The Saga of tourist arrivals

By Srilal Miththapala

Traditionally one of the main indices by which tourism performance is assessed the world over, is by analyzing the total tourist arrivals into a country. Historically Sri Lanka also has been adopting this method. However, Sri Lanka seems to place too much of emphasis on arrivals only, to determine the 'health' of tourism in the country.

In addition, due to certain inherent country-specific issues, related to gathering this source data and other operational issues, there could be some serious misinterpretation of these arrivals numbers. This in turn, gives rise to wrong strategic decisions being made regarding tourism development in the country, based on this information.

This is particularly relevant in the current context, where there is some debate going on about the actual extent of rebound of tourism after the SL/4 attacks.

This paper attempts to analyze and discuss the issues relating to this controversy.

1.0 International visitors and tourists

1.1 Definitions

Although the terms 'tourist' and 'visitor' (or guests) are used interchangeably in general parlance, from a proper tourism perspective there are differences in the terms.

A visitor is a traveller taking a trip to a main destination outside his/her usual environment, for less than a year, for any purpose (business, leisure or other personal purpose) other than to be employed by a resident entity in the country or place visited. These trips taken by visitors qualify as tourism trips. (UNWTO, 2008)

A tourist (domestic, inbound or outbound) is classified as a tourist (or overnight visitor) if his/her trip includes an overnight stay or as a same-day visitor or excursions. (UNWTO, 2008a)

Hence if one were to combine both these definitions, we could arrive at a clear distinction of a tourist as follows:

Tourist spend per night

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>2017 USD</th>
<th>2018 USD</th>
<th>% Change 2017/2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maldives</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>10.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>339</td>
<td>4.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>3.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>1.85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 01

Figure 02

Tourists over 24 hours. However, in the correct sense of the word, they are not 'real tourists' and do not really contribute to the tourism value chain. There is no mechanism currently in place that can track this.

Hence for a country like Sri Lanka, which is a mini hub for transiting passengers, this 'error' margin that gets included in the overall tourist arrival data could be significant.

2.2 The 'Sri Lankan Diaspora'

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