

Alternative Tourism as an Alternate to Mass Tourism during the Post-COVID-19 Recovery Phase: the Case of Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The present concept paper aimed at promoting alternative tourism during the post-COVID19 revival phase. Formal and informal discussions, journal articles, industry reports have been used to formulate our arguments.

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Abstract

With the current travel restrictions due to the impacts of COVID19 tourist destinations have entered into an unprecedented period of zero tourist arrivals and zero income period. At this onset, mass tourism with the mass movement of people could impose great health risks and therefore the travelers will be vulnerable to health hazards. Therefore, we postulate emergence of alternative tourism replacing mass tourism that has a high upward potential during the post-COVID19 tourism revival phase. In this line of argument we identify niche tourism concepts like health, wellness, Ayurveda and spiritual tourism, rural tourism, agro-tourism and eco-tourism as emerging tourism products. The study also identifies potential tourism markets that will resume tourism after the COVID19 outbreak.

Keywords: Tourism after COVID19; Alternative tourism; Niche Tourism; Mass Tourism; Tourism and health

Introduction

As of now, the whole world is at a state of shock with COVID-19 pandemic affecting both human lives and the economy. According to the statistics released on 16th May 2020, the global COVID19 infected cases are well over 4.5 million with 308,660 deaths (Worldometer, 2020). That has resulted countries across the world to take strict measures for reducing human interactions by shutting down factories, closing down the airports, and imposing numerous restrictions on people's mobility. Tourism can be identified as one of the mostly affected global sectors in the world since all those health measures have adversely impacted on international travel (Samarathunga, 2020).

United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) estimated a 20% to 30% tourist arrival drop globally in 2020 compared to 2019. This could be read as a damage of \$400 billion of international tourism receipt, which can go up to \$ 1.5 trillion. These statistics are equal to the industry growth of five to seven years in a row. World health Organization (WHO) warned not to open up global travel too quickly, alarming that it would require a “Careful Risk Management”. This emphasize that even though the global travel opened up, there will always be a risk. At this backdrop we can postulate the temporal decline of ‘mass tourism’ and emergence of ‘alternative tourism’ during the revival of tourism. Thus, the aim of our article is to identify alternative tourism potentials in Sri Lanka during the post-COVID19 revival phase.

Decline of ‘Mass Tourism’ and emergence of ‘Alternative Tourism’

Mass tourism can be identified as the most famous form of tourism in the world that involves movement of large number of tourists (usually tens of thousands) to the same destination at the same time of year (Cooper, Fletcher, Gilbert, Fyall, & Wanhill, 2005). Mass tourism is very popular due to low cost and standard services, especially on ‘All Inclusive’ packages. The services provided under the AI packages include air transportation, ground transportation, accommodation, food and beverage, unlimited local liquor, morning and evening tea/refreshments and sometimes excursion (Samarathunga & Gnanapala, 2016). Due to a constant overwhelming demand, the tour operators, Destination Management Companies (DMC’s), hotels, airlines, cruise lines and other service providers make large scale economies and provide tourism products and services at a cheaper price. However, the present social distance measures and travel restrictions has driven mass tourism to a screeching halt with the fear of tourists visiting crowded places.

This alarming situation has grabbed the attention of the National Tourism Organization, investors, employees and other stakeholders. We believe that during the post-COVID19 revival phase, ‘alternative tourism’ can play a pivotal role to utilize our tourism resources and to protect the tourism stakeholders in the short run.

Alternative tourism is not an old concept. The concept has been there in the tourism world for about two decades now. The tourists who are tired of laying down on a beach and read a book with sun tan lotion are increasingly move to alternative tourism which is experienced based. The alternative tourism takes the tourists away from their comfort zones and gives them an exotic experience which is close to the nature, culture, history or even the religion of the country that they visited. Different facets of alternative tourism are: ‘Health and Wellness Tourism’, ‘Rural Tourism’, ‘Agro-tourism’, ‘Eco-tourism’, ‘Back-packing Tourism’, ‘Community-based Tourism’, Pro-poor Tourism’, ‘Volunteer Tourism’, ‘Spiritual Tourism’ etc. For the tourism investors and entrepreneurs this is a good market to earn big by serving to fewer and elite groups.

Sri Lanka tourism and alternative tourism potentials

Sri Lanka’s diverse landscapes, rich natural and cultural heritage, and traditional knowledge can lay a breeding ground for the promotion of alternative tourism within the country. Out of many, we propose following niche tourism concepts to introduce by means of alternative tourism to promote Sri Lanka as a primeval destination to visit:

Health, Wellness, Ayurveda and Spiritual Tourism

As we all know, movements of three quarters of the world population is now limited to their own walls or fence. All these people will look at different ways of rejuvenating to get away from the stress and haunting experience of their lives. Many European countries have already established 24 hours help lines to attend to the grievances of such people. As a result, we can forecast an increased demand for health and wellness tourism, and spiritual tourism among the Western tourists in the months to come. Rest and recuperation, spiritual healing and understanding, physical and mental wellbeing, Ayurveda and Yoga, meditation, and understanding the reality of life will be key search terms among in the tourism search engines during the revival of tourism. Sri Lanka has a comparative advantage to grab this market associated with deep rooted Buddhism and Hinduism philosophies and Ayurveda in Sri Lanka.

The Western institutions including hospitals, police, military, and other first respondents will select Eastern destinations like Sri Lanka to send their first line operational staff for distress and rejuvenation. A research based promotions will be able to get the attention of the potential clients towards Sri Lanka.

The remains of the ancient hospital in Mihintale (9th century AD) and Alahana *Parivena* (11th century AD) can certainly add some value to the strategic marketing campaigns since the West is very much interested in Eastern traditional knowledge.

Rural Tourism and Agro Tourism

Rural tourism and the Agro tourism can be identified as one of most famous niche tourism trends in the world. Lots of urban dwellers around the world are searching for rural and agricultural experiences during their vacations as a method of enhancing their knowledge and adding some life skills. The COVID-19 made the people to think back about their lives and skills of survival during their time at condominiums. As a result, the parents will think of equipping their children with basic life skills that include agriculture and farming to survive during unprecedented challenges of life. As a result we postulate agro-tourism will have an increased demand in the future where people can learn simple ways of life, planting, gardening and understanding the environment around them. Therefore we need to clearly identify what farms, what paddy fields and what *Chenas* are suitable to promote agro-tourism and make necessary developments to attract and retain the tourists.

Tea Tourism

Sri Lanka as one of the best tea producers in the world already has a reputation for its incomparable ‘Ceylon Tea’. Since some of our traditional international tea importers including Russia, Iran, and Turkey are badly affected by the virus, the demand for tea will be fluctuated in the short-run. However, to keep the tea estates running and to employ thousands of workers we can think of introducing experienced based tea tourism to the world.

Tea tourism is a very popular market in China where the domestic Chinese tourists visit tea estates to learn the entire process of tea production including tea planting, estate maintenance, tea plucking, tea processing, tea packing and most importantly tea tasting. Therefore, tea tourism events and activities are frequently being organized throughout China. However, if we are to promote tea tourism, tourists should be given unique and innovative experience in the tea estates that solely reflect the tea culture. The simple daily activities happening in tea estates can turn into tourism activities easily with proper planning and product development. The cost involved in this entire process is minimum.

The Chinese people give a high value to the entire tea making process including tea planting, plucking, brewing and tasting. They have narrated songs, play dramas about it and even some cities have been thematically planned with ‘Tea theme’. These innovative strategies have added value to the Chinese tea in China and are sold at higher rates in both local and international tea auctions.

Eco-tourism

Sri Lanka being a bio-diversity hot-spot in the world has a huge upside potential to promote eco-tourism. The 16 national parks, numerous rivers, tanks, and waterfalls, different weather zones and geographical zones, marine environment, endemic flora and fauna are not effectively touched by Sri Lanka tourism. Thousands of jeeps entering in to national parks per day, hundreds of boats launched at water bodies, hundreds of irresponsible nature lovers not only deplete the environment quality, but also make irreversible damages to the environment. On the other hand, a very low number of eco-tourists are visiting Sri Lanka get a real eco-tourism experience since most of tour eco-tourism products are largely concentrated to commercialized camping, jeep safaris chasing the animals and boat rides scaring the fish and other aquatic animals. Proper tourism product developments need to be done with the mediation of the eco-tourism experts either regionally or nationally. Trekking and tracking, bird-watching, whale and dolphin watching, turtle watching

in particular can be promoted as eco-tourism products in Sri Lanka while delivering benefits to the rural communities. However, without merely restricting the tourists' visits to 'gazing' an active participation with 'performing' is recommended to promote these events among the tourists. Having said that, we should adhere to eco-tourism principles introduced by The International Ecotourism Society when developing eco-tourism products.

One of the key advantages in alternative tourism development is that we convert local resources in to tourism resources at a minimum cost. Mentioned above are just few example and we have many more potential concepts throughout Sri Lanka and throughout our calendar.

Which markets should we look at?

During the last few years, Sri Lankan tourism was heavily depending on mass tourists' arrivals from India, China, Britain, Germany, Australia, France, Russia, United States, Maldives and Canada. Out of those countries only China has recorded an early recovery from the impact of COVID-19. Table 1 demonstrates Sri Lankan source markets and the impact of COVID-19 on them.

Table 1: Top 10 source markets to Sri Lanka tourism and the impact of COVID19

#	Source Market	Arrivals in 2019	Impact of COVID19 (16 th May 2020)	Impact of COVID19 (16 th May 2020)
			No. of cases	Deaths
1	India	355,002	85,940	2,753
2	United Kingdom	198,776	236,711	33,998
3	PR China	167,863	82,941	4,633
4	Germany	134,899	175,699	8,001
5	Australia	92,674	7,031	98
6	France	87,623	179,506	27,529
7	Russia	86,529	262,843	2,418
8	United States	68,832	1,484,285	88,507
9	Maldives	60,278	1,031	4
10	Canada	48,729	74,613	5,562

Source: Developed by the authors using SLTDA (2020) and Worldometer (2020) data

About 45 percent of the tourists arrived to Sri Lanka from four source markets in 2019: India, UK, China and Germany. Out of these four, only China has been successful in combatting the COVID-19 as of now. The latest study report by Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) along with CCT and IVY Alliance highlights the post-COVID19 travel behavior of Chinese tourists. According to the reports Japan (18%) and Thailand (14%) will remain as the most preferred travel destinations among the Chinese tourist, followed by European countries (14%), and Maldives, Singapore, New Zealand, Australia, South Korea, Sri Lanka and Malaysia. Further, opening up Chinese tourism destinations for domestic tourists is a good sign of resilience in China.

On the other hand Sri Lanka is one of the few countries who still keep the situation under control. At the moment (16th May) there are only about 935 active COVID 19 patients recorded, and that is less than most of the best tourism destinations in South Asia. This is a strong pull factor to promote Sri Lanka as a post-COVID19 destination with a new tag line '**So Safe Sri Lanka**'. Therefore, we can expect an early resumption of Chinese tourists' arrivals to Sri Lanka before we think of the West. Although Sri Lanka tourism has failed to identify niche tourist from China, we suggest the practitioners to do a comprehensive market survey and prepare the destination to welcome the right clientele from China.

As mentioned earlier it is not possible to resume mass tourism in near future since mass gatherings are risky until a vaccine is developed to fight with COVID-19. Now the challenge lies ahead is to re-brand Sri Lanka as

a ‘Niche Tourism Destination’ after correct tourism product identification and development. The concept of ‘quantity’ has failed and the ‘quality’ is emerging. Alternative tourism will protect the people, environment and economy while empowering the rural communities to increase their living standards. A learning based active experience will be a definite value addition to the promotion of alternative tourism development in Sri Lanka while using correct platforms to market our products. Researches based innovative methods will give birth to ‘Creative Tourism’ that will position Sri Lanka as a pristine Niche tourist destination in the world.

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