



COVID-19 Recovery Story

Navigating unchartered waters

Supporting a holistic recovery for Sri Lanka Tourism

Pristine coastlines, incredible wildlife and a vibrant culture are some of the unique offerings that keep Sri Lanka at the top of traveller wish-lists. Before COVID-19, tourism was a driving force of economic prosperity and employed close to 200,000 workers directly and some 200,000 workers indirectly in the country. An estimated 80 per cent of industry staff lost work due to the pandemic. Tourism destinations globally recorded one billion fewer international arrivals in 2020 than in 2019; Sri Lanka suffered a similar fate. Nevertheless, tourism remains essential to moving beyond the pandemic.



By the end of 2021, Sri Lanka tourism showed positive signs of recovery. Between January and December 2021, international tourists arrivals increased 53 times over. How is Sri Lanka navigating the uncharted waters of the pandemic and staying afloat amid one of the biggest storms in recent history?

Four strategies have been key



Understanding
data



Transforming
promotion



Strengthening
industry
coordination



Building a
more inclusive
tourism

MDF worked with national stakeholders to support these factors and drive recovery.



Understanding insights



Data plays a vital role in the post COVID-19 tourism revival.

Ms. Dhammika Wijeyasinghe,
Director General, SLTDA.

In the uncharted territory that is the COVID-19 pandemic, understanding changes in traveller behaviour and tracking new trends and preferences is vital to map long-term sector recovery.

In 2021, MDF signed an MoU with Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) to transform the authority's research capabilities by implementing a five-year Research Roadmap that MDF helped develop in 2020. MDF supported this strategy, along with a year-long capacity building program, to help align the Authority's research activities with global best practices. Supported by MDF and the international tourism consultancy Twenty31, SLTDA published a revamped version of its Monthly Tourist Arrivals Report in August 2021, with improved, timely analysis and upgraded presentation of immigration data, international trends, and brand and consumer surveys.

MDF also supported market research on Sri Lanka's brand health and consumer behaviour insights. Based on a survey of 10,000 travel consumers across 10 key market segments, the SLTDA-MDF report, Sri Lanka's Competitive Brand Standing and Consumer Travel Perceptions to Drive Smart, Sustainable Tourism Recovery, provided decision-makers and businesses with valuable traveller insights to inform marketing and promotion.



Transforming promotion

The one surety about the post-COVID travel landscape is that competition will be fierce among destinations in their bid to attract visitors to recover lost revenue. Destinations will race to re-design existing offerings to appeal to emerging traveller segments, such as high value travellers, eco-conscious travellers and digital nomads. MDF worked with SLTDA to diversify tourism promotion and to connect the authority with Australian marketing, promotion, and experience development expertise.

In November 2021, MDF and SLTDA hosted a webinar, "Brand and Consumer Insights for Tourism Reopening in Sri Lanka," based on the MDF-supported brand health survey and targeting key tourism stakeholders. The findings indicate ideal consumer segments to target, products and experiences that would resonate well, and the means of connecting with these high-value segments.



As much as we want to say that Sri Lanka is a discounted destination appealing to the lower-end mass tourism market, I can tell you that the data here is not saying that. Sri Lanka appeals to that immersive learner, the authentic travel consumer that is looking for a travel experience.

Oliver Martin,
Partner, Twenty 31 Consulting Inc.



MDF also worked with the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau (SLTPB) to negotiate and manage high-level initiatives and shift government focus to technology-based tourism for destination promotion. The collaboration led to MDF support on a wide range of initiatives. From assisting SLTPB to broadcast the Pereheras (a Buddhist parade of dancers, acrobats, singers and a variety of performers to pay homage to relics of the Buddha) and helping to promote Sri Lankan wildlife ('Couch Safaris'), MDF's support to the brand building process was a key driver of change for Sri Lanka tourism in 2021. The facility also helped revamp the SLTPB social media channels and assisted the development of the 'Hello Again' microsite, Sri Lanka's new consumer website designed in consultation with Australian expertise, to support the tourism application 'Visit Sri Lanka.'



Industry coordination

In any destination, the tourism industry relies heavily on the private sector, which is responsible for running most tourism establishments. Until recently, the Sri Lankan tourism industry was missing a cohesive voice and common platform. This has been the basis of MDF's work with Sri Lanka Tourism Alliance (SLTA), whose platform now has close to 1,700 such businesses.

In 2021, with strategic guidance from Australian tourism consultancy Droga & Co. and MDF, SLTA continued to lead and engage the business community to see the value of pursuing a renewed strategy for attracting high value tourists. Engaging over 500 businesses in the digital space and creating over 100,000 impressions on social media, SLTA's tourism conservation series focused on preserving Sri Lanka's natural resources that are directly linked to the survival of the tourism industry. With MDF and Australian support, SLTA also strengthened their consumer portal, lovesrilanka.org, and launched 'Love Sri Lanka Jobs,' Sri Lanka's first dedicated tourism employment portal.



Inclusion of the informal sector

No recovery is sustainable unless all stakeholders are included in the recovery process. Over 80 per cent of Sri Lanka's tourism workforce operate in the informal sector but they are crucial to the local hospitality industry. MDF worked with SLTDA to carry out a membership drive to help the informal sector gain access to government services and benefits.

The 'Register with SLTDA' video series featuring Sri Lankan cricket legend Kumar Sangakkara was developed to encourage registration, highlighting the benefits to business. As Sri Lanka re-opened for tourism, this served as an avenue to ensure that all stakeholders can share the benefits of tourism. Since its launch, close to 210 service providers have registered with the SLTDA. MDF will continue to support this initiative to encourage a shift towards a more inclusive and formalised industry, where smaller actors are better represented and served.



It has opened a golden door for anybody, any Sri Lankan who wishes to be recognised.

Riza Badurdeen,

Elephant Watch Hut on registering with SLTDA.

While there is a long way to go, Sri Lanka's holistic approach to recovery is on the right track. The island currently has an ambitious goal of recovering 1.1 million visitors in 2022. Through strategic support and working with key stakeholders, MDF will continue to collaborate with the Sri Lankan tourism industry to build the industry back better.



Click/scan these to access the files/sites.

lovesrilanka



Couch Safaris



Monthly Tourist Arrivals Report



SLTPB social media channels



'Register with SLTDA' video series



Webinar: Brand and Consumer Insights for Tourism Reopening in Sri Lanka

