Atoll in the Maldives. The 4-star Riu Atoll and the 5-star Riu Palace Maldivas opened in May 2019.

The RIU chain has eyed Asian expansion for some time since its first Asian hotel opened in Sri Lanka in 2016.

The process for opening the two Maldivian hotels began in early 2017 and has taken over two years to create the finished product. The properties, on neighbouring islands, are linked by an 800-meter walkway over the water.

In a statement, Luis Riu, CEO of the family-owned third generation company, said, “This is a great moment for the chain because we have been working towards opening a hotel in the Maldives for over seven years. To open two hotels at the same time, having overcome an exciting technical and logistical challenge due to their geographic location, is, for me, a dream come true on both a personal and a professional level.”

Riu Atoll, the 4-star classic hotel has 264 rooms, 36 of which are over the water. Riu Palace Maldivas is a smaller, 5-star hotel with 176 rooms. Both hotels have interior décor that respects the surroundings in which they are located, with the use of natural wood elements and glass.

The RIU chain was founded in 1953 by the Riu family. Since its beginnings as a small holiday firm on the island of Mallorca, the chain has expanded vastly.

RIU Hotels & Resorts now has 93 hotels in 19 countries and over 70% offer on an all-inclusive service.

LAOS TO INTRODUCE E-VISAS

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that e-visas will be introduced in June.

All foreign visitors will be eligible to apply online for a single entry visa for visits of up to 30 days. The Vientiane Times reports that preparations for the service have been underway for some time. The scheme aims to attract more foreign visitors to Laos by modernising and improving the speed of public services.

According to Lodging Econometrics (LE), at the end of Q1 2019, the total construction pipeline in the Asia-Pacific region consisted of 4,634 projects and 975,947 rooms. These figures are up by 75 projects and 14,771 rooms since Q4 2018.

A similar number of projects are in the early planning stage and are scheduled to start in the next 12 months. Collectively, these will provide an additional 344,206 rooms across 1,575 projects.

Two-thirds of the Asia Pacific hotel construction pipeline is currently under construction. LE data shows 3,059 projects and 631,741 rooms in this phase of development.

LE forecasts 3 projects to open in 2019 with 652 rooms, and 6 projects with 903 rooms anticipated to open in 2020. These will increase the current supply of hotel rooms by 13.7%.

Source: Data provided by Lodgings Econometrics – The Global Leader for Hotel Real Estate Intelligence
TOURISM

Occupancy, ADR & RevPar down in the Asia-Pacific Region

Data from STR across three key performance metrics show negative results for the Asia-Pacific region’s hotel performance in the first three months of the year.

- Asia Pacific

-1.3% to 67.4%
Occupancy

-0.9% to $103.63
Average daily rate (ADR)

-2.2% to $69.81
Revenue per available room (RevPAR)

- Central & South Asia

In the Central & South Asia region, figures for the first three months of the year bucked the wider Asia-Pacific Trend. Comparing Jan-Mar 2019 with the same period in 2018:

+1.5% to 70.1%
Occupancy

+1% to $124.13
ADR

+2.5% to $87.05
RevPar

PIPELINE

HYATT TARGETS INDIA EXPANSION

Hyatt Hotels Corporation (Hyatt) plans record growth for the company in the Indian market. Over the next 24 months, 14 new properties will be opened in the country, adding 2,100 guest rooms.

The hotels are targeted at leisure and cultural destinations, with a focus on emerging Indian cities. In a statement, Hyatt acknowledged relaxed visa rules and heightened tourism spend as key factors in the demand for growth in India’s hospitality industry.

The new hotels will be across several of Hyatt’s brands: Hyatt Centric, Alila (acquired as part of the Two Roads Hospitality acquisition in November 2018), Hyatt Regency and Hyatt Gurgaon.

Four hotels are scheduled to open in 2019 with a further seven in 2020. The first Hyatt hotel in India opened over 30 years ago. Globally, Hyatt has more than 850 properties in 60 countries across 6 continents.

MARKET

Get onboard! – TripAdvisor Moves into Cruises

TripAdvisor users can now write reviews, share photos and search for deals on cruises under a special section on the website called “TripAdvisor Cruises”. By branching into this new market, the company expects to “expose cruises to up to half a billion monthly users”.

TripAdvisor Cruises features user-generated content, price comparisons, search filters and the so-called “Ship-tinerary” pages – robust profiles of ships to help users decide if it is the right option for them.

The global cruise industry continues to grow at a steady pace, according to data from the Cruise Liners Association (CLIA), with 30 million passengers expected to travel in 2019, a 34% increase over the past five years.

TripAdvisor is tapping into a market they are already familiar with, having acquired Cruise Critic, the world’s largest cruise site in 2007. TripAdvisor data from 2018 show that 32% of TripAdvisor users have cruised before and 44% are cruise shoppers. So far, TripAdvisor Cruises is available in the US and the UK.
APAC Growth: Vietnam Takes the Lead

Vietnam is predicted to lead Asia Pacific destinations in terms of the annual average growth rate over the next five years, says the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA).

An average annual growth Rate (AAGR) of 14 percent is predicted for Vietnam, well in excess of the Asia Pacific average of 5.5 percent.

Out of 210 mn additional IVAs into APAC by 2023, predicted source regions are:

- **73.7%** Asia
- **10.1%** Americas
- **10.9%** Europe
- **2.2%** Pacific
- **0.5%** Africa
- **2.7%** Other Countries


SUSTAINABILITY

Six Senses Extends Eco Credentials

Marine Life, a marine conservation NGO, reports that there may be up to 82,000 different chemicals entering the oceans from personal products. Most sunscreens contain synthetic chemical ingredients harmful to the marine environment. Along with ocean acidification and climate change, these can cause significant damage to corals, including bleaching and deformities. To engage guests in this initiative, Six Senses will be communicating with them prior to their stays, informing them of this commitment and suggesting options they could use during their stay. Six Senses is also a part of the United Nations Green Fins Environmental Programme, which aims to ensure conservation of coral reefs.

Six senses is a leading operator of luxury hotels, resorts and spas. They currently manage 18 hotels and resorts across 14 countries, plus 37 spas under the brand names Six Senses, Evasion, Six Senses Spas and Raison d’Etre. A further 18 hotels and resorts are in the development pipeline. In February 2019, Six Senses became a part of the IHG family of hotel brands.

TOURISM TRENDS

ITB CHINA PREDICTS TRAVEL TRENDS

At the ITB China conference in May, ITB’s experts revealed the trends driving Chinese tourists this year.

**Culture Travel** is high in demand, with three quarters of surveyed travel agents expecting growth of 30% or more over the next three years. Chinese travellers are looking for cultural immersion, driven by a core desire to understand a destination’s local culture. Cultural travel is also becoming more segmented, with products targeted to specific demographics. In Europe, for example, many visitors are keen to experience local wine culture and tours are arranged around this. ITB’s experts also note that Chinese culture travellers are usually older and appreciate Chinese-speaking guides and ‘opinion leaders’ at the destinations.

**Sports Travel** is expected to grow by 25–30% over the next three years. Data from a survey of outbound travel agents suggest the market will reach RMB1.5 trillion ($220 billion) by 2020. Big sporting events, such as NBA basketball, World Cup football and the European football league, are hugely popular. The industry predicts the 2019 AFC Asian Cup and the 2020 UEFA European Football Championship will be top attractions over the next two years.

Luxury hotel & spa operator Six Senses is instigating a brand-wide ban on all toxic sunscreens. With effect from 1 September 2019, all hotels, resorts and spas will only provide marine-safe, environmentally friendly sunscreen products.
YOUR DAILY MUST-READ

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Tourism levels may be low now, but bit by bit, visitors and business will return to Sri Lanka.

The goal of this article is not to talk about the short term, about issues of immediate financial difficulties, travel advisories, financial relief or low-season promotion strategies, important and urgent though these are. It is to look beyond and ask how this time can be used to develop the industry into a better version of its current self. In this regard, we collected opinions from several leading industry figures and asked them, where do the opportunities lie?

Much like in the fable of the crow and the water jar, a thoughtful approach, clever actions and perseverance may lead the way out of this drought.
JOHANNE JAYARATNE

Joyaratne held the position of Managing Director of the SLTPB until May, when he took on the role of Chairman of the SLTDA. Prior to joining the SLTPB, Jayaratne served as Executive Director of the Airport and Aviation Authority of Sri Lanka. He sees an opportunity to strengthen the systems in place to create a more solid footing for when visitors return.

Long term, I want to make use of this time to strengthen three key areas.

First, I want to set up a complete automation of the SLTDA registration and certification process for stakeholders. There should be minimum physical intervention involved, other than the physical inspection of a premises. The current system is a little archaic and needs to be automated to expedite the process. ICT will play a huge role in that process.

Second, to look at resorts in areas like Passikudah and bring them up to mark. We can assist them in improving their business models and infrastructure, etc.

Third is the enforcement area. It’s estimated that the informal sector accounts for around 65% in Sri Lanka – that’s a huge number. We want to bring them into the fold and get them registered. Now, with the government’s financial relief package, the informal sector has a definite incentive to be formalised. Bringing them into the fold means they have support to continue with their business operations and there’s a regulatory framework at play.

There will be no penalties for previously unregistered accommodations that come forward and want to register to take advantage of the incentives offered. Of course, bringing them into the fold will give the government an additional tax return, which will help offset some of the financial relief packages they’re putting in place; it’s a nice give and take.

I really see an opportunity, a silver lining if you will. If we can put our house in order and put all these things in place, we can definitely offer a much more sophisticated product and service to guests coming to Sri Lanka in the future.

Speaking of, I’m really keen to move away from using the label of ‘tourist’ for visitors coming into the country. I want to replace it over the next couple of months and start talking about ‘guests’ rather than ‘tourists’ and numbers. Sri Lanka is known for its hospitality. When people come to Sri Lanka, they are guests of this large family; that’s what we need to promote. Changing the rhetoric will have a subtle impact on all the interactions in the industry.

"More environmentally conscious travellers are more likely to reinvest and return year on year"

MALIK FERNANDO

Fernando is the Managing Director of Resplendent Ceylon and a founding force behind the new Sri Lanka Tourism Alliance. Dilmah Tea’s Relais & Chateaux luxury resort circuit in Sri Lanka includes Tea Trails, Cape Weligama and Wild Coast Tented Lodge.

Looking at the longer term, we want to take advantage of the outpouring of sympathy for Sri Lanka. There is a lot of support from overseas companies, not only in terms of security and advice, but also with positioning and marketing.

There has been frustration in the industry over a lack of proper promotion to attract high-end travellers. Going forward, if things get back on track, this frustration may still be there, and may even be exaggerated because higher end travellers could stay away longer.

We have established the Sri Lanka Tourism Alliance to be a lightning rod within the areas that we (the industry) can control, to improve both communication and the quality of the product. The opportunity is there for us to get together as an industry, understand how fragile we are, see how we could drive a consensus on the kind of product we want to be, and look at specific positioning rather than the mass market.

I firmly believe that we shouldn’t cheapen the destination, because the Sri Lankan product hasn’t changed. Luxury and high-end is the future. ‘Bucket-list’ travellers play a key role, but a market based solely on them is not sustainable.

"When people come to Sri Lanka, they are guests of this large family; that’s what we need to promote"
VICKUM NAWAGAMUWAGE

Nawagamuwage, the CEO/Founder of Santani Wellness Resort & Spa, near Kandy, believes that, ultimately, all press is good press. The key is to use it to connect with potential future visitors.

The bottom line is that we can’t let go of the awareness Sri Lanka received as a result of the attacks. We need to keep it going until we are ready to welcome people back. It is not about driving traffic for the next week, but creating engagement that means something when things are okay again. Sri Lanka should be the first destination in people’s minds.

Sri Lanka has received much more publicity now than it has ever before, even during the war. This was an international issue, a shared issue with the world, and it received significant front page coverage. Obviously, this news was tragic. At the same time, news is still news, and I am sure that more people know about Sri Lanka now than compared to before 21 April.

We need to leverage this news coverage and use this opportunity positively, to create a long-term emotional attachment with people. That way, when the country is ready and people are thinking about their next holiday, Sri Lanka is already at the back of their minds.

To do this, we need to have stories about Sri Lanka in the international press throughout the recovery period. It needs to be done subtly. It’s not about trying to push tourism too much – that might give an impression that we care about our bottom lines more than the safety of tourists – rather, it’s about long-term client engagement.

We can keep Sri Lanka in people’s consciousness through articles on other topics: the recovery, our people, property, surfing and wellness for example, and gradually feed in little bits of tourism and the destination as well. People who didn’t know about Sri Lanka before will read these articles and learn about the country, and this information will remain in their minds.

Over time, we can slowly change the narrative from negative to positive. We can create emotional connections with people who will be our visitors of the future. That’s a positive thing we can gain out of all this, and the publicity we’ve received. After all, there’s no such thing as bad publicity. The next step is to leverage it.

"Over time, we can slowly change the narrative from negative to positive, and create emotional connections with our future visitors"
Tourism and Terror
ACROSS ASIA
LESSONS FOR SRI LANKA

WHAT WILL SRI LANKA’S TOURISM RECOVERY LOOK LIKE?

One approach to answering this could lie in looking outward at industry trends in countries that were affected by similar incidents in the past. There are typical aftermath visitor behaviour patterns to be aware of, as well as a trend of general industry bounce-back. The disclaimer, of course, is that no terror attack is the same – outside of the obvious factors (location, weaponry used, fatality and injury numbers), recovery can be heavily dependent on global perceptions of the country, its governance structures and its history of conflict.

We take a look at broadly comparable attacks in neighbouring South and Southeast Asia to see what they experienced in the aftermath, and guidance that can be taken from it.

Bali, 2002

Three bombs ripped across the crowded tourism hotspot in October 2002, leaving 202 dead. Among the dead were foreign nationals from 21 countries, including 88 Australians and 28 Brits. Multiple travel warnings ensued, including from the key source markets of Japan (Bali’s No. 1 source market in 2001), Australia and the UK. Arrivals took an immediate hit, dropping 16% in October. November saw an even more severe impact, with a 57% drop year-on-year (YoY).

While Bali had seen a mild decline in arrivals that year, during the January to September period (1.1%), attributable to seasonal factors, this sharpened to a 5.2% drop in total arrivals by the end of 2002.

The data then takes an interesting – if slightly conflicting – turn. In 2003, total arrivals to Bali were down 22.8% versus 2002. This is despite October, November and December 2003 seeing a YoY spike in arrivals, with positive growth rates even compared to 2001 levels. In the first half of 2004, tourist arrivals return to roughly pre-attack levels and are up 69.1% on 2003. By the end of 2004, tourism has recovered, with total arrivals increasing 46.9% YoY and even showing a moderate 13.4% rise versus 2002. This puts the bounce-back for Bali at around 20 months.

THE RIPPLE EFFECT

While a decline in arrivals is to be expected, its ripple effects often go beyond the large players to reach the informal sector. In Bali, most beach vendors were young migrant workers from other islands, with limited alternative livelihoods. Lower business translated into difficulties in paying for basic amenities, while also exacting a social cost through being unable to pay for children’s education or participate in religious rituals that are a vital aspect of social life. Many of the small vendors reported anxiety and depression, while others fell to petty theft and crime. The situation was...
exacerbated by rising religious tension brought on by the attack.

**Bangkok, 2005**

In August 2015, a bomb exploded inside the Erawan shrine in Bangkok, located at the Ratchaprasong Intersection - one of the Thai capital’s busiest tourism hubs. The explosion killed 20 people including five Malaysians, five Chinese, two from Hong Kong, one Indonesian and one Singaporean. Citizens from 13 countries were among those injured. Most of the victims were tourists visiting the shrine. Twenty three countries issued travel warnings, ranging from the lowest Level 1 warning from the Netherlands to a Level 4 from Hong Kong.

After the attack, while the number of tourist arrivals continued to increase YoY, the growth rate declined significantly. In the first half of 2015, the YoY growth rate was 29.1%. During September to December following the attack, arrivals growth slowed to 5.6% vs. 2014 levels. This suggests a sizeable impact on the tourism industry, although it should be noted that using Thai arrival data to map arrivals to Bangkok is not without its limitations, particularly given Thailand’s highly diverse tourist offerings.

"Originating countries with low to no exposure to terrorism are often more sensitive about travel safety than those with a history of conflict"

Although the tourism sector as a whole suffers with each attack of this nature, market segments often react differently. After Hong Kong raised its travel advisory for Bangkok to “Red Alert”, arrivals from major Asian markets dropped by 10%. Originating countries with low to no exposure to terrorism are often more sensitive about travel safety than those with a history of conflict in their country of origin. Nationals from countries that tend to travel in groups (commonly China and Japan) are prone to mass cancellations.
Mumbai, 2008

The coordinated terror attacks in Mumbai in November 2008 included multiple explosions and hostage situations in two popular hotels: The Oberoi Trident and The Taj Mahal Palace. The Oberoi lost 32 staff and guests, while 137 people were killed at the Taj, with foreigners holding western passports being singled out.

Tourist arrivals took an immediate hit and were down 10.5% YoY the first month after the bombing. This negative trend continued for five months, with numbers down an average of 10.4% YoY. After six months, the decline starts to level off. Twelve months after the attacks, tourist arrivals recovered and were registering a slight increase on both 2007 and 2008 levels.

What contributes to a swift bounce-back? In Thailand, officials were keen to have things back to “business as usual”, re-opening the shrine in a few days and encouraging people to visit and pay their respects. Most businesses and schools in the area remained open. But Thailand also invested heavily in consistent and clear marketing, with back-to-back annual country marketing campaigns for “Amazing Thailand”.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTELLIGENCE

Governance, too, is key. Following the Mumbai attacks, the media spotlight fell on intelligence – or lack thereof. At a national level, given India’s vast land area, the Intelligence Bureau (IB) reorganized itself to share information effectively with all other security agencies. Subsidiary Multi-Agency Centres were set up in 30 key locations across India to strengthen country-wide surveillance. At a more granular level, since the attackers entered the city in a boat, coastal surveillance and security was tightened. Ensuring safety and security is often beyond the private sector’s ambit and is instead a function of higher-level governance and intelligence bodies.

So, what does this mean for Sri Lanka? The global story of recovery is not as bleak as one may expect. An understanding of what to expect in the few months after an attack, as well as being prepared to weather the storm, will go a long way in cushioning the economic and social impacts of a tourism fall-out.

"An understanding of what to expect in the few months after an attack, as well as being prepared to weather the storm, will go a long way in cushioning the economic and social impacts of a tourism fall-out"

Expert view:

The industry was poised for an increase in tourist arrivals in 2019 and the Easter Sunday attacks are certainly a setback. Having said this, Sri Lanka came out of a 30-year conflict, and so did the tourism industry. The entire industry is working as one to come out of this crisis. The challenge is to shorten the recovery period and bounce back as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, terror attacks are becoming a common phenomenon globally. Industry leaders are lobbying with government authorities to extend financial relief packages to industry stakeholders and employees, lobbying with the authorities concerned to speak in one voice as the country’s situation gets under control, formulating a recovery marketing plan including tactical offers to stimulate market demand, planning a medium- and long-term PR-led communication plan combined with a clear focus on strengthening the security and safety measures in the industry. The tourism industry in Sri Lanka is resilient, with the courage and determination to make a comeback fast.

Amal Goonetilleke - CEO of The Hotels Association of Sri Lanka & MDF Senior Tourism Adviser.
Thinking Differently
Promotions to cut through the noise

What holds potential travellers back from committing to long trips? Well, rent expenses for one. Knowing there will be an outlay of expenses back at home (or the hassle of subletting) can be quite off-putting.

Contiki, a group travel operator for 18 to 35 year olds, recognised this and turned it to their advantage. They offered to pay the rent of travellers who book their 7 Wonders tour, visiting the Seven Wonders of the World. Paying my rent while I’m on holiday? Sounds great!

In the small print, the promo actually boils down to a discount. A standard saving of up to $2,840 on the tour price, calculated based on the national average rent in the US for 2 months. What’s important here is not the figures, but the approach. Contiki recognised a pain point for their target demographic and, by presenting the saving in a different way, removed the barrier to purchase (and generated a lot of press coverage at the same time).

No doubt Sri Lanka’s tourism industry is going to be in for a tough couple of months. How can your hotel think differently and offer promotions that cut through the noise?
CRISIS COMMUNICATION

How hotels handle guest and staff communication in the aftermath of a crisis can be crucial for the company’s future well-being.

When a destination faces an unexpected event, whether it’s a terrorist attack, natural disaster or political instability, the first question holidaymakers ask is ‘Should we stick to our plan?’ As a knee-jerk reaction, many will cancel their bookings, while some might want to monitor the situation more closely before taking a decision. These unfortunate situations lie beyond the control of hoteliers and hotel staff. However, how hotels conduct themselves and how they handle guest concerns is of paramount importance and will dictate the quality of the relationship with their guests. Learning to manage communications with guests and staff during a crisis will help you sustain your business in the long run. Follow our list of tips to help you improve your communication skills to deal with guest concerns and prepare your team for future emergencies.

With Hotel Guests

1 **BE PROACTIVE** – Contact your guests before they reach out to you. Not only will this shine a positive light on your hotel, but it will also show guests that their safety is of the highest importance to you.

2 **COMMUNICATE CLEARLY AND TRANSPARENTLY** – Being honest and clear in your communication to your guests about the situation in the country is very important.

3 **ASSURANCE** – Guests may request to cancel their bookings, which is inevitable in a crisis. For guests who may still show an interest in keeping their bookings, or have bookings far in the future, assure them that you will do your best to keep them informed about the latest developments.

If your hotel is not in the vicinity of the incident, it’s important that you inform guests that the hotel did not incur any damage. In the event that your hotel is situated close to where the event transpired, be honest about this and the security situation. You might lose reservations by being honest, but being transparent in a crisis is always important. Guests have the right to make informed decisions.
With hotel staff

1. **PROFESSIONAL TRAINING** – Provide professional training for your staff to educate and equip them with the right set of skills to handle different crises. Whether it’s a fire, a bomb threat or a natural disaster, preparing your staff ahead of time will empower them with the necessary skills and the confidence to conduct themselves in an emergency. Ensuring that all staff members know safety procedures in times of a crisis is mandatory.

2. **APPOINT A CRISIS TEAM** – Crises don’t inform anyone before they knock on your door. Being prepared for any kind of situation will always help you in the long run. Select team members who are proactive, good at thinking on their feet and will create a contingency plan for emergencies. Most importantly, they need to take the responsibility of guiding the rest of the team in the event of an emergency. Preparing a crisis communication plan will also come in use. Being prepared and proactive will help your business weather these storms.

3. **MANAGE STAFF MORALE** – This is perhaps one of the first things an establishment thinks of during a crisis. In addition to the financial impact on the business, the situation may also have an effect on your staff’s psychological state. Managing your staff’s morale and encouraging them to keep up the good work is very important in difficult times. Maintaining open communication and helping your staff understand that you are in this together with them will create a sense of unity and teamwork that will be invaluable when your business bounces back.

4. **OPEN COMMUNICATION** – Maintaining open communication with employees and guests is vital. Make time to answer questions and concerns raised by both parties.

5. **FLEXIBILITY** – Understandably, many guests tend to cancel their bookings and holidays entirely when a country they are hoping to visit experiences a devastating event. While you cannot control cancellations, provide your guests with the freedom to cancel it closer to the booking date and promise to keep them informed of the ground situation routinely. This may help you sustain the booking instead of receiving an immediate cancellation.

6. **CONSIDER RELAXING POLICIES** – Hotel managements need to be open to relaxing their in-house policies in the event of an emergency. In these situations, always remind yourself that ensuring the safety and well-being of your guests and staff is of the utmost priority.

7. **SOCIAL MEDIA UPDATES** – In the event of a crisis, deviate from your normal social media planning process and provide updates on your platform to keep your guests and followers informed. Ensure that your brand voice is maintained and that your message is consistent throughout.
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The world’s first fully-robotic hotel announced early this year that it will be cutting up to half of its robotic workforce. Since opening in 2015, the Henn na Hotel in Nagasaki, Japan, has utilised over 240 robots for everything from guest services to transporting luggage. Now, however, The Wall Street Journal reports that they are returning to a more traditional (human-based) service for guests. Robots will be maintained in areas where they were helpful and efficient, and removed in others.

There is no denying the speedy rate of technological progress, but when considering implementing advancements in a hospitality setting, careful consideration on the user experience and purpose is essential. Data from the Brooklyn Institute says that 61% of people still feel somewhat, or very, uncomfortable with robots.

The Henn na Hotel was designed for minimum human contact, together with a good dose of futuristic entertainment. However, is this really what the future of the hotel industry looks like? Can the ‘human touch’ - the cornerstone of traditional service - ever be replaced by machines?

Modern technology is meeting the needs of guests who want instant gratification and instant answers. Fed up of calling room service to place an order? With in-room voice recognition services, this may become a thing of the past. If, at home, a guest can ask any question from Alexa – for example, what time is it in Spain or where’s a great place for pizza - why should a hotel setting be any different?

With the growing popularity of AI and advanced technology in people’s homes, is it inevitable that these innovations will cross into hotels? Or, will hotels become an escape and a refuge from the hyper-connectivity of guests’ everyday life?

High-tech or no-tech: What will the hotel of the future be?
What does the traveller of the future want?

Identifying the needs of the traveller of the future ahead of time is crucial for the growth of Sri Lanka’s tourism industry. Key figures in the travel sector tell Hospitality Insider how they think demands are changing, and what the travel industry needs to do to keep up.

Dilshad Sadiq
Vice President
Authenticities Sri Lanka

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

I feel the future traveller will be more inclined to go on more personalised tours instead of group travel. They will want to try out different modes of transportation and be more tech-savvy, but also want to have more face-to-face time.

Guests are looking for experiences and activities that cater to their interests. Even if they are travelling as a family, each member is looking at experiences that cater to their individual needs and interests.

The segment we cater to is generally over the age of 40 years, affluent and tech-savvy. They are interested in something that is authentic and uncommon. They want to discover nooks and corners where locals dine instead of going to famous restaurants frequented by mass tourists.
My family and I spent 11 weeks in South America recently. Because we wanted to stay as a family, we mostly opted to stay at Airbnb homes, sometimes with hosts and sometimes without. At one particular accommodation, we got the chance to spend time with a host family, to exchange and share our stories and experiences with them. Money can’t buy that experience.

I feel more families are going to take time off from work and school and go on sabbatical holidays, just so they can have a better understanding about life and the world in general. This is especially important for children because travel bridges cultures and gives them the opportunity to understand the differences and similarities of these cultures. No school can teach you like travel does. It shapes you as a person and teaches you very important life skills.

The concept of travel has evolved greatly since everything is now freely available online. People don’t necessarily depend on the advice of travel agents, and with booking engines offering far more flexibility when it comes to cancellations, the price-sensitive traveller has far more options to choose from. Because everything is transparent, the traveller has a lot of bargaining power. They are looking at saving a few dollars here and there so they could use that to get an upgrade at an accommodation.

If a company wants to sell a package to a group of price-sensitive travellers, they will offer competitive prices by cutting down on any value addition that is perhaps essential for the trip in order to close the deal. The profit in these types of sales is very small because the idea is to be competitive. Being part of a small company, I’m able to avoid the price-sensitive market altogether. It is not an easy decision but it is a decision I can make because I don’t have a large number of staff.

We focus on high-end clients – the millionaires and billionaires who do not have the time to go online and cross-check prices, but who is looking at someone they can trust and rely on. That’s where we come in. These clients have a high spending capacity and spend money on value additions whether it’s an experience or food and beverage.

I feel this is the way forward for local travel agents. Companies that are well-established have good networks, and that is what these clients ultimately want – someone they can trust and someone who can make their trip worthwhile.

"Some people say there will be a time when travel agencies will have to close shop but I don’t think that’s true" - Nalaka Amaratunge
Creating New Pathways

As the Head of Purchasing for Cinnamon Resorts, Samanthi Jayawardena’s day is anything but monotonous. Sitting at her office on Vauxhall Street surrounded by a range of products awaiting transportation to hotels around the island, Jayawardena says one of the most important things when handling purchasing is to solve issues as and when they occur.

As the only woman holding a senior role in purchasing in Sri Lanka, Jayawardena’s entrance to the field was not pre-planned. After completing her education, she worked in the transport division of John Keells Holdings (JKH) as a trainee accounts clerk. Thereafter, Jayawardene worked at Maersk, the largest container ship and supply vessel operator in the world. Wanting to re-join JKH, she took up a position in the company’s leisure sector, Cinnamon Hotels & Resorts, as a purchasing executive in 2010.

“In finance, there’s a guideline for everything. There is no such set framework in purchasing. I feel my background in finance has given me a sense of discipline, which has been useful in introducing certain processes to give purchasing more structure,” she says.

Dispelling all doubts cast on her ability to handle responsibilities, Jayawardena quickly rose up the ladder. In 2012, she was promoted to Head of Purchasing after serving as an assistant manager. Currently overlooking a staff of 14 and with senior management support, she has made great strides in elevating purchasing standards not just for the company, but the sector as a whole. Seven years on, Jayawardena still plays an instrumental role in introducing practices and systems to overcome challenges in the sector.

Headed by Jayawardena, the department manages purchasing for 13 hotels categorised into city hotels, resorts and Maldivian resorts (two more hotels will join later this year). City hotels include Cinnamon Grand, Cinnamon Lakeside and Cinnamon Red, in addition to the resorts Hikka Tranz, Cinnamon Bey, Cinnamon Wild, Habarana Village, Cinnamon Lodge, Trinco Blu and Cinnamon Citadel. The two Maldivian properties are Ellaidhoo
Maldives and Cinnamon Dhonveli Maldives.

Jayawardena and her team handle the entire purchasing process for Sri Lankan resorts, while centralising the ordering and documentation process for the three city hotels and Maldivian properties, each of which has its own purchasing department. Only 30% of the Maldivian purchasing is managed by the head office due to logistical reasons.

Overcoming brand bias is one of the biggest challenges in purchasing. Loyalty or preference towards a brand, irrespective of the quality and price, is an obstacle that impedes the efficacy of the supply chain. In an effort to eliminate human biases and provide quality products at the best price, Jayawardena and her team have developed and introduced blind testing. All food, beverage and linen items are subjected to blind tests after the quality of the samples have been pre-approved by the purchasing department.

“We try our best to be as transparent as possible and introduce ethical business practices wherever possible. We are the only company to practice blind testing during the purchasing process, and this has helped us provide equal opportunities to our suppliers,” she emphasises.

Technology also plays a role in making the supply chain process more efficient. In March, the purchasing department she leads saved a total of Rs5 million during the procurement process by using an online platform developed by JKH. The custom-designed system helps find vendors, request for supplies and carry out transparent negotiations, which minimise favouritism towards certain brands. Only suppliers who have been pre-qualified are able to register on the system, ensuring that quality is always upheld.

However, in addition to all process improvements, satisfying the requirement of the client, whether it’s the executive chef or the head of housekeeping, is still the priority of the purchasing department.

As the Head of Purchasing for Sri Lanka’s largest leisure sector, Jayawardena considers creating healthy competition in the supply market as one of her prime responsibilities. “Providing equal opportunities to small suppliers and helping them establish themselves in the market is one of our key focus areas.”

Prior to the Easter attacks, the purchasing department had taken a decision to absorb price differences in order to promote small vendors, particularly importers. However, in the aftermath, with tourist numbers dwindling fast and the scale of purchases dropping, the company decided to postpone its implementation.

However, with the same motivation, to encourage small local vendors to enter the market, Jayawardena initiated a programme to provide advice on improving quality standards. These programmes are held annually after carrying out an independent suppliers audit across the Cinnamon leisure sector. Due to the limited number of auditors available in Sri Lanka, the audits are carried out in city hotels from January to March, and from April to June at the seven resorts. Subsequent to the audit, the purchasing team provides non-financial advice on their shortcomings for those who have room for improvement. The programme, which was introduced three years ago, monitors the progress of vendors for a period of two years.

“These programmes have been very useful for small-time vendors. I have seen many of them improve the quality of their products and compete in the market alongside some of the bigger suppliers,” Jayawardena says.

Trusting that the supplier always provides the approved quality is another common mistake made in the industry. Despite having pre-approved the quality of products, vendors still tend to deliver sub-par items, more often for large scale orders. To mitigate this malpractice, Jayawardena and her team carry out random spot checks at the hotels. In addition, she signs a performance bond with large scale suppliers, with the exception of those who provide perishables such as vegetables and fruits, which provides a safety net for buyers, who are able to recover damages in the event of shortfalls or quality issues.

Undaunted by new challenges that lie ahead, Jayawardena has 100% confidence in her team and is determined to ensure that their ethical business practices are recognised internationally over the next two years.
MANAGING DIRECTOR OF TEARDROP HOTELS, HENRY FITCH is determined to position ‘Teardrop’ as a brand that provides authentic Sri Lankan hospitality to travellers that appreciate the finer things in life.
When Teardrop Hotels set up its first hotel – The Wallawwa in Kotugoda – it was the first boutique property located close to the Bandaranaike International Airport. Eleven years on, with an investment of $8 million on six properties and a restaurant, Teardrop is positioning itself as one of the most-sought-after boutique property collections in the island.

Sitting at Monsoon - Teardrop’s venture into the restaurant business – a stylish restaurant nestled on the culinary avenue of Park Street in Colombo 02, Henry Fitch, the Managing Director of Teardrop, says most of the projects had been stumbled upon quite unexpectedly. “Out of all our hotels, only Fort Bazaar had been in the pipeline since 2005.”

The Teardrop collection includes: Fort Bazaar in Galle Fort; Camellia Hills in the verdant, rolling hills of Dickoya; Kumu Beach on the western coast of Balapitiya; Goatfell in Kandepola, minutes away from the island’s Little England; and Nine Skies in Ella; with the seventh property – Pekoe House in Kandy – set to open next year. Teardrop was set up in 2005 by Michael Davies and Charlie Austin – who had known each other from their cricketing days at Bryanston School in England. While on holiday in Sri Lanka, Davies came across an old Dutch villa in Galle Fort and decided to purchase it on a whim. Catching up with his old cricket buddy, Austin, who had just migrated to Sri Lanka to set up Red Dot Tours – a bespoke travel company - they realised that there was a need for a boutique collection to cater to high-end clientele. Conversations led to the dream of setting up a small hotel model that could provide personalised service targeting the tastes and demands of discerning clients.

Davies, with his background in commercial property developing, and Austin, with his insight to the travel industry, were joined by Henry Fitch, a fellow Bryanston cricketer, who brought his experience in hospitality and marketing. Their fourth partner, Viraj Premasinghe, pooled in his strong legal background to further cement the group. The chance encounter with a property brought together the combined expertise and knowledge of four individuals who wanted to make headway in Sri Lanka’s boutique sector.

Since opening its first boutique hotel in 2008, Teardrop Hotels’ growth in Sri Lanka has been rapid. With the addition of five new properties over the last three years, the group is determined to make headway in the island’s niche boutique concept sector.

BY SHERWANI SYNON

A SERIES OF FORTUNATE EVENTS

After the planning permission for Fort Bazaar was delayed, luck shone through when the group was introduced to The Wallawwa, a heritage home 15 minutes from the airport. Once the villa was refurbished, Teardrop opened its first boutique hotel with 12 bedrooms in 2008. Thereafter, Teardrop secured the necessary documentation to start on Fort Bazaar and focused on commencing work on their three Tea Country bungalows. Their plans were sidetracked briefly when the group was presented with the opportunity to work on Camellia Hills and Kumu Beach. Of their seven hotels, five fall under long leases with the exception of The Wallawwa and Kumu Beach. The former is freehold, while the latter is their first asset-light venture where the group has been contracted to provide a management service.

Like many expats who have made Sri Lanka their home after falling in love with the island on holiday, Fitch first arrived in the country in 2001. He joined Teardrop in 2007, two years after the company started. He feels that the company’s directors’ joint
knowledge of the tourism industry has helped them in their expansion process. The group is keen on increasing their current inventory of 60 to 66 rooms by next year. In three years, they plan to increase it to 88 keys. They are also looking at the asset-light direction of providing management services and are keeping their sights open for the next spectacular location.

“The demand for the location, the relationship with the owner, the characteristics of the building, and its ability to connect with the discerning, luxury traveller in an interesting way” are some of the key factors that take precedence when Teardrop considers taking on new projects.

Traditional architecture complemented by contemporary interior is the overarching style that connects the six existing hotels under the brand. Fitch says that this was a conscious decision made by the group to separate themselves from the boutique hotels and chains that had tapped into the market of colonial charm. Although the interiors at each of the Teardrop properties stand independent of the others, similarities are evident and are appreciated by their clientele for its familiarity.

In addition to providing stylish accommodation with luxurious amenities, personalised service and delicious food, each hotel has its own unique selling point, from spectacular views of the unspoiled verdant tea country to being at a coveted historical location such as the Galle Fort.

Fitch spends much of his time travelling between the seven hotels and says that each of the more recent properties came with its own set of challenges. “Notoriously narrow and windy road networks in the Tea Country, and the long distance” are just some of the aspects Teardrop consciously considered and decided to navigate in order to provide a unique experience to their niche clientele.

Charging an average daily rate of $300 (which varies during the low and peak seasons), the year-round occupancy rate at all Teardrop properties was around 65% on average prior to the Easter Sunday attacks. Honeymooners, families and retirees from the United Kingdom, the US, Australia, Western Europe, Singapore, Hong Kong and the Middle East are their main clientele. Teardrop wants to be identified as one of the top boutique brands providing authentic Sri Lankan hospitality, encompassing experiences in the local areas, with excellent food and service. Finding the right clientele for their brand is of utmost importance to the company, and to this, partnerships with local DMCs (destination management companies) and travel companies play a vital rote.

### Building Partnerships

Charlie Austin’s venture - Red Dot Tours - now operates as a brand under the destination management company The Fabulous Getaway, which caters to the travel needs of mid- to high-end travellers. Despite having Austin’s insights of the tourism industry at hand, Fitch says that while they share ideas, they ensure that between them, they “keep things clear, transparent, and there’s no favouritism”. Fitch added that Teardrop works extremely closely with all the main destination management and travel companies in the country. They are big partners of the Teardrop business and Fitch “actively makes it clear that they are not linked to a particular DMC”.

In 2016, the company made a decision to appoint Perowne International - a reputed UK public relations company experienced in international luxury hotels and travel to represent Teardrop Hotels. Perowne’s clients include the likes of Scott Dunn, Ampersand
Travel, Taj Hotels, and Six Senses Hotels, Resorts & Spas – placing Teardrop on an international platform. Through this partnership and independent initiatives, Teardrop has received press coverage across globally acclaimed travel publications including Conde Nast Traveller. In addition, the company is represented by The Sri Lanka Collection based in the UK, to promote sales and marketing, as well as facilitate dialogue and interaction between travel companies across the UK, France, the Netherlands and Scandinavia. The Collection also represents nine other hotels in Sri Lanka — Kahanda Kanda, Kandy House, and Water Garden, to name a few. Teardrop, along with other members of The Collection, have participated in several travel trade exhibitions such as WTM and ITB in the past year.

So where does Fitch see Teardrop properties positioned? He cites the likes of Manor House Concepts, Resplendent Ceylon, Uga Escapes, and Taru Villas as ‘friendly’ competitors. Fitch is quick to emphasise that each brand has its own unique style despite falling into the larger category of boutique hotels.

With over 5,000 followers on Instagram, Teardrop’s digital presence is of immense value to the company. They are looking at expanding their digital marketing reach. Fitch considers Instagram as a crucial factor for them and the company has hosted several social media influencers at their hotels. Even though both social media marketing and PR don’t always produce tangible results, he feels that the combination of these factors along with word of mouth and guest recommendations has had a significant impact on their numbers.

Fitch’s easy-going demeanour has the ability to make anyone feel at ease, something surely that comes as an advantage when managing 250 employees. Of course, keeping the stakeholders happy is important, but the recognition of Teardrop being a good employer, is what defines success for him. Flexibility and providing ongoing training play a huge role in keeping the staff motivated. Teardrop Hotels’ CARE (Creating A Rewarding Experience) is a charitable foundation that encourages the staff to engage and give back to local communities. Talking about the company’s focus on sustainability, Fitch says that, although it had been on the back of his mind for a while, the drive to pursue it was revived by a conversation he had with a fellow passenger while flying to the PURE conference in Marrakech last year. Teardrop plans to contribute a certain percentage from its overall profit into projects relating to sustainability in each of the locations and communities around them.

With six properties across the island, more in the pipeline and with plans to branch out to asset-light ventures, Teardrop is gearing up to be a brand to be reckoned with in Sri Lanka’s niche boutique sector.
For Madhava Ehelamalpe, the Executive Chef at Heritance Negombo, presenting fusion cuisine with the right ingredients and nailing the flavour palate is priority. Since joining Heritance Negombo, Ehelapalme has elevated the gastronomic reputation of the hotel by creating dishes to remember.
Q: Tell us about your current role.

I’m the Executive Chef at Heritance Negombo. I joined Heritance Negombo as a sous chef in 2015 after working in the Maldives and Dubai. I currently oversee the operation of four in-house outlets - Bluetan, See lounge, B-bums and the banquet. There are also three more outlets located opposite the hotel - Swiss Bakery & Café, Mad dog Bodega and Rouge.

Q: You have worked at multiple brands under Aitken Spence Hotels, most recently Adaaran and Heritance. How has this influenced your culinary journey?

Heritance and Adaaran are two independent brands and their approach to food has taught me different skillsets. At Adaaran hotels, I learnt about documentation, process, planning and kitchen designing. When I joined Heritance Negombo in 2015, the executive chef at the time was Amila Silva, a batchmate from hotel school. He had just arrived from Saudi Arabia and we were given the responsibility to create something new for the hotel. This gave us the opportunity to explore and understand the Sri Lankan culinary scene as we had been overseas. We spent a lot of time researching and dining at restaurants in Colombo and Negombo. We used this experience to design a menu based on what people wanted.

Q: What are the three most important things for you in fusion cuisine?

When you do fusion, the ingredients need to complement each other. When I prepare a fusion dish, I want people to be surprised by it, from the presentation to the taste. After guests taste the dish, they need to talk about it and remember it. Those three things are crucial for me when creating fusion dishes.

Q: What challenges do you face when sourcing supplies in Sri Lanka?

Sri Lanka has many holidays and suppliers tend to be closed for days during these periods. There are some suppliers who inform me in advance when they are unable to provide goods, and then I plan ahead and order extra. When you’re in the food industry, they need to forget about holidays and work around the demand for products, not the other way around.

Q: What kind of training do you provide?

I train them in skill and technique development and prepare them for competitions, particularly in the creation of aspic – an important component in competitions. In addition, I also train the chef de partie and the commis team in computer software that is related to food and beverage. Nowadays, chefs should know about technology and that is another aspect

Q: Do you prefer local or imported ingredients?

If I’m able to match the taste and quality of the final product to around 90 percent by using a local ingredient, then I would use it. If not, I would rather go with the imported ingredients.

Q: What do you look for when you hire staff for your kitchen?

When I hire staff for the commis level, I don’t focus on their experience. I mainly look at their attitude. Respect and how they treat others are two things I observe. When I call people for an interview, I always ask them to prepare for a practical. At the practical, I don’t ask them to cook what I want. Instead, I ask them to cook what they make best. Because what they serve in a plate is a representation of themselves. Afterwards, they have to prepare a rice and curry meal as well. As a Sri Lankan, you have to know how to prepare rice and curry!

Q: What do you focus on when you create a menu for Heritance Negombo?

I focus on presenting dishes that have a fusion of local and foreign ingredients. Sri Lanka has a lot of ingredients that many are not familiar with, so we use many of these ingredients to create a tasting menu. We create several tasting menus till we get the flavours and quality right. The menus we have at our restaurants are unique to our hotel and I haven’t come across similar dishes at any other hotels in the area.

Q: What do you rely on local ingredients?

Fifty-five percent of the ingredients I use for my dishes are locally sourced and the remaining forty-five percent is imported.
we lack in the country. I encourage each member to browse the internet and find out what’s happening around the world and keep themselves updated. Sometimes, I start the daily briefing and ask a chef de partie to take over the meeting and talk about something they have read or learned. If they are going to be the next sous chef, they need to be given the opportunity to display their skills and knowledge. If you’re going to give them a position, you have to groom them for the position as well.

Q: What advice would you give a young chef?

I would encourage them to grow and to not stay at the same place for too long. I have never worked at one property for more than four years. You should get the experience and move out. If you’re willing to stay at an establishment for 5-6 years and get experienced, that is up to you. But if you go to a new property, you will get the opportunity to sharpen your skills further. If they are in a position to get international experience, I always encourage them to do so.

Q: How do the skills of Sri Lankan chefs compare with those in other locations?

Sri Lankan chefs are really skillful. Most of the chefs in Dubai are Sri Lankan. When you compare them to chefs of other nationalities, I believe they are the best. They are easy to teach, they have the passion and they are willing to go beyond what is necessary. I feel this is why Sri Lankans have ample career opportunities overseas.

Q: How do you think the hospitality sector can elevate the standards of chefs?

In Sri Lanka, chefs are not given sufficient training. It would be great if we can bring in international chefs on a regular basis and conduct training for local chefs so they are aware of what’s happening around the world. We have a Chef’s Guild and they can organise regular training programmes with internationally recognised chefs to bridge the knowledge gap. That experience is necessary for chefs to learn and grow.

Q: How does Negombo compare to other locations, in terms of work environment and the staff?

People in Negombo are really good. The youth in particular are helpful and always ready to go beyond what is asked of them. They are kind-hearted and know how to enjoy themselves. In terms of work environment, I feel there’s a difference, especially when it comes to the people. They are straightforward and I admire that trait. I feel that Beach Road (where Heritance Negombo is located) offers an experience unlike any other place in Sri Lanka.

Q: Tell us about a defining moment in your career.

My family was living with me when I worked in Dubai but I barely spent time with them because I worked very long hours. I decided that it might be best for them to return to Sri Lanka and be with our extended family. Six months after they left, I returned to Sri Lanka. I think that decision changed my life.

Q: Who is the chef you admire the most?

I really like Chef Heston Blumenthal. His cooking explores the scientific aspect of how you can prepare food – I find that very interesting. I try and follow his practices, the way he approaches food and the ingredients he uses. I have ordered some of his equipment for our kitchen as well.
In 2018, Marriott International (Marriott) opened a hotel every 14 hours. Plans for the future are no less ambitious.

As part of their three-year growth plan, announced in March 2019, Marriott will be opening another 17,000 hotels around the world and adding between 275,000 and 295,000 rooms to their inventory.

With 30 brands, Marriott has the diversity in its portfolio to suit a wide variety of owner assets. Over the coming years, it will be introducing 3 more brands to Sri Lanka across 4 properties.

The “big red M”, as Area VP for South Asia Neeraj Govil calls it, first arrived in Sri Lanka in 2017 with the opening of Weligama Bay Marriott Resort & Spa.

There are now another 4 properties in the pipeline. The Sheraton Colombo Hotel in Colpetty and Sheraton Kosgoda Turtle Beach Resort are in the pre-opening stages. The Ritz-Carlton and JW Marriott, both part of The One project in Colombo, are in the construction phases.

Govil believes that South Asia as a destination is still underserved for tourism, and that Sri Lanka is too.

The company’s plans for growth in the South Asian region are robust. Currently, Marriott International operates 122 hotels, with 24,000 rooms in the region. Adding to this portfolio in 2019 will be 24 hotels, approximately another 4,500 rooms. In the first three months of this year, they’ve already opened six.

Locally, the aim is to have both Sheratons up and running within 12 months. However, as Govil quips, “Sri Lanka doesn’t have the best track record of delivering on time, so it’s really hard to put a date on it.”

Until recently, the Marriott International website listed the Colombo Sheraton
as due to open in March 2019 and Kosgoda in May 2019. Late 2019 or early 2020 is now looking a more likely prospect.

With 30 brands to contend with, creating an individual personality and identity for each product is a priority for Marriott. Attention has recently been lavished on its most geographically diverse brand, Sheraton. The classic brand’s logo has been resigned for the first time in its 82-year history. The new design still bears many similarities to the old, with the aim of having an ‘eye on the future, while also hearkening back to the Sheraton’s history’.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Three of Marriott’s upcoming properties will be in Colombo. As the gateway to Sri Lanka, Colombo deserves this kind of representation; however, Govil believes the real opportunity in Sri Lanka lies in creating a circuit – having multiple properties in multiple locations.

These locations do not need to be tied to the typical tourist hot spots along the coast and up into the cultural triangle.

As a management company, what matters most to Marriott is that they select the right partnership. The existing Marriott hotel was a case in point, says Govil, “Weligama was not a high-density location, but we found the right partner and we opened the hotel.”

Thus their strategy of marketing the destination, not the hotel – which has worked so effectively in little-known Weligama – comes into play. Average occupancy in Weligama Bay Marriott during 2018 was 72 percent.

“No one can argue with the tourism potential of Sri Lanka,” says Govil, “It’s about getting the short term together.”

TALENT WARS

In the short term, with two hotels about to open, staffing and manpower will be getting a lot of attention. Other international chains, like Hilton, are planning to open multiple properties over the next five years, and the fight to hire (and keep) the hotel’s best talent in Sri Lanka is going to intensify.

“The versatility we can offer allows people to work in different locations, experience different cultures and grow their careers in 30 different brands. I don’t think too many competitors can offer that.”

The current industry situation often sees existing hotels losing staff to the newest hotel to open up, even if the upside for the individual is only a small salary increment. “Today, people jump ship because they don’t value their career, they value their job,” Govil says. But he believes that, eventually, “people will realise that’s not the right thing to do”.

Getting employees to understand and appreciate the difference between a ‘job’ and a ‘career’ is a cornerstone of their approach to talent. “We’ve got to make sure that the people we hire are career-managed right from the get-go. For one thing, that means clear career development plans in place.”

“It is critically important for us to develop the talent base in the country. If we want to grow and be successful in Sri Lanka, we’ve got to be a favourite of the locals. That means providing the right employment opportunities and the right career advancement prospects. A company like Marriott can provide overseas opportunities, and can train staff here to get them ready for those jobs.”

In the Weligama hotel, only two percent of the staff are expats, while 75% come from the local area. Not only does hiring locally help to build the culture of the hotel, it’s also cheaper.

Marriott is targeting getting more women into the workforce, recognising the innate value they bring.

Says Govil, “We’re in the people business. We have to have diversity in our workforce if we’re going to take care of our guests, because our guests are diverse.” Simply put, “Having more women in the team helps us take care of our guests better.”

The target for women working at the hotel is 35 percent. “Today, we’re close to 20.”

With other international chains also touting their career development plans and overseas opportunities, Govil believes Marriott International’s vast market share means they will still come out on top in the scrum for talent.

“The versatility we can offer allows people to work in different locations, experience different cultures and grow their careers in 30 different brands. I don’t think too many competitors can offer that.”

“As a hospitality employer, we have to be versatile and flexible enough to make sure that our people are at their best when they are taking care of other people”

SHERATON HOTELS & RESORTS

CATEGORY:
Classic Premium

TAGLINE:
Where the World Comes Together

BRAND VALUES:
Ambition | Empowerment | Heart

The Sheraton brand has aligned itself with the trend for unique and memorable experiences, a trend particularly attractive to millennials. Their target guests are “collaborative, optimistic and hyper-connected”.

REACH: 70+ countries, 450 hotels
This well-established brand recently went through a refresher. Its new logo was launched in March 2019, the first change in its 82-year history. Over 30 percent of the Sheraton portfolio worldwide is currently undergoing some sort of renovation to modernise the brand and make Sheraton properties “the central gathering place of communities around the world.”
SAYING ‘I DO’ IN SRI LANKA

As destination weddings become a global trend, find out how you can tap into one of the fastest growing tourism segments.

BY SHERWANI SYNON
At the annual Destination Wedding Planners Congress held last year in Los Cabos, Mexico, it was estimated that the destination wedding industry amounted to a whopping $90 billion, representing 25% of the global wedding market. In an article carried by TravelDailyNews, it was reported that North and Central America makes up the world’s largest destination wedding market, with an overall value of $27 billion, closely followed by Asia valued at $19.8 billion and amounting to 22%.

In a survey conducted by Sunshine.co.uk, Sri Lanka was ranked ninth for destination weddings, between Sicily and Florida. Wedding Ideas, Britain’s largest bridal magazine, has also featured the island as a hot new venue, building Sri Lanka’s reputation as a top choice.

Unlike hosting Sri Lankan weddings, destination weddings come with its own set of unique requests and challenges. In order to attract the right clientele, the island’s hospitality sector needs to be aware of and prepared to navigate these demands. We spoke to various stakeholders who have played a role in the destination wedding segment to provide a better understanding to those who are interested in getting into the industry.

Sri Lanka is a favoured destination for many European, Australian and, more recently, Indian expat and native couples looking to tie the knot in a foreign country. The country’s south coast in particular proves to be the first choice of many who idolise the concept of a beach wedding. Unlike the popular Sri Lankan wedding held at large hotel banquet halls, most foreign couples who select the island are interested in a smaller, bespoke celebration. The requirements of this niche clientele fit perfectly with the concept of boutique hotels and villas who pride themselves in providing a personalised service. However, for Indian weddings, which consist of several ceremonies and events that continue for days, the choice of venues at larger resorts such as Shangri-La Hambantota and Taj Bentota is far more appealing.

**COMPATIBILITY**

Wedding planners like Charm De Silva, founder of Magical Moments and Henri Tatham, celebrant and owner of Kikili Enterprise, emphasise that the partnership between the hotel and wedding planner plays a crucial role in organising successful destination weddings. They both unanimously echo that “communication and transparency are absolutely vital” to maintain a great working partnership.

Charm De Silva, originally from a marketing and merchandising background, quit her job at Brandix in 2012 in order to kick-start her lifelong dream of becoming a wedding planner. De Silva’s reputation
as one of the most-sought-after professionals in the island is a testament to her meticulous approach to planning and coordinating weddings. Currently in her sixth year organising weddings along with her husband, Shamal, who comes from an IT background, the De Silvas take the business of organising dream weddings very seriously.

Having worked with couples from all over the globe across various locations in Sri Lanka, it is her view that hotels who are in the business need to pick up their pace. De Silva says “quick responses to wedding enquiries, flexibility in venue policies, and training staff to handle the demands of a destination weddings” are key areas for improvement. However, certain hotels and travel agents are taking the responsibility of planning destination weddings. De Silva feels that they need to prioritise what they do best and leave organising destination weddings to the professionals as it requires a special set of skills and expertise that everyone may not have.

Based just outside Galle Fort, Henri Tatham wears multiple hats, from the proprietor of Kikili House, Kikili Beach and owner of Kikili Enterprises, to that of a celebrant. Her infectious bubbliness has been instrumental in officiating the marriage of 220 couples, of which the majority were destination weddings. Tatham first visited Sri Lanka on holiday in 2001. When she was offered a job at the newly established Sun House under Taprobane Properties a year later, she took a leap of faith, quit her job in PR and moved to the island. During her time at Sun House, Tatham who is fondly known by her friends as ‘Hen’, had to officiate a wedding when the local vicar was unable to perform his duties due to an accident. After realising that she enjoyed marrying people, in 2012, Tatham trained and registered herself at the Fellowship of Professional Celebrant in the UK, thereby receiving the official nod to preside weddings, funerals and naming ceremonies.

Apart from her role as a celebrant, Tatham also organises small-scale destination weddings and parties through her venture – Fluff and Puff. “Couples who select Sri Lanka as a wedding destination are looking for something special and personalised, so hotels need to be able to offer different styles that appeal to this clientele,” says Tatham. She emphasises that those hotels interested in entering the destination wedding segment need to have a thorough understanding of the demands and styles of a personalised destination wedding.

Due to limited space, and unlike large resorts, many boutique hotels and villas require couples to book the property for a minimum of two to three nights. Hoteliers include this as a policy in order to ensure that their regular guests aren’t disturbed and that the wedding planners and crew have sufficient time to set up and clear out the premises. At the other end of the scale, for larger resorts like the Shangri-La Hambantota, complete hotel buyouts are rare. The hotel’s numerous venue offerings provide sufficient space to host a wedding without interrupting other hotel guests.

The Villa Bentota – a 15-bedroom boutique hotel under the Paradise Road Collection – has hosted destination weddings since 2010. Daham Panangala, the Resident Manager of the hotel, says that typically they host six to eight weddings each year but by April of this year, they have organised five so far. Renowned for its high standards and food, due to Paradise Road owner Shanth Fernando’s eye for finesse, the hotel only handles the catering and service aspect of a wedding. The rest is organised by the wedding planner. "There

"Quick responses to wedding enquiries, flexibility in venue policies, and training staff to handle the demands of a destination weddings are key"

- Charm De Silva

Photo credits: Magical Moments
was one wedding that was organised by the couple themselves and we saw how stressed they were. Since then, we always recommend that a wedding planner is involved. It makes everything easier for the couple as well as for us. If the couple doesn’t know anyone, we recommend a professional wedding planner we have worked with in the past,” Panangala highlighted.

On the flipside, for smaller properties such as Sri Villas, working with the couple directly is preferred instead of through a wedding planner. Located on the Bentota coastline, Sri Villas comprises three villas that used to operate independently but changed its strategy a few years ago to accommodate room-only and villa bookings depending on the season. Popular with guests who want to spend milestone birthdays in Sri Lanka, the property has

3 TIPS FOR HOTELS TO ATTRACT MORE INDIAN DESTINATION WEDDINGS

by Hemant Dadlani, Managing Director of The Banquet Company

1. Practice flexibility - Indian celebrations can continue till the wee hours of the morning, so hotels need to be flexible with their house rules and policies if they want to make headway in hosting more Indian destination weddings.

2. More food! - Like any wedding, food plays a huge role in Indian weddings. While most Indians love Sri Lankan cuisine, hotels need to be diverse in their food offerings and ensure they include Indian comfort food to complete the Indian wedding experience.

3. Overall picture - When it comes to Indian weddings, hotels need to look at the overall revenue instead of focusing on individual departmental revenues. Indian weddings bring in on average over 200 guests. If hotels focus only on room rates or the food and beverage cost instead of how much the total revenue a wedding brings, they are losing out on the bigger picture.
also organised and hosted several destination weddings. Resident Manager Caroline McKay says that, in the last two years, they have organised four weddings in total. The villa can accommodate up to 18 adults and can host up to 80 people for an event. McKay says, “Most guests who want to have their wedding at our property are easygoing and aware of the logistics, which makes it easier to work with them directly so that we can cater to their needs.” To encourage direct enquiries, Sri Villas has advertised several wedding packages on their official website.

MEETING CLIENT EXPECTATIONS is one of the most crucial factors in catering a destination wedding

"Most destination weddings in the south held at small properties can’t take on the added responsibility of catering another event; that’s when we step in"
- Julia Dance

HOW’S THE FOOD?
Panagala, who has overseen all the weddings held at The Villa Bentota says that navigating guest expectations around food has been one of their biggest challenges. Although the boutique hotel organises a sample tasting for the couple once they have decided on the menu, there are bound to be last minute changes which can be “difficult to coordinate, especially if we’re trying to prepare a sit down meal for 120 people.”

As the wedding party most often stays at the venue, cocktails before the big day and midnight snacks after the event have become a norm. The Villa Bentota and Sri Villas all offer a host of activities their guests can partake in during their time at the venue or in the country. Both properties offer additional food and beverage options to maximise revenue.

For Julia Dance, the founder of The Fabulous Food Factory, fringe events around wedding celebrations such as welcome cocktails, dinners and post-events have provided a business opportunity in catering. Dance left her career in HR and business development in the UK and moved to Sri Lanka in 2012 a few years after she too came to the island on holiday. Since setting up the company at the end of last year, The Fabulous Food Factory has worked alongside wedding planners and catered several events at villas in and around Galle. “Many of the destination weddings in the south are held at small properties who can’t take on the added responsibility of catering another event, so that’s when my team and I step in,” says Dance. Mindful of the fine line she has to steer as a supplier to a property with an existing kitchen staff, Dance supplies her own equipment and tools to maintain a good relationship with the property.

LASTING PARTNERSHIPS
Both De Silva and Tatham say that they have seen an increase in the number of destination weddings in Sri Lanka as well as the number of enquiries they have received for this year. “When I first launched the company, I made sure that we had a very good website with all the details but my first enquiry came through a recommendation,” says De Silva. Word of mouth and
Funny stories from destination weddings

1. When the bridal gown had not arrived at the day of the wedding, the bride confidently borrowed her friend’s black dress and wore it for her wedding.

2. A couple had wanted an elephant present at their wedding, but the entrance to the property was through a railway line and the elephant was determined not to move. Despite the couple’s insistence that the elephant should be moved, no one including the mahout could change the elephant’s mind. So the ceremony and wedding proceeded without the elephant. This was also the last time the property hosted an elephant on their premises.

3. Prior to the wedding, the best man was completely naked except for a hat covering his private parts. He walked across the property while the staff was setting up to deliver a message from the groom to the bride, who was at the opposite corner of the villa.

recommendations play a fundamental role in destination weddings. While Magical Moments generate a sizeable number of enquiries from their official website and Instagram account, De Silva still feels that recommendations has brought in the most business.

Two years ago, after renowned Bollywood actress Deepika Padukone attended her friend’s wedding at The Villa Bentota, the boutique hotel received several enquiries for future Indian weddings. According to Panangala, they receive 60-80 wedding enquiries for a year and says that there’s definitely demand for the destination wedding market considering the last five years. Just as hotels recommend wedding plan-

ners to couples, planners also recommend hotels and villas to clients to suit their style and budget.

Tamarind Hill, a boutique hotel located inland of Galle, is another preferred venue among wedding planners and couples. Nihal Jayasinghe, Resident Manager of the property, says that while many of their enquiries come through wedding planners, as the hotel is under Asia Leisure Hotels, they also have a corporate team that has annual targets.

In an industry that is dependent on recommendations and the mutual beneficial relationship between hoteliers and wedding planners, hotels are cautioned to exercise transparency in their policies and costs. Several hotels have gotten into the habit of agreeing to weddings unconditionally and thereafter imposing hidden costs and policies once the clients have signed the agreement. This creates mistrust on the onset of a partnership between hotels, wedding planners and guests. As an industry that is heavily dependent on recommendations, hoteliers need to maintain transparency to avoid negative feedback that could damage their reputation concerning destination weddings.
Pavan Kumar Chennam
The new Executive Chef at Weligama Bay Marriott Resort & Spa

After a whirlwind recruitment, Pavan joined Weligama Bay Marriott in April. In his new role, he’s looking forward to providing wholesome organic food, capturing the essence of tea and coming to grips with soursop.

My first day at Marriott Weligama Bay was...

Exhilarating. I joined during avurudu, right in the middle of the festivities. The hotel was immensely busy; what you would normally learn in a month, I learnt in day! The environment was very eclectic and festive. I think I started off on a positive and auspicious note.

When did you decide you wanted to be a chef?

I come from a family of doctors and engineers, but one of my uncles had made the unconventional career choice to be a chef. I saw him grow in his career and become an executive chef at a young age. My mother is a very good cook and as a child I would help with the cooking, so I had that knack of working in the kitchen; but at a professional level, the trigger point was when I saw what my uncle had achieved in his career.

How do you describe your cooking style?

I like to let the ingredients talk. To use the finest, freshest ingredients and let them shine. I’ll embellish the dish with my own skills, but the ingredients are the champions.

What Sri Lankan ingredients are you most excited about?

The tea! Looking at all the varieties of tea, I am asking myself how I can introduce these teas into cured and smoked meats. I’m also very excited about the spices here. Though we get a lot of spices in India, the spices here are more preserved and pronounced. The cinnamon and cardamom, in particular, are fantastic.

What is your advice to young chefs aspiring to become an executive chef?

As a budding chef, make mistakes, remain hands on and become an entrepreneur – a ‘chefpreneur’.

As chefs, we have to be hands-on 24/7 and we let our hands do all the talking. Sometimes we hold ourselves back from making mistakes, but it’s only when you make mistakes that you learn. Knowledge is power, but in our profession, putting that knowledge into practice is the only way to hone our skills.

Chefs these days are not just tied to the kitchen. They are entrepreneurs and they can make or break a restaurant, so they need to create a brand for themselves. Young chefs need to develop additional attributes like how to communicate, how to talk about food and learn the financials of the kitchen.

Which trends do you see emerging in F&B?

Healthy eating and sustainable food are the next big things. Many people, particularly millennials, are making very health-conscious choices these days. They could be following the keto diet, no-sugar, gluten free or vegan. Healthy eating means different things to different people.

How do you see Sri Lanka positioned as a destination for culinary travel?

Sri Lankan food has tremendous variety. Though it’s a small island nation, the depth in culinary offerings is immense. I see a lot of opportunities.

With the Marriott team, we want to create a concept of holistic healthy eating. I want to create a menu that is end-to-end organic with no additives at all. When it comes to healthy eating, this type of menu would tick all the boxes.
CAPSULE HOTELS TARGET MILLENNIALS, AND OFFER HIGHER RETURNS FOR INVESTORS

by Rohan Gunasekera
Capsule hotels offer Sri Lankan investors a relatively quicker and lower-cost way to provide accommodation than putting up conventional hotels. The target market are young travellers wanting to explore without the expense of a hotel room.

$2,000
COST TO INSTALL A SINGLE-BED CAPSULE

6
NUMBER OF BED PODS THAT CAN BE HOUSED IN A 20-FOOT CONTAINER

Soft blue lighting, digital displays and control panels give an almost space capsule-like feel to the place. The modular, double-deck accommodation pods at ‘The Capsule by Sala’, a capsule hotel, offers an alternative form of accommodation for visitors to the island – one that’s basic but comfortable, without the trappings of a conventional hotel room.

The duo who established the hotel, Chinthaka Wijewickrama and Fayaz Hudah, think the concept is suitable for existing and prospective homestay owners, and even other investors with buildings in suitable locations looking to quickly set up or expand existing tourist accommodation.
and improve returns on their properties.

The capsule or ‘pod’ hotel concept emerged in Japan almost 40 years ago as extremely small but cozy spaces for budget travellers and mainly individuals wanting cheap, safe overnight accommodation usually near train stations in big cities. Today’s versions retain the same compact size, usually enough to put a single or double bed, but are more sleek-looking, stylish and almost luxurious spaces.

The first capsule hotel in the world was the Capsule Inn Osaka, designed by well-known Japanese architect Kisho Kurokawa and located in the Umeda district of Osaka, Japan. It opened in 1979. China opened its first capsule hotel in Xi’an in 2012. In 2014, the first European capsule hotel opened in Belgium with bigger pods to accommodate taller clientele.

Wijewickrama and Hudah are targeting millennial travellers looking for authentic experiences, but also want privacy and independence. ‘The Capsule by Sala’ on Galle Road in Kollupitiya is a 30-bed, three-floor setup that opened in September 2018. It averaged about 30% occupancy in the first two weeks of opening, and around 55% by the start of 2019. Much of the traffic comes from online booking channels, and travellers are mainly Asians, Europeans and Middle Easterners.

A capsule or pod is almost like a fully-functioning hotel room except that some amenities like toilets and kitchen are shared. TVs, safety boxes, individual mirrors and mood lighting are all provided in a capsule, which is accessible by a personal smart card for added safety. Separate common areas are provided for recreation or relaxation, and others for refreshments.

“The main difference between bunkbeds for budget travellers in hostels and this is that capsules have most of the functions and features of a room, plus the privacy,” explains Hudah, formerly a part of the Information and Communications Technology Agency, and now an investor in tech startups. Backpack travellers stay in hostels that are for a different type of audience, more European-centric. Capsules are more Asian-centric, for travellers such as millennials who may not be into interaction with fellow guests but are looking for privacy and are usually glued to electronic devices. Chinese tourists are now only second in the total numbers of visitors to the island, behind Indians, many of whom are day travellers and not actual tourists.

The tourism industry expects arrivals from Asian countries to grow in the coming years, especially given promotional efforts in markets like China. Close proximity, strengthening economic ties and
Capsule Hotels offer independent, experience-seeking millennial tourists complete privacy and independence.

new, varied product offerings should help. “Capsules in Sri Lanka are a modern take on offering a differentiated product to the independent, experience-seeking tourist, while offering complete privacy and independence,” explains Hudah. “Young travellers want to explore and not spend a few hundred dollars on a hotel room.” He notes that millennials and younger, independent tourists are experience-seekers. They are cost-aware, but crave privacy and independence. They are looking to move around a lot more and spend money to capture and record their life’s experiences.

Sri Lanka’s tourism product largely consists of properties that are attractions by themselves, drawing visitors who want to spend their time in them, relaxing on beaches or in spas. Or, they are hostels and homestays that mainly target budget, so-called backpacker tourists.

For a number of years, tourism authorities have been trying to enhance the relaxation-centric tourism offering with recreation and activities that add to the total spend per tourist while on holiday. This figure is relatively low in Sri Lanka compared with other similar destinations, notes Hudah. And a hike in room rates will only reduce the total number of tourist
arrivals to the country, which will have a knock-on effect across the network of support and other services geared to serve visitors.

The duo doing ‘The Capsule by Sala’ is offering investors keen on taking advantage of this new wave of tourists the opportunity to either own their own branded capsule hotel, where the Sala hotel development firm supplies all the equipment and setup on a turnkey basis, or ongoing hotel management on their franchise brand. Anyone with even very little space now has the ability to gain more revenue per square foot by converting an existing hotel or even a different class of property into a capsule hotel.

Wijewickrema, best known as the founder of electronics retailer Sala Enterprises, says they can offer other investors like homestay providers a franchise under the Sala group name that includes expertise on how to manage and promote traffic or simply help them set it up by providing and installing the equipment.

“Someone who has a homestay setup can easily increase yield by 50% by making this kind of investment because you put multiple beds inside the same space,” says Wijewickrema, who got the idea during his travels abroad and felt the need for this type of accommodation in Sri Lanka. The model offers benefits that an investment into conventional tourism properties doesn’t offer, at a much lower entry price and risk. Any new investment into a conventional tourism property requires significant spending for land if it is located close to or within a major city, and long lead time to bring it online. A lot of risk analysis has to be done up-front with no recourse for change once the investment is put in. A capsule hotel, on the other hand, offers investors the ability to locate their hotels close to or within major cities at a fraction of the cost. The ability to recover most of the investment in a situation where relocation is needed is also possible with a capsule-type hotel.

Potential investors who sign up with the duo can skip much of the legwork needed to set up a new business, like market research and supplier contacts. “We’ve already done the spadework – from the research to finding a supplier in China,” notes Hudah. “If you have a small space difficult to rent out on the first or second floor, you can convert it and easily start making money. In less than three months from placing the order, you can be commercially operational, which is impossible to do in a traditional hotel. That includes

Digital control panels give an almost space capsule-like feel to the pods, which, though small, provide the basic comforts
getting the capsules made, shipped, delivered, installed and commissioned. Also, the amount of staff you need to run the setup is much less compared to a traditional hotel. So, the long-term operational cost is also low.” Another advantage is avoiding the difficulty of finding land for a new property or having to provide space for parking. The duo is already in touch with potential investors in tourist hotspots like Galle and Kandy.

The investment required, while being much lower than putting up a conventional hotel, is not as cheap as, say, offering hostel accommodation or the typical homestay. Setting up costs of installed pods with one-year warranty can range from $2,000 to $5,500 (Rs340,000-935,000) per pod, depending on features and functionality. Pods come in single and double beds, with various features like sound proofing, television and safety deposit boxes.

“For $2,000, you can install a single-bed capsule with bare minimum features, and the $5,500 dollar double-bed pod comes with all the features,” explains Hudah. Even common use facilities like washrooms come in self-contained pods. Investors even have the option of setting up capsule hotels using standard freight containers, either 20-footers or 40-footers, if they don’t have their own building and only a land area. A 20-foot container can house up to six bed pods with toilets.
ANDREW MILHUISEN, General Manager at The Bartizan, is passionate about the history of the Galle Fort.
With its soft colours and stunning view of the Indian Ocean, The Bartizan hotel in the Galle Fort is the place to go to experience the history and serenity of island life.

Driven by the dream of opening a boutique hotel, Managing Director Dr Samararatne and his wife lovingly restored their family vacation property into The Bartizan hotel, which opened in 2017. Day-to-day activities at the property are now managed by General Manager Andrew Milhuisen, who joined the hotel in August 2018 and shares the owner’s love for the history of the Galle Fort and the colonial-style hotel.

"I’ll use words used by our guests themselves – stylish, refined, with the ambiance of Europe"

The hotel has 10 bedrooms, most with views over the ramparts to the Indian Ocean beyond.

Did you always want to be a hotelier?

A: I come from a family of hoteliers. My father was a pioneer in the hospitality industry. My parents used to own St Andrews in Nuwara Eliya (now Jetwing St Andrews) and Blue Lagoon in Negombo (now Jetwing Lagoon). My father built Blue Lagoon in the mid-1960s; it was one of Geoffrey Bawa’s inaugural hotel projects.

At the time, as a child, it was quite a terrifying prospect to manage my dad’s hotels. I used to dream about being a pilot or a doctor, but hospitality was in my blood. After completing my O/Levels, I went to hotel school in Switzerland. During study breaks, I worked aboard cruise ships – I had circumnavigated the world several times by the time I was 19!

I attended hotel school with the notion of coming back to manage my dad’s hotels, but this was not on the cards. My father had passed away and St Andrew’s was already sold, as well as Blue Lagoon to the Jetwing Group as the war ended. It was heart-breaking, but there was a sense of freedom. My career was able to take a new turn and I had to start at the very bottom, as the Front Office Manager at Serene Pavilions, Waduwa.

How did your career progress from there?

A: Thereafter, I worked in various properties in Kalpitiya, Colombo, Galle and Weligama as front office manager and operations manager. I’ve always loved history and sharing stories of the properties with guests. That passion is one of the reasons I wanted to work in the Galle Fort at a property like The Bartizan.

How would you describe The Bartizan’s hotel product?

A: I’ll use words used by our guests themselves – stylish, refined, with the ambiance of Europe. Our courtyard is very similar to
the cobbled streets of France. The hotel is 300 years old, with Dutch architecture, and was refurbished in keeping with its original features – so it’s like a time capsule within the Fort.

It’s a simple operation, a luxury bed and breakfast with an afternoon tea and snack menu. We maintain a very high standard of service and deliver this to each and every guest.

**Who is your target market?**

*A:* The majority of our guests come from the UK, the US and Canada. I was really pleased when we started getting American visitors. I know from working on cruise ships around Europe that Americans take care of their citizens very well, so seeing American visitors was a positive sign that Sri Lanka was becoming viewed as stable and safe.

Galle Fort is a historical attraction, so the demographics tend to be slightly older. Most of our guests are under 40 years old, but we do get a sizeable number who are much older (over 60s). The latter tend to come for longer stays of 5 or more days and use the hotel as their base, so they spend a lot of time here.

We don’t do much advertising for the hotel and only recently started working with travel agents. Over 80 percent of our bookings are from online platforms and direct contact.

**Why do you love your job?**

*A:* Working in a hotel is an incredible experience; it’s almost an escape from reality. I spent my early years travelling overseas, working on cruise ships around Europe. For me, meeting an international guest is as enjoyable as travelling to their country myself. When you work in a hotel, you can be a host to the world – that’s why I love it.

**What was the best advice given to you in your career?**

*A:* To simply stay at it.

**What is your favourite place to visit in Sri Lanka?**

*A:* There are so many! The country is so diverse, but if I had to pick one, it would be Weligama. The bay, the vista, the vibe, it’s amazing; it has such a great energy.

I’ve travelled all around this country and have fallen in love with it. I believe everyone in Sri Lanka, and especially if they’re working in the tourism sector, should visit as many places as possible so they can share that knowledge and experience with visitors to the island.

**How do you describe your management style?**

*A:* My style is example based. We have 12 staff members, including security, and they see me doing everything they do. Everybody here is working towards the same goal: satisfying our guests.

The staff have seen the way I interact with guests, making them feel comfortable, the service style involved, the manners and language used, and they’ve come to their own realisation about how to handle themselves.

When dealing with visitors, you need to give your best, and Sri Lankans are naturally good at this. To be hospitable to a paying guest is not a big shift from our traditional Sri Lankan hospitality. Service is very genuine here.

**This is your first role as a general manager. Is it what you expected?**

*A:* I’m aware that this hotel is very different to others. The Bartizan is not a 700-room property with hundreds of staff. It’s a very small place, but it has everything that I love about hotels. To be the General Manager of The Bartizan, I think, is the best job in the world.

**What’s the most difficult part about your job?**

*A:* Dealing with the government and administration. In this industry, we’re used to using minimum resources to get things done, so we notice when things are not efficient. Even simple administrative tasks like posting a registered mail takes multiple people to process. Once public service becomes more streamlined, we will be able to move a lot faster and provide a much better, more professional service.
Meet the Team: Amith at Fox Jaffna

Originally from Pussallawa in the Tea Country, Amith Kumar, the ever-smiling Food & Beverage Supervisor at Fox Jaffna, started his journey in hospitality with a diploma in hospitality from the Thondaman Vocational Training Centre in Hatton. Thereafter, he worked as a Trainee Waiter at Galway Forest Lodge and gained experience as a steward and busboy, and was promoted as a senior waiter. Afterwards, Kumar joined Royal Retreat in Sigiriya as a captain, and overlooked the bar and restaurant at the hotel. After a short stint at Lake Wind Resort in Tissamaharama and American restaurant chain TGI Fridays in Colombo, Kumar joined Fox Jaffna as its Food & Beverage Supervisor in January. He oversees the duties of three senior waiters and three trainee waiters.

How did you know you wanted to be a part of the hospitality trade?
A: I remember when I was a child, I watched a travel programme on the Discovery Channel and since then I wanted to join the industry. I like hospitality because it gives me the opportunity to meet people from different countries and to learn from them.

What is the hardest part about your job?
A: Training people can be difficult because you have to repeat instructions and be patient before the staff learn to get it right.

What is the most memorable moment in your career?
A: While working at my previous hotel in Sigiriya, I was asked by a solo traveller to accompany her to climb Pidurangala. The sunrise I saw from the rock was spectacular. It is one of my best memories.

What are the three things you want to improve on in the future?
A: To train my staff on how to provide a good service to clients. To have a better understanding about the food, the hotel and its regional specialities. To be more aware of the surroundings as well as the day-to-day occupancy in order to plan and set up for meals appropriately.

What’s your favourite part about your job?
A: I really like wine service. I’m keen on learning more about it in the future.

What’s next for you in your career?
A: Restaurant Manager, Food & Beverage Manager, and then Resident Manager. In the short term, I’d also like to learn about pastry making.

Fox Jaffna, launched last year, is a 24-bedroom boutique hotel in Jaffna under Fox Resorts. The group also has two hotels - Mas Villa in Kotmale and Ranna Beach Villa near Tangalle, and is in the midst of constructing another property in Kandy.
WHY WOMEN ARE SHUNNING HOSPITALITY JOBS

THE SECURITY FORCES HAVE A HIGHER SHARE OF WOMEN IN THEIR RANKS THAN STAR-CLASS HOTELS. WHAT’S KEEPING WOMEN AWAY FROM THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY?

BY CHANDEEP WETTASINGHE
Jayamuthu Weerasinghe wakes before the crack of dawn. By the time she’s ready, the hotel transport service picks her up. By sunrise, around 6am, she’s already working. Weerasinghe is a restaurant hostess at the new and posh Weligama Bay Marriott Resort & Spa. A tasting panel follows after she steps into the kitchen, for the dishes on offer for breakfast. “I need to be able to answer any guests’ questions on the dishes being prepared,” she says. Some guests are picky and many have allergies, so restaurant staff must be ready with answers to questions about the food and beverages on offer. Weerasinghe has a mental database of myriad dishes that she’s ready to recite at a moment’s notice. Apart from learning Chinese, believing it is fast becoming a global language, she spends her free time pursuing her passion for cuisines, learning about various food and beverages from around the world.

“We ensure dining is an experience. Sometimes a guest would ask if we could prepare their favourite dish from back home. Sometimes we haven’t even heard about it, but the chef steps in. We do our best, and when I go home, I look it up,” Weerasinghe says. Before she welcomes the first guest to the restaurant at 6.30am, she checks the table arrangements and buffet name tags, and then goes through the guest and VIP lists. Interacting with guests is a learning experience for Weerasinghe. “They tell me about where they’re from and where they’ve travelled to, and I get the chance to tell them about Sri Lanka,” she says.

She couldn’t be happier about switching careers from ground handling at SriLankan Airlines to one of world’s largest hotel chains, with prospects of working at Marriott Group hotels across the globe. However, Weerasinghe is among the handful of women working in the tourism industry. Sri Lanka faces a glaring supply gap of around 70,000 hotel workers, as trained supply at 30,000 over the next five years lags behind the projected number of 100,000 new jobs. This is on top of the estimated 6,700 job shortage the industry says it’s currently grappling with. There are now only two options: the politically sensitive one of opening borders and importing labour or attracting more women workers by positioning the industry more positively.

According to the Sri Lanka Tourism and Hospitality Workforce Competitiveness Roadmap 2018-2023 report, less than 10% of the industry’s workforce comprises women. At large chains like Marriott and Jetwing, initiatives like community engagement, internal gender targets, and better pay have increased that number to 15%. In comparison, a 2010 United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) study said women occupy around 49% of hotels and restaurants jobs globally, although data was scarce in some countries. A 2014 World Travel & Tourism Council study on five countries representative of all major geographical and economic characteristics said that women hold over 60% of jobs in the tourism industry. Sri Lanka cannot claim the excuse of poor labour force participation of women, which at 34.1% is similar to other countries. Here, even the military has greater women representation (12.5%) than tourism.

In the island’s eastern districts, where the civil war claimed the lives of men and where women-led households are more common, women made up 18% of employment in tourism, according to an independent study of the Sri Lanka Skills for Inclusive Growth programme.

What makes the tourism sector jobs pariah for women? Many parents are unwilling to let their daughters work in tourism, fearing what goes on inside hotels. “Even my parents didn’t like the idea. So my general manager, Mrs. Wijenaike, spoke to them to reassure them about safety,” says Jetwing Lighthouse hotel Front Office Supervisor Sajini Kalugalage, who hails from a village half an hour inland from Galle. “It’s very safe. The management supports us, but of course we too have to use our heads,” she says. Her father initially insisted she train to become an accountant after she left her textile industry job. However, she chose tourism over her father’s protests. She figured accountancy might bore her, just like the apparel sector had. Kalugalage smiles, as she recounts how her parents now attend hotel parties after their change of attitude towards the industry. However, not all young people have shed the stereotypical thinking that inhibits women from participation.

Sahani Senasinghe, a Management Trainee at Jetwing Lake, and previously at Jetwing Lighthouse, notes that some girls don’t consider work in hotels or some hotel roles, viewing those as damaging their marriage prospects. “Sometimes men don’t like women who work in housekeeping, food and beverage, or as chefs. The hours are long in some of these roles,” she says.

A World Bank study has found that women are 11% less likely to participate in work after marriage, while firms are 26% less likely to hire married women. However, it also
JAYAMUTHU WEERASINGHE
Restaurant Hostess at Weligama Bay Marriott Resort & Spa
What I enjoy the most: Learning new things, meeting new people
My goal: To become a General Manager
3 tips: Be Passionate. Be ready to learn. Don’t worry, it’s safe.

SAMADI ATHUKORALA
Senior Sales Manager, Corporate & MICE at Galle Face Hotel
What I enjoy the most: Everyday is different. It’s never boring.
My goal: To be a General Manager at a leading hotel. Get engaged with a long-term project
3 tips: Be yourself. Be confident. Grab opportunities.

GEENU WICKRAMARATNE
Owner of Bougainvillea
What I enjoy the most: Reading little notes guests leave behind on how much they enjoyed the stay
My goal: Expanding operations on authentic accommodation and experiences
3 tips: Let your personality reflect in the property. Be confident and take risks. Enjoy what you do.
HASINI JAYASURIYA
Tour Executive at Asian Adventures Travel Management Company

What I enjoy the most: Travelling

My goal: Ask me again in a few years!

3 tips: Be passionate. Be ready to travel anywhere at a moment’s notice. Be open-minded.

SAHANI SENASINGHE
Management Trainee at Jetwing Lake

What I enjoy the most: It’s kind of cool to work in different departments

My goal: In the short term, a Training Manager. Beyond that I want to rise as far as I can.

3 tips: Do what you love. Believe in yourself. Don’t be afraid.

SAJINI KALUGALAGE
Front Office Supervisor at Jetwing Lighthouse

What I enjoy the most: Meeting guests from different cultures

My goal: Aiming higher than a General Manager

3 tips: Do a good job and be proud of it. Don’t worry, hotels are safe but you should behave yourself.
found that the tourism sector views women as better workers than men, compared to ICT and commercial agriculture sectors, where men are preferred. Senasinghe, who seems to have an unrestrained enthusiasm, already has new ideas that she says can attract more women to the industry. But Senasinghe, a high achiever who graduated top of her class at the Sri Lanka Institute of Tourism and Hospitality Management (SLITHM) Kandy branch, says she’s planning to unveil those in her project report due at the end of her Management Training.

At a recent Tourism Leaders’ Summit, Carmen Niethammer, who manages the International Finance Corporation’s (IFC) Women in Work programme, highlighted the lack of daycare facilities as one of the biggest barriers keeping women out of work, and particularly so in tourism where shift work is common. According to the World Bank, women in Sri Lanka are 7.4% less likely to join the labour force if their children are under five years. Another study that social enterprise Chrysalis undertook found that 90% of women students at a hotel school interviewed felt they would stop working once they have children. Senasinghe agrees that daycares are crucial. “If three or four hotels located close to each other jointly set up a daycare, that would help,” she says. The problem is magnified in rural areas, where unlike in Colombo, independent daycares are unavailable.

Women shun roles in housekeeping and hotel restaurants and prefer front office roles at hotel receptions, where there is guest interaction at check in and check out. Perhaps hotels are encouraging this selectivity. At many hotel chains, women make up over 70% of front office roles or desk jobs such as marketing, sales, and public relations. Nirodha Rukshani, Assistant Housekeeper at Marriott, treads the path less travelled. The daughter of an Executive Chef, Rukshani prefers the more active housekeeping department, resisting her father’s influence to become a chef. She is the hotel’s only woman housekeeping executive, working in a department where her women colleagues are in the laundry or common area units.

“We can’t recruit just anybody into housekeeping; the skill must match,” she says. Many women also find housekeeping strenuous and off-putting as it can involve rearranging furniture, making beds, and ensuring the hotel is spotless. However, Rukshani isn’t daunted by the gender imbalance, and enjoys the work even when it stretches beyond duty hours. Her colleagues think she is a workaholic. Niethammer finds the lack of women workers diminished the guest experience. “Women are big conveyors of culture, food, music and dance.”

Flexible work will encourage more women, according to Hasini Jayasuriya, a Tour Executive at Asian Adventures Travel Management Company, an experiential and adventure destination management firm now vying to become the largest in the country. “For those in administration, marketing and sales roles, the option to work two or three days a week from home will help balance family life. It’s available in other countries,” she says, after making a switch from hotels to the travel trade where friendlier hours appeased her parents, who were initially wary of her working in tourism. Asian Adventures offices, where more than a third of employees are women, provide flexibility to employees than do hotels. “But the Sri Lankan travel industry isn’t still accepting the work-from-home concept by setting key performance indicators to measure how effective I would be working from home,” Jayasuriya says.

Flexible work isn’t welcomed by tourism employers in the eastern districts, despite the greater need to engage women for business growth. Nearly 60% of the firms in these districts said they would not hire more women, due to an unwillingness to provide flexibility, cultural stereotypes, and women-specific family commitments. Having graduated with a bachelor’s in Tourism Management where half her batch mates were women, Jayasuriya finds the consensus among friends to be that women are feeling the pressure of a glass ceiling, and some are contemplating leaving the country for better prospects overseas. “I don’t think it’s limited only to the tourism industry in Sri Lanka, but if you’re working for some of the bigger hotel chains, you’re less likely to face this,” she admits.

Of 138 star-class Sri Lankan hotels, only five have women as general managers; three at the Jetwing chain, who are all locals, a Sri Lankan recently returned from overseas at the Uga Escapes group, and one foreign GM at Colombo’s Kingsbury. There is no glass ceiling to shatter for Samadi Athukorala, Senior Sales Manager Corporate & MICE at the colonial-era Galle Face Hotel. “Here, women hold key management positions. and I rose rapidly to this level in 10 years, despite a three-year break I took in between,” she says. Even a tourism pessimist would agree
A 2016 GLOBAL STUDY OF 22,000 FIRMS FOUND THAT BIAS IS EXPENSIVE. FOR PROFITABLE FIRMS, A MOVE FROM NO WOMEN LEADERS TO 30 PERCENT REPRESENTATION IS ASSOCIATED WITH A 15 PERCENT INCREASE IN THE NET REVENUE MARGIN.

that Sri Lanka’s tea and rubber plantations are far poorer prospects for women workers than hotels. Despite employing over 150,000 women in low level labour such as plucking tea, only one woman has been admitted to the fraternity of planters, who supervise plantation estates. As a share, more women sit on hotel company boards of directors than those companies employ, according to the IFC, with 15.7% of the seats, although many are accounted for as these businesses are family-controlled. As a sector, women board representation in hotels is the second highest after banking and finance. It is also much higher than the average 8.2% of women in boards in Sri Lankan listed companies. Globally, women hold around 15% of board seats.

The informal sector is also a potential hotbed for empowering women, through entrepreneurship, instead of taking them to the foot of the corporate ladder. The UNWTO says tourism has the potential to contribute to informal employment and provide decent opportunities for entrepreneurship. This couldn’t be truer for Geenu Wickramaratne, who works as a project manager for an ICT firm during the day and moonlights as an Airbnb host.

She is the face of Bougainvillea homestay in Colombo, which started as a family project. Guests, some of whom have stayed up to 14 days, are giving the property raving reviews at a time when many tourists limit stays in the city to a day or two.

Wickramaratne gives guests tips on her offbeat favourite things to do in Colombo. Her list keeps growing as she tries new experiences around the city. When the family gets a break from their schedules, the lucky guests who happen to be staying at the property get free city tours.

Born to a family that loves to travel and experience authentic culture, Wickramaratne plans to expand her portfolio into villas, starting with another family property in Badulla and maybe another along the coast depending on Bougainvillea’s success. Providing women with equal opportunity to work is high on her list of factors for success, alongside providing authentic experiences.

“I don’t think we will ever operate hotels. When our family travelled, we always liked to experience culture away from hotels, where things seemed to be orchestrated,” she says.

Providing experiences is also the passion of Independent Hiking and Adventure Guide Krishani Samaraweera. On weekends, she is as likely to be found hiking in the Knuckles or rappelling down waterfalls around Kitulgala. Local gangs tend to control the supply of services to guides, such as canoes and rafts, she says. “But I’ve never felt as if my safety was at risk. If you’re down-to-earth and don’t antagonize them, they respect you.”

The hiking community credo is respect based on skills and not gender. However, she is among a handful of women who are adventure and hiking guides in the country. The problem is closer to her home in Colombo. Samaraweera’s husband accompanies her during tours requiring a licensed guide. This is because she does not have a guiding license. The SLITHM issued National Tourist Guide Lecturer License takes six months to complete, and Samaraweera has found the full-time training challenging while working a normal office job.

“They should provide flexible, part time training. I managed to do my MBA part time,” she says.

The Sri Lanka Chauffer Guide Lecturers Association affiliated with the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority provides a shorter course. “But when I went to enroll, they said they don’t accept women,” she says. Flabbergasted, Samaraweera explains how a group of women had joined the short course, only to be threatened by foul language from course instructors, which resulted in women being banned from enrolment. “They maintained it’s challenging to convey the proper meaning without using filth. I find that hard to believe. They offered to consider training one big enough group of women, of 20 or so. Honestly, I haven’t tried.”

To fill 100,000 vacancies, the private sector has highlighted need for a campaign to change public perceptions about tourism. However, industry biases must also change. Its leadership understands the root causes: that better transportation and child care facilities will encourage greater women participation and that women should receive equal opportunities. Many established hotel chains are positively engaging women to join and find advancement in the industry. However, there is a significant gap between the impact of those initiatives and the number of positions needing talent.

Sri Lanka’s ambition to be a world class travel destination will also require an equally ambitious strategy to bridge the talent gap. Engaging women and advancing them may become a cornerstone of that.

A version of this story first appeared in Echelon magazine.
Designed for Success

Getting the online marketing right for your hotel has never been more important. In the second part of our marketing series, Nick Hart looks at how to make your website shine, how to avoid common pitfalls, and why blogs are now essential.

If your tourist hotel doesn’t have a website, it might as well not exist. And not just any old website, either. In a fiercely competitive market, it must stand out. It must instantly connect and engage with prospective guests.

It must say, in words, pictures and video: “We truly understand your needs and expectations. We offer better accommodation, better value, a better experience, better service, better food—better everything—than anyone else. Come and stay with us!”

But for potential guests to get the message, they must first find your site, or have it found for them. And there are basically five ways that can happen: a Google search (e.g., ‘best hotel in Mirissa’); social media; key influencers (professional bloggers); personal recommendations; and direct mail newsletters.

You can also pay for Google Ads that place your property and website link at the top of the results for a specific search string. But this procedure is variable and complicated—and costly—and you will probably need an expert to guide you through it, if you have no background in this industry.

Your website is the heart of your marketing campaign, the hub at the centre of your web of social media channels. It is also your shop window, the place that tells your all-important unique story, and where guests can make direct bookings or contact your customer-relations/sales/marketing team.

Increasing direct bookings will grow your bottom line and boost website ROI (return on investment) by avoiding the extortionate commissions charged by online travel agencies (OTAs), which also hit you with a double whammy by ‘negotiating’—pushing down—your room rates.

ROI for any kind of marketing spend is notoriously difficult to measure. Direct bookings aside, this is particularly the case with a website. So do you save money by leaving it to a friend’s cousin who “knows a bit about websites” (a seriously false economy)? Or pay a competent professional the market rate to ensure it is at least technically up to scratch?

Then there’s the content. To stand out from the crowd, your words, pictures, and video must be the highest possible quality in order to show your property at its best. This includes accommodation, pool, spa, restaurant, food, beverages, ambience, etc—the total ‘wow’ factor—plus the happy smiling faces of staff and guests.

That sorted, who will manage the site day-to-day: regularly refresh it; safeguard it against hackers, viruses and malware; create secure backups; and ensure it accords with Google’s vitally important search-engine-optimization (SEO) algorithms?

What about a blog, where you not only sing your own praises, but also highlight key local attractions and market Sri Lanka itself as the world’s must-visit tropical holiday destination? After all, guests won’t be staying at your property if they’re not actually in the country.

"A potential guest in the UK Googles ‘best place for whale-watching in Sri Lanka’"
And Google’s search algorithms love blogs, not only for their regularly updated, original and (hopefully) compelling content, but also because visitors will stay longer on your site. This tells Google that searchers have found what they’re looking for—Google’s only objective as a search engine—which will boost your site ranking for that particular search string.

The blog is also a back door to your site. For example, you post a story about whale-watching in Mirissa, with great words, pictures and video, and with all the right SEO keywords and triggers.

A potential guest in the UK Google’s ‘best place for whale-watching in Sri Lanka’—and bingo, your blog post, which includes that key phrase, appears in the search results. Click, and they’re on your site, connecting and engaging, and direct-booking a three-night stay.

For all of the above you will need two essentials: a knowledgeable, keen, and trustworthy senior manager tasked to hire and deal with the developer—the individual or agency that will design, register, make, and maybe manage your site—and a realistic budget.

The first is the most problematic, because the manager must be trusted with the logins and passwords for the hosting service and the site itself. This is so that when the site is complete and the developer paid, the logins and passwords can be changed for security reasons.

However, if the developer is also being paid to manage the site on an ongoing basis, they will retain the logins and passwords. Your manager must therefore ensure that said developer does what you want them to do, promptly, and to the required standard.

And if they can’t or won’t, for whatever reason, the logins and passwords—and the developer as well, if necessary—can be changed, hopefully without any downtime or security issues.

But what happens if your manager leaves (or is fired) and locks you out of your site—or worse, threatens to close it down or upload damaging posts and pictures—and demands a ransom? These situations are more common than you might think.

The good news is that there are precautions you can take that will minimise the risks and effects of such a worst-case scenario.

First, don’t leave it all to the developer. Register your domain and hosting service yourself using your own computer (for possible future IP-address ID purposes), with you as the registered owner and administrator, with your own email address and phone number, and pay with your own credit card.

This way, your manager and designer/developer should not actually need the hosting-service login and password except in specific circumstances, in which case you can supervise and control their level of access.

More to the point, you will not be dependent on the developer for your hosting. You, not the developer, will be in control of your site.

At the same time, if your hosting service (and/or website) is hacked or disabled by a third-party outsider, it will be much easier
Marketing ROI (return on investment) is notoriously difficult to measure. Nevertheless, the accepted target marketing spend for hotels is roughly 5-7 percent of gross revenue per year.

Your website is a key element of your marketing strategy, and includes three elements: the build; the content (words, pictures and video); and the ongoing day-to-day management. Each should have its own separate budget.

Bear in mind, and as the saying goes—you get what you pay for, the corollary being that you don’t get what you don’t pay for.

First, do the research. Check out competitor websites, and ask yourself: which one would most make a discerning guest want to stay there? Then ask at least three experienced developers how much it would cost to create something even better.

If you’re starting from scratch, or undertaking a major upgrade and refresh of an existing site, it will take time to see measurable results in terms of visitor numbers and site-related bookings.

The key here is measurable. You will need to regularly monitor your site’s performance across a range of key-indicators, including visitor location and demographics.

Google has a host of marketing tools that can help you do this, including Google Analytics, which provides pretty much all you need to know about how much atten-
tion your site is getting.

It will also tell you where visitors are coming from, including cross-linking from website content you post on social media channels such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube.

And if that includes links from your blog posts, it will also help you determine which are the most popular, so you can tailor and focus your content accordingly.

The takeaway here is—persevere. Because if you don’t try, and keep trying, you won’t succeed.

DESIGN, MOBILE-FIRST, SITE SPEED, GOOGLE

For best search-engine performance and user experience (UX), Google favours responsive, mobile-first design, and fast page loading when it ranks your site in search results.

A site should be created with ‘break points’—for mobile, tablet and desktop—that essentially present three different visual orientations of the site depending on the screen widths of the most popular phones and tablets.

Getting it right will enhance user experience. Getting it wrong will have the opposite effect. And Google knows how much time visitors spend—and don’t spend—on your site, which will have a significant impact on site rankings for any given search string.

Meanwhile, speed is of the essence. The popular consensus is that if a site doesn’t start loading in 3-7 seconds, visitors will abandon it and look elsewhere.

But there are many factors at play here, including internet connection speed, so that load-time number is not carved in stone. Nevertheless, it’s a ballpark figure for your developer to bear in mind when they are creating the site.

TARGET DEMOGRAPHICS

If your property targets particular nationalities—e.g., Indian, Middle East, Chinese, British—you might want to tailor your site for their particular cultural preferences.

This applies to colours, fonts, pictures, video, and the general look and feel. Check out some of the most popular hotel websites in your category in each home country, and take note of their design preferences.

Language is also a vital factor. At the very least, use the Google Translate plugin or equivalent, which can machine-translate your whole site at the click of a mouse.

A more complicated—and better, albeit expensive—option is to have bespoke language versions of your site (with the option to change the language) which load automatically depending on the visitors’ geographical locations/IP addresses.

NEWSLETTER DATA GATEWAY: CRM, MAILCHIMP

If you are using a CRM (customer-relations management) tool such as Hubspot—and you really should be—you can link its database to a mail-shot utility such as MailChimp to send out personalised email newsletters.

Direct mail is reckoned to be one of the most effective marketing tools—with the right timing, it puts your all-important sales pitch at the top of potential guests’ inboxes when they log in.

This applies to OTA (online travel agency) contacts as well as individual potential guests, plus previous guests you want to keep in touch with and get repeat business from.

This works well when linked to a subscribe/contact-us form on your website, which can be configured as a ‘pop-up’ to get your visitor’s attention.

ABOUT/CONTACT US, PROMPT RESPONSE

‘About Us’ and ‘Contact Us’ pages are cornerstones of your customer-relations effort, so the UX (user interface) must be compelling and user-friendly. You want customer feedback, so make it as easy and simple as possible. For maximum benefit, you should include a 24/7 contact email address and phone number, and ensure that there is 24/7 communication.

Response times should be as short as possible. Take note of different time zones in relation to Sri Lanka - a fast reply is important! Meanwhile, ensure that whoever is dealing with this can answer the most common and expected queries. And if they need to check something and get back, ensure they do so when they say they will. See above.

BE HONEST

Above all else, be honest. Make sure that all the words, pictures, and video on your site reflect the reality. Your guests would like the pictures on your site to actually greet them when they arrive, and they will be disappointed if this is not the case. This can affect your reputation, so be honest about your offering.
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When disaster strikes, listen to your GM!

New thinking is needed to manage this existential crisis

When investors buy or build hotels to capitalise on a tourism boom, they often don’t understand the relationships and balance-sheet dynamics of the hospitality industry.

Success in manufacturing and retail is all about the short-term sales pitch, monthly and quarterly ROI (return on investment) reports, and cutting overheads to the bare minimum. As some of them have thrived in that hard-sell, hard-nosed environment—doing deals, landing suppliers, prioritising profits—investors often fail to grasp that selling a dream is not like selling a washing machine. This is why some are now learning the hard way that investing in an industry they know little or nothing about can be a recipe for disaster when things go wrong. Like now.

In the aftermath of the Easter Sunday terror attacks, many hotels are seeing a huge drop in advanced bookings—as much as 70–80% cancellations at the time of writing.

But sole experience in a different industry means these non-industry owners are not able to handle the crisis best—and neither are some of the managers they hired. Managers have a tough job—they need to manage resources, operations, and when necessary, non-hospitality industry owners’ expectations.

At times like this, with occupancy rates plunging and bottom lines are under water, a hotel’s future depends on the strength of its management team.

In particular, it needs an experienced and savvy general manager who is not afraid to argue the toss with the boss.

Unfortunately, rigid managerial hierarchies and ‘boss deference’ mean that some GMs avoid telling owners what they don’t want to hear. Such as, forget ROI, forget cost-cutting, forget your comfort zone—this is an existential crisis. Find a good marketing agency that knows every trick in the book to connect and engage with potential customers. Then, throw money at it!

This goes against the grain for manufacturing and retail industries, where an owner’s first instinct in a downturn is to cut costs—including the marketing budget. But general managers know that hotels live by constantly connecting and engaging with potential customers—and right now, that means more marketing, not less. This touches on the relationship dynamic between owners and GMs, the heartbeat of any hotel.

Those same GMs may be reluctant to make decisions or even voice their opinions if it means second-guessing or questioning procedures instigated by the owner. This is not a good practice at the best of times, and doubly not when decisive and effective damage-limitation action needs to be taken urgently.

It is then that an investor’s one-industry mindset, which achieved success in hard-sell manufacturing or retail industries, can be their own worst enemy.

For example, ROI is a key indicator when determining how well—or badly—a business is being run. But for newly built tourist properties, which at the best of times can take years to show a profit, that is not the case.

In difficult times, business owners, who saw hotels purely in terms of jumping on the tourism bandwagon, need to recalibrate their expectations. This means ditching preconceived ideas and listening to their GMs. There are times when new thinking is required. This is one of them.
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