

Promoting Tourism in South Asia

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1. INTRODUCTION

South Asia is home to a solid one-third of the world's population. Some of the best brains that run the world have South Asian roots or lineage. The region is home to the highest and the second highest mountain peaks of the world (Everest and K2). Most of the world's quality water resources are in the region with the river systems originating from the Himalayas. Some of world's best ocean resources (coral reefs of Maldives), beaches (Coxes Bazaar), and mangrove areas (Sunderbans) are located in the region. Its biodiversity is unmatched (Sinharaja, Chitwan). Home to marvels such as the Taj Mahal, Ajanta, Sigiriya, Timpu, and Taxila, the heritage and cultures of the region date back thousands of years. For centuries, the region has been a hotspot for seafaring nations looking for spices and other riches. It was the playground of several colonial powers, and is now home to almost all of the world's religions. The cuisine of the region is exquisite, and its people are friendly and warm. The South Asian region has the key ingredients to delight its visitors.

Yet, with some 400 million people remaining below the poverty line and 71 million people affected by violence or its threat, most of South Asia remains conflict ridden. Poverty, health, child, and gender-related issues are pulling down the region's image.¹

In 2007, the South Asian region received less than 1.1 percent (9.7 million) of the 898 million visitors from around the world (UN World Tourism Organization 2008). In comparison, Europe received 53.5 percent of the global arrivals, and the Asian region, including East and Southeast Asia, received 19.3 percent. The volume of arrivals to the Asia Pacific region more than doubled between 2000 and 2007, from 85 million to 198 million (UNESCAP 2008). Within this growth scenario, regrettably, most of South Asia saw only marginal growth, with the exceptions of some significant growth to India and Maldives.

For several decades now, the region has promoted tourism. As far back as the early 1980s, the World Tourism Organization (now UNWTO) set up a Secretariat in Colombo for South Asian Tourism Promotion and attempted to promote the region. This initiative failed because of inadequate support and interest from the individual nations' state tourism organizations. In the 1990s, the SAARC Chambers of Commerce and Industry (SCCI) began a Nepal-based initiative to promote tourism to the region.² A special tourism committee was formed and several rounds of meetings were held. A promotional tagline "Magic That Is South Asia" was coined, and talk of a regional tourism year was initiated. It was thought that tourism would improve if private sector business and tourism stakeholders took the lead in moving regional tourism initiatives forward. Several South Asian tourism business and trade marts³ have been held since the 1990s.

On the formal intergovernmental sphere, tourism occupies an important position. The official Web site of the SAARC Secretariat⁴ presents tourism as follows:

The SAARC Leaders have always recognized the importance of tourism and emphasized the need to take measures for promoting tourism in the region. During the Second Summit, the Leaders underscored that concrete steps should be taken to facilitate tourism in the region. Tourism has been an important dimension of most of the subsequent Summits. At the Twelfth Summit held in Islamabad in January 2004, the Leaders were of the view that development of tourism within South Asia could bring economic, social and cultural dividends. There is a need for increasing cooperation to jointly promote tourism with South Asia as well as to promote South Asia as a tourism destination, *inter alia*, by improved air links, they stated in the Declaration. To achieve this and to commemorate the twentieth year of the establishment of SAARC, the year 2005 was designated by the Leaders as "South Asia Tourism Year." Member States were required to individually and jointly organize special events to celebrate it.

On the formal action front, the site reports the following:

The Working Group on Tourism was established by the Council of Ministers during its Twenty-fourth Session held in Islamabad in January 2004. This was done after a comprehensive review of the SAARC Integrated Programme of Action by the Standing Committee at its Fourth Special Session held in Kathmandu in August 2003. This intergovernmental process will compliment the endeavors by SAARC Chambers of Commerce and Industry (SCCI) Tourism Council, thus ensuring public–private partnership for the promotion of tourism.

The First Meeting of the Working Group on Tourism was held in Colombo on 16–17 August 2004. In addition to the SAARC Member States and representatives of the SAARC Secretariat, representatives of the SCCI Tourism Council and the ASEAN Secretariat also attended the Meeting.

Besides reviewing the implementation of program of activities relevant to its mandate, the Working Group made a number of recommendations for promotion of tourism in the SAARC region, for example, printing of a SAARC Travel Guide, production of a documentary movie on tourism in SAARC, promotion of sustainable development of Eco-Tourism, Cultural Tourism and Nature Tourism, collaboration in HRD in tourism sector by having programmes for exchange of teachers, students, teaching modules and materials, Promoting Cooperation in the field of tourism with other relevant regional and international tourism organizations. It also proposed a number of activities to celebrate the South Asia Tourism Year–2005 in a befitting manner.

When comparing the progress made on the ground and by other regional tourism initiatives that began much later than SAARC—such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Pacific Tourism Commission, European Union (EU) Tourism, and the Mekong Tourism Initiative—progress must be classified, at best, as wanting.

With the backdrop of the frustration of SAARC's underperformance, in 1997, a separate initiative was undertaken by several governments of the South Asian region, titled the South Asian Growth Quadrangle, consisting of Bangladesh; Bhutan; 13 of the north, east, and north-east states of India; and Nepal. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) supported the initiative under the South Asian Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) program, which includes a tourism component.⁵ This is an ongoing program within the South Asian development framework of the ADB.

In addition, also in 1997, another initiative was created to link some of SAARC's countries with Myanmar and Thailand, as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation

(BIMSTEC), to take advantage of the historical link and turning them into economic opportunities. Named BIMSTEC to represent Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand Economic Cooperation, it set up a Tourism Working Group and has conducted several rounds of meetings, but to date, it has not achieved much progress. Since 2005, the ADB has supported this initiative as well.

2. THE DICHOTOMY THAT IS SOUTH ASIA

South Asia can indeed be described as a dichotomy. Although it has not lived up to expectations as a regional grouping, at the individual country level, tourism development in SAARC presents several unique models, containing some successful best practices.

Bhutan has presented a model of tourism development,⁶ in which its operations are based on the model of a kinked demand curve (Sen 2004) to create a premium value for the destination. Bhutan limits access to a few tens of thousands of tourists each year at a premium charge, placing the per capita yield from one tourist at a high level. Bhutan has a business model aimed at conserving its heritage, culture, and natural resources. This model is in keeping with its unique development indicator of “Gross National Happiness,” in contrast to the conventional development measurement of gross national product.

Maldives, known today as one of the most successful island destinations in the world, works on a business model of establishing strong partnerships with foreign investors and tour operators. Beginning with investments from Sri Lankan conglomerates in the early 1980s (still accounting for about 20 percent of all hotel rooms), Maldives Tourism, offering the “sunny side of life” as its positioning platform,⁷ is driven by some of the best international and regional brand names in the island tourism business.

Nepal is an example of a pioneering brand of unique community-based tourism initiative. With its early model of the Annapurna Tourism Development Project⁸ and the Bhakthipur Conservation Project⁹ of the 1980s, Nepal introduced a good tourism operational model, offering its unique nature and heritage conservation, community benefit, and sustainable funding features.

Sri Lanka is addressing the challenge of global warming and climate change faced by all nations of the world. It has extended its conventional position as a tourist destination of a treasured island with a warm people

offering nature, culture, and adventure¹⁰ to include an extensive green cover. Through its Tourism Earth Lung initiative it is working toward being a carbon-neutral destination by 2018.¹¹

Table 11.1 illustrates the country-wise spread of visitor arrivals to the South Asian region (the newest member country, Afghanistan, is not included).

TABLE 11.1 Country-wise Spread of Visitor Arrivals to the South Asia Region

	<i>Year</i>					<i>%</i>	<i>CAGR</i>
	<i>2003</i>	<i>2004</i>	<i>2005</i>	<i>2006</i>	<i>2007</i>	<i>Change</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>South Asia</i>						<i>06/07</i>	<i>2003–07</i>
Bangladesh	244,509	271,270	207,662				
Bhutan	6,261	9,249	13,626	17,342	21,093	21.6	35.5
India	2,726,214	3,457,477	3,918,610	4,447,167	4,977,193	11.9	16.2
Pakistan	500,918	647,993	798,260	898,389	839,500	-6.6	13.8
Nepal (Air)	275,438	297,335	277,346	283,819	360,350	27.0	6.9
Maldives	563,593	616,716	395,320	601,923	675,889	12.3	4.6
Sri Lanka	500,642	566,202	549,308	559,609	494,008	-11.7	-0.3

Sources UN World Tourism Organization 2006 and Pacific Asia Travel Association statistical reports, various years.

The figures illustrate the powerful position of India in driving arrivals to the region with close to 5 million visitor arrivals in 2007, with Pakistan and Maldives also showing their prowess. What is also significant is that, except for Sri Lanka, where a war against terrorism and the tsunami (December 2004) affected growth, all other countries in the region performed well in light of the new regional dynamism. In the case of Sri Lanka, in spite of the lack of growth in recent times, public-private sector partnerships have been established for the tourism industry to take off on a sustainable development path.

The largest intraregional tourism-generating market is India, and with better connectivity and thawing of political tensions, the potential growth of Indians traveling within the region will become even more significant. Also offering potential are Pakistan and Bangladesh. Between Nepal, India, and Sri Lanka, Buddhist pilgrimage travel is currently a strong phenomenon (Table 11.2). The low bases of visitation seen in the statistics between countries of South Asia are no indication of their potential. If access (air, sea, and road transport) is efficient, better border formalities are established, and restrictions are eased, these numbers have the potential to grow exponentially. In each of the countries, the growing middle class is offering new opportunities for travel (Singh 2005).

TABLE 11.2 Intra-regional Travel between SAARC Countries, 2007

To	<i>Sri</i>							
	<i>India</i>	<i>Pakistan</i>	<i>Maldives</i>	<i>Nepal</i>	<i>Bhutan</i>	<i>Lanka</i>	<i>Bangladesh</i>	<i>Afghanistan</i>
India		106,283	45,787	83,037	6,729	204,084	480,240	23,045
Pakistan	48,242		341	1,655	90	4,312	6,352	80,459
Maldives	17,327	1,013		333	31	9,654	1,284	25
Nepal	96,275	2,566	181 ^a		2,135 ^a	1,303	7,892	n.a.
Bhutan	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.		n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Bangladesh	86,232	5,671	220	3,378	1,187	2,322		104
Afghanistan	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	
Sri Lanka	106,067	10,204	29,539	885	n.a.		1,665	n.a.

Sources UN World Tourism Organization 2007 and Pacific Asia Travel Association statistical reports 2007.

Notes n.a. = not available.

^a Data are for 2006.

To make things more dynamic for South Asia and South Asia tourism, action must be taken. No amount of patting each other on the back or being politically or diplomatically correct will move the region forward.

The following three problems have prevented South Asian tourism from taking off:

- Lack of a pragmatic approach of political and bureaucratic leadership toward identifying and exploiting sociopolitical and economic opportunities, and the environment of mistrust between India and Pakistan.
- Self-imposed limitation of access to and within the region as a result of an introvert attitude.
- Resultant political instability, the absence of rapid economic growth, and failure to distribute the growth achieved to reduce poverty.

3. THE OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

3.1 Powered by India's Growth and Recent Pragmatism

India presents the region's largest economy as well as the largest tourism operation. India has been the principal trendsetter in determining the region's future, whether it was negative or positive. With an economy growing at 9.2 percent in 2007 and 9.6 percent in 2006, it is cited as one

of the most promising prospects of the world for the future. Growth is supported by market reforms, huge inflows of foreign direct investment, rising foreign exchange reserves, both an information technology (IT) and a real estate boom, and a flourishing capital market. India has reduced poverty levels by 10 percent and achieved growth in the services sector of more than 11 percent, with the sector accounting for about 53 percent of the economy.

The concept of “Chindia,” in which the growth dynamics of both China and India will complement Asia’s newest prospects for economic superpower status, augers well in positioning India as a modern growth economy with a proud heritage and culture, rather than as a poverty-stricken country.

As a result, India’s tourism industry is experiencing a strong period of growth, driven by the burgeoning Indian middle class (for domestic and outbound travel) and growth in high-spending foreign tourists. The tourism industry in India is substantial and vibrant, and the country is fast becoming a major global destination as well as an outbound visitor-generating market. India’s travel and tourism industry is one of the most profitable industries in the country and is credited with contributing a substantial amount of foreign exchange. This contribution is illustrated by the fact that, during 2006, 4 million tourists visited India and spent US\$8.9 billion.

Several reasons are cited for the growth and prosperity of India’s travel and tourism industry. Economic growth has added millions annually to the ranks of India’s middle class, a group that is driving domestic tourism growth. Disposable income in India has grown by 10.11 percent annually from 2001–06, and much of that is being spent on travel.

Thanks in part to its vibrant IT and outsourcing industry, foreigners are making a growing number of business trips to India, often adding a weekend break or longer holiday to their trip. Foreign tourists spend more days in India than in almost any other country worldwide. Tourist arrivals are also projected to increase by more than 22 percent per year through 2010, with a 33 percent increase in foreign exchange earnings recorded in 2004.

The tourism authorities at the central and state levels have played an important role in the development of the industry, with promotional campaigns such as “Incredible India,”¹² which promoted India’s culture and tourist attractions in a fresh and memorable way. The campaign created a new image of India in the minds of consumers around the world and has led directly to an increase in interest among tourists. Similarly, campaigns such as, “God’s Own Country” for Kerala,¹³ Goa Tourism’s

“Go Goa,”¹⁴ and Uttar Pradesh Tourism’s “Amazing Heritage—Grand Experiences”¹⁵ made significant impacts on regional tourism development in India. In the earlier part of this decade, it was the success of Kerala’s regional campaign that led to the “Incredible India” campaign.

The tourism industry has helped growth in other sectors as diverse as horticulture, handicrafts, agriculture, construction, and even poultry. Recent increased growth in tourism in India has created jobs in a variety of related sectors: almost 20 million people are now working in India’s tourism industry.¹⁶

Recent trends of terrorism, threats to food security, poverty still at undesirable levels, increasing fuel costs, and looming security issues will continue to pose challenges to unleashing the full potential of India as well as the region. An evident breakthrough in thinking of the middle class elite and youth in India and an equally strong desire to break through protectionist and introverted attitudes of other individual nations and the collective psyche of the leadership of the region provide a potential silver lining for tourism. Success is the best driver of change. Within the region, tourism success stories of private sector-driven initiatives, including Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka amidst many external challenges, demonstrate what is possible in terms of solid achievement.

3.2 The Changing Face of Tourism in Pakistan

Pakistan’s tourism assets are described on its official Web site as follows:

Stretching from the mighty Karakorams in the North to the vast alluvial delta of the Indus River in the South, Pakistan remains a land of high adventure and nature. Trekking, mountaineering, white water rafting, wild boar hunting, mountain and desert jeep safaris, camel and yak safaris, trout fishing and bird watching are a few activities, which entice the adventure and nature lovers to Pakistan.

Pakistan is endowed with a rich and varied flora and fauna. High Himalayas, Karakoram and the Hindu Kush ranges with their alpine meadows and permanent snow line, coniferous forests down the sub-mountain scrub, the vast Indus plain merging into the great desert, the coast line and wetlands, all offer a remarkably rich variety of vegetation and associated wildlife including avifauna, both endemic and migratory. Ten of 18 mammalian orders are represented in Pakistan with species ranging from the world’s smallest surviving mammals, the Mediterranean Pigmy Shrew, to the largest mammal ever known; the blue whale.¹⁷

With the economy of Pakistan growing, visitor arrivals to Pakistan more than doubled in the 1996–2007 period, increasing from 369,000 to 839,500. A significant sharp increase in 2004 and 2005 was the result of the relaxation of boarder restrictions and the new influx of tourists from India, a most desirable trend that lacked consistency in operation.

The number of visitors to Pakistan has increased significantly, but it has not translated into a corresponding growth in foreign exchange receipts. Earnings from tourism increased from US\$146 million in 1996 to US\$185 million in 2005. Earnings per tourist were equal to less than one-third of the global average. Of the four provinces in the country, Punjab has been the most active in developing tourism. Pakistan today remains a small player in global tourism.

The number of visitors traveling the country in 2005 was less than 1 percent of the world total. Pakistan's earning from tourism was only 0.03 percent of the global average. These proportions are less than Pakistan's share in global population (2.75 percent) or in global output (0.4 percent). The share of revenues and number of tourists traveling is much greater for the countries of East Asia, as well as for China and India. It is obvious from these numbers that Pakistan is not fully realizing its potential. This could change if a different approach to the development of tourism were developed that builds on developing an interest on the part of the citizenry to travel for pleasure within the country and then begins attracting people from the other nations. Such an approach is better done by the provinces and districts. In other words, what is required is a local touch.

3.3 Maldivian Island Magnetism, "Lazing off" of Bangladesh and Looking beyond Conflicts in Nepal and Sri Lanka

The Maldives Web site succinctly describes this atoll island nation's charm as follows:

Sun, sand and sea, a thousand "Robinson Crusoe" islands, massive lagoons with different depths and infinite shades of blue and turquoise, dazzling underwater coral gardens; a perfect natural combination for the ideal tropical holiday destination. However there is more to the Maldives than just the 1,190 coral islands, forming an archipelago of 26 major atolls. Stretches 820 kilometers, north to south and 120 kilometers east to west. 202 are inhabited, 87 are exclusive resort islands.¹⁸

Maldives will continue to attract visitors to the region, with its magnet-like pull, and will hold a high-end position among the region's other tourist destinations.

Bangladesh's tourism assets are presented as follows in its official Web site:¹⁹

As a holiday making land, Bangladesh exposes many flamboyant facets. Its tourist attractions are many folded, which include archaeological sites, historical mosques and monuments, resorts, beaches, picnic spots, forests and tribal people, wildlife of various species. Bangladesh offers ample opportunities to tourists for angling, water skiing, river cruising, hiking, rowing, yachting, sea bathing as well as bringing one in close touch with pristine nature.

However, visitor arrival levels to Bangladesh have remained around 250,000 a year for several years now, showing only marginal growth. Political instability, access limitations, inconsistency in promotional efforts, and frequent changes in the leadership positions of the industry seem to keep Bangladesh tourism from realizing its full potential. Although Bangladesh has the potential to become a major destination for visitors, both intraregional and globally, it needs a major overhaul of its governance and industry organizational structures to realize its full potential.

For Nepal and Sri Lanka's tourism industries to realize their full potential, they need to be free from political instability and conflict. Both exotic destinations can be called "destinations waiting to happen." Sri Lanka, which has the potential in the short and the medium term to attract a few million visitors a year, has been limited for several decades to a half million arrivals. Nepal, which also has the potential to generate a million visitors in the medium term, has at best generated 380,000 visitors. The rapid growth it showed in 2007 of 27.1 percent upon the signing of the peace accord in 2006 is testimony to its ability to "unleash itself"²⁰ quickly once the political issues are resolved.

Sri Lanka is no different. Upon signing its Peace Accord in 2002, visitor arrivals rapidly increased by 27 percent in 2004, and in spite of the impact of the devastating tsunami in 2004, it continued to record an increase in arrivals. The correlation between conflicts and tourist arrivals is stark, and optimal performance of the tourism sector in South Asia will be possible only if the nations within the SAARC framework resolve to take a pragmatic approach to resolving internal conflicts and see the benefits of working in unison.

Although this chapter does not cover the affairs and contributions of the newest SAARC member country, Afghanistan,²¹ it is imperative that the same yardsticks be applied to progress to be made in that country.

Tourism is a movement for generating peace.²² The understanding among people that travel and tourism bring about is the best recipe for ensuring that conflicts are resolved through discussion and compromise, rather than through violent means. Poverty alleviation and removing the root causes that drive terrorism are both possible through the generation of understanding that can be gained through tourism. Ease of access, therefore, becomes a key determinant in creating such an environment.

4. THE AVIATION REVOLUTION

Until early 2000, the aviation industry in South Asia (with the exception of Maldives) operated under heavy protection. While Sri Lanka liberalized its skies somewhat, it was still dominated by its national carrier (Sri Lankan Airlines), and determining traffic rights and freedoms was not entirely liberalized. Earlier in this decade, the Indian aviation industry began to take a strong look at liberalizing its skies. Several new private airlines came into operation around 2003. India's first low-cost carrier (LCC), Air Deccan, set off the LCC boom in India. Air Deccan later sold 26 percent of its stake to Kingfisher Airlines.

In 2007, the two Indian government-owned airline companies, Air India and Indian Airlines, were merged to form the National Indian Aviation Company Limited (NIACL). This was considered a major breakthrough in conventional thinking in India's aviation history.

In April of the same year, India's largest private carrier, Jet Airways, bought rival Air Sahara for US\$340 million. Jet Airways has ordered 20 Boeing 737-800 aircraft to add to its fleet of 60. Although most of the other 16 scheduled airlines registered with India's Director General of Civil Aviation are undertaking austerity measures in response to rising fuel prices, India's aviation industry has never been so robust, with companies such as SpiceJet, Kingfisher, Air India Express, Yamuna Airways, Magic Air, Paramount Airways, Air One, Indus Air, and Go Air, among those in the offing.

Several private airlines are now flying between India and Sri Lanka and India and Maldives. Other destinations need to open up to private

airlines. The most recent operation of Bangladesh's Best Air to Colombo and Male and Sri Lanka's Deccan Air's proposed flights connecting Male with Anuradhpura, an ancient city in the interior of Sri Lanka, are excellent best practices.

The airports pose another area of constraint. With the Indian government succeeding in privatizing the Delhi and Mumbai airports, several other Indian state governments began to look at expansion of airports based on a business model different than that adopted under complete state control. The European Union's South Asia Civil Aviation Programme²³ and the U.S. Trade and Development Agency's (USTDA) US-India Aviation Cooperation Programme²⁴ are geared toward supporting the airport development and facilitation initiatives of the region. Male and Colombo airports have followed similar business models with liberalized management structures, which have proven successful. These examples will serve as a pull factor for most other state-run airports in the region to shift gears, which should augur well for the future ease of access within the region. Yet there is much to be done for the region's aviation facilities to be on par with rest of Asia and in particular with those in most of ASEAN and China.

5. SEA AND WATERWAYS TRANSPORT

The South Asian region is endowed with ocean-based transport potential that needs to be explored fully. The ports at Colombo, Chennai, Mumbai, and Chittagong offer ocean-liner connections, although it has not been a popular mode of transport for visitors. Cruise liners traveling between Europe, Singapore, and Australian ports have been using ports such as Colombo and Mumbai as stopovers. None of South Asia's ports has developed as dedicated cruise destinations, but they have the potential to do so. Fast ferry transport services are possible between several destinations in the region. Bangladesh, India, Maldives, and Sri Lanka ports offer excellent opportunities.

A comprehensive report on South Asian transport was prepared by the USTDA in 2005 and serves as a guide to all transport sector opportunities in the region (Domus 2005).

The internal waters of most of the countries of the region offer immense possibilities. With the exceptions of Bangladesh, Maldives, Kashmir, and Kerala and other parts of India, use of internal waters for tourism-related

activity is limited. Sri Lanka, with its Dutch canal systems and man-made network of ancient irrigation tanks offers numerous opportunities for water-based tourism activities. Nepal, Sri Lanka, and parts of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh also use their waters for white-water rafting and other adventure pursuits. Possibilities for regional joint venture operations in these areas exist between private sector entities, through which experiences can be shared and the region can be better positioned.

6. ACCESS WITH ROADS AND HIGHWAYS

The Asian Highway network is the largest highway that connects Southeast Asia with South Asia and then on to Europe. A network of 141,000 kilometers of standardized roadways criss-crossing 32 Asian countries,²⁵ the Asian Highway is the single most potent infrastructure project undertaken by the nations of ASEAN and SAARC.

This project was initiated in 1959 to promote the development of international road transport in the region. During the first phase of the project (1960–70), considerable progress was achieved; however, progress slowed down when financial assistance was suspended in 1975.

Entering into the 1980s and 1990s, regional political and economic changes spurred new momentum for the Asian Highway Project. It became one of the three pillars of the Asian Land Transport Infrastructure Development project, endorsed by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) Commission at its 48th session in 1992, comprising Asian Highway, Trans-Asian Railway, and land transport projects.

UNESCAP and ADB are undertaking a number of joint activities to promote international road transport along the Asian Highway under a regional project. This project aims to assist in providing a transport infrastructure linking Asia to Europe, to promote regional and international cooperation for the economic and social development of the region, and to open new potential for trade and tourism.

Countries linked by the Asian Highway share a wealth of historical and cultural heritage and unspoiled natural beauty. These countries could join together in promoting tourism under a common tourism banner. Promotion of tourism would provide excellent opportunities to strengthen not only intraregional cooperation within South Asia, but with Southeast Asia, China, the Middle East, and Europe.

Accordingly, UNESCAP at its 52nd session suggested that member countries initiate activities to promote tourism along the Asian Highway. A questionnaire survey to identify major tourism attractions was subsequently conducted by the Secretariat. The results of the survey identified tourism attractions and suggested various national and regional levels to promote tourism.²⁶

The Intergovernmental Agreement on the Asian Highway Network was adopted on November 2003 by an intergovernmental meeting held in Bangkok, was open for signature in April 2004 in Shanghai, and entered into force in July 2005.

A total of US\$26 billion has been invested in the improvement and upgrading of the Asian Highway network. However, there is still a shortfall of US\$18 billion. The UNESCAP Secretariat is working with its member countries to identify financial sources for the development of the network to improve their road transport capacity and efficiency, which in turn will facilitate tourism development in the region, providing adequate return on the investment.

7. REMOVING BARRIERS FOR ENTRY

It is critical that air, sea, and road access be expanded and enhanced if regional tourism development is to take off, but it is equally critical to ensure that most artificial barriers in terms of visa facilitation are made as easy as possible for visitors to the region and for each of the countries in the SAARC alliance.

Currently, except for Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, visa formalities are cumbersome for the rest of the countries of SAARC. Almost all countries in the ASEAN region²⁷ allow visa free or visa-upon-entry facilitation for intraregional travel. The ASEAN group goes one step further to offer an ASEAN Air Pass,²⁸ whereby traveling to one ASEAN country qualifies a traveler to visit other countries at a concessionary airfare. An ASEAN Hotel Pass (Hip-Hop Pass)²⁹ with similar incentives is also in effect. In the European Union, most member countries may be visited with a common EU visa, obtained from one of the member countries. ASEAN is aiming to have a common ASEAN visa by 2009. The South Asian region is far from achieving such levels of freeing formalities among the SAARC member countries and for visitors to the region.

In 1998, the SAAEC Expert Group on the Visa Exception Scheme recommended that there was a need to expand the Scheme by nearly

doubling the number of categories entitled to be included for visa exemption. At present, some 21 categories of persons are exempted from requiring visas for travel within the SAARC region.³⁰ The Expert Group deliberated on improving the existing guidelines and procedures of the Scheme. The simplification of visa procedures across the board should help accelerate trade and tourism in the region through the facilitation of increased people-to-people contact. A 2007 review of the decisions on trade and access facilitation³¹ indicated that a gap existed between the decisions taken at the various stages to ease visa facilitation and its implementation. To achieve results, the region's officials need to shift from a control mindset to one that is customer oriented and pragmatic.

8. PROMOTING SOUTH ASIAN TOURISM IS NOT ABOUT PROMOTION

To develop a tourism promotion plan for South Asia, the following elements are needed: a conducive environment for attracting international visitors, an effective potential demand on which the region can rely, and a program of promotion to deliver the region from the shackles it has been bound by in the past. The reality on the ground is far from meeting those needs (Adeney and Wyatt 2004; Lal 2006).

The South Asian region possesses all the ingredients needed to be a prime international tourism destination. Given the successes achieved by India and Maldives, individual countries have the opportunity to get it right. However, as a regional entity, South Asia needs to be repositioned in the minds of the international visiting public by erasing a negative perception that is currently associated with the region's poverty, chaos, and disorganization.

Getting this perception right requires deciding what must come first. To deliver on the promise of successful tourism, the region needs to get its collective act right, or create a desired promotional platform as a pull factor for the region's stakeholders to get the act right eventually.

Intraregional tourism promotion is a precursor to promoting the region for international visitors. Taking that route will strengthen the capacity within the region to develop better structures and institutions to correct some of the problems that are endemic in the region's polity.

The following process-based actions are proposed to achieve the objective discussed in this chapter:

- Further liberalize air access between countries of SAARC, facilitating any SAARC airline to operate to other SAARC countries without restriction.
- Facilitate ocean and other water-based, road and highway, and railway transportation of people of SAARC (to serve tourism as well) through the liberal operation of fast ferry services, shipping services, and cruising operations, and by exploring road and rail transport options.
- Undertake joint programs at both regional and bilateral levels to jointly develop the infrastructure and institutions^{32,33,34} needed to establish tourism operations and investments, which should be driven by the private sector³⁵ or as public–private partnership ventures.
- Commence joint initiatives at both governmental and private sector operator levels to enhance the current Buddhist circuit,³⁶ the Ramayana Trail,³⁷ and other regional and bilateral thematic tour circuits.
- Undertake the publication of an annual South Asian Tourism Events Directory (to be published a year in advance to enable tour sales for those events).
- Commence a twinning of cities program within the SAARC region.
- Establish a SAARC joint Climate Change Response using Sri Lanka's pioneering Tourism Earth Lung³⁸ initiative as the platform.

9. CONCLUSION

Tourism promotion can be compared to dream selling. To sell dreams to people, the dreams sold must be beautiful and believable. In promoting and branding South Asia as a tourist destination area, the challenge faced by the marketer is to ensure that the three key characteristics of brand identity are met: quality, consistency, and integrity. To ensure that these characteristics are maintained, an intense and continuous effort is needed at both the destination and the regional levels.

This challenge stretches beyond the capacity of the marketer, to the level of the policy and strategic leadership in each of the South Asian countries, engulfing the collective conscience of the region. The need to position and promote the South Asian region has been identified, and the will exists, at least as demonstrated through the many resolutions that are made at the various fora. What is lacking, however, is consistent

commitment, in terms of action on the ground, to transform the need and will into solid action.

When looking at the relative success stories of regional cooperation in ASEAN and the European Union, the key success factors have been the pragmatism with which the leadership of these alliances has looked at the issues in seeking solutions. For South Asia and for South Asia tourism, it should be no different.

NOTES

1. World Bank, South Asia Poverty Web reference, <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/SOUTHASIAEXT/0,,contentMDK:20969099~pagePK:146736~piPK:146830~theSitePK:223547,00.html>.
2. See <http://www.saarcchamber.com/>.
3. See <http://www.saarcetraffairs.com/> and <http://www.satte.org/>.
4. See <http://www.saarc-sec.org/main.php?t=2.10>.
5. Asian Development Bank, Web document, [http://www.adb.org/Documents/Reports/SASEC/Tourism-Development/South Asia Sub-regional Economic Cooperation: Tourism Development Plan, 2004](http://www.adb.org/Documents/Reports/SASEC/Tourism-Development/South%20Asia%20Sub-regional%20Economic%20Cooperation%20Tourism%20Development%20Plan,%202004); and http://www.adb.org/documents/events/2001/reta5936/tourism/tour_proceedings.pdf.
6. See www.tourism.gov.bt/.
7. See <http://www.visitmaldives.com/>.
8. See <http://www.visitnepal.com/acap/>.
9. See http://www.nepaltourism.info/aroundkathmandu/bhaktapur_history.html.
10. See www.srilankatourism.org.
11. See www.earthlung.travel.
12. See www.incredibleindia.org.
13. See www.keralatourism.org.
14. See www.goatourism.org.
15. See www.up-tourism.com.
16. See www.economywatch.com.
17. See <http://www.tourism.gov.pk/tourisminpakistan.html>.
18. See <http://www.visitmaldives.com/Maldives/>.
19. See http://www.bangladeshtourism.gov.bd/overview_country_profile.php.
20. "Unleash Yourself – Naturally Nepal, Once is not Enough" is Nepal's promotional tagline as presented at <http://www.welcomenepal.com/nepal/index.asp>.
21. See <http://www.kabulonline.com/> for more destination information.
22. See <http://www.tourismforpeace.org/>.
23. See http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/asia/regional-cooperation/support-regional-integration/saarc_en.htm.
24. See <http://www.ustda.gov/program/regions/southasia/>.
25. See <http://www.unescap.org/ttdw/index.asp?MenuName=AsianHighway>.
26. See <http://www.unescap.org/ttdw/common/tis/ah/tourism%20attractions.asp>.
27. See <http://www.aseanvisa.com/>.

28. See <http://www.visitasean.travel/AirPass.aspx?MCID=78>.
29. See <http://www.aseansec.org/hiphop.htm>.
30. See <http://www.south-asia.com/saarc/dec98.htm>.
31. See <http://www.ipcs.org/ConferenceReport-SAARC.pdf>.
32. See <http://www.southasianmedia.net/>.
33. See <http://www.isasnus.org/>.
34. See <http://www.anderson.ucla.edu/zone/clubs/saba/index.html>.
35. See <http://www.doingbusiness.org/southasia>.
36. See <http://ebudhaindia.com>.
37. See <http://www.tourslanka.com/ramayana-sri-lanka/tours/ramayana-site-tours-excursions.php>.
38. See <http://www.earthlung.travel/>.

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