

Destination preparation for re-opening

Interview with Kimarli Fernando



Kimarli Fernando is the chairperson of Sri Lanka Tourism, heading the government's four main tourism entities, Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau, Sri Lanka Convention Bureau and Sri Lanka Institute of Tourism and Hotel Management.

In this second blog Kimarli describes the preparations Sri Lanka is making for the reopening of tourism.

I know it's very hard to put an approximate date on when you believe you might reopen, but do you see it being in 2020 or perhaps in the first quarter of 2021?

It's evolving all the time, but I think it could be this year, by December 2020. Many Sri Lankans want to return home, and tourists from Australia, Europe, Germany, the UK, Russia, want to come here. If you look at the Maldives data, you will see the Russian market is the biggest and Germany and the UK. I noticed they had had roughly 37,000 tourists from Russia.

Similar countries to us will be open to travelling. People who have some connections to Sri Lanka want to return. They have a villa or a business or some other connection or a family member – a lot of these people want to return.

Some people come from Germany, for example, specifically for our local Ayurvedic treatment. Private jet requests are coming, and approvals that used to take seventy to ninety-six hours are now taking twenty-four hours.

In fact, during this COVID-19 period, we have used this as an opportunity to open another International Airport. So now, on our small island, we have five international airports, and we have fourteen other domestic airports, where you can travel on seaplanes, helicopter and so on.

We have looked at the infrastructure, such as upgrading the trains and the customer journey in some of the very popular sites, like Sigiriya. We've already started working on making that the first sustainable destination in Sri Lanka. It is already under paperwork, and we're having a lot of inter-ministerial cooperation to get those done.

Udawalawe is also quite popular. We are looking at the likes of East Africa to make that a nature conservancy. There we have the private sector's support to provide us with some input because of the limitation of resources.

I personally have come from having worked thirty-four years in the private sector. I was asked to take this job and was appointed, and others in the private sector have joined just to support the government and the country.

We have used this opportunity also to push the sustainable angle because we have already changed the guidelines if you are going to invest in Sri Lanka. There are still many investors, even from overseas, investing in Sri Lanka. We have included sustainability criteria as mandatory for new projects. And if you want to be identified as a boutique hotel, you need to get a review and implement those requirements for boutique hotels. You are given a period to achieve zero plastic renewable energy recycling etc. We will make that mandatory.

We are working on multiple other areas. We created the tourism travel app just to meet the requirements for UNDP when we went for assistance. That is now being expanded. We have studied all the tourism apps in the world, analysed them and identified what we want.

With the support of the World Bank and ADB, we are upgrading our app to include over five thousand new sites;

whether you want to hike, camp or whatever you want to do, it will be included. If you're going to do a Buddhist trail or a Ramayana trail, that will be there in the app.

Our tour guides give us feedback, but currently, we don't get feedback from you as a tourist. So you will be able to rate them, and you will also have an emergency button connected to the closest police station. Then you can share your location if you have some issue because our goal is zero tolerance on anything against any tourists. It's not as bad as some of the other countries in Asia, but we do not want to have any issues. For the first time in Sri Lanka's history, we have a new Police force appointed for tourists, and of course, the structure has already been created.

So the tourism app will have a complaint management system where you can make any complaints about anything at all. You can complete a survey and give us feedback about your ideas; you can upload and share your pictures with us so that the tourism app will be quite beneficial for all of us.

We see COVID-19 as a way to reset our tourism. Because of how tourism happened in Sri Lanka, we had a goal for 30 years, and it ended in 2009. It sort of evolved, but we didn't focus on what type of clients we want, what we have to offer or what is so special about us? We have always been marketing country-wide, say, Australia or India or wherever but we never really looked at data as a government.

So thanks to MDF Australia, they are assisting us. The Australian government is helping tourism; I'm in touch with them regularly. They have provided me with human resources; they are doing the analysis research-based, database-driven marketing.

We are also looking at upskilling people in our industry because of our use of the hotel school. So we are looking at the hotel school where we do all training of chefs and everybody down to the guides. We are expanding what we have here, with the support of Australian Skills Development also for several initiatives that we have going on.

I also want to ask you about the tourist visas, as you're seeking to increase the validity of tourist visas from one month to six months. Is that correct?

That's obviously to encourage longer stays, so tell us more about the thought process around this. From looking at our research and our trends, I know that people will travel less frequently, but they will travel for longer. It certainly aligns with some of the global trends that we're

looking at, where people want to immerse themselves in local culture and perhaps, in some cases, even work in some of those destinations as well.

The current visa is only for one month, and you can stay for six months, but you have to keep renewing it, which is troublesome. We have already discussed it, and the process will most likely happen so that it will be six months. After that, we will look at extending it to a five-year multiple entry visa, which would make life much easier, but the immediate action is to increase it to six months. That will most likely be approved, and we are suggesting 14 days minimum stay because we want people staying longer.

And you talked about KPMG doing your audits for the accommodation establishments. Is that something that is continued after they're initially audited? And does KPMG continue to do that, and how frequently do those happen?

KPMG does the audit, and we will be doing spot audits as well. The Ministry of Health is very involved. We have a medical system in Sri Lanka with several layers. So we have the Ministry of Health, and under that, we have nine provinces with medical officers. Then we have between that twenty-five districts with medical officers; it's a British system which we have followed and kept.

That's one reason we can handle infectious diseases quite quickly because we also have a procedure in place now, even with the app. When a guest says they will stay in a Level One hotel, certified by KPMG, automatically an email goes to the district medical officers and the provincial medical officer to say that person will be in this hotel in your province. The answer is it's not just a vacation and finishing it, it is a continuous process. We also have Public Health Officers involved.



Join our community
to find out more about
our webinar series

 **Bonailie**
 **www.bonailie.world**