



Patterns of Tourism Development in the Maldives and Sri Lanka

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This is the first of an intended series of articles that will attempt to examine the tourism industries of the Maldives and Sri Lanka from different perspectives, with a view to highlighting similarities and differences as they develop and impact the national economies of both countries. This the first article, attempts an understanding of how the realities of geography have fashioned the development of the respective industries in different directions.



Sri Lanka and the Maldives are geographic, cultural and economic neighbours whose lives and livelihoods have been historically and even today intermingled and integrated. Occupying a total length of less than 1300 km north to south, within the larger expanse of the Indian Ocean, we share the same climate and experience the exact same monsoonal forces that fashion our existence.

While sharing so much and even as both are island nations, Maldives and Sri Lanka are also broadly different in their geographical reality. These differences in geographic reality have fashioned our tourism industries in very different ways and led them down separate paths to the reality we experience today.

This article will examine, in the main, how geography has defined the tourism industry of both countries through the availability of geographical space and diversity of the tourism product.

Model of Development



While Maldives is geographically almost twice the length of Sri Lanka, the country is almost 99.9% sea and the country consists of upwards of a thousand very small islands that are separated from each other by expanses of deep water.

When tourism first started in the Maldives back in 1972, the pioneers, who on their original visit actually stayed in guesthouses in Male', the capital, decided that tourism would be borne and

developed on small uninhabited islands separated from the inhabited islands. They visited several nearby islands during their initial visit and decided to develop the uninhabited islands of Vihamanaafushi and Bandos; both very close to the capital city, to lay the foundation of the tourism industry in the Maldives.

Two uninhabited islands were deliberately chosen so that tourists would spend their holidays away and detached from the life and livelihood of the Maldivian. Therefore, tourism was deliberately started as an activity that would be removed from the living space of the people. As tourism developed and grew, this distance in space from the Maldivian way of life was maintained and resort hotels were geographically separate from the urban centres. Tourists spend their vacation in exclusive resorts and do not intermingle with the local population, unless through an organised day tour to an inhabited island.

While tourism started in islands that were in close proximity to the capital and has now spread throughout the country, each resort hotel was developed in an uninhabited separate island and tourists were transported to and from the airport by special ferries, charter flights and water taxis. They continued to spend their day, mostly restricted to one specific resort diving, swimming and relaxing by day and night.

International hotel chains and brands started investing in the Maldives and the Maldivian tourism industry has, over the last decade, been largely seen as the favoured exclusive destination for the rich and the famous.

This model of tourism development, where tourists and their holiday behaviour have been separated from Maldivians and their daily life have meant that there has been breadth and depth for the industry to develop without impinging on the culture and ethos of the Maldivian people; a 100% Muslim country from the 12th Century onward.

This model of separateness and uncoupling of the tourism industry from the living space of the Maldivian life has allowed an industry that started in 1972 with 266 visitors to grow into an industry that hosted more than 1 million visitors in 2014

without causing consternation or alarm to a population whose cultural norms and ethos are largely different from those of the visitors.

While Sri Lanka too, is very much an island country, the internal geography of the two island countries differs tremendously and has therefore allowed tourism development to forge a separate path in Sri Lanka. Unlike its neighbor, Sri Lanka is on the whole very much a one large island, thereby enabling land transport to and from its regions and cities.

While history records that there was a Government Tourist Bureau since 1937, it is in 1966 (just six years before tourism started in the Maldives) that the need to develop and foster tourism in a centrally planned fashion was identified and the Ceylon Tourist Board was instituted as a statutory board by an Act of Parliament.

As the Ceylon Tourist Board started its effort to welcome and house tourists, one of the first attempts were to ensure that there were adequate accommodation facilities for the incoming guests. The network of accommodation facilities, built by the British administration, in their effort to administer the country, were selected and converted as tourist accommodation. Some of the accommodation that in fact later became hotels were even residences of the governors and their working offices. Therefore, the fact that the original tourism accommodation were facilities developed to house officials and allow for administration, inter alia meant that these accommodation, while maintaining some distance would still be very much accessible to population centres, markets and centers of culture and commerce. Even today, while the major hotels of Colombo are enveloped by a perimeter of about 7 km within Colombo 1 and 2, they do not hinder guests from mingling with people and their life.

Tourists who travel to Sri Lanka are free and encouraged to travel and experience the length and breadth of not only the capital, but also the considerable wealth and diversity of the Sri Lankan landscape. They do not necessarily restrict themselves to a single hotel or indeed to even a region. Even if they do register at a single hotel for the duration of their stay, the day is spent in tours and visits to other regions, markets and other places of interest.

Therefore, even while tourism has developed in close geographical proximity in a global sense, the internal geography and national circumstances have fashioned two very distinct types of tourism in both our countries. In Maldives tourists have been very limited to exclusive resorts and tourism detached from the daily life of the population. Yet in Sri Lanka, just an hour's journey away, the model of tourism development has not restricted tourists to single hotels or even regions but has allowed tourists to travel the breath of Sri Lanka and has afforded for greater interminglement with the people and their daily life.

Diversification of the Tourism Product.

Scuba diving is popular throughout the Maldives. While the model of tourism development have differed, it is also evidently true that the diversity on offer have also largely been determined by internal



geography of both countries. This has defined the tourism product of Maldives in different terms to the tourism product of Sri Lanka even while we are just less than 700 kilometers away from each other.

The Maldivian tourism product is famous for the tropical getaway holiday of sun, sea and sand. It is the dream destination of honeymooners and the rich and famous have marked Maldives as their own. Within the Maldivian tourism experience, there are indeed different types of holidays to be experienced from the live-aboard holidays in traveling safari boats to diving holidays to world class diving

sites like the Fothayo Kandu in Vaavu Atoll. Maldives also offers top class opportunities to surfing enthusiasts and professionals at famous locations such as Kuda Vilin'gili in Male' atoll, among others. With variety and differences, it is also true that Maldivian holidays have a largely nautical tinge to it, as the geography of Maldives is largely ubiquitous across its length.

Thus while Maldives offers spectacular white sandy beaches, turquoise blue lagoons and rich marine life, the attractions are very much the same from the north to the south of the country. Days on the beach or in the sea. Nights of luxury and indulgence. Expensive spas and underwater restaurants. The packages of the different resorts differ from the degree of luxury and opulence and by the number of stars coveted by the brand that make the offer.

The landscape of Sri Lanka varies greatly throughout the country

However, while the length of Sri Lanka is about half the geographical length of Maldives, Sri Lanka offers a considerable expanse of diversity to its clients, a veritable smorgasbord of richness from luxurious beaches to lush jungles and



forests and lakes filled with rich bio diversity. Six UNESCO recognized world heritage sites and a rich mix of culture and religion with ancient venerated sites add additional charm and attraction to the Sri Lankan holiday. There are offers for those inclined to rest and relax, for the adventurous, for the nature lover and for the curious and the inquisitive.

Tourists, while spending some time in Urban Colombo, spend a lot more time travelling and experiencing the diversity of richness that is Sri Lanka; from the cooler climes of Nuwarelliya and its rolling tea plantations, to the jungle flora and fauna of the Sinharaja Forest Reserve. This mix is made richer by opportunities for kayaking and canoeing in the Kalu Ganga and the Kelani Ganga, or because of a culturally enhancing visit to a sacred city like that of Anuradhapura.

Therefore, while Maldives and Sri Lanka, both share very much a similar global location, the realities of geography has not only defined and customized both our tourism industry and taken them down different paths, the diversity of the tourism product, too, is different in our two countries.

Changes



Tea country offers cooler climes to tourists in Sri Lanka. Change being an inevitable process, even while the model of development has been different in both countries, there are changes happening in the tourism industry of both the countries.

The model of tourism development in the Maldives, where tourists were detached and distance from the local population has started to shift in 2008, with the then incoming government allowing and supporting development of tourist hotels in inhabited islands. Commonly referred to as Guesthouse tourism, this fork of tourism development has grown from 400 guest houses in the year 2008 to over 1918 guest houses in 2013; an increase of over 375%. Tourists, today are being hosted in island communities and spend their

vacation intermingled with life on an island and the culture of the Maldivian people in their daily life.

Guesthouse tourism has allowed SME involvement in the tourism industry and generated employment and commercial opportunities to small islands giving a much-needed boost to the island economy, elevating entrepreneurs and strengthening SME development throughout the country.

Yet, as guest houses develop, Maldivians may have to learn the tourism industry all over again. For forty plus years tourists have flown into the country and spent their holidays in resort islands. They were a presence largely known but rarely physically felt. They contributed to the swift development of the economy but did not intrude into the daily life of most Maldivians. Yet, with the introduction of guesthouse tourism tourists will occupy the same space and interact with the life of the island people on a daily basis.

As Maldivians, while we are famously known for our hospitality, we shall still have to develop new rubrics of interaction and contact that will allow guesthouse tourism to prosper while still preserving and maintaining intact, the Maldivian way of life.



Whale watching in the south of Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka too, there are developments happening in the geographical landscape. After being hampered and restricted for 25 years, Sri Lankan tourism too is

undergoing rapid development. While Maldives has hosted the world's biggest brands in hospitality for some time, their venture into Sri Lanka has been

understandably muted. Yet, today, billboards in Colombo herald the coming in of Sheraton and Shangri-La among other luxury brands preparing their entrance to the Sri Lankan tourism industry. The entrance of such giants of the hospitality industry will surely change the tourism dynamics of Sri Lankan tourism undoubtedly.

Conclusion

Because of the travesties of the war that bound Sri Lanka for a quarter of a century until 2009, tourism development has naturally been impeded. During this period, Maldivian tourism has grown and expanded including developments from Sri Lankan investors. As Maldives enter, the guesthouse tourism market, and Sri Lanka welcomes the big brands of hospitality there will be much for entrepreneurs and people to learn from each other. With a firm understanding of the differences and similarities and the reasons why they have emerged so, there will be many experiences to be shared and lessons to be learnt.

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Other articles by the writer, Ibrahim Athif Shakoor are available at www.economicdesk.mv. The writer invites comments and feedback to this particular article and to other articles on the website at ibrahimathif@yahoo.com

