

All Clear at Customs

Posted on



The warm Sri Lankan welcome for visitors is evident at the customs counters of the Colombo International Airport where affable, smiling customs officers aim for quick clearance.

“We are always willing to assist passengers,” says Lalith Heengama, Sri Lanka’s Director General of Customs. “As long as they are not attempting to break the law.”

Heengama says it is advisable for visitors to Sri Lanka to have a - und knowledge of our regulations on foreign currency. There is no ceiling on the amount of foreign currency allowed ,into Sri Lanka, except in the case of Indian and Pakistan rupees where the

maximum permissible is Rs250.

A declaration of the amount of currency carried by a passenger has to be made on the counterfoil of the D form (declaration form) which every arriving passenger must complete. The top section is retained by immigration while the counterfoil, which must be kept for surrender on departure, is held by the passenger.

The amount written on the counterfoil is endorsed by a customs officer who may sometimes ask passengers to show they are in possession of the amount of foreign currency they are claiming to have. It is necessary to enter all foreign currency on the D form in case you still have some left over when you come to depart. In the Director General's own words: "Sri Lanka is a developing country and a tight hold on all available avenue of earning foreign currency is essential. Filtering it out illegally is severely frowned upon."

Heengama assures visitors that there is no hostility intended by these instructions but that they are simply regulations that most developing countries enforce on visitors to safeguard their economies.

Tourists with nothing to declare can clear customs in private in the section of the customs hall which has a separate door and green-lit sign: the green channel. "We request all passengers to bear with us in case we make random checks. This is just a routine formality. The few passengers on every flight who have to submit to this check are not upset and we intend them no insult," says Heengama.

The import of gold, precious metal, gems and other valuables, dangerous drugs, firearms and obscene literature and pictures is prohibited. No gold is allowed in the form of coins or biscuits without a permit from the exchange controller. Dutiable items like computers, typewriters and cameras should always be declared on arrival and taken away on departure. If it is not in the tourist's possession on departure, questions are likely to be asked.

There is a bonding counter where items that cannot be cleared through customs for some reason can be deposited for safekeeping until the time of the visitor's departure. A receipt is issued and on collection of the items, payment has to be made to the bonding counter. Movie cameras and film equipment can only be brought into the country on a carnet de passage or a bank guarantee. Goods are not allowed into the country in commercial quantities without the proper taxes being paid. "If a tourist brings in 100 new shirts, we would have to tax him for it," says Mr. Heengama.

Nearly all customs regulations adopted in Sri Lanka are based on international law,

Heengama says, explaining that visitors to our country will find them no different from the regulations in most other Asian developing countries. "In fact, in comparison to some nations which are economically and geographically bigger and stronger than our little isle, our customs regulations would seem remarkably relaxed."

Tourist may not be familiar with the practice of having a customs check on departure as well as on arrival. At the Colombo International Airport, customs officers are on hand during the mandatory hand-searching of passenger baggage by uniformed security personnel which occurs even before passengers reach the airline desks.

This is where there is likely to be a check to see that the dutiable items declared on your D form are, in fact, being taken out with you. No more than Sri Lankan Rs250 can be taken out and no more than the amount of foreign currency you bring with you into the country can be exported.

Heengama advises all tourists who purchase valuable gems to keep their receipts to prove the proper value was paid. Heengama says the most frequent smuggling attempts are of gold and currency notes, with narcotics coming a close third. The strangest objects are sometimes smuggled out by stranger passengers. Customs officers discovered a live cobra in one passenger's baggage, fortunate! before it could slither out of its hiding place into public view.

Genuine tourists, even if not familiar with Sri Lankan customs procedure, need have nothing to fear, as long as they are not attempting to bring in more than the amounts permitted by the custom concession. If you do have more, or are uncertain about the procedures, one of the helpful gentlemen of the Sri Lanka customs service will be happy to assist you.