

## EXPANDING HORIZONS

**Denham Schokman** strikes an optimistic note as Favourite Holidays spreads its wings across the seas.

A travel company that began life around 10 years ago, as an in-house agency catering to the travel needs of the diversified Favourite Group, has now been rebranded as Favourite Holidays. The company has broken new ground and is optimistic about the future. With the group's significant investment in the local aviation industry via its joint-venture company – Deccan Aviation Lanka – some four years ago, Director/CEO of Favourite Holidays, Denham Schokman, who is also on the board at Deccan Aviation, observes that there are numerous gaps to be bridged in the travel industry.

"Our core philosophy has been to provide products and services to niche markets – a philosophy that has worked well for us in the past... Favourite Holidays plans to bridge some of those gaps. We are a fully-fledged travel agency operating the gamut of inbound, outbound, charters and medical evacuation – not only in the domestic context, but regionally as well," he elaborates.

In under a year, the company connected Dhaka with Colombo to coincide with the recent SAARC Summit, using modern Boeing 737 aircraft, and has now extended its operations to the Maldives in keeping with its ethos of promoting regional tourism. Schokman maintains that while there are a large number of travel companies in Sri Lanka, Favourite Holidays is unique, as it includes aviation in its product offering. "Our advantage is the winning combination of aviation and travel. With no other specialised airborne tourism company in Sri Lanka, we secured a niche position," he asserts.

Elaborating on this formula, Schokman cites the example of the long-haul European traveller, who is often subjected to long hours in transit. "We want to introduce transit tours whereby such travellers can simply board a helicopter, fly 'Down South', enjoy the sights and, perhaps, treat themselves to spa therapy – and be back at the airport in five hours. Another area is golf tourism. The high-end tourist, who reflects our customer profile, enjoys golf... but with our best courses being at least four hours away by road, time doesn't permit them the luxury. But with a helicopter package, they can now play golf... even on all three major courses, over three days, with leftover time for shop-



The interviewee is Director/CEO of Favourite Holidays and Director – Deccan Aviation Lanka.

ping or chilling out on the beach," he enthuses.

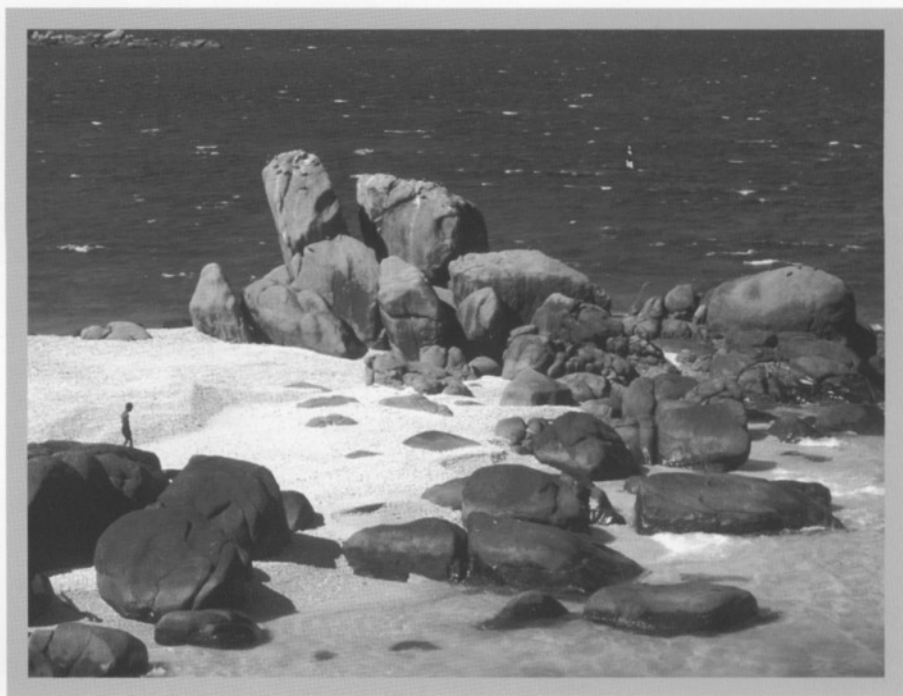
Having tied up with Maldivian resorts under the John Keells and Aitken Spence umbrellas, and with a yachting package already in the bag, the company now has plans to connect Colombo to the Maldives using private-jet charters, as well as tap into the lucrative medical-evacuation market. Favourite Holidays has obtained the general-sales agency for Best Air – flying from Colombo to Dhaka – and aims to add more routes to its portfolio... especially from Vietnam, Thailand, Pakistan and India, where air traffic is on a high-growth curve.

Schokman doesn't perceive the current

macro picture as being a disincentive for tourists. "To us, every threat must be turned into an opportunity and we have found that regional tourism would be one way to assuage any challenges we may encounter internally and ensure that our bottom line keeps growing. Sri Lanka is really a small market when one looks at the regional potential, so that's what we are focused on," he explains.

Shockman adds: "On the other hand, we have seen successes in the war on terror here in Sri Lanka and I do believe that will have a positive impact on tourist numbers. We have seen some growth in higher-end tourist arrivals, because they simply want an exotic destination with the luxuries they are used to. We have all that... so, it all works out well. Also, our formula doesn't require 100 per cent occupancy in a resort – if there is 10 per cent occupancy in multiple resorts, that will keep the company profitable. Our resort in the Maldives, in partnership with the Six Senses Group and other investors, will also be operational by 2009... this will give us further advantages when pursuing regional tourism," he concludes.

– Savithri Rodrigo



MEDIA SERVICES PHOTOFILE (DECCAN AVIATION LANKA)