

The Guide to Tour Guides

Tour guides are usually depicted in fiction as knowledgeable, charming, but determined to become involved with attractive single lady tourists, or ignorant, dull, and scheming, intent on material gain from contact with people from a more economically-advanced society. The truth as always lies somewhere in-between. In Sri Lanka every effort is made to ensure that guides are well-trained to satisfy tourists' curiosity yet be non-intrusive.



A naturalist showing one nature's many wonders to an enthusiast

Gehan de Silva Wijeyeratne

It's a common scenario. Some tourists head out to one of Sri Lanka's spectacular cultural sites. Once arrived, as they step out of the vehicle, a number of men jockey for position around them, all promising top-notch guide services. For both hardened tourists and softer first-timers it's a dreaded moment, encumbered with uncertainty. Is a guide necessary or worthwhile? How can you know which are "real" guides? What makes them legitimate? And what are standard guide fees?

Making the Grade

There are four types of official guides, all licenced by the **Sri Lanka Tourist Board (SLTB)**:

- **national guides** – travel anywhere in the country with groups both large and small
- **chauffeur guides** – also cover the whole island but with about six people at a time
- **area guides** – knowledgeable about a specific zone, like Galle or Kandy; and
- **site guides** – specialise in only one site, like Sigiriya or Mihintale

The training and certification process for national and chauffeur guides is intense. Managed by the **Tourism Training Centre (TTC) of Sri Lanka**, it begins with a special programme that recruits enthusiastic people between 21 and 50-years-old with experience in the travel industry and, perhaps, foreign language competency. As a minimum qualification, all candidates must have completed O-level studies and received a pass grade in English.

"People who do not fall within these categories will not stand a chance due to high demand," says Mr Bernard Seneviratne, Director of the TTC. Still, recruitment calls commonly yield many more applicants than there are openings in the programme.

After a first round of interviews, selected candidates follow a rigorous four-month educational module taught by leading scholars and professionals. Classes cover personal etiquette and hygiene, history, monuments, archaeology, ancient culture, customs and traditions, religion, art and music,

the economy, politics and government, and even nature tourism, traffic laws and first aid. Special outings include a one-day visit to Galle and a five-day technical tour of the country's primary historical attractions.

"This syllabus helps a guide to meet a tourist and help him to see Sri Lanka and answer his curiosity," continues Seneviratne. "We look at this from an educational and positive point of view, since Sri Lanka should be seen from a positive note. The process of learning is highly professional."

Mr Wijesiri Manawadu, General Secretary of the **National Tourist Guide Lecturers' Association of Sri Lanka (NTGLASL)**, could not agree more. "After [the programme], I changed my outlook on life. I'd had a petit bourgeois outlook, where my language medium was English. But I learned about heritage, culture, and my people from thousands of years ago. It was a good thing that happened to me."

Successful contenders are awarded a certificate confirming the completion of their studies, and then, eventually, a licence from the SLTB.

Keeping it above Board

Despite the care taken to assure a regular and high calibre of national and chauffeur guides, work is not guaranteed. Bright, qualified TTC graduates must seek out employment on their own. Many make applications to major tour operators, hoping to secure freelance contracts with groups holidaying on organised tours.

"It's your capacity to work and good relations with travel agents that keep you working," Manawadu says. Seneviratne agrees: "A good man gets the job back; the bad man gets weeded out."

Another challenge to regular employment is competition from area and site guides as well as unlicensed guides. At major tourist attractions "there is demand from various voluntary helpers, whether they possess a valid tourist board or provincial council licence," admits Seneviratne.

by Ethan Geiber

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Area and site guides sometimes begin as unlicensed escorts looking for income. Many of them, even before training, are quite knowledgeable. Most of them, after proper schooling, are excellent sources of local lore that national guides haven't always mastered.

When travelling alone, or in larger groups with assigned national or chauffeur guides, the decision to use an area or site guide is a personal one. "There is a certain awareness that there are legitimate local guides and unlicensed helpers," opines Manawadu. "But you can always say no. If you want help, take it and pay the fee for it. That's the *modus operandi*."

"There is a pyramidal effect," Manawadu continues. "All are stakeholders who have a right to make a living, but not at the expense of the tourist. [Licensed guides'] main goal is to satisfy the tourist. We understand their sentiments. We understand their thinking. We want to make sure they are happy. [Unlicensed guides] are not concerned about the well-being of the tourist."

The challenge is to identify someone who has the right training and documentation to prove it. "It's kind of a cat-and-mouse game," says Seneviratne. "You have to be very tactful. In all cases, with proper training from the tourist board, people are given area or site guide licenses which will have a number, their names and an official stamp."

Of course, "Sometimes the guide is a greedy man, but that is a common human failing," adds Seneviratne. "Still, if you come with the image that this man is trying to take money out of your pocket, you will not listen to what he says." And that's not a good thing. "Tourists should not think about it. Tourists should haggle. It's normal. A good shopper knows where to draw the line."

This much is clear: despite the persistent confusion at some sites, qualified help is available. Until improved systems are in place to eliminate the confusion (something about which all tourist services are aware), tourists themselves should calmly demand licences and ask questions that will

help them decide whether someone is competent and honest. At all levels of training and service, most are. And most will add to the value of a visit to Sri Lanka.

"If you want to have a special experience, it's good to get guidance," suggests Seneviratne. "It's worth the money."

Getting the Right Guide

Travellers not assigned a licensed guide as part of advance travel arrangements may contact the **NTGLASL** or the **Chauffeur Tourist Guide Lecturers' Association of Sri Lanka**.

At present, fees for national guides are Rs650 per person per day, less for chauffeur guides. All fees, currently being re-negotiated, are likely to increase. National guides are always provided with lodging (for full price, unless groups are large) in standard rooms in the selected hotel. Chauffeur guides use staff or drivers' quarters free of charge.

Fees for site and area guides are highly variable. Check ahead with the **Central Cultural Fund** or the **Department of Wildlife Conservation** in Colombo for the latest information, as local offices may be under pressure from local guides to quote inflated rates. ✱

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