

Destination Trends & Industry Sustainability

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

The final blog about Sri Lanka discusses trends and the visioning of the future of tourism

In our research, we're seeing the shift from a silo approach to integrated in working together. We're also seeing a trend around, moving from global to local, due to border closures, but then shifting back from local to global, to be local.

The impact of COVID-19 has put more focus on people wanting to give back to communities and to feel that they're travelling for a purpose. Is this an area that you're aligning your next marketing and new products around? Do you see that trend as well?

Yes, we have seen that already. Even with the food, cooking and living in the villages. We still have several thousands of tourists who didn't go back to their countries for whatever reason. You see now where they immerse themselves in our local communities. Some people get involved in schools and teaching, others get involved with the farmers or with our own Ayurveda. There are so many areas; this is absolutely the way forward.

And I know the type of tourists who will travel here are going to have a different mindset. I think we've all changed with this, for example, with zero plastic. Many years ago in Sri Lanka, it would have been nearly impossible to agree with the people about zero plastic. Now people need to see that we are going to have to change.

And even the animal rights bill that is now being drafted and going through shows the change in people's mentality, which is very positive. Everybody has felt the need to participate in growing something in Sri Lanka, including myself. I've never grown anything before, but now we are all growing produce.

There is another trend that we're seeing, which is the shift from competition to collaboration. And I believe Sri Lanka is working more with other countries to impact and reshape the future of tourism?

Yes, we are open to all types of partnerships. We have partners in several areas, whether embassies with ambassadors, travel agents, tour operators, or other hotel chains. Other countries, governments who are willing to work with us, for example, the Germans, the German ambassador, would be in touch to tell us how to do it. The Indian Embassy is also involved from the government to government.

We are open to any type of relationship that benefits both countries. It's the only way. And the airlines are also critical for us because we are an island. Many airlines that do not fly to us now have spoken to us wanting to fly to our country.

“So yes, partnerships come in many forms and international funding agencies, for example, are a key partner, also for me. We have a complete section on our strategic action plan about partnership.”

Other trends we're seeing emerging are more around

agility and flexibility around booking terms and conditions with tourism products.

Consumers will look at booking at much shorter notice than they have in the past and want to know that they can cancel without any significant impact if COVID-19 escalates. Is that something that the Sri Lankan tourism industry has taken on board?

Yes, the industry has already implemented that on their own and are entirely on board. And almost all of them have advertised that there's a 100% refund on cancellation. Because your country could be locked down, or my country could be locked down.

What changes do you feel need to happen to shift the industry to ensure the sustainability of tourism and positively impact the planet, society, and a stronger economy?

On the sustainability side, I think the industry had done a little bit before. And we had the WTO here, and the UN helped us and so on in the past. I think sustainability could be incorporated into our registration classification process; we will also go to schools and engage with our students. Now is a good time to do that.

We will start from there, and the industry is very much seeing its value, not only from a sustainable point of view or even from a branding perspective, to be completely sustainable. From the government's perspective, there's massive importance put on it, and already approvals have been given for huge projects; wind power projects and solar. That's something that we will incorporate into the new investments and go line by line and encourage businesses to get in and then maybe give them an additional logo. If you are sustainable, you will get it, and then the consumer will decide. I believe this is the correct decision.

There are lots of hotels or accommodations in tree houses, which were never approved before. Now all these unique products are being approved and not only approved but also encouraged. So you will see Sri Lanka will try to move much more towards nature.

I know everyone's super keen for the international borders to open and start travelling again. Is Sri Lanka in discussions with any particular countries officially about creating a travel bubble of destinations that have their cases down to a minimum and so forth?

Like all other countries, we looked at travel bubbles, but every time we decided, it kept changing. But then my personal view at the moment is that we should open our country to tourists, they will do their PCR test seventy-two hours before, then they will do a PCR test when they arrive. Then they will do one next within the hotel after fourteen days. Then we can safeguard them and safeguard ourselves. At the moment, nobody is

looking at it very seriously; if any country would like to do it, we are more than open to doing so.

From your experience so far, what advice would you give to other countries planning to open soon, when safe to do so?

I think we first have to make them believe that they are safe. And you have to make sure you have the guidelines, and you have to initiate some other company which will do it. You also need to communicate, communicate, communicate.

First, you have to get your own citizens comfortable. To that extent, we are using a PR campaign for the Sri Lankans to say don't be worried the tourists are safe to come, we have to do that.

There are two key areas where you have to be safe. The consumer, the tourists, feel safe and for our own citizens not to worry. Also, to show, with evidence, that you are confident and competent in handling it if there is a COVID-19 patient. We have proven to our citizens already that we can do that. We do take care of you. Here, poor people are getting good money; we have given money to 2.3 million people. We have taken care of them all, including beggars who were given food, beds and masks.

So you need to walk the talk and show the citizens you care and then convince the guests who are coming that we will safeguard them and make sure that when they leave the island, they are healthy, safe and happy.

That's an extremely important point. You need your citizens to give that warm welcome to tourists coming back in and make them feel special when returning to the country. And understanding how much that contributes to the economy as well and the importance of that.

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