Time for Sport on Sunny Beaches

Posted on

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Water-skiing is fun and full of excitement

Most foreign travellers associate this Indian Ocean isle with sun-swept beaches, lush forests, gushing waterfalls, tea-carpeted hills, rich cultural sites and smiling faces. If you are looking for more variety than the conventional holiday of beach, sun and good food, the place is Sri Lanka, for these ingredients do not constitute her only charms. Today, things have changed and l)er hitherto unexploited potential for water sport and recreation is at long last being developed.

It is the foreign traveller who has inspired this change with his persistent demands for novel pleasures. This has led to the discovery of many sporting choices the seas and inland waters offer, spelling out a whole new dimension for Sri Lanka and her tourists.

Aqua-sport lovers are converging on Sri Lanka from all over the globe attracted by blue seas, gentle breezes, safe currents and a tropical sun; irresistible conditions for windsurfing, deep-sea fishing, snorkelling, water skiing, cruising and speedboating. There are the added pleasures of palm-fringed shores, charming coves and coral

gardens, marvellous seascapes, secluded beaches all within easy reach of the capital city, Colombo. They are also well-serviced by a network of good hot.els and guest houses. It is unfortunate that many travel promoters have ignored the potential of this beautiful Indian Ocean island blessed with a coastline of approximately 1,600 kilometers and 600,000 acres of inland waterways. In all probability the enormous capital outlay for sophisticated equipment may have been the main inhibiting factor, while Sri Lanka herself can boast no history of her own exploration of aqua-sporting capacities, despite being strategically placed on the world's ancient trading routes and continuing to be the calling place for numerous explorers and seafarers. Whatever the inhibiting factors that may have been, local promoters are making up for the lost time. If you must don mask, snorkel or flippers or decide to surf, scooter, ski or cruise at some of Sri Lanka's best beach resorts on the Southwest Coast, the best months are from October through April when the skies and seas are at their bluest. It is only a simple matter of planning and choosing your destination for there is a variety of experiences and vistas open to you.

Cashing in on the new attraction is the island's tourist promotional service, which is giving aquasports in Sri I.anka the right royal treatment in all its overseas promotional campaigns. The Ceylon Tourist Board's Marketing Manager, Priyantha Fernando, says: We have marked aquasports as a key area for further development and in future we are not only going to concentrate on attracting the sporting activist, but also invite foreign investments in this sector, to augment the existing services."

The Tourist Board" enthusiasm reflects the important role aqua-sports v.ill play • image of a dream holiday venue.

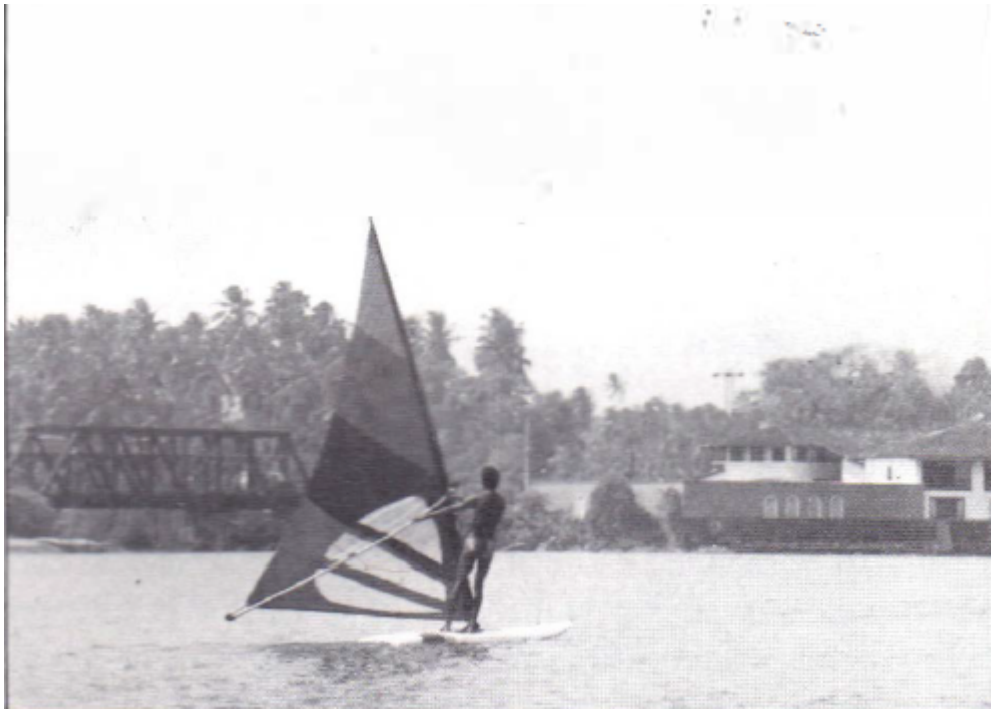
Exploiting this facility to optimum is Sri I.anka's first self-contained resort complex – Bentota, 50 kilometres from Colombo, which is a romantic rendezvous of sea and river. It boasts of the island's prime Southern beaches supplemented by the gentle flowing of the Bentota Ganga (m-er) which is fed by the lower reaches of Sri Lanka· last remaining patch of virgin rain-forests – the Sinharaja. Most of the recreational facilities are concentrated at the mouth of the river. Being a tidal river, the Bentota Ganga offers blue water unpolluted by industrial waste and a sandy bar, vital requirements for aqua-sports. Aqua-sports specialist, Calistus De Almeida, who manages a facility in Bentota offering an array of water sports activities says: 'The conditions here are ideal for water sports with the warm tropical climate, clear beaches and most of all, the comparatively low-cost hotel facilities." With over

twenty years of experience, De Almeida knows Sri Lanka's coastline well. "In ideal times, the best places for water sports are off the eastern coastline, in places like Nilaveli off Trincomalee, the golden beaches of Pasekudah and Hambantota where the waves are eight to ten feet high giving the best conditions for surfing and right here in Bentota where the waves are not so high but the wind is the best for windsurfers."

To cater for the avid sportsman and woman, several resort hotels with well-equipped sports cabins dot the banks of the river and seashore. Deep-sea fishing is a must for all those with a soft spot for angling. You will enjoy fishing in warm waters sixteen to twenty-five kilometres into the sea, off the continental shelf. For a group of six persons (three guests and three fishing), charges are Rs. 3,000. On a good day your catch could range from barracuda and tuna to seer and paraw and a variety of other smaller fish. With a little persuasion your haul will be turned into a gourmet's delight by your friendly hotel chef. Rods, bait and tackle are provided but you are welcome to bring your own. A snorkelling excursion would provide you with a fascinating view of life beneath the sea, where you discover the intricate beauties of coral reef and multihued tropical fish. Your expedition costing Rs. 175/ inclusive of gear takes you five kilometres into the sea to an idyllic spot, "Hondaran rocks", which sports a patch of coral and has black rock protruding from its shallow waters. Even an amateur swimming with just a pair of goggles could view something of the beautiful underwater life. A special feature is a boat trip to Hikkaduwa, 32 kilometres away, for Hikkaduwa is home to a long ribbon of -coral reef creating a natural lagoon of shallow crystal clear water. Beneath its gentle rippling surface you will find an underwater Disneyland of tropical fish, spectacular coral formations and an occasional turtle. The trip costing Rs. 2,500 for a group of six persons, inclusive of snorkelling gear, takes half a day. The steady breeze and gentle waves provide ideal conditions for windsurfing and an exciting 60 minutes will cost you Rs. 125. For those inexperienced, take heart, you will be trained by Sri Lanka's National Windsurfing Champion for 1987, nineteen-year-old Thushara Gunewardene, which costs you Rs. 1,250. You will be instructed on the river and once you have mastered the art, it will be smooth surfing all the way. Surf boats for wave-riding promise a lot of fun and excitement and cost Rs. 50 for sixty minutes. Since the waves are not very high during the season, it is good for practice. Water scooters are also available at Rs. 120 for fifteen minutes. One must not fail to make a booking on the daily five kilometre river cruise (Rs. 120 per person) or the sixteen kilometre river safari (Rs. 300 per person) where you will spend a couple of hours exploring the tropical sights and sounds of the river estuary. Colourful birds, monitor lizards, an

occasional crocodile or fishermen in their ‘oruwas’ (outrigger canoes) paddle around inspecting their bamboo traps for crabs and fish. Or, looking up into the trees, you may spot a man walking his way assuredly on a tight rope in the sky – no, it is not a circus; he is on his daily walk on the tightrope from coconut tree to coconut tree collecting toddy, the sweet sap of the coconut flower. Do try some, it is a delicious thirst quencher. On board, however, there is an equally delicious sample of tropical fruit including papaya, coconut, pineapple, mangoes and bananas.

If you wish to venture out on the traditional Sri Lankan fishing craft, the oruwa or outrigger canoe made out of tree bark, fastened with wire, rope and water proofed with gum, it will be organised. For Rs. 75 you can convince any of the numerous fishermen to take you onto the river or sea, under their guided skill. A fifteen-minute demonstration flight in the amphibious, ultra-light twin seater plane is a must for a breathtaking glide over turquoise seas, green coconut jungles, and the tranquility of Lanka’s rural life. All this for Rs. 600 but the service is limited by the shortage of flying craft. Plans are now underway to make Sri Lanka an international venue for windsurfing training. The Sri Lanka Windsurfing Association assisted by Sri Lanka’s first German-qualified ‘A’ grade windsurfing instructor, Thilak Weerasinghe, is closely studying the project which will be open to all ages and novices. The Association is also busy making preparations for the Open Windsurfing Championship due to be held in December 1988 at Mt. Lavinia, Sri Lanka’s weekend beach resort. Many international entries are expected, so if you are around and want to compete, please contact the Association. But to enjoy the joys of aqua-sports in Sri Lanka, don’t wait until then. Do it now.



A wind surfing enthusiast sets off for an exhilarating ride out.



On a water scooter on the river at Bentota. Suresh de Silva