



Sri Lanka Tourism: 2018 to Today, and What to Expect in Oct-Dec 2026



The big picture in 30 seconds

2.36M

visitors in 2025

Best year on record, just above the 2018 peak. The benchmark for 2026.

1.69M

visitors Jan-Sep 2026

1.8% below Jan-Sep 2025 (about 1.72M), so 2026 is slightly behind.

+3%

first half of October

77,868 visitors on 1-15 Oct, ahead of last year. The recovery is holding.

655K

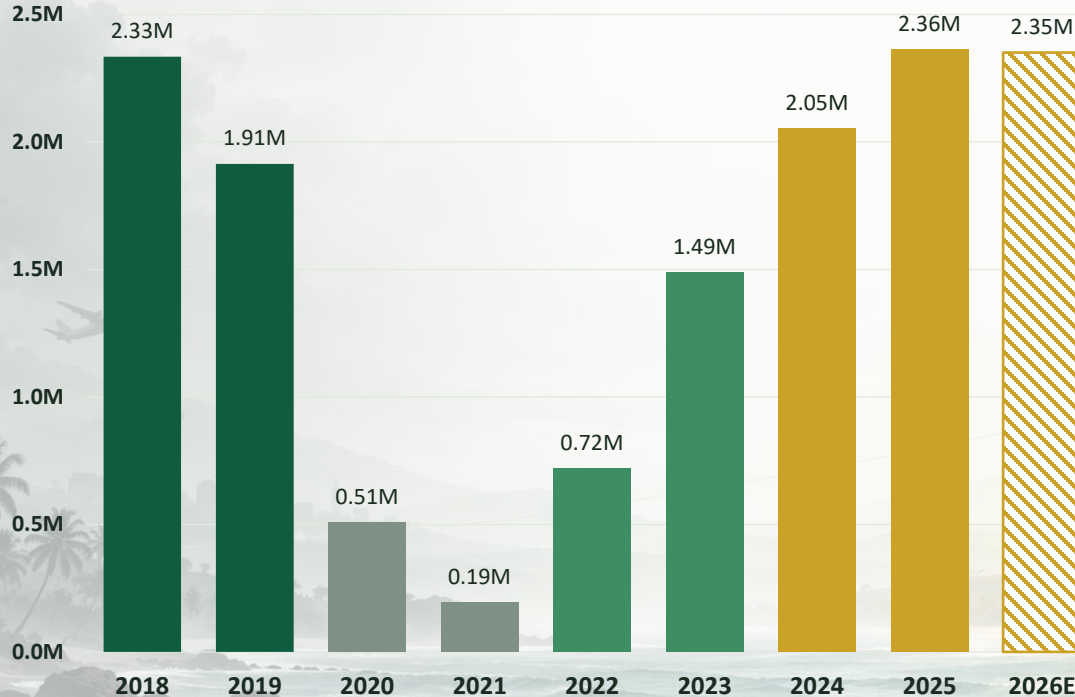
expected in Oct-Dec 2026

Most likely forecast (range 605K to 688K). The only forward-looking figure.

In one line: 2026 started at record speed, fell back after the Middle East war in March-April, and has almost caught up. 1.69M so far plus 655K forecast puts the year at about 2.35M (range 2.30M to 2.38M), level with 2025. Beating 2025's 2.36M needs the top of the forecast range.

Eight years in one picture: fall, collapse, comeback

Tourist arrivals per year



2018 Pre-crisis peak: 2.33M visitors

2019 Easter Sunday attacks: 1.91M, -18%

2020-21 COVID-19 closed borders: 0.51M, then 0.19M (92% below 2018)

2022 Economic crisis and fuel queues: 0.72M, still 69% below 2018

2023-24 Recovery: doubled to 1.49M, then +38% to 2.05M

2025 New record: 2.36M, +15%

2026E 1.69M by September; about 2.35M forecast, level with 2025

Arrivals fell 92% by 2021, then took four years to pass the 2018 record.

More visitors than 2018, but less money per visitor

Tourism earnings, USD million



\$1,877

per visitor 2018

\$4.38B from
2.33M visitors

\$1,363

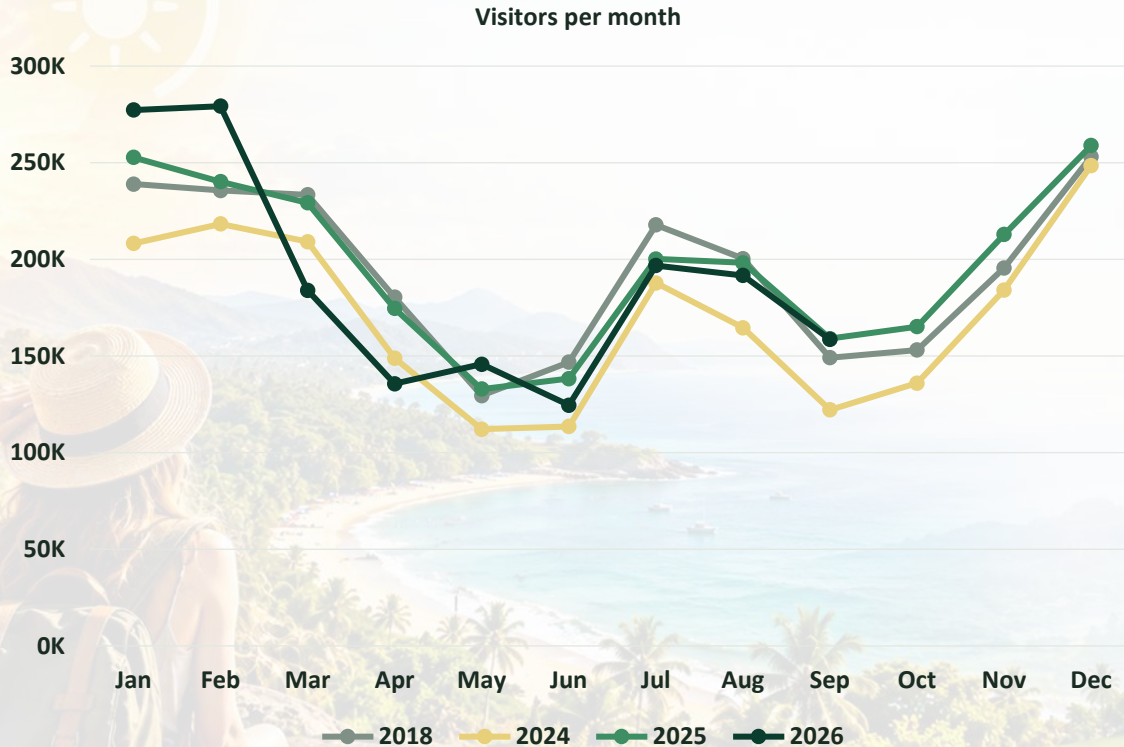
per visitor 2025

\$3.22B from
2.36M visitors

2025 had 1% more visitors than 2018 but earned 27% less.

Earnings recovered to \$3.2B in 2025, still \$1.2B below 2018. Shorter trips, lower daily spending and a new measurement method explain the gap. Next goal: value, not volume.

Every year has the same rhythm



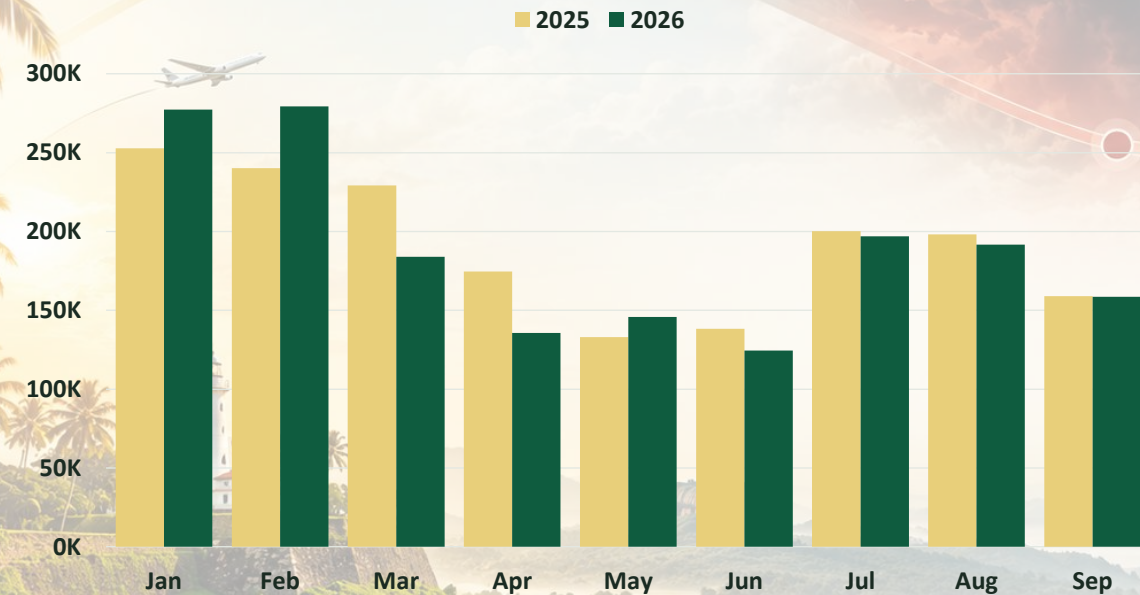
Peak: December to February
Europeans escape winter. Jan–Feb 2026 hit about 278K each, the highest on the chart.



Low: May, June, September
Monsoon and off-season in key markets drop arrivals to 110–160K. July–August lift with summer holidays.

Oct–Dec climbs every month: 637K visitors in 2025, 27% of the year. 2026 should follow the same climb.

2026: strong start, sudden shock, recovery



Change vs 2025

+9.7%

+16.3%

-19.8%

-22.3%

+9.6%

-9.9%

-1.7%

-3.3%

-0.3%

Jan–Feb: best months ever (277K, 279K), up 10% and 16%.

Mar–Apr: war in the Middle East from 28 Feb closed Gulf air routes; arrivals fell about 20%.

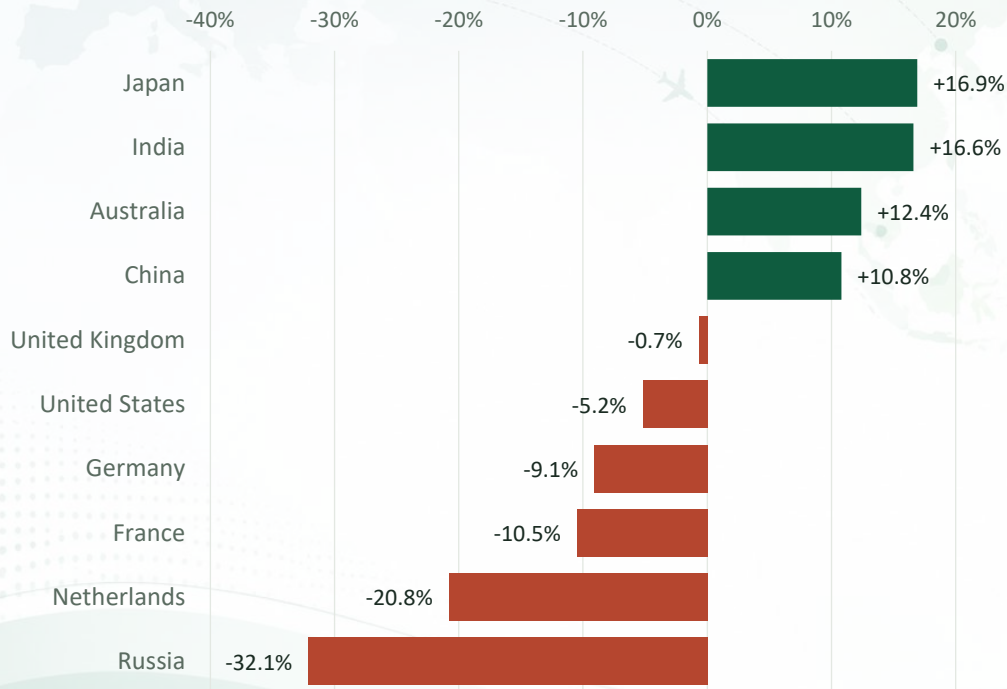
May–Jun: mixed (+9.6%, -9.9%) in the quietest months.

Jul–Sep: the gap almost closed (-1.7%, -3.3%, -0.3%).

Net result: 1.69M visitors Jan–Sep, only 1.8% below 2025.

Asia is growing, Europe is slipping

Top 10 markets: change in visitors, Jan-Sep 2026 vs 2025



India: 437K visitors

+62K (+16.6%) on 2025, about 1 in 4 visitors. Japan, Australia and China also grew 11–17%.

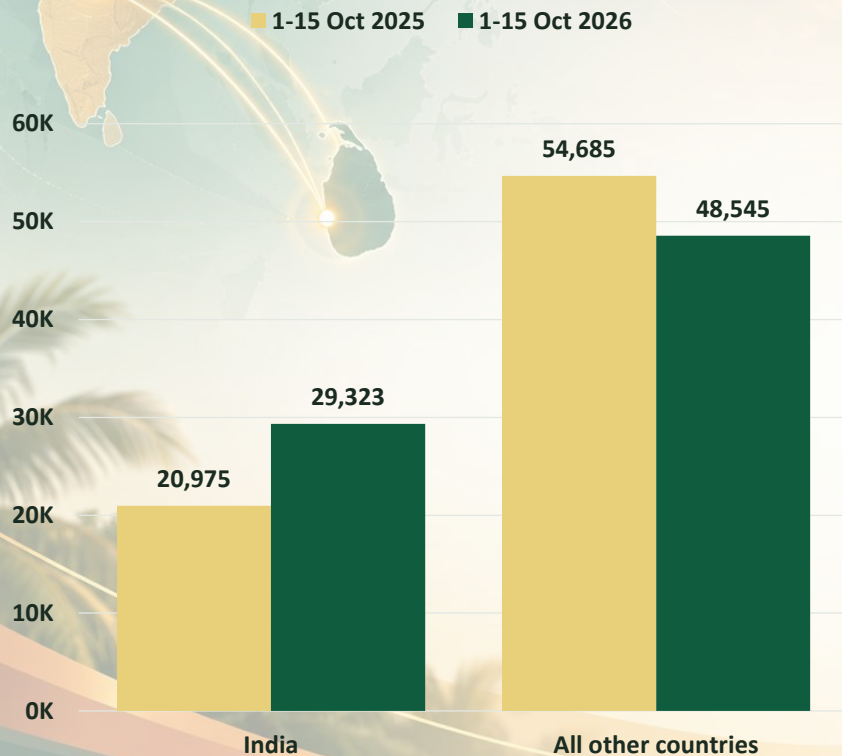


Russia: down 39K visitors

-32%, the biggest loss. Netherlands, France and Germany fell 9–21%; UK flat.

Asian visitors are filling the gap left by Europeans. Europeans usually stay longer and spend more, so earnings per visitor fall.

October so far: India is carrying the growth



+40%

India
+8,348 visitors

-11%

Everyone else
-6,140 visitors

+3%

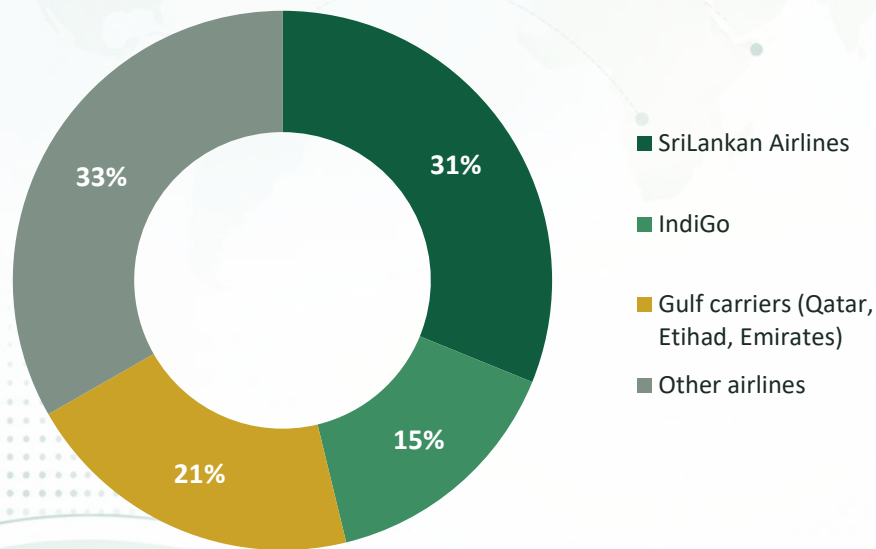
Total
+2,208 visitors

What happened: India added 8.3K visitors, more than the 6.1K lost from all other countries.

Why it matters: 38% of October's visitors so far came from India. If Indian demand slows (airfares, visas, an advisory), there is no cushion.

Weak spots: Germany (-22%) and the UK (-12%).

How visitors arrive: a few airlines carry most of them



1 in 5 visitors (21%) flies via a Gulf hub

Qatar, Etihad and Emirates connect Sri Lanka to Europe and America through Doha, Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

Who carries them: SriLankan 31%, Gulf carriers 21%, IndiGo 15%. These 5 airlines fly 67% of visitors.

The weak link: when Gulf hubs are disrupted, as in March–April, European arrivals drop almost overnight.

The fix: more direct flights (British Airways, Edelweiss, Aeroflot) reduce this risk.

What will push Q4 2026 up



Peak season starts

November and December are naturally strong (213K and 259K in 2025): about 470K visitors before any growth.



India and Asia keep growing

India +40% in early October; China, Australia and Japan up 11–17% this year. This offsets weaker European demand.



Sri Lanka got cheaper

The rupee has fallen about 6% this year, so a holiday costs foreign visitors less. Each dollar buys more in hotels and tours.



New and returning flights

Edelweiss from 26 Oct, Aeroflot 3x weekly from 27 Oct, British Airways back, Azur Air from 8 Russian cities from 2 Nov. They bring back long-stay Europeans.



Momentum is back

The gap with 2025 shrank to -0.3% in Sept and turned to +3% in early Oct. Earnings grew in Aug and Sep. Q4 starts on a rising trend.



Strong recovery story

2025 proved demand is there: a record 2.36M visitors, +15% on 2024. Airlines and tour operators are adding capacity, not cutting it.

What could pull Q4 2026 down



Middle East war continues

Riyadh airport was attacked on 10 Oct; EU regulators advise avoiding Qatari airspace until 16 Nov. 20% of visitors fly via the Gulf, so another March–April drop of about 20% is possible.



Expensive oil, expensive tickets

Higher fuel costs push up fares, which hurts long-haul trips most. Europe, the market that spends most per visitor, is long-haul.



Europe is weakening

Germany -22%, UK -12% in early October; Russia -32% this year. These visitors stay longest and spend most.



World travel is slowing

UN Tourism cut its 2026 global growth forecast to 1–2%. South Asia fell 5% in the first half. Fewer travelers means more competition for each one.



Too much depends on India

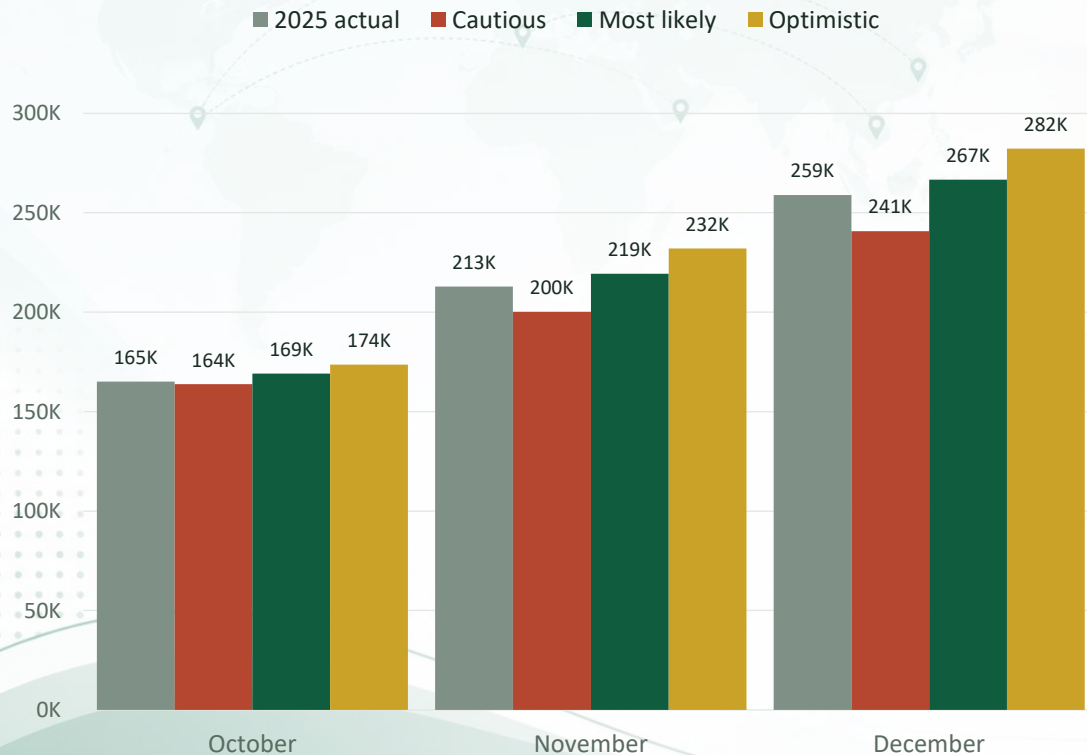
Without India, October arrivals are down 11%. India is 38% of October visitors, so one shock in that market could flip the total.



Weather and local costs

Nov–Dec monsoon and cyclone risk (like Cyclone Ditrwah in Nov 2025). Local fuel up over 50% and 7.3% inflation in July raise hotel and transport costs.

Q4 2026 forecast: three scenarios



Cautious: 605K

-5.1% vs Q4 2025

Gulf disruption gets worse in the peak
Oct 164K, Nov 200K, Dec 241K

Most likely: 655K

+2.8% vs Q4 2025

Today's trend continues
Oct 169K, Nov 219K, Dec 267K

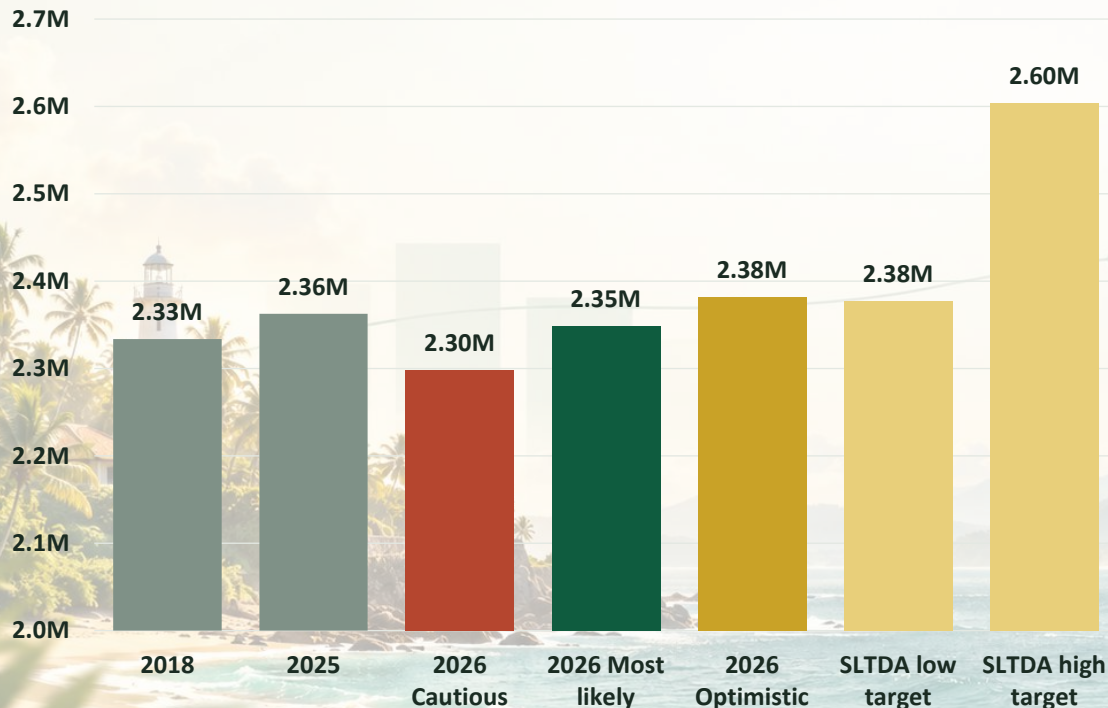
Optimistic: 688K

+8.0% vs Q4 2025

Conflict calms, new flights fill up
Oct 174K, Nov 232K, Dec 282K

Full-year 2026: about level with 2025, short of target

Visitors in the whole year



Visitors: about 2.35M (range 2.30–2.38M), level with 2025's record 2.36M. Only the optimistic case beats it.

Target gap: SLTDA's revised target of 2.38–2.60M needs 7,900–10,800 visitors a day for the rest of the year.

Money: about USD 3.0B for 2026 (Q4 about USD 779M), USD 1.2B short of the USD 4.2B target.

How we made the forecast, in plain words

1

Start from last year

Take actual Oct, Nov and Dec 2025 as the base: 637K visitors.

2

Lock in what we know

Add the real 77,868 visitors for 1–15 Oct 2026, already 3% above the same days of 2025.

3

Apply a growth rate

Most likely: up 2–3%, as in early October. Cautious: down 4–7%. Optimistic: up 7–9%.

4

Turn visitors into dollars

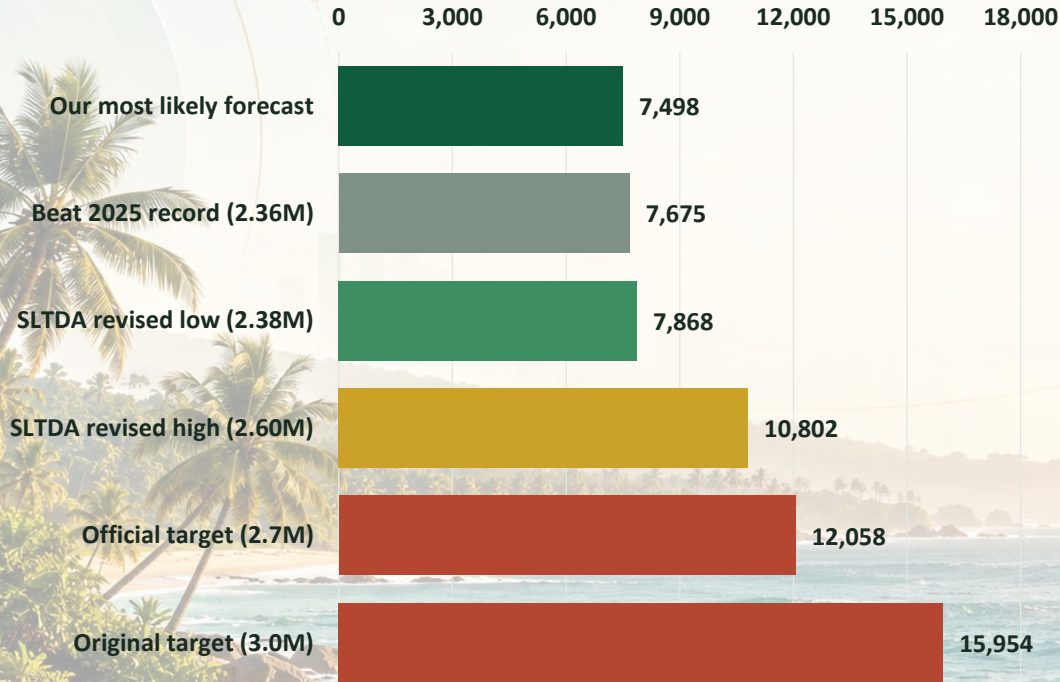
Multiply by what each visitor spent in the same month of 2025: about USD 779M for Q4.

Why these growth rates? The last 3.5 months moved between -3% and +3% against 2025. New flights and Russian charters add capacity from November; the Gulf risk and Europe's slowdown hold it back. The cautious case assumes a March-style disruption, softened because flights now partly avoid the Gulf.

Result: 605K cautious, 655K most likely, 688K optimistic.

Can Sri Lanka reach its 2026 arrival target?

Visitors needed every day for the rest of 2026



8,353 a day

The best month ever (Dec 2025). Last year this same period averaged 7,290 a day.

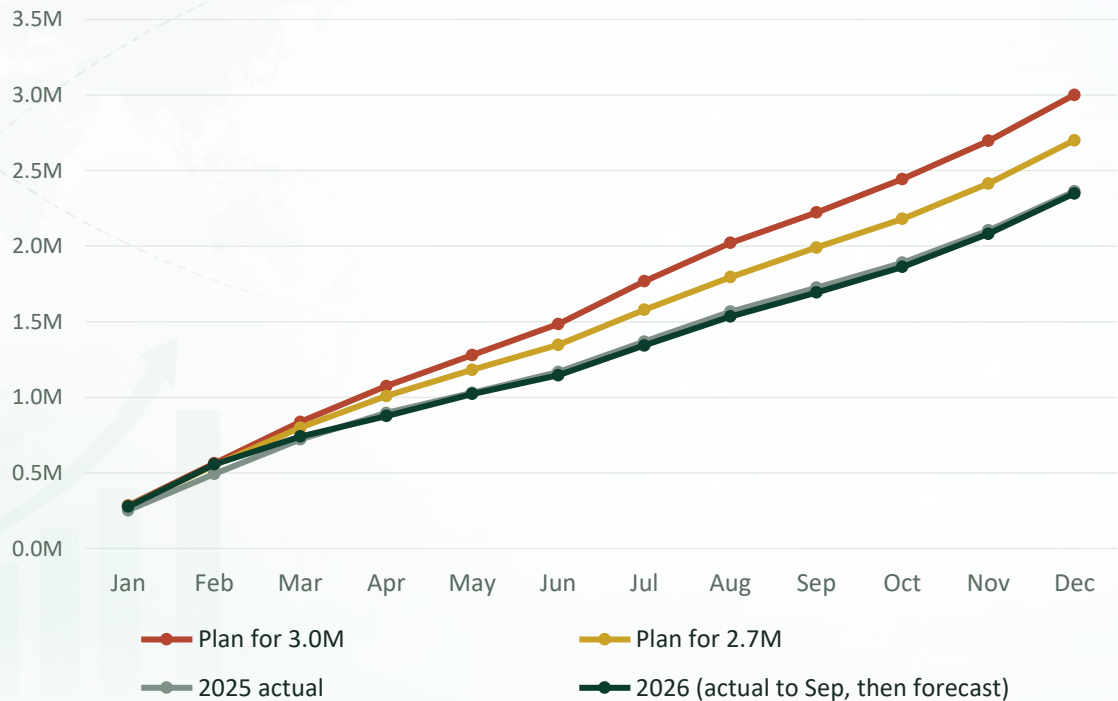
Simple test: is the daily number close to the best month ever (8,353)?

Within reach: 2.36–2.38M needs 7,700–7,900 a day, just above our 7,498.

Out of reach: 2.6M, 2.7M and 3.0M need 10,800–16,000 a day.

The target slipped away in March and April

Running total of visitors through the year



297K

Behind the 2.7M plan
by end-Sept

529K

Behind the 3.0M plan
by end-Sept

The plan: beat 2025 every month. January and February did.

The break: March and April lost about 84K visitors versus 2025, and the gap was never filled.

So: even the busy season cannot close a 297K–529K gap.

Target scorecard: what is realistic

Target	Still needed	Per day	Growth needed*	Verdict
Beat 2025 record (2.36M)	590,974	7,675	+5%	Possible
SLTDA revised low (2.38M)	605,823	7,868	+8%	Stretch
SLTDA revised high (2.60M)	831,764	10,802	+48%	Out of reach
Official target (2.7M)	928,453	12,058	+65%	Out of reach
Original target (3.0M)	1,228,453	15,954	+119%	Out of reach

* Growth needed over the same 77 days of 2025 (16 Oct-31 Dec), which brought 561,367 visitors.



To reach 2.38M: about 29K more visitors than our forecast, or 370 extra a day, roughly one more full wide-body jet every day until New Year.

Only possible if: the Gulf stays calm, the new Russian and European flights fill up, and India keeps growing near 40%.

How to read the verdicts: Possible needs about +5% on last year; Stretch +8%; +48% or more is three times this year's best month (+16%).

What to watch, and what to do

Watch

- Gulf airports and airspace (Doha, Dubai, Abu Dhabi)
1 in 5 visitors flies through them
- Daily arrivals: above ~7,100/day in Nov
keeps us on track
The earliest sign the forecast holds
- Germany and UK weekly numbers
Down 22% and 12% in early October
- Indian demand and flights
38% of October visitors

Do

- Push direct flights that skip the Gulf
A Gulf disruption then hurts less
- Promote to Asia: India, China, Australia, Japan
The markets growing 11–40%
- Win back Europe with winter offers
Peak season is when Europeans travel
- Sell longer, higher-value trips (wellness, MICE)
Lifts spend per visitor, now \$1,363



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