

COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM

Two Kurunegala Case Studies



“There is a new kind of tourism sweeping the world today, one increasingly demanded by travellers with a conscience. These travellers acknowledge that the decisions they make affect the people and the land around them. They hope to have a positive impact on the nature, animals and communities they visit.”

by Ethan Gelber
An inquisitive friend once asked me to define “community” and “tourism” as they relate to community-based tourism (CBT). The challenge at first stab seemed much harder than it actually was. Only the imagined politics overlaying the simple virtues of the community-prompted travel trade were far more complex than necessary. And, not at all unexpectedly, the reward of untangling a fat knot of misconceptions and false expectations was as true as the satisfaction that should come from travel distilled down to its most basic qualities.

Setting Boundaries

Traditional definitions of community invoke the importance of groups of people united over time by shared actions and experiences in a common space. CBT, then, is simply a form of tourism undertaken (managed and/or owned) by and for such a group of people as one of its shared actions and through which its constituent members are united by a purpose, that of “enabling visitors

to increase their awareness and learn about the community and local ways of life” (as described by REST, the Responsible Ecological Social Tours Project).

But what is tourism? To me, it is a safe, modern variation on the theme of travel as it was practiced ages ago when explorers first set out for lands unknown. In those days, if the adventurers had fallen upon people like them (speaking similar languages, observing similar customs, heeding similar seen and unseen forces) in places that looked and felt like those left behind, I still believe they would have travelled and been celebrated for it. *Abandoning one’s geo-cultural comfort zone, with little or no knowledge of the destination, requires courage fuelled by a love of discovery.* And courage and love are rarely out of fashion. That the lands and peoples beyond the horizon turned out to be so fantastically dissimilar to those of home only made the thrill of discovery more poignant and the required pluck more heroic.

Today, the heroism of travel has withered. First, demystifying information about foreign ports has been spread far and wide, dulling the fearful edge of the unknown. More and more travellers choose their destinations as a function of what they learn and how far they can extend the boundaries of their comfort zones. Second, and sadly, enterprising enablers have actually created safety-zone pockets, real havens of ease and security, in places where the cautiously inquisitive would normally never set foot.

I have no problem with self-education, even if it

dimutes the aura of wonder in travel. *This is no longer the age of exploration and today’s world actually needs more travellers who take time to learn about the countries in which they will be guests.* However, I strongly object to the thriving and crass practice of resort/enclave tourism, whereby a visitor’s limited contact with a host country is through sensitised staff, sanitised culture and sterilised cooking. Why go through the time, energy and expense of travel if the excitement of discovery and the charm of changing place are nullified by the homogeneity of basically ending up right where you started? Why ask for a mix of flavours if all you really want is vanilla over and over again?

An able devil’s advocate could posit many a response. Nevertheless, no matter what the argument, now is the time to re-inject a little self-education and outside-the-box (but not necessarily comfort zone) thinking. This opens up a whole new set of options: the CBT options.

Two Fine Examples

Due north of Kurunegala, at the southern foot of the Galgriyawa mountain range (a protected primary forest reserve) not far from the village of Embogama, two neighbouring retreats shine as compelling, but very different examples of the vitality of CBT.

Ranpathwila Enterprises has been billed as the first model community-based ecotourism scheme. Initiated in 2006 by the Sri Lanka–Australia Natural Resource Management Project in cooperation with the Forest Department and the Sri Lanka >>



Courtesy of Sri Lanka Ecotourism Foundation



Tracie Willis

Ecotourism Foundation, the Ranpathwila venture united a village community. Working together, they are developing two tourism sites in an idyllic setting: one, backing up against the mountain, includes a six-room former meditation centre, a few stand-alone rooms and several camping sites; another, built on and around a nearby rocky outcropping, will include clay-walled huts as well as tent sites. Every involved community member shares in the work of hosting, cooking traditional food using local produce, providing cultural evening entertainment and leading a variety of activities like boating on the nearby Mahagale *wewa* (lake), accompanied day or night hikes within the forest reserve to archaeological, historical and religious sites and more. Of course, as a project owned and managed entirely by the community, profits really are put entirely to local poverty reduction and village welfare through increased employment opportunities, while also fostering an eco-friendly tourism culture.

Ulpotha is a very different place, but no less intriguing. Gathered in a delightfully wooded dell rehabilitated from previously abandoned lands and made lush from adjacent reconstructed tanks, the community is really a large, self-sustaining organic farm that hosts visitors during part of the year. The site's spiritual history captivates the imagination, aided by the eco-style daub-and-wattle design of the villagers' homes and guest accommodations, the traditional *ambalama*, a pillared and mostly open-sided wayside shelter for travellers, where meetings and local-produce vegetarian meals are taken and the on-site Ayurvedic and yoga services. The meditative tranquillity of Ulpotha is not inexpensive, but the rewards are rich. So is the knowledge that the money earned supports the locals who run the farm and staff the facility when it is open. It also funds a new year-round Ayurvedic clinic free to the resident community and already serving over 100 people each week.

The Responsible Alternative

There is a new kind of tourism sweeping the world today, one increasingly demanded by travellers with a conscience. These s travellers acknowledge

that the decisions they make affect the people and the land around them. They hope to have a positive impact on the nature, animals and communities they visit. They do this by searching out ways to support conservation, preservation and community development.

Now, more than ever, we must remember that tourism no longer is, nor should ever be, limited to resort package deals that sometimes find themselves at odds with the nature and communities of which they are a part. And the indirect benefits of such tourism – like patches of preserved nature, training of a few locals for improved chances of employment, increased financial opportunity for enterprising individuals – although important, really are not enough. This is especially true when, as has happened in many places in Sri Lanka, resorts benefit travellers and investors more than they do the surrounding communities and their diverse and fascinating culture.

Tourism today is, or at least should be, about active and responsible engagement. People should not hide behind walls. They must meet the locals, taste the foods they cook, hear and learn the languages they speak, learn about their lives, their festivals, their beliefs. They should be confident that the tall trees they visit today will still be standing tomorrow and that the bird and animal species sheltering in their branches won't have been threatened to the point of extinction by human neglect.

CBT usually holds such principles dear. Isn't it time you did too? *

Ranpathwila Enterprises

For info contact the Sri Lanka Ecotourism Foundation:

T: +94 (011) 270 6433 / +94 (077) 763 1334

E: sleco@sltnet.lk

Ulpotha

T: +94 (077) 305 1812

E: info@ulpotha.com

W: www.ulpotha.com