

Sri lanka tourism

Sport & Tourism



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Tourists Return to Paradise Isle a Year After War's End By Amantha Perera
COLOMBO, May 17, 2010 (IPS) - A year since Sri Lanka's bloody civil war ended on May 18 last year, tourists are returning in huge numbers to a popular beach destination located over 300 kilometres from where the last battles were fought. Nowhere is the relief at the end of fighting more tangible than on the beautiful beaches of Hikkaduwa, south of the capital Colombo.

The war against the secessionist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, fighting for a separate state for the minority Tamils, cost over 70, 000 lives in over two and half decades and sent over 280, 000 fleeing for their lives in its final phase. Hikkaduwa, famous for its coral reef, sandy beaches and swanky hotels, is on the rebound. Visitors who abandoned the sun and the beach when bombs started going off have begun to return. The best days may be still ahead of this famous tourist destination south of the capital Colombo. Already, it is bracing itself for huge arrivals during the next European winter season.

Arrivals grew by an impressive 50 percent or an increase to 160, 000 from 106, 000 in the first quarter of 2010, compared to 2009, according to the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, the government agency that monitors tourist arrivals. This year, the island known for its scenic beauty expects over half a million tourist arrivals, making 2010 one of the best seasons in the last half a decade. " We saw very good arrival rates this season (between November 2009 and April 2010)," Siri Goonewardene, president of the Hikkaduwa Hoteliers' Association, told IPS. With the war no more, travellers feel safer visiting here and there were no unexpected

security-related incidents that would have driven them away. " The general manager of Coral Sands, a 75-room luxury hotel on the Hikkaduwa beach, expects better results later this year when the next winter season starts. " The bookings have been good. If the trend continues the next season will be definitely better than this one," says Goonewardene.

He adds that operators expect about a 50 percent growth in arrivals next season. The upbeat assessment is shared by operators who run smaller hotels and restaurants and others who depend on the tourist trade. This season was good. We had a high number of visitors," says Dhammika Silva, who runs a small hotel at Mirissa, a cove-like beach south of Hikkaduwa. He depends on individual tourists who visit the Mirissa area as his business is too small to tie up with tour operators. " I needed more people on the beach having a good time to make ends meet. This time it happened. " The same is true of Nimal, who sells traditional woodcarvings from a small shop near the beach. " We had a very good season. I made some good sales," adds Nimal, who simply identified himself by his first name.

These hopes for a bumper tourist season are a far cry from the beach operators' downcast mood less than 18 months back. With the war raging in the north, by the time the winter season began in November 2008, arrivals were sliding. With earnings going down, in 2008, tourism fell to number six in the country's top foreign revenue earners from the fourth slot, accounting only for 2. 8 percent of the gross national product. The industry supports a large workforce, much of it informal. According to a labour survey conducted by the Sri Lanka Census and Statistics Department in 2007, over 100, 000 were employed in the trade, 56 percent of whom were nformal employees. It

was the informal employees that felt the pinch when arrivals kept going down without the security of at least a small wage packet. In early 2009, business operators like Nimal were complaining that they could not keep their shops open and at least pay the utilities.

Some decided to close shop. The downturn in arrivals due to the war attracted low spenders to the island. Silva says that many tourists from Eastern Europe and Russia began arriving in Sri Lanka when the big spenders from Western Europe stayed away. I have nothing against them. But these were budget travellers who travel through the region. They don't spend much," he told IPS. Nimal concurs. " They are not the type who buy souvenirs, let alone expensive carvings, they will show up in the number of arrivals, but have no money. " Goonewardene from Coral Sands warned that the high numbers should not be an indication that the industry has fully recovered. " When the numbers are analysed, we will see that there will not be a 50 percent increase in earnings corresponding to the increase in arrivals. "

He says the government should launch an aggressive public relations campaign to attract high-end spenders and give incentives like tax breaks to the industry. The new government that took office last month has brought tourism under the purview of the Economic Development Ministry, which has been tasked with accelerating development. It is an indication that tourism is to be a vital component in the new economic plans. " It is good that the government is showing signs of making tourism part of the bigger national plans. Whoever invests in tourism now will be making a lot of money come next season if we make the right decisions," Silva