Tourism drives post-war recovery in Sri Lanka

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By Random Jottings

ATEAR-DROP shaped island nestled seductively on the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka is blessed with more than its fair share of abundant and varied touristy delights—from golden beaches and lush mountains to colorful festivals and a rich cultural past that dates back several centuries.

However, the debilitating three-decade long secessionist war manipulated by the Tamil Tigers’ terrorist outfit, which cynically pitted the north of the country against the south, put paid to all that and stunted Sri Lanka’s efforts to showcase its full potential on the tourism map.

But that was then, and this is now. With the Tamil Tigers annihilated and relegated to the dustbin of history, and peace restored in the island, the Sri Lanka government is keen to show that the country is now open for business on all fronts. And neatly off the mark is Sri Lanka Tourism which, with a fresh and catchy tagline “Sri Lanka Small Miracle” is ushering in a glorious revival for tourism in the country. The newly designated chairman of the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau, Bernard Goonetilleke—an urbane for-mer diplomat who served his country with distinction at home and abroad—sees the new challenge thus: “Our slogan ‘Sri Lanka Small Miracle’ denotes the mysteries of Sri Lanka and how it holds so many different features in such a small geographical area. The positioning strategy was arrived at based on the key aspects of the destination—diversity, compactness and authenticity which differentiates the destination from other competitors. Sri Lanka truly combines diverse treasures so amazingly concentrated to provide the most pleasant and authentic holiday experience that no other Asian destination could so conveniently offer.” Adds Dileep Mudadeniya, Managing Director of the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau: “The objective of the Sri Lanka Tourism re-branding exercise was to create a single core idea that can change people’s perception of the country. The challenge faced by Sri Lanka Tourism was to find an idea that embraces the truth of the country, which is relevant to the potential visitor; then communicate that idea, thus establishing an integrated marketing communication approach.” Leading up to the re-branding—and in a overt display of the nation’s new won unity—Sri Lanka Tourism launched an island wide program entitled, “Making of the Small Miracle.” The main objective was to get all Sri Lankans to be a part of the re-branding. Local communities were asked to provide pictures, artifacts, and other collectables that they believed epitomized Sri Lanka. The collectables, amounting to several thousands, were displayed at an exhibition, while some of the most innovative items have been used by the advertising agency for the new print campaign. Coinciding with the new brand launch, all the communication material of Sri Lanka Tourism has been revamped. The website was relaunched with a new look and feel in keeping with the brand strategy, while brochures and posters with eight different themes unique to Sri Lanka have also been produced. In addition, a new print campaign is to be launched in prominent international trade magazines as well as a sustained TV campaign on the BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera and Discovery Travel & Living. To mark the launch, Sri Lanka Tourism introduced value additional offers for tourists. A postcard campaign was launched the day after the re-branding, with 250,000 post cards to be distributed, while a discount booklet campaign will also launched with over 50 attractive offers. Ten postcards and a discount booklet were bundled together and packed in a gift box and given to tourists arriving in Sri Lanka for a period of one month after the June launch. Giving his own considerable weight and authority to the reinvigorated tourism drive is Sri Lankan President Mahinda Raja-paksa who has declared 2011 as “Visit Sri Lanka Year.” Says the president: “Having regained peace, my vision for development of tourism has become a reality. Every effort will be made and all resources will be provided to Sri Lanka Tourism to meet the target of 2.5 million tourists by 2016, as envisaged in the tourism strategic plan.” Meanwhile, President Raja-paksa’s bold strategy to end the war is already reaping dividends. Around 40 surfers from Cornwall in the United Kingdom staged a special Surf Tour Champion of Champions event earlier this month in Aragum Bay—renowned as one of the best point breaks in the world—which has been out of bounds for much of the past three decades because it sat uncomfortably in the conflict zone. The fact that eager foreign tourists have wasted no time in heading to the island to taste its myriad of offerings, and the early evidence that there are no longer no-go areas to deter tourists, augurs well for the tourism prospects of Sri Lanka which really is an island like no other. rjottings@yahoo.com Courtesy: manilatimes.net