
South Indian tourists make beeline for Lanka after end of war

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CHENNAI: K Palaniappan, an industrialist, had to shelve a business collaboration when the insurgency broke out in Sri Lanka in the latter part of the 70s. He had not had a chance to visit the island nation since then. This August, he grabbed the first opportunity he had to visit the country and travel to tourist spots popular long before the war. Tourist traffic to post-war Lanka has increased exponentially, led by Indians waiting eagerly to visit the neighbouring 'Paradise Isle'. The number of travellers from south India, including from Chennai, Tiruchi, Bangalore and Hyderabad, increased by 25% to 30% in June and July 2009 compared to previous years, following a promotional drive in India and abroad by the Sri Lankan tourism board to attract leisure and business travellers. According to Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (STDA) statistics, total tourist arrivals to the country has almost doubled since April and May 2009 when the war was at its peak. Tourist arrivals to the island nation touched 42,200 in July 2009 compared to the 24,800 who visited in May and the 30,200 tourists who came in June. Even during the war, flights from Chennai were full, but a majority of the 600-plus seats available daily were occupied by traders and kuruvīs (couriers) ' who returned with duty-free liquor. That is not the case anymore. "As the war is over tourists can now visit different destinations other than Colombo. We visited Kandy, to see the famous Murugan temple," said Palaniappan, proprietor of Precision Scientific Company, Chennai, who travelled with a group of his Lion's Club friends to celebrate Independence Day there. The profile of the traveller has broadened to include leisure travellers, corporate travellers, and people travelling on incentives provided by their companies or dealers. "Even private entertainment events organised by Indian companies are being held in Sri Lanka," said Sri Lankan Airlines manager for TN and Karnataka, Sharuka Wickrama. There is also widespread interest from entertainment and corporate circles to hold events in Sri Lanka. Encouraged by the renewed interest, Hi Tours has tied up with Sri Lankan Airlines to offer a special package for Rs 9,999 per person on twin sharing basis for three nights and four days in Colombo with onward and return flights on Sri Lankan Airlines from Chennai till October. "The package includes breakfast, half-day city and shopping tour, arrival and departure transfers and stay in three star hotels in Colombo," said Hi Tours vice president M K Ajith Kumar. Even Sri Lankan Tourism is offering a package for Rs 21,000 per person including travel and accommodation. "We had Meet in Sri Lanka' road shows in Mumbai, Bangalore and Delhi to attract more travellers," said Sharuka. According to Ajith Kumar, "This is the best time for Indians to visit. Within a matter of time tourism from western countries will pick up. If hotels and resorts fill up with western tourists, the Sri Lankan destinations will become pricey." by: V Ayyappan, TNN Courtesy: timesofindia.indiatimes.com