

Sri Lanka opens its first motorway

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Since the war in Sri Lanka ended in 2009, the government has stepped up work on big infrastructure projects, which it says are the key to its future development. One of the most notable has just been given a grand opening: the island's first motorway, or expressway as it is known locally, leading from the capital's outskirts to the southern town of Galle.

The old road to Galle snakes its way through the southern Colombo suburbs.

The traffic crawls, with overloaded buses, motorbikes and motorised rickshaws stuffed full of bananas. Pedestrians criss-cross it. The road runs parallel to a railway and is lined with houses, shops and shacks most of the way south.

Now at last there is an alternative route.

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“Start Quote This is the first [such] experience of this country and there may be a few lapses”

Ranjith Premasiri

Road Development Authority

The E01 Expressway is the first motorway on this island, which is slightly smaller than Ireland in land area.

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True, for now you still have to drive through the fairly congested eastern suburbs to get to it, but then you see the start of the motorway, with multicoloured flags flying for its grand opening.

At the moment bulldozers still rumble around. A Chinese team is constructing one of the link roads that will make future access easier. But when you go through the toll plaza, paying between 400 and 2,000 Sri Lankan rupees (\$3.50-\$17.50; £2.25-£11.30) depending on the type of vehicle, and you leave the congestion behind.

Given a sneak preview, I was able to glide down the motorway, even stopping randomly to record, photograph and film, which is now strictly prohibited.

This road has cost \$700m (£449m), the bulk of which has been funded with a Japanese government loan, with the rest coming from the Asian Development Bank and the Sri Lankan government.

Five thousand plots of land had to be taken over and the motorway was built by Japanese and Chinese contractors at a ratio of two to one.

Learning curve

A road like this, with a speed limit of 100km per hour and restricted interchanges, is completely new for Sri Lanka. Within its first 24 hours, a minor accident on the motorway left two people injured.

So the government has been running media campaigns with basic instructions on things like stopping distances, the overtaking lane and the speed limit. "Do not reverse!" screams one TV advert, with a big red cross. "No U-turns", warns another.

"By doing that we may be able to reduce most of the accidents on this road," says the head of the Road Development Authority, Ranjith Premasiri.

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Chamber of Commerce

There have been criticisms of the structure, notably from the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport Sri Lanka.

It says the lanes - two in each direction - are narrower than the international norm, and the hard shoulder or breakdown lane is considerably narrower (1.75m as opposed to 2.5m), which means the door on the driver's side cannot be opened once the car has stopped.

"This is the first [such] experience of this country and there may be a few lapses," Mr Premasiri admits. "But overall I think we have achieved a great milestone and we are hoping to operate this motorway with less safety issues."

Being several kilometres inland, the new road slices through low hills. At the half-way point, a service area and filling station are almost complete.

Quicker commerce

After 95km the motorway ends and the driver rolls into the nearby town of Galle, with its 400-year-old fort and quaint streets that are a magnet for tourists.

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Among the area's products are cinnamon, coconut, tea and rubber.

Lakshman Walpitagamage of the local Chamber of Commerce says traders will benefit from the much shorter journey to Colombo: a three-hour journey halved to 90 minutes.

"It's a very good thing for the farmers and fishermen," he says. "Especially perishable things like fish, vegetables and fruits. They have to transport immediately. If you are taking more time in the lorry, that will spoil."

"I think it's really good for the development of the country," says antiques and jewellery dealer, Mangala Karunanayake. "For the tourism also it should be really an advantage."

Work has started on the next two legs of the brand new motorway network, which will include a link to Colombo's airport. There are also plans to build motorways to the former war zones of the far east and north.

At the road's grand opening, President Rajapaksa said new high-speed roads would bridge the gaps among Sri Lankans and, he hoped, counter separatist tendencies that led to war in the past.

Already reunified thanks to the end of the war, with quicker journey times Sri Lanka will gradually feel as if it is shrinking, too.

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