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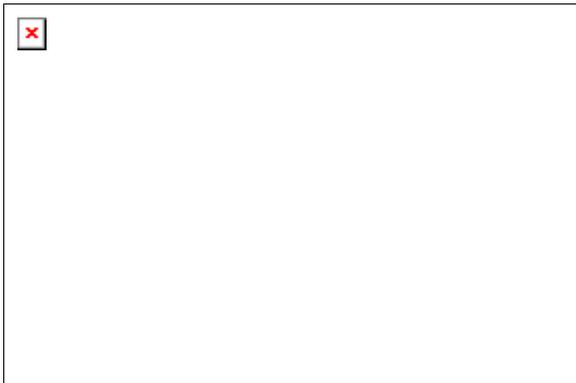
Sri Lanka vie for first Green Awards - a boost to tourist industry

KUMBUK RIVER IN THE RUNNING FOR OSCAR AWARD AT THE WORLD TRAVEL AWARDS (WAT):

by Rosanne Koelmeyer Anderson

Every great and commanding movement in the annals of the world is the triumph of enthusiasm.

Nothing great was ever achieved without it said Emerson and so true an experience, an overwhelming awe for Dinesh Watawana, the pioneer of the unique eco-lodge concept KumbukRiver in Buttala recently discovered on the net that his unique 40 foot high distinctive elephant conception had been voted among the world's eight leading eco-lodges along with seven other very well established large scale eco-lodges around the world.



Eco-Villa at night

This prestigious nomination will give Sri Lanka and KumbukRiver the prospect of vying for the top slot Oscars when 200 countries vote at the first ever Green Awards of the fourteen year old World Travel Awards(WAT) 2007 to be held shortly .

"This has certainly put Sri Lanka back on track as yet another motivator to make our Lassana Sri

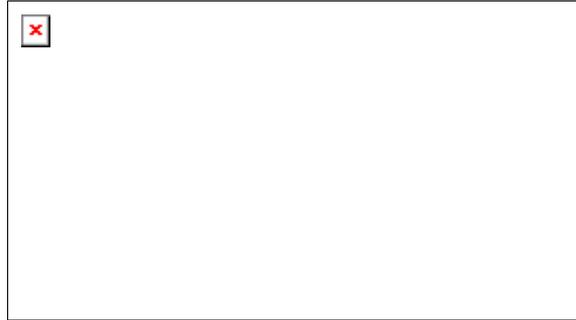
Lanka a thriving tourist hub once again at a time when tourism is facing its challenges and on a rather low ebb.

An incredible effort and personal commitment towards the totally innovative concept, the use of half burnt out trees which has gone into the entire structural making of the eco-lodge needs to be acknowledge as a fine piece of art of a man whose modesty goes beyond just wanting to secure awards but to make a contribution of value to his motherland.

"I am happy that I have put Buttala on the world map today and I'm proud of what I have been able to do for my country. From absolutely nothing, I have built a world class property. The glory belongs to Sri Lanka and not to me. I will take care of it and make the most of it , Dinesh Watawana the mastermind behind KumbukRiver commented in an exclusive interview with the Sunday Observer.

"No one told me that KumbukRiver

had been nominated for the prestigious Oscars, I happened to see it while browsing the net. I was taken aback .I couldn't believe my eyes. It was a beautiful surprise considering all the hard work that went into the making" ,he said.



Kumbukan Oya which runs on the border of the Eco lodge from where it got its name

The WTA is an esteemed annual showpiece event which receives the attention of world media especially

in the Europe and USA. The other two Sri Lankan entries which received recognition by the WTA are Jetwing's Ayurveda Pavillion under leading Resorts and Asia's leading Spa Resorts respectively, while Sri Lankan Airlines was named amongst Asia's best airlines.

KumbukRiver was fashioned out of hundred year old half burnt out trees which is evident on the outer view of the eco- lodge while the interior of it reveals that the tree used was in tact. The perception of the eco-lodge is that of an elephant, symbolic of Mr Watawana's theme, the elephant-human concept due to bio-diversity, conservation and mismanagement has posed a threat to villages in the area.

Bitten by a snake at the site when instructing the workers did not dispirit the enthusiast from making his dream come true in an almost unexplored terrain. Quite matter of fact about it he explained that there are 90 species of snakes in Sri Lanka but only 20 were venomous and 13 of the venomous snakes do not live in the jungle. When clearing up jungle area it is a common thing he said smiling.

Situated on a 10 acre land in Dibeyaya, Okkampitiya in Buttala, which may not be even known to most locals is nevertheless a spellbinding eco-hideout which has reached its heights as one of Sri Lanka's best eco-lodges set up in an unexplored area, a potential tourist hub of the future.

Buttala has much potential for tourism with Wellawaya, the next town's enthralling mountain terrain which is less than three minutes away an area which takes you through a change of climate from hot to dry in less than three minutes.

Then towards Ella is the spectacular town Buttala, one of greatest places in the world for wild life while Thanamanvilla which is not so far away takes you to the beaches and the Kumana Bird Sanctuary. Much to explore in close proximity which authorities could look into as a prospective tourist hub.

The remarkable aspect of the unique innovation and brainchild of KumbukRiver is that of a down to earth ,unassuming novice in tourism who simply felt very strongly about making a difference ;finding a niche to do something for the tourist industry and the future of Sri Lanka.

He simply wanted to do two things namely to be a role model in eco tourism. "Today the world is talking about eco-tourism so I thought of designing something unique, a concept I had dreamt of. So I put all the finance I had on this luxurious eco villa which stands to bring glory to Sri Lanka at this juncture.

I am now completing the second chally with no outside investors, no architects nor any contractors," Mr Watawana humbly said. The government is looking of ways and means of getting people to go there. This is one way in which they can promote Buttala as a tourist destination.

KumbukRiver perched on 2000-3000 square feet provides accommodation for eight persons with uniquely designed cutlery with a touch of localism while the gourmet service is masterminded by the villages themselves who comprise the staff.

KumbukRiver has also been currently shortlisted for an award at the Virgin Responsible Tourism Awards while the Times On Line voted it among the world's 50 best green places to stay last year and it is rated as one of the hottest destinations in Sri Lanka in the world of tourism.

The success story of Mr Watawana goes beyond all precincts. It is even more interesting. A free lance writer who later moved into advertising and set up the Seven Frontier Maverick Ad Agency and began marketing consultancy where worked arduously was a totally different calling but today for the first time in the World an Ad Agency has built such a brand of their own which transcends all barriers.

Leaving Colombo every Saturday at 3 am and returning late Sunday night for an entire year to supervise the work going on the site which was done by none other than the unemployed youth of Okkampitiya who rallied around, toiled and laboured continuously to perfect the image Mr Watawana had in mind was no easy task .

He had only called 20-25 marginalized youth of the area who had been otherwise engaged in illicit mining, drug abuse, poaching and illicit timbre searching and asked them if they were interested in a new way of life to which they would be the guardians of the heritage of this village. He spelt out his plan and they promptly agreed. Thus, KumbukRiver was born putting Buttala on the world map.

rosanne@sundayobserver.lk

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