



On the Road

News and Features from Tsunami-Affected Regions

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Repair work at the Tsunami Hotel in Arugam Bay.

Photos by Ethan Gelber

Guesthouses threatened by rules favouring huge resorts

by [Ethan Gelber](#), Lonely Planet Author

Wondering if Sri Lanka's idyllic beaches will ever be the same after the tsunami? Probably not, but it won't be due to a natural disaster. If a government initiative is successful, Sri Lanka's family owned guesthouses might lose out to environmental restrictions, while multinational resorts are given preferential treatment.

The government agency leading the Sri Lankan post-tsunami rebuilding effort is the Task Force for Rebuilding the Nation (Tafren), which is working in cooperation with the Ministry of Tourism and the Ceylon Tourist Board.



Piled-up, damaged toilets and chairs pulled from the battered Nilaveli Beach Hotel

'The Sri Lankan image was seriously affected [by the tsunami]. So, we came up with the idea of restoring confidence, getting Sri Lanka back on the map' said Suresh Pararajasingham, director of Tafren.

Based on the recommendations of a tourism task force, the government has announced a campaign 'for confidence building and mind setting of the tourists', called Bounce Back Sri Lanka Programme. This programme calls for the creation of 15 special, mostly upscale Tourism Zones with modern infrastructure, clear views of and direct access to the coast. Nearby community zones will be established in which an estimated 70% of the immediate population directly or indirectly associated with tourism will live. Certain tsunami-destroyed hotels that meet the necessary regulatory approvals will be given land free of charge within the Tourism Zones on which to rebuild. Based on a newly developed coastal buffer, called the Coastal Conservation Zone, new development will not be allowed within 100m to 200m of the coast (see [Getting in the Zone](#) for more information).

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Bouncing Back and Building Up (continued)

by [Ethan Gelber](#), Lonely Planet Author

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A Tafren report about the Bounce Back Sri Lanka Programme begins: 'In a cruel turn of fate, nature has provided Sri Lanka with an opportunity to put 20 years of low-price tourism behind it and begin over again.'



Work continues on the Coral Bay Hotel in Nilavelli. What's the future of such small guesthouses?

True enough, the Tourism Zones and established tourist development schemes are decidedly upscale. All of the 15 zones will be resorts based on 'appropriate themes and concepts depending on the available resources and diversity,' says the Tafren report. Opening these zones to development by the private sector will be an important part of the strategy. It is, thus, no surprise that since the beginning of the year, Ramada International, Hilton International, the Sheraton group, and another foreign investor have all already agreed to build new four-star (or better) hotels in Sri Lanka.

Of course, not all hoteliers agree with this strategy. This is especially true of the small guesthouses and hotels, most of which are not registered with the tourist board. Presently these types of accommodation make up the vast majority of the establishments within the coastal zone and would presumably be classified as the low-priced tourism that the authorities wish to leave behind. In the absence of clear guidelines, the owners of these establishments are fearful that they will not be able to qualify for land within the Tourist Zone or easy access to loans for rebuilding.

Fred Netzband-Miller of Arugam Bay's Siam View Hotel said, 'The idea of a clean view of an uncluttered beach has a certain appeal. But any country should consider the fact that backpackers and budget tourists are an important group to be catered to. Arugam Bay [one of the proposed Tourist Zones] just isn't an up-market destination.'

The public outreach component of the Tafren campaign has seemingly been successful in luring back tourists, despite the media-transmitted vision of a country in crisis and travel advisories issued by the US and UK governments. Anura Bandaranaike, Minister of Tourism, indicated that Sri Lanka's tourism is regaining momentum. He cited that in January, even despite the tsunami, 32,000 visitors came to Sri Lanka, compared to nearly 50,000 total in 2004. According to Emi Weir, marketing manager of Adventure World, one of Australia's biggest travel wholesalers, "Australians are beginning to return to the island's

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holiday destinations in increasing numbers."



About Ethan Gelber

Born in New York City, Ethan is a devoted sojourner (six continents well covered, often by bicycle) and co-author of Lonely Planet's *Cycling in Italy*. He currently lives with his fiancée in Colombo, Sri Lanka, where he is involved in many writing projects.

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