Chandra Wickramasinghe: A Story of Vision, Courage, and Enduring Passion for Hospitality

Posted on

Success is always intertwined with a story of fearlessness, passion, and resilience. Few embody that journey as profoundly as the godfather of Sri Lanka's tourism, Chandra Wickramasinghe, the Founder of Thema Collection, a group of fourteen unique properties in Sri Lanka. This year, he celebrates fifty remarkable years in the industry – a half-century that can only be described as extraordinary.

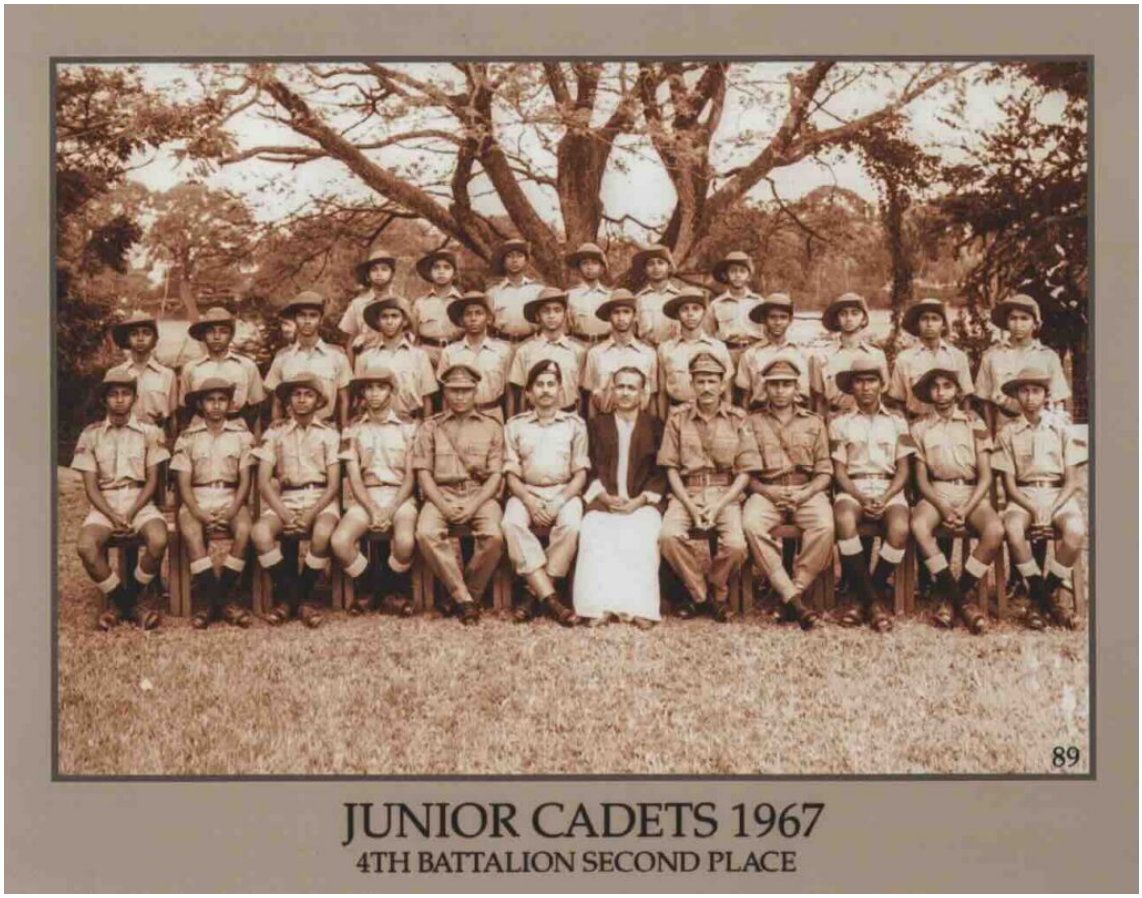
Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.



Chandra Wickramasinghe’s five decade journey demonstrates passion, resilience, and vision.

Chandra Wickramasinghe is known for a phrase he often shares with young people seeking advice on navigating their careers: “Learn more to earn more.” This phrase perfectly encapsulates his philosophy of continuous learning and innovation. The world witnessed his brilliance in 1994 when he opened his first hotel, Culture Club in Kandalama, the first hotel ever constructed on the banks of the Kandalama Lake. By then, two decades into his career, it marked a defining milestone for a man who had entered the world of work without privilege, wealth, or powerful connections.

When Chandra first pitched his tent in tourism and hospitality as a novice, he quickly realized that success would depend on creating a unique selling point for himself. Thus, his properties became known for stories built on cultural authenticity, each one drawing inspiration from the localities they represent, serving as windows into Sri Lanka’s diverse culture, showcasing region-specific traditions, practices, and cuisines. From the beginning, Chandra proved to be a natural fit for the industry, bringing the much-needed out-of-the-box thinking and innovative spirit to unlock Sri Lanka’s vast potential. Today, after fifty years in tourism, Chandra’s journey inspires future practitioners, showing them the art of defying the odds to realize their vision.



At Maliyadeva College, Kurunegala as a member of the junior cadet team.



Chandra in France as a student at Alliance Francaise de Paris.

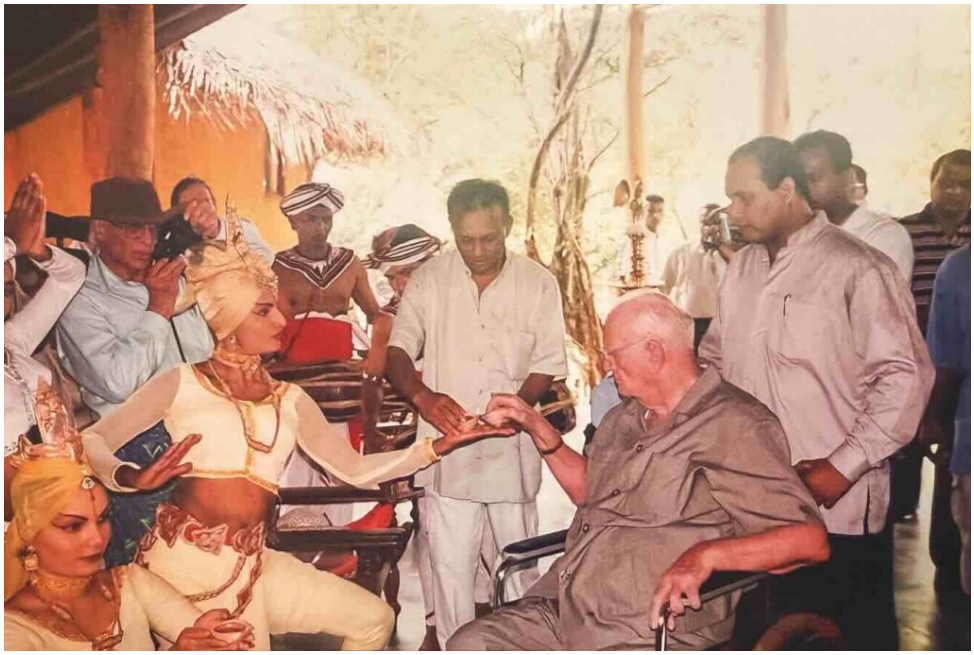
The First Steps into Hospitality

Born on June 5, 1953 in Kurunegala and educated at Maliyadeva College, Chandra stood in stark contrast to the social order of the 1970s. At that time, those who rose through corporate ranks typically came from Colombo, armed with elite English-medium schooling. Chandra had none of these advantages, but he did have an unshakeable spirit and “never say never” attitude.

His genius shone early on as he considered his options and, with remarkable foresight, recognized the vast potential in tourism. As he describes it, Sri Lanka’s golden era of tourism from the 1960s was a time of growth and opportunity until the civil war stifled its progress in 1983.

Determined to carve his career path, Chandra began by strengthening his education. In 1975, he enrolled in a Diploma in Tourism at the Sri Lanka Technical

College and studied French at the Alliance Française de Colombo. The prestigious Ceylon Hotel School was the premier gateway into hospitality, yet Chandra was not selected for its three-year program. Undeterred, he pursued a Diploma in Front Office Management instead, which led to his first professional role as a receptionist at Hotel Samudra. Here, at the frontlines of the industry, he began laying the foundation for a career that would transform Sri Lanka’s tourism landscape.



The Varichchi Eco Houses and Ayurveda Center opened at Chandra’s first hotel, Culture Club, graced by Sir Arthur C. Clarke (1994).



Opening of Le Kandyan, Chandra’s second hotel, with the presence of the then Minister of Tourism, Dharmasiri Senanayake.

Discovering a Calling Beyond Hotels

Chandra soon discovered his true calling as a tour guide. His fluency in French, which often proved invaluable at the front desk, inspired him to further his skills. He traveled to France to complete the Certificate in Spoken French at the Alliance Française de Paris, and upon returning home, earned the National Tour Guide Diploma from the Sri Lanka Tourist Board. With these qualifications in hand, he traded the front desk for the open road, working as a freelance tour guide for leading French tour operators such as Jet Tours and Kuoni, while also lecturing on tour guide courses in his spare time.

This phase marked a turning point in his journey, which could be called Chandra's entrepreneurial apprenticeship. The experience equipped him with practical skills and international exposure and gave him a deep understanding of Sri Lanka's immense potential as a world-class destination. In 1982, he took his first decisive step in entrepreneurship by cofounding Connaissance de Ceylan, a travel agency dedicated to inbound tourism.



In 1984, Chandra first represented Sri Lanka at the Paris Semaine Mondiale du Tourisme et des Voyages.



Representing Sri Lanka at the World Travel Market in London.

Landmarks of Innovation

The next phase of his entrepreneurial journey saw him stepping into hotel ownership. His advent, of course, was transformative, beginning in 1994 with the creation of his first property, the Culture Club Resort in Kandalama. True to his belief in thinking beyond convention, Chandra broke new ground by choosing a location where no major hotel brand had ventured. He drew inspiration from indigenous concepts of the lake, the dagoba, the village, and the temple, crafting an experience that allowed guests to immerse themselves in the authenticity of Sri Lankan village life.

Two years later, in 1996, he unveiled Le Kandyan Hotel in Kandy, reaffirming his vision of regional hospitality development. From there, his portfolio grew steadily, giving rise to an impressive collection of themed hotels under the Thema Collection brand.

In 2011 Chandra opened Maalu Maalu Passikudah, the first resort built on Sri Lanka's East Coast after the civil war's conclusion. This bold venture came to symbolize renewal and hope for the region. Again in 2019, at a time when the tourism industry was reeling from the Easter Sunday attacks, he stood out as the only hotelier to complete and launch a project in the aftermath: the Tea and Experience Factory at Mandaram Nuwara, a tribute to resilience in the face of crisis.

Even the pandemic could not deter him. While global tourism ground to a halt, Chandra defied the odds by completing and launching Wild Glamping Gal Oya—the only hospitality project in Sri Lanka to debut during that extraordinary time. In 2025, he again pushed boundaries with Amba Yaalu in Kandalama, Sri Lanka's first female-led and operated hotel. It is a powerful symbol of inclusivity and women's empowerment in the hospitality sector.

These milestones reflect his unwavering spirit of innovation and his enduring reputation for bold "firsts" in Sri Lanka's tourism journey. Today, his portfolio includes some of the island's most distinct properties – among them Aliya Resort and Spa in Sigiriya, Mountbatten Bungalow in Kandy, Kithala Resort in Tissamaharama, Scottish Planter Bungalow in Nuwara Eliya, Ayurvie Weligama, Wild Glamping Knuckles, Parangi Weligama Bay, Vis Ta Vie Mirissa, Waraka Udawalawa, and many more. Each venture bears his unmistakable trademark: a seamless fusion of authentic Sri Lankan culture with imaginative hospitality concepts.

It carries his "Sri Lankanizing" tourism philosophy, strongly focusing on sustainability. From the outset, he introduced innovations ahead of their time, such as employing naturalists in his hotels to educate guests about nature and sustainable practices. Today, his properties have 20 naturalists, engaging with guests on ecosystems and conservation.

A Trailblazer Acknowledged

Chandra has been honored and recognized at home and abroad for his contributions to championing Sri Lanka's tourism. In 1999, he received the National Silver Award for the Sri Lankan Entrepreneur of the Year from the Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry. In 2017, the French Government honored him with the Officier de l'Ordre National du Mérite title. This distinction recognized his

achievements and role in deepening Franco-Sri Lankan ties through tourism. In 2018, he was honored with the Tourism Legend Award, cementing his reputation as a pioneer whose influence continues to shape the industry.



Recognizing his achievements and role in deepening France-Sri Lanka ties through tourism, the French Government honored with the Officier de l'Ordre National du Merite Title.

A Voice for Sri Lanka's Tourism

Chandra has been a driving force in shaping tourism policy and industry leadership in Sri Lanka. He has held key positions including President of the Travel Agents Association of Sri Lanka (2001/2002), President of the Sri Lanka Association of Inbound Tour Operators (2008/2009), Board Member of the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau (2009/2010) and the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (2010–2016), as well as founding President of the Alliance Française de Kotte (2010–2016). Since 2021, he has continued his service as a member of the Tourism Advisory Committee.

Since debuting on the global stage at the Semaine Mondiale du Tourisme et des

Voyages in Paris in 1984, he has been a tireless ambassador for Sri Lanka. He showcases the island's potential yearly at the world's foremost tourism fairs—from ITB in Germany and IFTM in France to WTM in the UK, IBTM and FITUR in Spain, and ATM in Dubai.

An Enduring Blueprint for the Future

Chandra's five-decade journey is a testament to endurance, creativity, and dedication. Through his groundbreaking projects, he has transformed Sri Lanka's hospitality landscape while elevating the nation's profile on the world stage. As Sri Lanka enters a new chapter in tourism, Chandra's legacy is a source of inspiration and a guiding framework for the future.

One thing has remained constant through it all: he never gave up. Giving up is not in his DNA, says Chandra. It's essential to give life to new things, start projects, fight for one's vision, and keep going.

According to Chandra, even when the bottom line isn't the strongest, the positive feedback from clients makes the journey worthwhile. It is a journey that has built iconic properties, supported livelihoods, built careers and businesses, and shared its success by giving back to Sri Lanka through community development projects. That's precisely why Chandra wants to see his beloved industry thrive and his country rise above its differences and unite as one nation. He envisions a Sri Lanka where social equality and improved quality of life will be the privilege of all Sri Lankans.

Even after five decades, Chandra dreams big—conceiving new projects, exploring new properties, and envisioning new concepts for Sri Lanka's untapped regions rich with tourism potential. True to his inimitable spirit of perseverance, Chandra's journey continues—refusing to slow down or set aside his vision. He remains committed to contributing to Sri Lanka's future for as long as his strength allows.

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Giving back to society has always been central to Chandra’s outreach programs.