

"Travel & Tourism Awards" - January 26, 2009
at BMICH

Tourism today is a major foreign exchange earner. Unfortunately in the recent past an unwanted internal conflict between the state and a band of organized terrorists prevented us from developing the East and the North of our country where great tourist potentials exist. It meant that our youth had to join the armed forces and fight a war rather than build careers in national development, including tourism. It also meant that tourists did not come in the numbers we might have expected.

Despite these setbacks there have been pioneers in travel and tourism in Sri Lanka who have made it their life's work. Some of those people will be honoured here tonight. Through their hard work and ingenuity we were able to attract tourists to our beaches. We offered Sun Sea and sand but only on the West and South coasts.

All this will change soon. Our brave soldiers and others in our armed forces are now poised to wipe out the forces of terrorism. With peace we will be able to offer so much more. In the East we have some of the finest beaches in the world: over 150 miles of them, enough for any traveler to lose themselves in the tranquility and warmth of a sunny Sri Lankan afternoon. For the adventurous we have surfing at Arugam Bay.

In the North we are developing our first fully fledged eco-resort at Kalpitiya. In Trincomalee we have the opportunity to create hotels with stunning views overlooking one of the deepest natural harbours in the world - a place where, in the

future, cruise liners will be able to dock long enough for their passengers to travel to Polonnaruwa and Anuradhapura and witness one of the oldest civilizations in the world centred on Buddhism.

Those new resorts have to be built and people have to work in them. That is where we will give our people the greatest opportunities. Investment will provide jobs for our construction workers, planners, manufacturers and those involved in transport. Once the hotels are built they will need people trained in room service, front office, food and beverages and catering as well as managers. That is where we expect great things from the hotel management school to raise the level of training and to offer more opportunities for our youth.

But many more people are involved in tourism than just hotels. We need to have the best airlines in the world coming here. We have one of the best in Sri Lankan airlines and I pay tribute to all the staff at this our national airline. We shall need many more guides and chauffeur guides to explain to the foreigners what it is they are seeing and experiencing. Then we need the local restaurateurs, the specialist shops such as batik and souvenir shops, the wood carvers, and the many other arts and crafts providers. The hotels will need the very best food which can be sourced locally from our farmers.

As the numbers of foreign tourists arrive we shall need many more of all these workers. Small entrepreneurs who will supply the larger companies to provide the services needed to make our island the very best place to stay.

Nor should we forget the role that our people have to play in tourism. A tourist visiting our country for the first time may not understand all of our customs and the ways of our culture. We shall need our people to gently educate them and to make their stay a pleasant one.

But so far I have talked only of the services we will need to provide for foreign tourists. This is important because they will bring in much needed foreign exchange.

However, we mustn't forget the opportunities we want to provide for our own domestic tourists. Many of our people would like to visit our religious heritage sites to enjoy a family day out or to treasure a weekend at the beach. We need to make sure that those facilities are there for them with clean and pleasant services, good affordable restaurants, playgrounds for our children and so much more.

After 23 years of conflict it is time that our people have a chance to enjoy all these things unhindered by the fear of violence.

I congratulate all our winners tonight. I urge those who didn't quite make it to try harder and come back next year. You are all at the forefront of an exciting industry which is about to flourish with peace.