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TREND REPORT 2023

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Return to Paradise

Why Sri Lanka is all set to sweep the stakes for top spot when it comes to travel this year

By **MALIK J FERNANDO**
MD, Resplendent Ceylon, Dilmah Tea's boutique resort arm

At the dawn of the New Year, tens of thousands of Sri Lankans gathered at Galle Face and the new Port City to celebrate a new dawn for 2023 at the very same location made infamous by the initial protests. More than a jubilant shout-out to the world, it emphasised an opportunity for a new beginning—a fresh start.

Hope was already rife in the salt air of the island state as it welcomed close to 100,000 tourists in December 2022 alone. India has consistently proven to be one of Sri Lanka's top markets, and search data along with arrival data earmarks India's huge potential as Sri Lanka's primary source market.

Who can blame the returning hordes of tourists; there's a reason Marco Polo hailed Sri Lanka as the finest island of its size in the world. With a continent's worth of attractions, rarely found on one small island, tourists and travellers alike, from across the world, flock to its breathtaking landscapes, diverse history, rich biodiversity and incredibly warm, genuine hospitality.



AQUATHERAPY
Sri Lanka scores high when it comes to stunning land and seascapes



Despite the negative press the island country received last year, normalcy returned as far back as July, 2022. Tourists, who were already in the country, carried on with their holidays; there was no real exodus as protests were largely peaceful and contained within the capital.

However, much to the disappointment of the Lankan travel industry, there hasn't been any sort of international consumer communication by the country's tourism authorities to date and this has delayed recovery. The private sector has been trying to fill the void with its own campaigns. Unfortunately, Indian consumer sentiment is yet to return to its previous robust levels, but it's just a matter of time. If one wanders around the south coast towns and beaches, they are teeming with European travellers.

As we move into 2023, I am confident that Indians will retrace their steps back to Sri Lanka as before, given the proximity, regular flights and ease of visa formalities. Also, Sri Lanka offers significant diversity compared to other Indian Ocean islands and caters to several market segments. The tourism supply chain includes luxury Relais & Chateaux resorts such as Resplendent Ceylon

as well as boutique and mid-market properties, smaller guest houses and Airbnb's. We have already witnessed a very encouraging pickup in bookings from India; we expect this trend to continue.

Sustaining the travel initiative

The country has also stamped its own sustainable initiatives in response to traveller demand— four out of five travellers considered sustainability to be a priority, according to a recent survey by Booking.com. Temporary import controls (effected during last year's protests) acted as a catalyst, precipitating a shift towards hyperlocal supply chains. Sri Lankan hotels are now leaner and less reliant on imports; several local industries have sprung up and are a part of the hospitality supply chain. All manner of resorts, from larger chains to smaller guesthouses, focus on self-reliance and have begun to grow their produce. Hotels are also pursuing renewable energy; I expect off-grid to feature more for smaller properties.

Tourism and conservation are also closely interlinked, especially in a country that boasts as much biodiversity. The Peak Ridge Forest Corridor is an initiative by several tea estates,



LIVING ON THE WILD SIDE

The island is a haven for wildlife; whale watching (Above left); in Sri Lanka at Cape Weligama, a stunning luxury resort (Left) near Mirissa, is a must-do for every nature junkie and wildlife enthusiast





HISTORY IS IN VOGUE
The stunning Galle Fort in Sri Lanka

Dilmah Conservation, Resplendent Ceylon and Wilderness & Wildlife Conservation Trust to protect an 18km highland corridor near Tea Trails traversed by leopards. The research from this project enhances the tourism product in tea country. The Uda Walawe Elephant Transit home is an elephant conservation project that is funded by tourism. Many hotels act as guardians of their spaces and species that live around them, including loris conservation in the cultural triangle and turtle conservation on the southern coast.

Slow Travel

The development of the Pekoe Trail in the tea country is an example of travelling with a light impact. This is a 300km 22-stage hiking trail in the Central Highlands. Travel of this nature has a positive economic impact on the surrounding communities—these projects highlight our industry's ability to be a force for economic upliftment while remaining true to sustainable principles.

What Gives

Due to the late recovery, hotels and resorts in Sri Lanka currently have significant availability compared to previous years. This means that guests looking for larger buyouts for milestone celebrations have more options to choose from

compared to other destinations. Last-minute bookings and long-weekend getaways are also significantly easier to book, with several attractive offers, which means guests travelling to Sri Lanka will enjoy more value for money. Case in point: Resplendent Ceylon introduced the Winter Escape, which was the first time they reduced rates in high season, where guests can save 15 per cent with complimentary upgrades. Many other hotels have introduced many offers which provide Indian guests with the opportunity of staying in higher room categories during the high season for much lower rates.

Whether it is a quick weekend getaway or a longer workcation, Sri Lanka offers many choices. Extended stay visas have been introduced and flight connectivity has resumed. Plus the country's digital infrastructure supports travellers who work remotely. The traditional backpacker will also find trekking across the island a worthy challenge, exploring multiple terrains, while the high-end guest searching for privacy and luxury is spoiled for choice.

Connectivity is on the mend too; SriLankan Airlines operates regular flights to nine key cities in India and as many as 80 flights a week between the two countries. The airline also hopes to ramp up frequencies further with increasing footfalls. All in all, 2023 comes with renewed optimism, where travellers will fall in love with Sri Lanka all over again.



The Legend

It is the magical blend of time, passion and perseverance that defines the unparalleled generosity of a Balblair whisky.

By MAGANDEEP SINGH

Time, they say, is a great teacher. Time imbues one with experience and there is simply no replacing that. A single malt, one that is painstakingly aged for decades and blended with the time-honed skill of a seasoned master blender can shape a whisky in a way that will make it truly special. At the Balblair, one of Scotland's oldest surviving distilleries (since 1790), all these factors converge to create one exquisite sip.

For the virgin hillsides overlooking the Dornoch Firth in Northern Scotland—these Highlands were Pictish gathering places (almost 3000 years ago)—time already seems to stand still. This easy passage, as if almost suspended, effectively helps us dissect each step in the process and hone it in isolation. Special Black Isle barley and Edderton Hill water that is directed down through a precious lade make up the special raw material that shape the eaux-de-vie here. The process of making whisky at Balblair is special, and what sets it apart from most other commercial distilleries is the amount of time invested in each step of the whisky-making process. Fermentation here is a 62-hour-long process, which

is then followed up with a distillation step that takes at least four and a half hours. These slow speeds put greater focus on the flavours that will constitute the final blend. It allows the blenders to make precise choices and cuts to ensure that they can fine-tune the final beverage to a greater degree. John MacDonald, an outstanding and extremely gifted whisky distiller, above all, is described as a patient man. And rightfully so because any other mindset would be at crossroads with the spirit itself; it certainly likes to take its time.

As drams go, Balblair is a curious mix of simplicity and complexity. Intense esters captured at the beginning of the process impart lovely fruity notes (think apricots and oranges but also fresh spices and floral touches). This is deftly balanced off with heavier oils that come towards the end of the cut, which brings fuller-bodied leathery and nutty notes. The eclectic mix of the two, aged and nurtured over time, is what makes up the distinct Balblair profile.

For a distillery that has persevered for over 200 years, seen lots of ups and downs, the best and worst of times, Balblair is a living statement on the rewards of patience.