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## Sri Lanka woos tourists

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By:K. VenkateshwarluGALLE: When cricket stars, Mahela Jayawardene, Muttiah Muralitharan and Kumar Sangakkara addressed a media conference in Mumbai recently, they spoke nothing on cricket but everything about tourism. Team Sri Lanka was batting for the nation's tourism destinations courtesy Sri Lankan Airlines and Sri Lankan Tourism Promotion Bureau.

Innovative step The two agencies' innovative move to boost Indian tourists arrivals clicked and the 'cricket package' for the ongoing India-Sri Lanka test series saw 450 bookings within a week of its launch. Senaka Fernando, regional manager (Indian sub continent and Maldives), Sri Lankan Airlines, told a visiting group of journalists from Hyderabad that more such media events were being planned to attract more Indian tourists to the island. The objective was not only to draw them to cricket matches but to an array of tourist destinations. The Airlines, Keells Resorts and Walker Tours took the Indian journalists on a week-long enchanting tour of five world heritage sites, a breath taking hill station, sun-kissed beaches and a wildlife sanctuary. These included the 5th century impregnable Sigiriya fort perched atop 200 metre high hillock, Polonnaruwa once the second capital having the ruins of the royal palace and four statues of Buddha in different postures carved out of a rock, Dambulla cave temple having the largest area of paintings in the world, culturally significant Kandy and Galle Fort built by Portuguese. Rare sight In between, the group was treated to a rare sight of 60 elephants, some sauntering, others rolling and yet others saluting the visitors at the world's only orphanage for them and then to the beaches of Bentota. Mr. Fernando said the Airlines was now offering Indian tourists flexible tailor made individual packages that included air fare, sight seeing, accommodation and local transportation. The basic two- night three- day package starts at Rs. 17,000 from Hyderabad and it could be extended to suit one's itinerary. Mr. Fernando said the Airlines would set up an office in Bhubaneswar during this week and planned to start flight services to Port Blair in Andaman and Nicobar islands soon. The Airlines was doing well though Government did not extend any subsidy like India does to its national carriers. Conceding that the rising fuel costs indeed caused concern, he said it worked out to 60 per cent of the costs. On the IATA's advice, the Airlines set a target of reducing this cost by two percent by September and five percent by the year-end. It has carried 1,08,000 Indians to Sri Lanka and 2,04,000 Sri Lankans to India and set a target of ferrying 1,25,000 Indians this year. The Airlines was in the process of tying up with state tourism departments. (Courtesy : The Hindu )