

SPELLBOUND BY SINGAPORE – SEE PAGE 14



5th Anniversary Special Report Issue

Following tourism expert Nisha Barkathunnisha's presentation, the forum saw several industry leaders sharing their key takes as well as recommendations. Here are the highlights of the panel discussion moderated by Daily FT Editor Nisthar Cassim

Sri Lanka Tourism industry leaders have their say on Singapore model



TOURIST Hotels Association Chairman Hiran Cooray: In cricketing terms, Rohit Sharma hit us in Calcutta and Nisha has hammered us in Colombo on tourism. The presentation was really fantastic and spot on. It is like a crash course on tourism for us. It is the tonic we needed. Sri Lanka has struggled and come a long way. It has not been an easy ride for the hospitality industry. It is our dream one day to get to the place which Nisha was outlining. It is ironic that in the 1960s Lee Kwan Yew came here to study our tourism policy and 40 years later we are listening to the Singapore success story. However, I think there is hope for us and there has been progress. We had only five years of a clear and level playing field. Nisha's presentation has shown the way, what and how we can become more successful.

Inbound Tour Operators Past President Nilmin Nanayakkara: Nisha's presentation was inducing and encouraging. My key take from Nisha's presentation from the perspective of tour operators and DMCs will be accreditation, training and having a better lined up staff coming in with more productive approaches.

SriLankan Airlines CEO Kapila Chandrasena: Nisha's presentation was very informative. As the National Carrier, I agree with Nisha that it is not the mere numbers that Sri Lanka needs to look at but the experience. I always say that tourists don't come solely to stay in hotels but for an experience. Sri Lanka perhaps tends to focus too much on the luxurious aspects and lays less emphasis on providing an awesome experience. The National Carrier's induction of the new Airbus A330 recently is one aspect of giving the traveller a new experience onboard. Country branding is also very important and SriLankan is playing its part. I think Sri Lanka also needs to take a cue from how Singapore has shown the discipline to achieve what it wants.

Airport Services Acting Head of Marketing Rohan Manukulasooriya: As Nisha explained, the airport is the front office of a country, hence the first impression people get is important. As tourists depart, the airport is also the last impression they have. Therefore we are committed to ensure the overall impression turns to a lasting impression. We no longer treat tourists as passengers but as our guests, giving them the first taste of the warmth of our country as they land. Another key take from Nisha's presentation is how Singapore developed its travel industry with various measures. There are a lot of synergies between the travel industry and the airport and Nisha's presentation had several useful learnings.

Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau Managing Director Rummy Jauffer: I think there are many takeaways from Nisha's presentation. She is right when she says there are good hotels in Sri Lanka but there are less 'wows' for tourists when it comes to services. We



Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau Managing Director Rummy Jauffer

have been working with hotels to address this. Our tourism promotion strategy has been progressive but there are several key learnings from Singapore. After suffering 30 years of conflict, during the past five years we have significantly improved consumer awareness that Sri Lanka is a peaceful destination now but there is lot more to be done. The next step is greater destination marketing. The suggestions to develop the travel industry and professionals are welcome, especially the proposal of accreditation. There has been some discussion already.

Nisha: About people, changing mindsets. When promoting Sri Lanka, when I am asked about security situation in Sri Lanka, I always say one hears more sirens on the roads of New York or Paris and not in Sri Lanka. Which one is scarier? Perception is reality; the moment visitor sees that a country is a high quality destination and quality experience. If you look at any successful destination, be it Dubai or New Zealand, they do lot of branding, brand strategy and top-of-the-mind awareness. Tourism can uplift the lives of so many people. All in all, the Sri Lanka tourism industry should focus on same. Singapore did a lot of branding and refined it as we progressed. We looked at Asia, New Asia, and we realised we are not so Asian and then came up with 'Uniquely Singapore' and revised it to a stronger 'Your Singapore'.

Q: You suggested more professionalism and more polish. Can you explain where is it missing?

A: It is how service staff carry themselves. For example, in my hotel I asked for a copy of the Daily Financial Times. The staff looked at me and said, 'I don't think we can find it or have it'. I have been a mystery shopper and I wanted to test the service. I asked, 'Could you look for it? Could you try and check for a copy?' I was waiting for the next answer or initiative. Then I said, 'Could you send it to my room?' Instead of me suggesting, I expected the staffer to say so. It has to be prompt. When we say



SriLankan Airlines CEO Kapila Chandrasena

service having more polish, it is being proactive and responding to the customer in a pleasant surprise or meeting your expectations to the point the customer will evangelise your service for you? If your service can be polished, wow, you don't have to do the marketing; customers will do it for you. Elated customers are your brand ambassadors.

Q: How did Singapore manage to age promoting casino tourism?

A: Casino tourism is working for Singapore. We went to it to address the situation at a time when Asia was going through an economic downturn. We had a strong foresight that in 2009 and 2010 we would face lot of challenges. I referred to promoting tourism segments which are not price elastic. During downturns leisure tourism gets affected, but certain segments such as medical, education and casino tourism don't. This shielded us from the economic downturn experienced in Asia in 2009 to 2011. With inbuilt local social safeguards, casino tourism has worked in favour for Singapore with the Chinese market responding well.

Q: How can countries with small budgets boost destination marketing?

A: Greater and effective use of social media can help. Bhutan, where I help on a pro bono basis, has made some success on this, so one need not have big budgets but focus on proper creativity and effective use of existing budgets.

Q: Nisha spoke of how Singapore helps new ideas. In the audience is Thilan Wijesinghe. Thilan, how can venture capital funding be increased for new ideas/start ups?

A: Sri Lanka is a country of paucity of venture capital. Talking of my experience, a partner of mine and I conceived an idea and we launched Ceylon Tea Trails by getting onboard one of the wonderful partners who understands branding - Dilmah Group. Everyone does not have required



Tourist Hotels Association President Hiran Cooray

capital, nor does the Government. But certainly Sri Lanka needs to evolve as a country where ideas are welcomed by corporates. We had Ranjan Gomes in the audience volunteering to sponsor Nisha. As an industry we need to harness experts such as Nisha and start developing novel ideas of a) How we position Sri Lanka and b) how we develop products that complement the positioning. What I am proud of about Ceylon Tea Trails is that we started with the principle of making the resort the destination, overriding the country image. When the hotel opened, the final phase of the war broke out. We were cash flow positive even during the war because people happened to recognise the concept in a country at war, let's go and see it. There are companies and people who have knowledge of branding and it will be good if authorities tap the existing resources with someone like Nisha helping to make it a reality.

Nisha: Championing new ideas and making them reality requires a collaborative effort, not just by the Tourist Board but all stakeholders.

Harpo: Regarding branding, there have been instances when I go overseas, when people are told I am from Sri Lanka, they reconnect with Arugam Bay. That is just branding. People from Israel, South Africa, they talk of Arugam Bay as one of the best surfing destinations. They know Arugam Bay when Sri Lanka is mentioned. Negombo too has been so. So taking cities and branding them can be another way forward. The industry can consider. We also have cities such as Trincomalee, Jaffna and Nuwara Eliya. Everyone needs sit around and focus on the same page; if not there is no focus.

Nilmin: We need to get the community involved too. SLITO has already suggested same, go town to town. Empower people to be part of tourism.

Trekurious General Manager Shehan Ramanayake: Further to the interesting Tea Trails story, we are a company with seed capital from venture capital firm. We create experiences, not a DMC, but our



Airport Services Acting Head of Marketing Rohan Manukulasooriya

customers are DMCs. They incorporate our experience in travel plans for tourists. So we started without looking for macro policy support. We started with a new value proposition and use digital platforms extensively.

Q: What advice can be shared to attract MICE tourism?

A: MICE market is a cash cow for Singapore and a MICE traveller spends more than an average leisure tourist. If you look at key MICE destinations, they thrive on right infrastructure whilst professional service and delivery are important. Singapore focuses on meetings and conventions.

Vipula Wanigasekera: Having 'me too' strategy is not prudent, compared to Singapore. When you started MICE, you hadn't started leisure. Sri Lanka didn't have the infrastructure to do MICE. Our strengths were in the incentives, which were successful in bringing incentives travels. In the last two years, Sri Lanka has seen an increase in meetings and conventions, with 42 events in 2013 and around over 60 in 2014.

Nilmin: Sri Lanka is also attractive for incentives travel from various parts of Europe and the Far East. But we can do more.

Nisha: In promoting incentives, remember dynamics have changed compared to 10 years ago. They don't want to just go to an attractive destination. Every corporate wants to maximise every dollar they spend on incentive. They want to make sure staff contribute to CSR during their tour. So Sri Lanka can leverage on good and credible CSR activities, thereby giving staff positive psychology and productivity so that when they can go back they can contribute to their careers and company. This will make Sri Lanka different.

Q (Sunil Dissanayake): In the past we had a dedicated and focused tourism industry, which we don't have now. Suggestions today must be taken forward and this requires focused intervention by senior levels of the Government.

Rummy Jauffer: The Government



Inbound Tour Operators Past President Nilmin Nanayakkara

has given top priority to tourism development, even though there may not be a dedicated or namesake Tourism Ministry. What is important is the right thrust and long-term policy and engaging the private sector. Some successful countries do not even have a Tourism Board.

Nisha: What I find interesting in the Singapore Tourism Board is that we have invited several foreigners on the Board. So we have people with expertise from the US, Europe, Australia, India and China to bring fresh international insights and perspectives. Otherwise we will be like frogs in the well. (Applause)

Q: What is the volume of online booking for hotels and SriLankan Airlines?

Hiran: Currently 30% and five years ago about 1%.

Kapila: Currently we are experiencing 10% from about 2-3% few years ago. We are focusing on increasing it to 15% with lot of effort by developing the necessary channels.

Q: Nisha, can you shed insights on the degree of the unbundling of tour operators' value proposition? What is the regional experience?

A: Online booking is experiencing double digit growth and going forward that will dominate. This is the reality for travel agents. I can imagine the disintermediation can be a painful process for travel firms. They can't be territorial. Sometimes we need to think beyond - is it about you or about destination? Do you want Sri Lanka to be visible as a destination or not? Hotels and travel agents and tour operators have to seize opportunities in digital media; how do you provide new offerings rather than be territorial?

Hiran: We are progressing from low ebb. Sri Lanka is like a born-again tourism destination, with confidence rising since 2009, with more investors and employees coming into tourism industry. For those in industry, my advice is don't be disheartened. We have a long way to go and we can learn a lot from Singapore's thinking and strategies. What was shared today must be taken seriously by all in the industry as well as Government and public sector officials.

Nisha: Tourism is one of the most resilient industries in the world. We can be impacted by economic downturns, natural disasters, but it has been so resilient. I am also impressed by the Sri Lanka tourism development. The country is a wonderful destination, with many resources that can charge a premium. My final advice is, believe in your country, your product and industry and work towards a wonderful future.

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