

■ **Industry practitioner and expert Nisha Barkathunnisha from iconic tourism city State shares useful insights at Daily FT-Viluxur Holidays organised evening forum**

BY KIYOSHI J BERMAN

THE iconic city State Singapore's success in tourism is well-documented and widely-used as a benchmark. Many Sri Lankans have personally experienced brand Singapore or have transited via its huge airport Changi. Singapore last year attracted over 15 million tourists and earned Singapore \$ 24 billion (Rs. 2.4 trillion) from tourism and related activities.

The figures for a tiny country are staggering. It is targeting S\$ 30 billion by 2015, a higher value from a relatively lower tourist arrivals figure of 17 million. Envisaging 15 million tourists in Sri Lanka is unthinkable in the foreseeable future even though the country is richer as a tourist destination and it will also mean mass influx of tourists for a country with a 20 million population. How did Singapore achieve this feat and how is it managing the growing popularity and influx despite being a nation with around five million people and limited land?

The tourism success of Singapore is not an accident but a result of well-conceived, planned and executed strategies over time, with efficient use of resources and smart marketing. As a key industry forum in Colombo recently found out, it was a collective effort involving even ordinary citizens.

Leading figures of Sri Lanka's tourism industry as well as professionals last week were spellbound by what and how Singapore did to be what it is today, thanks to a thought-provoking and absorbing presentation by tourism expert Nisha Barkathunnisha via an initiative championed by the Daily FT and Viluxur Holidays.

Several likeminded parties such as Reefs Edge, Harpo's Cafés and Restaurants, Hilton Colombo Residences, BBDO and Event Productions supported this pro bono initiative in the larger interest of shaping a better future for tourism and the people of Sri Lanka.

Nisha's presentation focussed on the recent performance of Singapore tourism, the quality tourism approaches and strategies, high yield driven marketing approach, enhancing destination attractiveness and supporting industry competitiveness.

Following are excerpts from Nisha's presentation which was well received by the audience, so much so there were spontaneous expressions of interest to fund her as a consultant to realise or crystallise some of the future plans of Sri Lanka Tourism, which is targeting 2.6 million tourists in a few years' time.

IT'S a great pleasure being in this beautiful country. I've been coming here for the last 18 years as a tourism practitioner and several times in the recent years and I've been experiencing huge change in Sri

Charting a new course for Sri Lanka tourism: Key lessons from Singapore



Nisha Barkathunnisha

Lanka's tourism landscape. I'm very happy to be here to contribute as much as I can and share a little bit of my experience in Singapore as a tourist destination.

I understand that in this room there are a lot of hoteliers, travel intermediaries, corporations, and investors. It's wonderful to see you and I think this is an exemplification of the commitment of the Sri Lankan industry to unlock the potential and to prepare the industry towards the 2016 goals. Are you ready to be unlocked, ladies and gentlemen?

I see myself as a facilitator over here. As someone in the tourism industry in Singapore, I want to facilitate an evening where we share how creative Sri Lanka's tourism industry can be in achieving the 2016 goals. I'm trying to facilitate how the industry can charge a new direction; we have a lot of questions coming up, a lot of ideas, creative thinking that could be initiated.

I hope to encourage Sri Lanka's tourism industry to see how much more your country can do in terms of development goals.

The tourism goal in Singapore at the moment is in terms of quality tourism approaches. It is similar in terms of Sri Lanka's plan in moving towards tourism development as well. I would also like to touch on how Singapore, not through accident, but by clever strategic planning, moved towards high yield marketing approaches, which I guess Sri Lanka is also looking at in terms of high yield marketing approaches for Sri Lanka.

Singapore has emerged as a tourism capital in Asia in terms of its attractiveness, despite being a very small country which fails in terms of resources in Sri Lanka. But we're still a very attractive tourism capital in Asia. It was not accidental but a lot of strategic planning by our Tourism Board. Singapore is also focussed on capacity building to ensure that our people have the capacity to serve.

Singapore has got very small population in compared to Sri Lanka. We only have close to five million people; 60% Singaporeans and 40% non Singaporeans. Having a very small work force, we have actually managed to bring in a work force that is highly-professional. When it comes to the MICE industry, we were rated as the top three country and top three city and that was feasible primarily because of the capacity of our tourism professionals in Singapore.

Tourism development in Singapore

Megatrends that influence tourism development in Singapore are economic, political, social, environmental and technological. These in turn lead to tourist values and needs and corresponding new product developments. Singapore's challenge has been increasing the inflow of discerning travellers amidst intensifying competition from the region, the country's own slower workforce limitations and increasing the impact of visitor on local population.

Despite these challenges, Singapore in the last 30 years has tried to elevate the tourism industry in reaching our goals primarily because of our challenging environments and mega trends that shaped us into thinking about where exactly we should be putting our dollars in marketing in terms of market segments. We have thought very clearly and tried to understand our tourist market segments in different parts of the world and their needs.

Primarily I think the interest of many of you over here is the China market. So we have put our dollars in the China market in trying to understand the psyche of the Chinese traveller and why they want to choose Singapore as a tourist destination; when the whole world is out there for them, why they think Singapore is so important and they want to be there.

The other thing we are looking at is new product development. As a small country, we have to persistently challenge ourselves to look at what new products we have to come up with and it's not just about products but it's about innovative experiences. Think about a country which has scarcity of land; it is very difficult for us to keep building and building.

In today's travellers' mindset, it's not about the destination but it's about the experiences. They choose the experience first and then they look at which destination they want to come to. We have got it quite correctly in terms of what experiences people want and in their map Singapore should be the first destination that comes to mind when they think about experiences. That's really about the unique experiences. And in terms of marketing campaign, we came up with this thing called 'Uniquely Singapore'.

Sri Lanka's challenges are also similar to Singapore's. Number one is attracting the right and modern traveller, who is very discerning. Today we have the very dynamic traveller who knows exactly at his fingertips what he wants and has all the information about a destination before he searches in terms of a destination in travel decision. So to get into that traveller's mindset, we have to understand what he or she really wants.

Secondly, it's about competition. I'm sure you're facing a lot of competition Sri Lanka, compared to the rest of the region. If you look at Singapore, we have a lot of competition from Malaysia, which offers a lot of diversity in tourism products and pricing wise is so much more affordable and value-driven.

We have Indonesia which is so large and the products are amazing and Thailand which is also one of our strong competitors. Despite challenges, today Singapore is rated very highly in the mindset of the tourists we have been reaching out to. It has a lot to do with our marketing strategy and our tourism development.

Regarding the strong work force, I have been speaking to quite a number of tourism professionals here in Sri Lanka; it's the same problem I'm hearing. Sri Lanka too doesn't have enough people to serve the tourism industry; the fortification of the tourism professionals and capacity building needs obviously is not fit.

Contd. on Page 12



SKILLS, CAPACITY AND COMPETITIVENESS

A key initiative of Singapore is building competitiveness and capacity. This is what Nisha described as software, with the hardware being the various attractions.

"Whilst Singapore has added a host of new attractions, going forward there will be limitations. So we are looking for more experiences for which the software or skills and competitiveness play a key part," she said. "The processes must be streamlined and policies must be supportive for tourism," Nisha emphasised.

"We encourage and nurture innovative and new ideas. We have a web portal where people, students and universities can submit such ideas. We have incubator projects in classroom, submit it over there and discuss with the stakeholders and get the funding from the stakeholders and develop these products in Singapore," Nisha added.

The Singapore Board has established a new Kickstart Fund to encourage more innovative ideas and the scheme provides recipients

with access to business incubator programs. This fund complements the existing Leisure Events Fund.

Readying the workforce for booming tourism industry

Singapore is preparing for 17 million tourists. Sri Lanka is targeting 2.5 million tourists. If Sri Lanka has concerns of labour and skills to meet such a large number, you can imagine the challenges faced by Singapore, which has a lesser number of people to serve on top of an ageing population. We are keen to have a vibrant industry in terms of staff and not be an industry looking old and we are encouraging more graduates to enter the tourism industry.

We have supporting policies. We have the Tourism Industry Professionals Training Scheme, which is 100% paid by the Government. Companies are compensated to send their staff for training with payment for absenteeism/

leave. This way the staff is sent for training and with the scheme, firms can pay part-time staff manning jobs of those being trained. For example, even the famous Musthapha Shopping Complex trained 1,000 of their staff on 'Customer Service Professional' and didn't have to pay a single cent.

Another initiative is the Professional Conversion Program. To address the lack of manpower, we are drawing people from other industries such as manufacturing, education and ex-armed forced personnel and giving them a six month internship program on tourism so that they can join the industry.

The Business Development Fund is another key initiative to help firms embrace technology and productivity. There is also a fund to support development of in-house training curriculum with training provided by external agencies. This will ensure customised training for those in the industry. Training agencies claim the money from the Government.

For the employees of the hospital industry in Singapore there are

various recognition and development schemes to enhance service capabilities and encourage them to create memorable and engaging experiences. They include initiatives such as Go the Extra Mile (GEM), Customer Service Professional (CSP) and Singapore Experience Awards

Industry accreditation schemes

Singapore has also been successful in enhancing the professionalism of travel agencies or destination management companies.

Its travel agencies accreditation scheme – joint accreditation between the Consumer Association and National Association of Travel Agents, Singapore (NATAS) – is an excellent proposition even for Sri Lanka. Going through this accreditation, a travel agent can say 'I am qualified travel agent'. This gives confidence to the tourist that he is dealing with a qualified travel agent. We have 260 qualified accredited travel agents.

Its objectives are to increase pro-

ductivity by equipping employees with the right service mind-sets, skills and knowledge; attract and retain talent by giving recognition through professional certification; improve industry's professionalism and profitability through upgrading the human resource capabilities.

Benefits include enhancing the image and professional standards of travel management practices in organisations and ensuring travel industry standards and capabilities for organisational and individual growth. Stakeholders of the initiative are the Singapore tourism industry, businesses, employers, training providers and travel professionals.

"The level of professionalism and service amongst Singapore travel agents has to be raised. By spearheading a new accreditation scheme that recognises an individual's effort to raise his or her professionalism, NATAS hopes that this will not only boost the workforce's attractiveness, but help the industry bridge the ever-widening gap between travel agents and consumers," according to NATAS.

FT Quotes

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Somebody was saying to me that 15 million tourists are mass tourism numbers. This is true, but what we're looking at, at the moment, is not numbers; we are looking at 30 billion dollars. Now we have a different objective, it's not the numbers game we're in at the moment; we are looking at how to improve the yield that we're getting from the travellers. So it's not about the bed nights, it not about the volume, it's about how much a traveller spends when they come to your country.

Some people say that Sri Lanka is an expensive destination. To me, it's not about the expensive products but it's about the experience you're able to sell to your traveller and let them be convinced that this is the destination they want to be in. Somebody was asking me if people will part with the money that we're charging them. My answer is that this is paradise on earth you know; many people have actually called Sri Lanka paradise on earth and you don't put a low value to paradise, do you?

If you believe in what Sri Lanka can offer, then I don't think we have worry too much about the price factor. It is a jewel, you want to call it a jewel and nobody wants a low price for a jewel. It's about the industry believing that this country has so much of value to offer to the visitor; having the right strategies in place to make people understand that this is the destination that is able to provide the value

I looked at Sri Lanka Tourism's plan. I think you have got your priorities pretty right and you're looking at high yield tourism, the right market segment. Any expert from any country who has actually developed tourism would suggest Sri Lanka doesn't have to reinvent the wheel because many of us have got tried and tested methods, and we're ready to share them. It's time for Sri Lanka to look at how best to learn from these countries in terms of what they have developed and try to adapt it to the Sri Lankan tourism industry. The whole industry should be looking at it in terms of coming up with innovative product development, moving away from traditional boundaries

I have been working with the Sri Lankan tourism industry for the past two decades; 18 years ago I wanted to sell Sri Lanka to Singapore tourists and I was looking at Sri Lanka travel itineraries. Even last month I requested a few itineraries from organisations and I'm still seeing the same itineraries. So how do we become different? How do we sell different itineraries? I tried to check and I looked at different company websites. I saw similar sentences and I see that even grammatical errors are similar. So what's going on here? Where is the creativity? Where is the difference among new tourism layers? In the traditional mode of doing travel and difference in Sri Lanka, I think we as tourists will be excited to come to your country and if you could be innovative, that would bring wonderful opportunities in Sri Lanka

I love Sri Lanka, I love the hotels. Despite being here several times I haven't gone through a hotel experience and left saying "wow" or "experienced something extraordinary," except for a very few interesting and nice experiences. Sri Lanka has so much potential. You have beautiful infrastructure, hotels, warm hospitality and nice people. All that is required is fine-tuning and polishing and professionalism among staff and service

One other thing that makes our Tourism Board very different from many other tourism boards – and personally I think that's one of the success formulas – is that while many take up the role of marketing and promotions, Singapore's Board takes up the role of travel industry development. That is the development of the community and development of trade, and in collaboration with various sectors, we have uplifted our industry to be one of the leading nations in the world for tourism