

## Sri Lanka woos tourists with books

By Lisa Mitchell  
BBC News, Sri Lanka

### **Yashodha de Silva's winning entry in the inaugural Galle Literary Festival's creative writing competition is about the futility of tears.**

Tears that were shed by the 14-year-old's classmates when Galle harbour in southern Sri Lanka was attacked by Tamil Tiger rebels last year.

Just a few months later, the site of the battle, the city's historic fort, has been playing host to an incursion of a far gentler sort from 61 writers from all over the world.

Among them author and historian William Dalrymple, Man Booker prize winner Kiran Desai, Arthur C Clarke and chef and actress Madhur Jaffrey.

That they came at all to a first and untested book festival is commendable.

But to an island which appears to be sliding towards civil war in the north and east is all the more remarkable.

### **Conflict fears**

With most Western governments - the UK an exception - warning against all travel to Sri Lanka, the country's tourist trade has taken a serious hit.

**Yes, we have a problem in the north and east but the rest of the country is safe**

Kumari Balasuriya,  
Southern province governor

In what should have been the busiest time of the year, occupancy at hotel resorts was around 40% over Christmas and New Year.

Just over a week ago, a local bus less than an hour away from Galle was bombed.

Rose Gray, chef and owner of London's prestigious River Café restaurant, who is preparing an Italian meal with Sri Lankan ingredients, said she had no second thoughts about coming.

But foreign tourists have been cancelling in their droves since last week and tempting visitors back is a core objective of the festival.

Its organiser, Asia-based businessman Geoffrey Dobbs, acknowledges he did not have high expectations of what could be achieved after the attack on the harbour in October.

But he points out that no authors cancelled and, after the bus blast, no-one demanded ticket refunds.

About 80% of the 1,000 tickets sold were bought by Sri Lankans or Westerners living full time here.

The owner of several local hotels and villas, Mr Dobbs is hoping the number coming from abroad increases for the second festival, which is already in planning.

The Sri Lankan government is just as keen to dispel an image it believes wrongly is being portrayed abroad of the island as a battlefield.

Southern province governor Kumari Balasuriya said: "When a bomb goes off in Madrid or Bangkok do their tourist arrivals suffer as much? Yes, we have a problem in the north and east but the rest of the country is safe."

### **English 'vacuum'**

Attracting tourists is just half the story.

The festival aims to highlight Sri Lankan talent and bring local writers together with international authors to discuss their work.

There are Sri Lankans like Romesh Gunsekera and Ashok Ferry who write in English.

The first book written in Sri Lanka and published in English was sailor Robert Knox's journal of captivity in 1681. Since then, English has been one of the country's languages of writing.

But in 1956, following independence from Britain, Sinhalese became the language used in schools and for official business.

In the past two years, as English-speaking India stole a march on them for international employment, Sri Lanka has once again promoted English-medium education although only a small number of its pupils receive it.

Yashodha's essay competition was one of a number of initiatives set up by between the festival and local education authorities to promote English.

Leading Sri Lankan writer Yasmine Gooneratne says the support the festival is providing for new writers is vital.

But the event has had its detractors, particularly about the lack of Tamil writers and those writing in Sinhala or Tamils - the island's two main languages.

Organisers say Tamil authors were approached but because of the short timescale (the event was put together in four months) were unable to attend, and that there are already events for those writing in Sinhala.

New York-based Indian author Suketu Mehta, a Pulitzer Prize finalist, said any new festivals were "wonderful" for writers and there was a "vacuum" for a festival in English.

"These people who are so exercised by this festival should leave out this language and go and start their own festival."

**'Too costly'**

Ticket pricing is another bone of contention.

Each talk cost \$10 (about 1,000 Sri Lankan rupees) for foreigners and 750 rupees for locals.

There is a two-tier system which operates across the island, with locals paying less than tourists, but it is usually a lot less.

Teacher Mahindra Ariyatileke praised the initiatives with local schools but said she felt priced out of the events.

"I would love to see Arthur C Clarke but it is too expensive for me and teachers like me. Maybe next year it will be cheaper."

It is largely an event for authors and they seem enthusiastic about having such a gathering on their shores.

Suketu Mehta said he hoped the festival may even "provide a bridge to resolve our differences".

Ashok Ferry said: "In the last few years we've had a huge flowering of Sri Lankan writing in English and it's about time we had this."

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