

**POST-CONFLICT RECOVERY OF HOPE
AND HOME THROUGH TOURISM**

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For almost three decades it was a nation that suffered the ravages of war: horrors of separation, civil unrest from unrelenting hardship, heartbreak, horrors and losses of hope, every reason to be afraid with every reason to lose faith, not to mention the ever-presence of distrust, displacement and despair.

For the people of Sri Lanka, the period from July 1983 until May 2009 will forever remain a scar on the landscape, economy, psyche and hearts of the nation. Civil war ripped the nation's geography and society apart. No one was spared. Whatever side of the country, or conflict one was on, everyone was impacted, some wounds visible, some not. Over 100,000 souls were estimated to be lost. For those to emerge through to the other side, able to exhale on announcement of the end of the war just before mid-2009, while still alive, a part of them no question was never to feel alive again. Nothing would be able to immediately breathe oxygen back into the one's sense of innocence, trust, security, stability. These small, yet profoundly meaningful deaths experienced by those still living, were the millions of unaccounted casualties of war.

But the Sri Lankan people are strong. They are resilient. They are people of faith. And they are innately people of unity.

They would find a way to once again find common ground, able to look one another in the eye – wartime friend or foe, slowly rebuilding a future that they could look to with confidence that they are safe, side by side.

The challenge: rebuilding their world in a way that allowed them to create a place called home.

The solution: rebuilding their once blossoming, now broken, Tourism sector, allowing the world to visit their home.

A mere seven years on, the people of Sri Lanka are slowly, steadily, and with certainty reestablishing their tourism sector based on a cohesive masterplan which holds tightly and preciously at its heart the quest for national reconciliation, reunification, strict governance, and singular focus on sustainable upliftment and reinspiration of all.

FORTITUDE, FAITH, AND FRANKNESS OF REALITY

The tourism numbers tell the story, the tourism experience conveys the glory. From a very small base of international arrivals in 1970 of just over 46,000 international arrivals, by 1982 the industry had grown almost ten-fold, reaching a pre-conflict high of just under 400,000 international arrivals and US\$ 200 million in receipts.

Then the troubles started, causing the country to go into a period of almost 30 years of decline. The tourism industry – a critical source of jobs, economic dispersion and stability, and a means of keeping Sri Lankan culture, traditions, history and heritage alive through the pride and participation of the people of Sri Lanka – experienced severe fragmentation, the beautiful, tourism-rich north-east of the country now completely off limits due to the conflict, the region the heart of the quest for a Tamil independent state. While the rest of the country received tourism intakes, these were naturally weak as the conflict negatively impacted the image of the

destination as a whole, multiple failed attempts at peace breaking the stability of the nation in tandem to breaking the spirit of the nation. Tourism arrivals, internationally, were cut in half.

And then peace finally came to the people of Sri Lanka in July of 2009, a mere seven years ago, allowed the people of Sri Lanka to step out of years of darkness and look towards the sun, towards the future. The time of war was over – now was the time of healing, and hope.

For an island nation dependent on international visitation for one in ten jobs, significant earnings and essential infrastructure investment, the Tourism industry was switched back into operation with increasing peace of mind.

Importantly, recognising the scale of reconstruction effort needed to rebuild the industry, the industry went to work. Slowly but surely, tourism numbers turned from red ink to black, reaching one million tourist arrivals in 2012 with revenue generation of over one billion \$USD, just one thousand days since the end of the war.

To this day, the tourism sector is hailed as a vital roleplayer in Sri Lanka's achievement of sustained peace.

CREDIBILITY OF THE CLAIMS

But can the tourism sector really be credited for having such a profound, enduring impact on the rebuilding of Sri Lanka's economic and social structures, not to mention psyche? Really? This is a challenge often received by tourism leaders.

According to Hiran Cooray, Chairman of Jetwing Hotels Ltd. / President of Tourist Hotels Association of Sri Lanka / Board member of Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, in the case of Sri Lanka post-war, the practical arguments made the case for tourism self-evident. With millions across the country needing to find a way to rebuild their lives, employment became a core focus of government.

"Once we finally were a nation at peace, there had to be a way of getting people back to work. We needed a way to create some sort of normality. There was no trust. For almost thirty years it was impossible to predict what tomorrow would bring. The first priority was finding the people jobs."

The tourism sector allowed for nation-wide participation in the already established yet severely disrupted tourism economy. This included, interestingly, former Sri Lankan forces. Significant numbers of Sri Lanka military personnel, local heroes having fought for and finally achieved the nation's freedom from the decades of conflict, were now unemployed. The tourism sector was able to provide a new means of livelihood and social integration, in some cases in specialized product development and experience delivery such as the navy for whale watching tours and island commutes, as well as military for helicopter tours, both former forces and equipment being reallocated to the tourism sector. As explained by Cooray,:

"The forces are becoming service providers in some ways. I look at it in a holistic way. They have done the greatest service to the country by bringing peace. This is one way of keeping them going, keeping them employed. Also if you look at the skills and hat they bring, they are the people geared to provide the safety, the for example navy insisting that tourists wear life jackets for boat tours, where the private sector might just put tourists on boats without being concerned about the safety aspects."

With an annual rate of growth in arrivals of +20%, and steady employment generation, Sri Lanka represents a global example of how the tourism sector can be utilized as a means of rebuilding not just national economy, but also identity, society and psyche.

For nations emerging out of conflict, what advice would Sri Lanka share? Cooray is clear.

“There has to be a lot of patience, a lot of understanding. The wounds need to heal, and heal patiently. There is no fast-tracking there.”

As recently spotlighted at the UNWTO Conference on Tourism, a Catalyst for Development, Peace and Reconciliation held earlier this month in Passikudah, Sri Lanka, essential to rebuilding post-conflict areas through tourism are: 1) community engagement and empowerment, 2) capacity building, 3) public/private sector partnerships and 4) proactive image rebuilding.

<http://media.unwto.org/press-release/2016-07-14/tourism-catalyst-peace-and-development>

As stated by HE Maithripala Sirisena, President of Sri Lanka, in his message to conference attendees from across Sri Lanka and the world,:

“Tourism is a vehicle for trust and goodwill. Cultural understanding can change attitudes and build peace. Tourism’s role in peace building is also enacted through its contribution to poverty alleviation, cultural preservation and environmental conservation.”

Where there is healing, there is hope. Where there is hope, home can be found once more.

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