

IN FOR THE LONG HAUL

Despite the prevailing country situation, **Suren Mirchandani** believes that opportunities for tourism's growth are considerable.

When Suren Mirchandani was about 12 years old, he spotted a brochure featuring helicopters and notes related to aviation on his father's desk. On enquiring what they were, he was told that the documents were for a helicopter service that had not received the approval of the then Government. Fast-forward to 2008, when Mirchandani is the Managing Director of Deccan Aviation, Sri Lanka's only helicopter company with a licence to operate. He still has his father's handwritten notes and counts these among his most treasured possessions.

As Managing Director, Mirchandani steers a domestic-aviation company that recently began operating regionally, which has a four-seater helicopter and a 17-seater twin-engined aircraft. "In 2002, there was a resurgence for Sri Lanka, especially in tourism. The country began catering to more discerning tourists. We knew that these upmarket travellers would not be comfortable without an adequate aviation-services solution," recalls Mirchandani.

With boutique hotels such as Aman Resorts and Per Aquum introducing a new brand of tourism to Sri Lanka, Deccan Aviation started up its operation in July 2004, aspiring to usher in a 'honeymoon year' at the end of December. "Following the tsunami, however, the leisure industry went into a tailspin and even though our business didn't pan out in the manner we anticipated, it was a banner year for us – although it was unfortunate for the tourism industry at large," he elaborates.

With this once-vital sector presently struggling, Mirchandani has generated a formula for growth in leaner times. "Low occupancy in multiple hotels may well translate into a higher number of flights for us, because we are carrying guests to a host of properties," he notes, pointing out that 2007 has been the best year so far for Deccan. The availability of a helicopter-transfer option has prompted the travel industry to secure these facilities for their respective clients. "While tourism comprises half of our business and we are not disappointed with the results, we need to double our current capacity to enjoy a stellar performance. The introduction of a new aircraft last year was a catalyst to the growth of our business, transforming our fleet from a single-helicopter operation into the only



The interviewee is Managing Director of Deccan Aviation Lanka.

company in Sri Lanka offering both helicopter and aircraft options," he says.

The fixed-wing component of the business has grown in leaps and bounds since May 2007. Deccan currently flies around 10 times a week to Jaffna, primarily for NGOs and private charters, as well as on international routes – including a twice-weekly crew-transfer contract for First Choice Airlines, between Malé and Colombo. "We now consider ourselves Sri Lanka's premier aviation company, in keeping with several criteria: an all-US-aircraft fleet, the youngest fleet age of any domestic airline, unique capabilities in helicopter and fixed-wing services, which no other Sri Lankan company can offer, and also that we are flying internationally," he explains.

While the ground (and, indeed, aerial!) reality vis-à-vis the security situation is challenging – although this has not restricted Deccan's operations – Mirchandani observes that 2008 may not be as promising in terms of growth. But he believes strongly that significant opportunities exist. "Currently, we can use only five of the 14 airfields in the island, owing to poor infrastructure. However, if these and other conditions improve, tourism will grow correspondingly. We also plan to re-introduce amphibious aircraft to Sri Lanka, given the adequate number of waterways available," he reveals.

Mirchandani says that more aircraft were added to Deccan's fleet because the company sees immense opportunity in the recent signing of oil-exploration agreements for prospecting in the waters of the Mannar Basin. "In mature helicopter companies, retail transfers constitute a minute percentage of business. It's the support given to the off-shore oil industry that comprises 95 per cent of the global helicopter business – 90 per cent of civilian helicopters are deployed purely for oil-support operations. We're bidding our time and playing a role in the tourism sector, but we're here for the long haul," he asserts.

– Savithri Rodrigo



MEDIA SERVICES PHOTOFILE