

Dhammika Kumari Semasinghe

Ambassador of Sri Lanka to the Republic of Poland

Ms. Dhammika Kumari Semasinghe, was born in Nikaweratiya, Sri Lanka. The Ambassador began her undergraduate studies in political science at the Peradeniya University, Kandy, and was awarded the opportunity to complete her degree in International Relations and Public Policy at Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania, USA. She has a Master's in International Public Policy from the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), Johns Hopkins University, Washington DC, USA. She is a career diplomat (class of 1996) with 25 years of both bilateral and multilateral diplomatic experience, having served in different capacities in the political, economic and multilateral sections of the Foreign Ministry, and abroad, in the Sri Lanka Missions in New York, Washington, DC and New Delhi. Prior to the current assignment, Ambassador Semasinghe was the Director General for Europe and Central Asia, and European Union and Commonwealth at the Sri Lanka Foreign Ministry. Formally assumed the post of Sri Lanka's Ambassador to the Republic of Poland on 6 July 2021. She speaks Sinhala, English and Hindi, and is an aspiring ceramic artist.



Sri Lanka tourism on the way to recovery

MAŁGORZATA ORLIKOWSKA

First of all I wish to congratulate you on your new appointment as an Ambassador of Sri Lanka to the Republic of Poland.

At the beginning of July you officially started your diplomatic mission by presenting the Letters of Credence to president of Poland, H.E. Mr. Andrzej Duda. During that meeting you assured Mr. President that Sri Lanka is open for continuing and strengthening relationships with Poland in various areas. Which areas you consider as the most important in terms of intensifying trade ties between our countries? Is tourism one of them?

Dhammika Kumari Semasinghe: Thank you for your felicitations on my appointment as Sri

Lanka's Ambassador to the Republic of Poland. I sincerely appreciate the opportunity of the interview with your esteemed publication. I look forward to exploring in depth, the rich culture and heritage of Poland, while focusing on advancing cultural and people-to-people linkages to build enduring bridges of friendship. It is the people, I believe, of Sri Lanka and Poland, who are the final keepers of memory and friendship.

It is a singular honour to serve in a country that, in the last three decades, has made tremendous economic and social advancement. Poland is an important bilateral partner for Sri Lanka in Central Europe, as we seek to increase our footprint in this region.

Our bilateral engagement, of over six decades, has been gaining renewed strength and momentum in the last 45 years. Increasing, two-way trade and tourism flows has been a priority for both sides. Sri Lanka and Poland are well positioned to seize the opportunities in each other's countries as, we have the bilateral legal framework already in place, with the signing of the agreements on Cooperation in the field of Tourism and Avoidance of Double Taxation and the Prevention of Fiscal Evasion with respect to Taxes on Income.

Total trade between our countries, has expanded from US\$ 13.5 million in 2000 to US\$ 66.5 million in 2019. Sri Lanka's main export item to Poland is tea, and Poland's key export product to our country is refined sugar. Therefore, there is not only potential to diversify the export basket of both countries, but a certain urgency to do so.

One of the most welcome developments to catalyse trade and tourism has been direct air-connectivity established between Warsaw and Colombo by the LOT Polish Airlines, since November 2019. We need to make this connectivity viable by increasing two-way tourism flows and through cargo operations.

Prospective Polish investors should consider Sri Lanka as an attractive investment destination in the larger context of Asia, which is the emerging economic powerhouse, according to analysts. In fact the 21st century is often called the Asian Century. Around 50 per cent of the world's population lives in this part of the world. Sri Lanka is in Asia, and enjoys its own unique strategic location as the gateway to accessing the vast Asia-Pacific markets.

We are keen to invite Polish businesses to explore investment opportunities in prioritized sectors with prospects for high value-addition and high-tech infusion. These include IT ena-

bled services, manufacturing (electronics), food processing, agri-business, hospitality industry, logistics, infrastructure, including transport and pharmaceuticals.

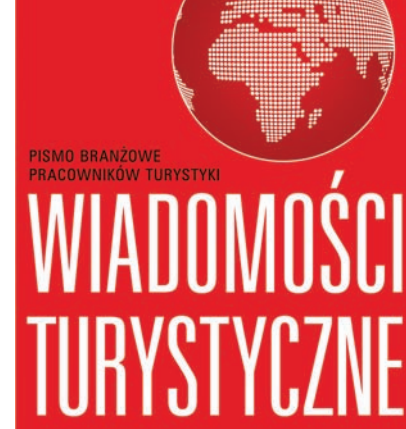
As I have underlined before, Sri Lanka is pro-business and welcomes investments that have a transformational impact on its economy, leading it to be listed globally as an important investment destination. As we speak, Sri Lanka has already invited Polish pharmaceutical companies to supply medical equipment and medicines conforming to WHO quality standards. Bids have also been circulated for joint ventures in value addition in the minerals sector.

The tourism industry is Sri Lanka's third foreign exchange generating sector. We have prioritized Poland as a source destination, and have already published a tender process calling for applications to select a world class Public Relations company for Poland. Tourist arrivals from Poland have increased phenomenally since 2012 from 5,806 arrivals to 20,896 by 2019.

The sector has already attracted US\$950 million in investments since March 2020. The Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) has streamlined the investor participation process by creating a user friendly single application to meet with investor expectations and international standards. An Investment Relations Unit (IRU) has been set up to expedite the approval of tourism investments, in addition to publishing an Investor Handbook. Transparency has been ensured with regard to the application and approval process.

Before we focus on promoting activities in Poland, let's talk about current situation of tourism in Sri Lanka. How pandemic influenced tourism sector and tourism in Sri Lanka?

The pandemic unleashed drastic economic, financial, investment and social disruptions in Sri Lanka's tourism industry. This is an industry that employs around 3 million people. The Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) contribute over 40 per cent towards the industry. The supply chain comprises of accommodation providers from five-star hotels to AIBIB, travel agents, restaurants, curios shops, event management companies (MICE) and such service providers, artists, wellness and adventure-related service providers, tour guides, drivers, and an array of informal sector workers. This industry provides income to all those from the corporate and government sectors to the grassroots level. It is anticipated that the sector



will lose around 41 per cent to 60 per cent of its employees.

During the pre-pandemic period in 2019 and despite the Easter Sunday terror attacks, Sri Lanka was doing reasonably well by recording 1,913,702 tourist arrivals and earning US\$ 3.7 billion. It is heartening to note that over 11,000 visitors came from Poland despite those attacks. The sector's direct contribution to the GDP was 4.3 per cent. However, by the end of 2020, arrivals had drastically dropped to 507,704. The Government proactively initiated several measures to support the industry during this pandemic period by extending debt moratoriums, providing soft loans to cover utility payments, extending liquor licenses, making cash transfers for tour guides and chauffeurs, reducing registration and renewal fees for those within the industry, among others. Re-skilling programmes are being initiated for those, who lost jobs due to the pandemic.

In 2021 the world has started the vaccination process. What percentage of the population of Sri Lanka is already vaccinated and how long will take to vaccine all of the population?

Sri Lanka has been handling the COVID-19 triggered public health crisis, and the accompanying challenges, especially with the emerging more transmissible variants and vaccination supply shortages, with a keen sense of urgency. The Government has intensified its vaccination drive, with WHO recommended vaccinations, including those recommended for emergency use. The effort is fast paced, well administered, and continuing without a vaccine resistant or hesitant public.

With excellent bilateral donor country support, and along with the WHO's country specific vaccination assistance programme, Sri Lanka has thus far vaccinated almost 50% of its population, with 11.6 million of the 21 million population having received the first dose, while 4 million have been given both doses. All personnel in the tourism sector are fully vaccinated.

The National COVID-19 Prevention Centre has made it mandatory from 15 September 2021 for members of the public to carry the vaccination

certification cards to enable inter-district travel and movement in public spaces, including for commuters using public transport.

At the beginning of June Sri Lanka opened its borders for international tourists. What are the government predictions regarding tourism recovery in Sri Lanka in the next years?

Sri Lanka has recognized that we are still in uncharted territory with regard to the nature of this pandemic. More importantly, we recognize that going forward, we will be operating in a context called the new normal. Therefore, we are ready and willing to initiate our best efforts to creatively adapt the industry to the new normal.

In the short and medium term, Sri Lanka will focus more on reviving tourism season by season.

In order for us to recover satisfactorily and aspire for the pre-pandemic growth rates, the situation in the tourism source countries must also improve. Therefore, the sector's wellbeing is globally integrated and inter-dependent in the pandemic context.

However, we remain optimistic as ever because, considering the arrivals figures for 2020 during the first wave of the pandemic, Sri Lanka attracted 507,704 tourists between January -December. The significant source countries (over 10,000 arrivals) were Poland (11,908), Australia (20,283), China (26,147), France (24,838), Germany (34,507), India (89,357), Russia (49,397), Ukraine (17,169), the UK (55,455) and US (16,842).

Outlook matters in challenging situations. Sri Lanka has viewed this challenge, however unprecedented, as an opportunity for building up individual and collective resilience, and for generating change through innovative thinking.

How does Sri Lanka lure international tourists to visit this country? Does government support inbound tourism in Sri Lanka?

Sri Lanka started welcoming foreign travellers since the end of 2020.

At present, fully vaccinated visitors with a negative pre and post arrival (within a day on arrival) PCR test, are free to travel around the country. The current restrictions on inter-province travel do not apply to fully vaccinated travellers.

We were quick to introduce the travel bio bubble concept for visitors in end 2020 following the second wave, to enable travel within the island to certified locations, and stay in similar accommodation facilities. In the travel bubble,

tourists were able to explore 22 sites in the country, and stay in any number of certified safe and secure hotels. For implementing this creative effort, Sri Lanka was awarded the Safe Travel Stamp by the World Travel and Tourism Council. We were the first in the region to be so awarded for adopting such a refreshingly novel concept.

We have also recognized that traveler confidence in his/her health safety has to be ensured, and that is the new imperative in the COVID-19 pandemic context. Therefore, adopting a forward looking and responsible approach, we were quick to have all our all hoteliers, staff guides, travel agents and chauffeurs trained, certified and vaccinated.

Sri Lanka tourism implemented the live streaming concept of stay home today and travel tomorrow by live streaming travel experiences or tours such as, The Couch Safari, which was viewed by around 350,000 viewers, local and international. More recently, the unique and magnificent Kandy Esala Perahera pageant was live-streamed from 1323 August 2021.

Our country continues to receive excellent rankings and was named the best travel destination for its fabulous products and services by the Lonely Planet, Condé Nast, Wanderlust, CNN, among others. More recently, the French Club Med ranked Sri Lanka as the second best country for digital nomads. Bloomberg Business listed the Sigiriya Rock Fortress as one of the new Seven Wonders of the World, making Sri Lanka, the only Asian country, to make it into the list, along with six other iconic sites appealing to the new age traveller.

We are already preparing to cater to the so called, pent up demand of the new normal traveller. Our tourism planners have identified that active tourism wellness products have become popular during the pandemic. These include hiking, cycling, water rafting, camper van tours, and rejuvenation and healing through Ayurveda and wellness experiences.

Sri Lanka is proactively developing sustainable tourism to stay competitive, and meet the demand in the Post COVID-19 phase. We are cognizant of the need to adapt our product to the outlook of future travellers, especially the Millennial and GenZ visitors, who are mindful of their ecological/travel footprint.

Most of our attractions are natural, and Sri Lanka's eight UNESCO World Heritage attractions are in rural areas, among the rural communities. As an island, Sri Lanka is extremely vulnerable to ravages of Climate Change. Therefore,

going forward, we will adopt a sustainable and community based approach to develop, what travel agencies call greener and fairer holiday packages. This is why, Sri Lanka also acquired membership in the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC).

Sri Lanka tourism has incorporated the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030 into its agenda. Towards that end, guidelines are being prepared to mandate new tourism projects to have sustainability requirements, including renewable energy, recycling, and zero single use plastic. Boutique hotels will be given a timeframe to comply with sustainability goals. The Sri Lanka Marine Environment Protection Authority is partnering with Sri Lanka Tourism to ensure a healthy coastal and ocean environment for future generations.

At the policy and systemic level, the Sri Lanka Tourism Act is being revamped through sector wide stakeholder consultations. The goal is to reorient the demand and supply chain by changing business models and governance structures to promote brand building.

For the first time, Sri Lanka has launched a five year integrated global promotions campaign worth US\$ 190 million. In fact, call for expressions of interest have been made by the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, to appoint a Public Relations firm in Poland, to launch a destination marketing and branding campaign, including through digital marketing to cover Poland and Central and Eastern Europe.

What do you consider as the most important in resuming tourist flow between Poland and Sri Lanka?

First, I want to say to Polish visitors *ayubowan* (may you live long) and that our doors are open for you, as they were centuries ago, for Polish travellers since the 1800s. We also appreciate that Polish nationals, in a gesture of solidarity, chose to travel to our country in 2019 following the horrific Easter Sunday terror attacks.

It is important to connect the mind of the curious and discerning Polish visitor with the soul of Sri Lanka tourism, which lies in our smiling and welcoming people, their warm hospitality, in the therapeutic cuisine we enjoy, in the healing Ayurveda, in the stunning and natural landscape and seascape, and in the timeless eloquence of its 2,500 year old culture and heritage.

We need to connect the present day Polish traveller with the documented travels of Poland's well known travelers, researchers, sociologists

and anthropologists, artists, poets and collectors to then Ceylon. They were, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (Witkacy), Bronisław Malinowski Julian Fałat, Karol Lanckoroński and Adam Asnyk. Their experiences are vividly captured in the book – *Moja podróż z Witkacym i Malinowskim na Ceylon* (My travel to Ceylon with Witkacy and Malinowski) by Kręcisław Alina. The diverse experiences and the natural beauty they encountered in such a compact land space, have survived time, and remains pristine as ever. We want your interest in Sri Lanka to travel from one generation to another.

We want to convince and compel the Polish visitor that Sri Lanka could be your home away from home. If you want to connect to Zako-pane from Sri Lanka, then travel to Kandy and the rest of the hill country dotted with lush tea plantations. If you want a site to fire your imagination, and quell your conscience, then climb to the top of the Sigiriya Rock fortress, a conceptual marvel, and hang out with the community in the area, as Sigiriya is under a sustainable tourism development programme. Sri Lanka can, and will cater to your pent up demand to de-stress and re-charge for the new normal by offering our time tested and holistic Ayurveda experiences and wellness repertoire. What is on offer in Sri Lanka is timeless and wholesome, and what we offer to make your experience worthwhile, is not mindless, but mindful.

We want to assure the prospective visitor

that his/her health is a priority for Sri Lanka. That is why our tourism recovery efforts and safety protocols are all science-led. We urge travellers to understand that all our efforts to ensure safety, are being undertaken within the parameters of a public health crisis, and that global pandemics often compel governments to impose restrictions on the choices otherwise available to individuals, because it is for the greater good.

What kind of activities you'd like to undertake on Polish market to promote Sri Lanka as a tourist destination?

Sri Lanka will conduct tourism promotional roadshows and participate in major travel shows hosted by Poland.

We look forward to collaborating closely with tour operators, prominent travel agents such as Rainbow, ITAKA and Tui, the LOT Polish Airlines, Polish Tourism Organization (PTO), Credit Card companies, and the media, including travel bloggers, to initiate an integrated tourism promotion approach by combining marketing, advertising and journalism. We look forward to reactivating our Visiting Journalists Programme.

Sri Lanka Tourism will conduct webinars for tour operators and travel agents regarding our products and health protocols currently in place. It is also useful to hold market integration promotional activities, where we combine tourism promotion with related products. For instance, Ceylon tea tasting events could incorporate the

promotion of virtual tours to Sri Lanka's lush tea estates, while showcasing the traditional snacks that accompany tea drinking in the exquisite porcelain ware of Noritake, Dankotuwa or Lanka Porcelain. We will organize festivals to familiarize the Polish consumer with our singularly delicious pineapples, mangoes, and 29 varieties of bananas.

In the period ahead, we will collaborate with Sri Lanka Tourism to organize programmes for families and children, such as kite flying, and traditional lantern making events. Discussions are under way to organize virtual tours for school children to the Udawalawe Elephant Transit Home, turtle nurseries, and whale watching.

We also need to undertake overall image building of the country, its people, Sri Lanka's excellent social and health indicators, its heritage, and many achievements, through public diplomacy programmes.

Equally important, it is useful for our hospitality sector to increase its awareness of the makeup of the Polish visitor. Exchange of study tours and Polish language training programmes for Sri Lankan chefs and hotel personnel, in the tourism and hotel schools in Poland, would be very instructive.

It would be wonderful to include your delicious pierogis in the menus of Sri Lankan hotels, restaurants and AirBNBs. We have to be creative and generous in our approach, by not only celebrating Sri Lanka in Poland, but also Poland in Sri Lanka.

