

ENHANCING THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE A STUDY ON THE DIVERSIFICATION OF TOURISM PRODUCTS IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract

Purchasing a tourism product is different from purchasing a consumer good. Tourism product contains of attributes such as service, experience, persuasion, involvement, and most importantly revisit. Destinations are supposed to fulfill all those desires of each and every visitor. Eventually, needs and wants of visitors have shown dynamic changes due to competition among destinations. In today's saturated markets customers look for experience rather than destination driven products. The creation of experience should consist of entertainment, educational, aesthetics and escapist elements. Theoretically, a product has an s-curve with stages of growth, maturity, saturation and decline in sales and profits and it seems to hold true even for tourism products imposing that product development and new product innovations is important in tourism. Sri Lanka is marketed for nature based tourism, cultural tourism and historical tourism. In a highly competitive market those elements are not enough to stay competitive. Therefore, this research study intended to explore possible new product development for the tourism industry of Sri Lanka. The Quantitative approach has been employed in this research. 70 online questionnaires were administered to identify tourist satisfaction with regard to existing tourism products. Findings of this study revealed that the visitor satisfaction for activities for kids, organized excursions, traditional dance and music, and for contact with local communities is at a lower level. Following niche product developments are proposed to make tourism a larger contributor to the economy: Galle fort trishaw ride, temple stay, honeymoon packages, thatched houses and performance of traditional music and dance.

Keywords: creative Tourism, Destination marketing, product innovation

1. Introduction

Tourism plays an important role in the economy of countries like Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Thailand. Especially in developing countries national plans are developed to gain economic advantage from international and domestic tourism. Sri Lanka entered to the international tourism in 1970s(Laksiri, 2007). Over the last 40 to 50 years tourism industry in Sri Lanka had ups and downs. From late 90s to early 2000s the industry was struggling due to the civil war. The golden era for tourism in Sri Lanka started from 2010 just after finishing the civil war in 2009. The annual tourist arrivals in 2012 just exceed 1 million. Tourism which forms 0.6% of the total GDP of the country was one of the fastest growing sectors in the economy, growing by 39.8% in 2010. The government has set a target of receiving 4.5 million tourist arrivals by 2020. Sri Lanka as a tourist destination is benefiting from the country's natural advantage of having the highest bio diversity in Asia backed by a strong culture, historical artifacts, exotic beaches, green environment and friendly people all of which are solid building blocks for tourism development (Strategic Plan, 2017). More often Sri Lanka is branded as "historic", "cultural" and "natural" to become overcrowded. In a highly competitive market those elements are not enough to make lucrative markets. Individuals travel to destinations to visit attractions, to participate in leisure activities and to form vacation experiences resulting from their interactions in the place they visit(Wang, 2011). For that purpose, the destination has to make deep emotional and psychological response in

visitors as revisits and word of mouth advantage can be achieved. In the past the travelling purposes of hundreds of people were similar. Recently, the purpose of travelling has become vast and travelers have different preferences and purposes of visit. This has become a huge challenge to destination planners. If a destination gets a wide range of tourist attractions it becomes the winning destination. Simply, more tourist attractions result in more arrivals.

People travel for a variety of reasons such as to escape, explore, participate, and understand. Therefore, tourism and hospitality providers have to identify their expectations and ways that can make a memorable and successful experience for tourists (Xu, 2010). Destination management often only advocates holistic tourism in the destination and minor opportunities for creative tourism are often neglected. Especially, Sri Lankan tourism planning and marketing are limited for traditional tourism products, meanwhile possibility to formulate new products from existing resources are not well recognized.

Attractions can be outstanding geological features, significant cultural monuments, important historical events; famous sites motivate people to become tourists. Without attractions, visitors have no reason to visit. Therefore, it is vital to assess a destination's attractions in order to identify potential markets. Tourism attraction and tourism products are often used interchangeably. An attraction is any object, place, person, or concept that draws people geographically so that they might have an experience. The experience can be spiritual, recreational or otherwise. An attraction is an outstanding example of resources which includes all kinds of elements. People divide attractions as cultural and natural. All tourism products begin with an attraction. An attraction should have easy access to draw people. Every visitor experiences activities in an attraction in different ways. Service is one of the most important components to offer great experience to visitors. Qualified people should be positioned in each attraction to offer great experience to visitors such as trained tour guides, drivers, police and etc. Every tourist product needs effective promotion to attract tourists (Stange, Brown, Hilbruner, & Hawkins, 2010). The tourism attractions of Sri Lanka can be identified in many different ways such as beach destinations, heritage attractions, casino and retail, national parks and bird sanctuaries (wildlife), shopping, and pilgrimage. The island of Sri Lanka contains a variety of beaches, surfing and diving sites. Sri Lanka has nine national parks and seven bird sanctuaries, with several endangered species. Sri Lanka also draws Hindu and Buddhist devotees for pilgrimages. Buddhist pilgrimage sites are located across the country. These sites are also recognized as historical tourist attractions. Most famous Buddhist pilgrimage sites are Adam's Peak, Tooth Temple (Kandy), Kataragama, cave temples, Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. The commercial capital of Sri Lanka Colombo offers entertaining activities such as shopping and casino. Currently, most tours ranging from 3 to 5 days involve visiting Kandy, Sigiriya, Anuradhapura, or Nuwara Eliya for world heritage sites and temples, and a visit to Bentota as a beach attraction, with entry and exit into the country from Colombo. In addition to the above mentioned destinations, the tours for a longer duration of 10-15 days include a visit to all or some of the following: tea factories in Nuwara Eliya, the beach in Trincomalee, beach in Galle, and a wildlife safari in one of the national parks. These are the forms of existing tourism products in Sri Lanka that have been marketed throughout the history of the tourism industry in Sri Lanka (Sri Lanka Tourism, 2018).

Attractions have different capacities and are gaining depending on their scale. The new product development and innovation in tourism is ignored due to the theme tourism. Especially in rural tourism development projects efforts are not made to develop new products. Unlike in the past, in the modern world tourists are searching for more interactive and fulfilling experiences rather than just being served by the travel industry (Tan, Luh, & Kung, 2014). Previous studies indicate that creativity should be an integral part of tourism since it has a

potential impact on generating economic impacts and on creating successful destination image (Lindroth et al., 2007). Developing new tourism products is not only increase the number of arrivals, but also it has many ripple effects such as making new employment opportunities, infrastructure development, and economic effects which improve the residents' quality of life. Most importantly it enhances the experience of visitors. Tourism is an important economic activity in many countries around the world. The main economic sectors of Sri Lanka are tourism, tea export, apparel, textile, rice production and other agricultural products. The contribution to economy of tourism can be divided into three main sections such as, direct contribution, indirect contribution and induced contribution. The total contribution of Travel & Tourism to GDP was LKR1405.4bn (11.4% of GDP) in 2016, and is forecast to rise by 5.5% in 2017, and to rise by 6.2% to LKR2686.2bn (13.5% of GDP) in 2027 (WTTC, 2017). Considering the economic impact of tourism industry Sri Lanka needs to move fast to make this sector a larger contributor to economy by innovating and developing new tourism products as global trends and visitor expectations are satisfied.

2. Objectives

The general objective of this study was to analyze the importance of developing new tourism products with existing resources in order to enhance the visitor experience in Sri Lanka. Following specific objectives were studied in this research:

- i. To assess to what extent visitors are satisfied with the existing tourism products in Sri Lanka.
- ii. To analyze the overall satisfaction of tourists on tourism related services in Sri Lanka
- iii. To propose possible new tourism products for enhancing visitor experience in Sri Lanka by looking at the creative tourism initiatives taken by other destinations.

3. Literature review

Purchasing a tourism product is different from purchasing a daily good. Tourism product contains attributes such as service, experience, persuasion, involvement, and most importantly revisit. Destination managers have to fulfill all those desires and needs of each and every visitor. In the past, destination management was barely showing something natural and something old to visitors. Over the past few years the consumer behavior and the needs and wants of visitors have been changed dynamically (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010). Tourism remains the fastest growing industries in developing countries like Sri Lanka. It is known that the industry provides motivation to growth in other sectors such as agriculture, transportation, retailing and manufacturing and is therefore seen as a key component of economic development. It plays a major role for the generation of foreign exchange which directly facilitates the improvement of foreign reserves of said economies. Similarly, the sector has shown greater improvements in employment generation, revenue adding to tourist sites, and increase in number of hotels and similar establishments and other tourism supply establishments (Ranasinghe & Deyshappriya, 2010). One of the major reasons for improving tourism in developing countries is multiplier effect of tourist dollar which means money paid for wages or in other ways is spent not once but sometimes several times for other items in the economy. Several models have been studied to identify the theoretical background of product innovation with regard to the tourism industry. Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model has been widely used for destination development. TALC model suggested that many tourist locations lack the element of overall control (Wang & Pizam, 2011). This is useful when creating, maintaining, and renovating tourism products and image of destination. According to this model tourist destinations are supposed to be dependent on the overall

appeal of attractiveness of the destination to its markets and loss of this appeal could be caused by few factors such as changes in market, demographic characteristics, high price, loss of quality, and etc (Lagiewski, 2006). The process of this model is similar with the stages of product life cycle; beginning slowly, rapid growth and expansion of facilities, stable, and declining. There are six stages in TALC model. The first stage is exploration, characterized by a small number of tourists travelling independently, using existing facilities and causing little if any change in the community. The second stage is involvement, would see the early emergence of a tourist product with some local residents providing services and facilities for visitors. In the third stage development, the encouragement and growth of services and facilities would be undertaken on a larger scale, tourism would be regular. The fourth stage, consolidation, destination would be identified as a tourist Centre and the economy would be dependent on tourism. The number of tourists would be likely to have exceeded resident numbers and have reached their maximum growth rate. In the fifth stage stagnation, the decline of visitation growth would happen. In the absence of effective destination management destination would enter a decline of inbound tourists (Kruczek, Kruczek, & Szromek, 2018). According to the TALC model, the tourism industry of Sri Lanka is in between stages of development and consolidation. Thus tourism industry has to identify the new trends of market and create tourism products accordingly to stay competitive. To stay ahead of the competition, destination managers must constantly look for new product innovations.

The traditional product life cycle theory indicates that typically a product will have an s-curve with stages of growth, maturity, saturation and decline in sales and profits. This theoretical model seems to hold true also for tourism products which means that product development and new product innovations are highly needed. Improvements to an existing product can render that product so new as to make it seen by prospective purchasers as a genuinely new product, and if an existing product is launched to a new market or to other purposes, that product is also new for the customer (Kompola, 2001; Keller, 2013). Generally, tourism products are advances on and modifications of existing products. The fact that services are intangible makes it even more imperative for a new-product development system to have certain basic characteristics. The development must be based on objective data about customer perceptions and market needs. As mentioned in the introduction Sri Lanka has the second largest tourist arrivals in Asia following India. The tourist receipts in both countries are 22,4275 and 3,518mn respectively in 2016 (UNWTO tourism highlights, 2017). Destination marketing has to be focused on tourists to open their wallets and spend more money during their stays in Sri Lanka. To increase tourist receipts the number of tourist activities should be increased.

In today's saturated markets customers look for experience rather than destination driven products. The creation of experience should cover elements including "entertainment", "educational", "aesthetic" and "escapist" (Weiermair, 2004). Inbound tourists have higher expectations when they come to country like Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is located far beyond the Europe, America and Asia as well. The average nights of staying in Sri Lanka is 7 to 14 nights. During the long stay tourists expect more activities to participate and something different from their daily life. According to the Sri Lanka tourism development authority 74% of tourists find Sri Lanka for pleasure. The challenge of destination managers is to identify what exactly the pleasure means for visitors and offer more than their expectations. As in the service industry tourism products contains of intangibility which has higher risk to both consumers and sellers. Particularly for a destination it is crucial to make confidence in the mind of visitors. Destinations have to have overall attractiveness to keep visitors in touch. Usually, when a tourist purchases a product from a destination he/she does not purchase that

single item but also it involves attributes such as service, participating and retaining. Tourism products are “experience products”. When tourists make a decision to visit a destination far away from their home they make a commitment to have special experience and build memories upon it. To make a special place to visitors destination managers have to consider the customization of tourism products. Usually tourism depends on the places such as landscapes, heritage sites, national parks and so on. Tourism activity is not only showing them the sites but also it contains activities that visitors can participate. The tourism industry involves activities and features such as sporting, entertainment, cultural, adventure etc.(Decelle, 2004). There is an invisible war to attract tourists among countries. Sun and beach are promising destinations across the world. Especially most European tourists find tropical countries during the winter. Considering the tropical countries such as Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and Maldives all these countries have diverse culture, heritage, natural beauty and pleasant weather. Among them Thailand is ranked 9th most tourist arrivals in the world in year 2016 with more than 32 million visitors. At the same time, Malaysia exceeds 26million tourist arrivals in 2016 while Sri Lanka and Maldives just exceed 1million arrivals in 2016 (UNWTO, 2017). Considering above data it is clear that culture, heritage, and nature solely do not make a destination competitive and attractive towards visitors. Destinations need to go for creative tourism through innovation in order to be competitive and for survival. Destinations those responses to continuously changing needs of visitors are capable of offering ultimate experience for travelers.

4. Methodology

The Quantitative approach has been employed in this research. 70 questionnaires were administered to identify tourist satisfaction with regard to existing tourism products. The travel agent assistance was received for administering surveys. The survey instrument included Likert scale questions to explore factors that are being considered by visitors when making the decision to select their next destination. Furthermore, the survey addressed the satisfaction for existing tourism products in Sri Lanka with regard to selected tourism product categories.. Considering the visitor satisfaction for existing tourism products several new product recommendations were derived by looking at the potential resources in Sri Lanka. In the process of making suggestions success cases of other destinations were also used for benchmarking.

5. Results

Table 1. Sample Profile in Percentages

Age (years)	
15-19	0
20-29	48
30-39	26
40-49	26
50 above	0
Gender	
Male	46
Female	54
Party in group	
Alone	14
With partner	26
With Friends	31
With family	29
Length of holiday(nights)	

1-3	26
4-7	33
8-14	31
15 & above	10

As per the summary illustrated in the Table 1, 54% of participants of this study are males whereas 46% are females. Participants' age is ranged between 15 and 49 showing nearly half of participants in the age group of 15-19. Most of the participants travel with their friends and families. 33% of participants said that they stayed in Sri Lanka for 4 to 7 days whereas 31% of participants stayed in Sri Lanka for 8 to 14 days.

Table 2. Mean Perceived satisfaction on Tourism Products (n=70)

Tourism Product Category	Mean	Std. Deviation
Nature tourism	4.44	.605
Cultural Heritage tourism products	3.83	.932
Availability of cultural and religious events and festivals	3.69	.894
Opportunities for adventure and sports	3.90	1.04
Opportunities to visit indigenous communities	3.61	.952
Activities for children	3.40	1.244
Organized excursions	3.31	1.03
Contact with Local communities	3.56	.934
Availability of traditional dance and musical events	3.36	.952
Traditional cuisine and drinks	3.64	1.07
Availability of shopping areas	3.57	1.07

Table 2 represents eleven tourism product areas identified by extensive literature and perceived satisfaction towards them were measured by using 5 point Likert scale (1 being strongly dissatisfied and 5 being strongly satisfied). As per the findings of this study tourists have higher satisfaction towards nature tourism, cultural heritage tourism and adventure tourism in Sri Lanka. Tourists' perceived satisfactions towards availability of cultural and religious events and festivals, opportunities to visit indigenous communities, traditional cuisine and drinks and availability of shopping areas lie just above the mean satisfaction whereas availability of activities for kids, organized excursions, contact with local community and availability of traditional dance and musical events lie around the mean satisfaction.

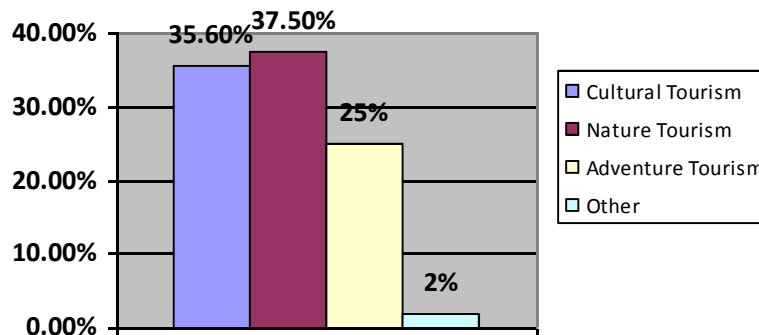


Figure 1. Preferred Type of Tourism

The tourists were asked to indicate their preferred type of tourism. The results indicated that majority selected nature tourism followed by cultural and heritage tourism and adventure tourism. This indicates that tourists have higher expectations towards nature tourism and cultural and heritage tourism when they make travelling decisions.

Table 3. Mean Perceived satisfaction towards tourism related services

Service Category	Mean	Std. Deviation
Transportation Facilities	2.24	.669
Availability of Rest Rooms	3.01	.732
Availability of Information desks, road signs and maps	2.74	.912
Hospitality of taxi drivers	2.61	.982
Hospitality at ticket counter	3.19	.856

This research study further requested the participants to rate their satisfactions towards highly required tourism related services. As Table 3 illustrates participants indicated their perceived satisfaction on transportation facilities, availability of rest rooms, availability of information desks, road signs and maps, hospitality of taxi drivers and hospitality at ticket counters in tourism attractions. It is revealed that tourists are dissatisfied on aforementioned services except hospitality at ticket counters and availability of rest rooms which lies around the mean satisfaction level. It is highly required to consider these tourism related facilities since they are highly related with the overall satisfaction on tourism products in a destination.

6. Recommendations and Conclusion

This research was aimed to explore possible new product development for the tourism industry of Sri Lanka so that visitor experience can be enhanced. The results of this study revealed that visitors have relatively low satisfaction towards availability of cultural and religious events and festivals, opportunities to visit indigenous communities, traditional cuisine and drinks and availability of shopping areas, availability of activities for kids, organized excursions, and contact with local community and availability of traditional dance and musical events. For that purpose, possible tourism products are proposed by studying the successive creative tourism initiatives taken by other destinations in the region. There are plenty of resources where it is possible develop new tourism products. Sri Lanka has the perfect climate around the year, natural scenic beauty, rich heritage, diverse religious and ethnic culture, and beaches. However, country does not seem to have an effective strategy towards creative tourism other than conventional positioning strategies. Creativity and innovation are seen as key components in destination management strategies (Lindroth et al., 2007). Creative tourism requires a fundamental shift in the creation of value from production to consumption and focuses on the active participation, involvement, learning, and absorption of tourists (Wattanacharoensil & Sakdiyakorn, 2016). Therefore, this type of tourism is expected to provide enhanced experience with special consideration to culture and authenticity of the destination (Richards & Raymond, 2000). Some new tourist products are suggested considering the success tourist product innovations in countries such as Malaysia, Singapore and South Korea.

6.1. Galle fort-trishaw ride

Galle fort is the largest construction remained in Asia built by European occupiers. Galle fortress was built during the Dutch Colonial era. The Galle fort is 2 ½ hours away from Colombo, capital. Malaysia has the same type of construction built by the Dutch occupier in Malacca which takes more than 3 hours from the Kuala Lumpur. Malaysia has created an impressive tourist attraction using Malacca effectively where they attract hundreds of

domestic and international visitors a day. There are numerous places to enjoy such as museum, street shops, and street guitar players. The best way to enjoy Malacca in a slow and laid back manner is trishaw ride. The trishaw can be rented on hourly or distance covered basis. These trishaws have their own decorations and music which take travelers to another end of entertainment. Not only the trishaw ride, but also visitors can purchase handmade jewelries, wood crafts, and souvenirs that reflect the Malaysian culture and tradition from the street shops. These street shops take more than 200m along either side of the road. Malaysia has created an impressive tourist attraction by commoditizing their cultural resources effectively. The Galle fort in Sri Lanka is situated faced to the beautiful beach where visitors can enjoy both beach and historical constructions. However, there is nothing attractive and colorful nearby this place. The Galle fort has potential resources to be developed as an attractive tourist destination through strategic planning. Formulating a tourist destination of bunch of products such as street shops, trishaw ride and diving boys is suggested. Thus, residents of destination can involve in those tourist activities which may increase the employment opportunities. On the other hand tourists can meet local communities in destination and run away from the tourist bubble.

6.2. Temple stay program

Unlike in other countries where tourism is believed, Buddhism is integrated in day today life of Sri Lankans which makes it more than a religion. There is a special culture in Sri Lanka which is formulated around the practices of Buddhism. The Buddhism of Sri Lanka is blessed with heritages such as ruins, temples, palaces, pagodas, and statues etc. Visitors can find a temple within every 200m or 500m in Sri Lanka. Although the Buddha's teachings have been known in countries throughout Asia for over 2,500 years, very few people in Europe or America would have known what the word 'Buddhist' meant unless they had been born in the last 50 years. Over a century ago people from France, the Netherlands, Great Britain, and other European countries began to travel in the Far East. Many of them returned with Eastern ideas, and so Europeans began to hear about Buddhism. As a respond to this trend South Korea introduced a program named "Temple Stay Programme" in 2002 when South Korea hosted FIFA world cup finals that took place in South Korea aiming thousands of foreigners visited during that time(Galmiche, 2010). Temple Stay is a cultural experience program designed to enhance the public understanding of Korean Buddhism which is open to everyone regardless of one's religious belief. A typical temple stay program entails an overnight stay at a Buddhist temple, and participation in such Buddhist rituals as "yeboof" (ceremonial service), "Cham-Seon" (Zen meditation), and "Balwoogongyang" (monastic meal). Other experiences of Korean culture include "Thado" (tea ceremony) with monks, outdoor meditation, lotus lantern and prayer bead crafts, painting, folk games, hiking, etc. (Temple Stay, 2018). The government operates a websites where they offer all information about this program and visitors can register for this program as well. Currently, there are several meditation centers and monasteries in Sri Lanka. Giving special consideration to available Buddhist temples and related heritages in Sri Lanka there is a possibility to widen the range of such programmes. Tourism authorities have to be mindful to offer this type of programmes in English and other international languages as well.

6.3. Honeymoon packages utilizing the resources outside Colombo

It is highly required to have a plan to improve tourism activities outside the Colombo utilizing available resources. Sri Lanka is blessed with fine beaches, waterfalls, hill country tea estates, friendly people, delicious dishes, heritage sites and many more. Young couples travelling to Maldives via Sri Lanka. More than 1 million tourists visited Maldives in year 2016(UNWTO tourism highlights, 2017). One of the main strategies of Maldives is offering special honeymoon packages with all-inclusive services. The best way to see the Sri Lanka is

by trains running around the country. Sri Lanka has rail way to hill country Kandy and also railway to Jaffa, Northern Province. It is possible to arrange visitor class seating in trains and train trips for foreign visitors as well as for couples coming for honeymoon. Packages may introduce for discounted prices and the promotion programs can be conducted through the airport and other regional visitor information centers.

6.4. Performance of traditional music and dance

Each region in Sri Lanka has inherited traditional dances and music practices. There are three main dancing types such as Kandyan dance, low country dance, and Samabaragamuwa dance. The three classical dance forms differ in their styles of body-movements and gestures, in the costumes worn by the performers, and in the shape and size of the drums used to provide rhythmic sound patterns to accompany the dancing. The music of Sri Lanka can be categorized into ancient folk rituals, music influenced from Buddhist religious traditions, European colonization and the modern music influenced by Indian culture especially Bollywood cinema. Currently, foreign visitors can enjoy these dances and music only during the Esela Perehera which is taking place in Month of July. In countries like Malaysia and South Korea they perform their traditional dances and music in well-known tourist destinations such as palaces, markets, streets and making ultimate entertainment. Such events not only produce entertainment but also those promote the culture of the destination. Such events have higher recalling ability even after visitors left that destination. Furthermore, result in higher word of mouth advantage. Most regions in Sri Lanka have cultural centers where they train traditional dance and music for teenagers. It is recommended for regional tourism bureaus to hire people from those institutions for performing at well-known tourist attractions such as Sigiriya, Galle, Kandy and Anuradhapura.

6.5. Thatched house accommodation

The traditional Sri Lankan houses are small temporary wattle and daub (stick and mud), thatched houses. Even in current days people from rural areas live in these types of houses. These thatched houses are cold and make perfect atmosphere to sleep avoiding hot weather. Especially rural areas nearby Sigiriya and Anuradhapura which are most visited sites, residents have huge area of land which they use to plant. Huge area of land is still remaining even after the plantation. The authorities can encourage residents to construct traditional houses which are not cost to build and rent them for visitors. This can be a solution for shortage of rooms and overpricing of five star hotels as well. The visitors can also experience authentic Sri Lankan culture and visitors get opportunity to contact with local communities as well.

The purpose of this study was to propose new tourism products that can be enhance the visitor experience in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is an Island where one can experience beaches, 2500 of Buddhist oriented culture, and meet hospitable people. In order to move fast to make tourism a larger contributor to economy Sri Lanka needs to focus on its strengths and come up with innovative and creative tourism product initiatives despite of conventional tourism strategies. From a practical perspective, this study presents several tourism product initiatives that can be implemented in order to enhance the visitor experience in Sri Lanka. This may help the policy makers and practitioners for developing creative experiences to ensure that wide array of needs of visitors are met.

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