

## PERCEPTIONS OF TOURISM IN SRI LANKA

by

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### Introduction

It is unnecessary to emphasize the importance of any industry's operating so as to produce the greatest returns on investment. When the industry is one of the major producers of foreign currency for a particular country, analysis of the industry in order to maximize its earning potential would clearly be beneficial. The tourism industry is no exception to this, as has been recognized by the industrially developed countries for some time, and research devoted to the analysis of tourism has flourished in the past few years in these countries. Particular attention has been given to such tourism issues as life style (Bernay, 1970), Psychographics (Schewe and Calantone, 1978, Wells, 1975), advertising (Calantone, Schewe and Allen, 1980), benefit segments for travel in the United States (Crask, 1981, Goodrich, 1977, Goodrich, 1979, Doyle, Pernicia and Stern, 1977), characteristics of American visitors to Canada (Graham and Wall, 1978; Rusk 1974; Young, Ott and Fergin, 1978) and Europe (Vogelfanger 1977), and the characteristics of the Americans who travel overseas (Wells, 1972; Woodside and Pitts 1977; Berrol 1981; Etzel and Woodside 1982).

However, for the less developed countries (LDCs) such as Sri Lanka there have been few such studies reported. Furthermore most published material is at a very general level and rather limited in scope (e.g. Harris, Kerr, Forster and Company, 1967, International Bank of Reconstruction and Development, 1968, Nanayakkara, 1971, Tourists' Attitude Towards South East Asia and Sri Lanka, 1973, Hettiarachi, 1974, National Report No 44 : Sri Lanka, 1978, Harrison, 1979, Yaccoumis, 1980, Gamage, 1981). To help fill this gap in the tourism literature, the present exploratory research provides data dealing with the beliefs of both tourists and Sri Lankans with regard to the strengths and weaknesses of Sri Lanka's tourism industry.

The importance to LDCs of tourist planning have been demonstrated in a number of recent studies. Cheung (1979) points out with respect to Hong-Kong, that tourism has made a substantial contribution to the economic growth of this newly industrialized country (NIC), and has a potential for

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contributing to the growth of other South Eastern Asian nations such as Sri Lanka. Boltvinik (1979) has shown similar beneficial results for another NIC, namely Mexico, and Wells (1982) has pointed out the importance of tourism planning in an NIC such as Malaysia so as to maximize the positive benefits from tourism. As an aid to such planning, Kaplan (1979) has shown how, by constantly monitoring the needs of U.S. travel consumers, and understanding their individual differences, the Mexican tourism industry was able to launch a highly successful marketing program to lure U.S. travellers to Mexico. It would seem therefore, that empirical data on tourists' beliefs about the Sri Lankan tourism product should aid in the strategic marketing of the country as a tourism destination, thus contributing to its economic growth.

As Cleverdon (1979) points out, over the years international tourism in terms of arrivals and receipts has been increasing. Yet the LDC's share of this increase is very small. The rich countries of Europe and America together accounted for 90% of all tourist arrivals and 80% of international receipts. Furthermore, it was the richer developing countries closer to the main generating markets that accounted for the bulk of the arrivals and receipts of the developing countries' share. A common weakness of tourism planning in many LDC's is the paucity of detailed data on the perceptions of the country's touristic features and their psycho-social correlates. This lack of a detailed data base impedes the understanding of the benefits or drawbacks of the tourist product offered by a country, and also obscures individual differences among tourists with regard to the values placed on such benefits.

The tourism industry in guest countries (airlines, travel agents, tour operators, etc.) attempts to maximize customer satisfaction by directing tourists to destinations that match their needs. Knowledge of a destination's strengths and weaknesses and individual differences in how these are perceived by tourists would help the guest country tourism industry not only to match customer needs with destination strengths but also to enable the customers to attain the greatest pleasure from their trip. The Changing World of Travel Marketing (1971) points out how important it is for a tourist to pass from an initial dream stage to the realities of a destination and the different information needs of the tourist through these stages. By proper education, a balance can be maintained between the needs of the tourists and the destination's ability to satisfy such needs. For example, a tourist anxious to see historic sites can also be psychologically prepared for the long, arduous roads leading to such sites so that the pleasure of visiting them is not marred by the shock of the inconvenience.

People who travel internationally for pleasure are decision-makers. In choosing between destinations, they subjectively evaluate each of the alter-

natives facing them. These judgments reflect each destination's predicted ability to satisfy their needs. These subjective judgments will vary from one individual to another (Mayo and Jarvis, 1981). To promote goodwill between the tourists and local inhabitants, Sethna (1981) has also made a plea for consumer education by the travel industry for customers going to a developing country. Wirtz (1981) points out the beneficial effects of such consumer education.

Contemporary views of tourism marketing strategy recognize that perceived product benefits are the key to achieving a differential advantage over competitors. The tourism product requires periodic modification to remain competitive. This may entail deliberate alterations in the marketing of the product, which may, in turn, necessitate quality or feature improvement. Feature improvement aims at increasing the number of real or fancied user benefits. An LDC that wishes to maintain an attractive tourist product must commit itself to the idea of a periodic product review.

While there are still many practical measurement problems to be resolved in order to improve the accuracy of the data collected, tourism marketing research in the late developing countries has to be carried out if they are to plan strategically in order to go from their present embryonic state towards gaining a larger share of the global tourism market. To this end, this study provides data on the beliefs as to why tourists come to Sri Lanka, how favourably the various attributes of the tourist product are rated and what measures are considered necessary for improving Sri Lanka's tourist trade. It also deals with the individual differences in tourist-rated favourableness of the tourist product and considers the managerial implications of this information for both the host and guest country's tourism industry.

This study deals primarily with the *consumer's beliefs* about a travel product, namely Sri Lanka. These beliefs could be based on consumption that may be anywhere from one day to several months long. The research is concerned with post-purchase and/or during purchase evaluation. Specifically, it is concerned with consumer beliefs with regard to the tourism-related attributes possessed by Sri Lanka.

Specific objectives of this exploratory research are threefold. These are :

- (a) Compare and contrast what international tourists and the Sri Lankan middle class believe to be the strengths and weaknesses of the Sri Lankan Tourist Product.
- (b) Correlate these perceived strengths and weaknesses with tourists' personal characteristics.
- (c) On the basis of the above information, consider the managerial implication of the results and make suggestions for further research.

## DESIGN OF THE STUDY

### Sample

In the summer of 1982, 300 international tourists and 150 middle and upper middle class Sri Lankans were contacted in the capital city of Colombo and the surrounding areas with a paper and pencil questionnaire by M.B.A. students at the University of Jayewardenepura. This generated a usable sample of 201 (66— response rate) tourists and 121 (80— response rate) Sri Lankans. Although this was a convenience sample, every attempt was made to include a wide variety of respondents in each of the populations. An inadequate command of the English language was given as the principal reason for non-completion of the questionnaire by both tourists and Sri Lankans. Analysis of the demographic characteristics indicated that tourists from 17 countries were represented in the sample. In terms of the age, sex, nationality and occupational profile, the sample characteristics resembled those of the tourist population at large.

### Questionnaire

The items for the questionnaire were generated from discussions with Sri Lankans, interviews with international travellers, and a review of relevant tourism and travel literature such as the *Journal of Travel Research* and *Tourism Management*.

The final questionnaire included 36 dependent variables and 86 independent variables. The dependent variables consisted of seven point Likert scales to determine the respondents' beliefs about Sri Lanka in terms of (a) why tourists come (7 items), (b) quality of the attributes possessed (22 items), and (c) how revenue from tourism can be increased (7 items). The independent variables consisted of a Rokeach Value Scale (36) (Rokeach 1979), a Six Dimensional Achievement Scale (6) (Jackson, Ahmed and Heapy, 1976), psychographic statements (30), Sri Lanka involvement items (6) and demographics (8). Sri Lanka involvement and demographic items were somewhat different for the Sri Lankans and the tourists.

### Analysis

To evaluate and compare the mean responses of Sri Lankans and tourists, a *t* test analysis was carried out. Table I presents mean responses of the tourists and Sri Lankans, and the statistical significance of the mean differences between them.

In order to uncover the correlates of tourists' beliefs about the quality of the Sri Lankan tourism product, a hierarchical procedure was adopted. Detailed description of the procedures followed and the results of the correlational and regression analysis are presented elsewhere (Ahmed, 1983).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

As Table I indicates, natural beauty and beaches and climate are considered to be important reasons by both tourists and Sri Lankans to come to Sri Lanka. Friendliness of the people and outdoor sports activities are not considered too important. Tourists felt that the provision of hotels and restaurants was the most effective way to increase revenue, followed by the provision of beach resorts, and the provision of facilities to enjoy historic sites. The Sri Lankans rated beach resorts facilities to enjoy natural beauty and the provision of hotels and restaurants as the more effective ways of increasing revenue from tourism. The largest mean difference between the two groups was in response to items dealing with sports facilities and was significant at  $P \leq .001$  level. This was followed by night life, where a difference was significant at  $P \leq .01$  level.

In terms of the attributes possessed by Sri Lanka, for only three out of the twenty items (wildlife and game, night life and sports opportunity) were the mean responses between the Sri Lankans and tourists significantly different at  $p \leq .05$ . Moreover, none of these differences was substantial in size. Quality of the scenic beauty was rated very high by both groups, followed by beaches, historic sites, friendliness of people and opportunities for rest and relaxation. The poorest rating was given to highways, traffic, night life and sports facilities. Cleanliness, sports opportunity and shopping were rated about average. Tourists ranked restaurants lower than hotels.

Thus, it is clear that the natural beauty and beaches are considered to be the principal assets of Sri Lanka and the lack of adequate transportation, sports facilities and night life its principal deterrents.

Surprisingly, whereas in comparison with the tourists, Sri Lankans were more likely to feel that sports opportunities and facilities were poor in Sri Lanka, they were less likely to perceive that tourists come for outdoor sports activities and that increasing these facilities could increase the revenue from tourism. As far as night life is concerned, Sri Lankans were somewhat less critical and were also somewhat less likely to feel that the revenue from tourism can be increased by providing better night life.

It is interesting to note that whereas in terms of the attributes possessed there was a large measure of agreement between the tourists and Sri Lankans, when it came to reasons why tourists come to Sri Lanka and possible methods of increasing revenue from tourism, except for the items dealing with beaches, climate and sightseeing facilities, some disagreement existed.

In general, the Sri Lankans tended to give somewhat lower importance to most of the methods included in the present research for increasing the revenue, from tourism. This can, perhaps be attributed to the fact that tourism being a relatively new industry Sri Lankans have not fully understood the different segments that exist in the tourist population, each with its own unique needs and desires. This lack of knowledge extends particularly to the existence of "young fun lovers" and "sun resorters" segments (Doyle, Pernicia and Stern, 1977) who place a particular emphasis on sports facilities and night life.

It is interesting to note that whereas friendliness of Sri Lankans was rated very high, it was not considered an important reason why tourists come to Sri Lanka. Perhaps, other competing destinations are also considered friendly and therefore, although friendliness is an important attribute sought in a foreign travel destination (Kaplan, 1979), Sri Lanka has no particular edge in this respect. Thus, their perception should reflect the actual unavailability of the sports experiences they were seeking.

### **Managerial Implications**

Results of this study and correlational analysis reported in Ahmed (1983) clearly indicate that the basic assets of Sri Lanka, namely, scenic beauty, beaches and historic sites, and to a lesser extent wildlife and game and climate are quite favourably evaluated by the tourists. On the other hand, many of the amenities such as highways, traffic, night life, sports facilities and cleanliness, and to a lesser extent shopping and restaurants which make it possible to enjoy these assets, are not favourably evaluated. Thus, it is clear that considerable opportunities exist for the Sri Lankan hospitality industry to improve its revenue from tourism by meeting the needs of the various tourist segments. Our research seems to indicate the existence among Sri Lankan tourists of segments such as allocentrics, near allocentrics, sports enthusiasts, and classic culture seekers.<sup>1</sup> However, because of the many limitations of the present study, more systematic research is needed to fully delineate and identify the segments of present and potential tourists. Future research should be able to answer questions such as : Does Sri Lanka attract culture pleasure tourists (Berrol, 1981) ? What is the size of the sun resorters segment (Doyle, Pernicia and Stern, 1977) ? Is it possible to attract the water-oriented activities segment (Graham and Wall, 1978) to Sri Lanka ?

In comparison with other south east Asian tourist destinations such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand that offer product benefits similar to Sri

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1. See Reime and Hawkins, 1979, and Plog, 1972, for details on the characteristics of travellers ad hoc who range from allocentrics to psychocentrics. Allocentrics are defined as independent adventure loving individuals with a Ulysses need—signifying a yearning to seek out an environment markedly different from one's own, (Anderson, 1970).

Lanka, Sri Lanka is smaller in size. Therefore, a tourist in theory should be able to fully profit without fatigue and inconvenience from most of the activities over a short time period. However, the transportation system—roads, traffic congestion and the lack of tourist information—is considered a major drawback to Sri Lanka. Therefore, any improvements that are made in the travel environment, for example in highways, traffic congestion, cleanliness, and travel information, cannot but enhance the tourists' satisfaction with Sri Lanka. As the cultural treasures of Sri Lanka are very positively evaluated, it should be possible to greatly increase the size of the classic culture (Berrol, 1981), and historian segment (Solomon and George 1977) by increasing tourist mobility across Sri Lanka. In as much as word of mouth is a powerful influence on the pattern of traffic established in an area, a very powerful tool for ensuring continued growth in the tourist trade is to satisfy tourists' needs as much as possible, (Williams and Zelinsky, 1970). It is acknowledged that constructing a highway system is a very expensive proposition. To overcome the financial burden of such an undertaking, the establishment of a system of toll highways should be considered. Such social issues as the appropriation of land may have to be resolved before roads are constructed. There may also arise the issue of introducing too many tourists to ecologically fragile areas such as the game parks where the capacity to absorb additional traffic may be limited. If such is the case, then attention may be given to making such strategic choices as increasing tourism revenue through attracting more affluent tourists by upgrading all facilities.

As far as the guest nation tourist agencies are concerned, they could increase the satisfaction of their customers by preparing them for the travel environment, particularly in the low tourist density areas of Sri Lanka. This would be particularly true for the allocentric ulysses need market who discover new destinations by word of mouth from other allocentrics or by assimilating information from diverse and usually technical sources.

The availability, or non-availability, of night life in Sri Lanka is considered a drawback and the tourists feel that the provision of a better night life is an important way to increase revenue from tourism. However, given the social fabric of Sri Lanka, and the possible negative impact tourism can have on an island society (Harrison, 1979), unrestricted use of this method of increasing tourism flow may not be acceptable to the Sri Lankan public. Moreover, given the large number of graded hotels that have bars and restaurants and the number of large, well stocked stores in Colombo, it is rather surprising that night life is considered so poor and the availability of restaurants and shops is considered somewhat mediocre. It is possible that the real problem is with the inability of the tourists to profit from the available variety. Of course, further research can establish more clearly what particular facets of night life, restaurants and shopping need to be improved. Because the

expansion in tourism started late in Sri Lanka, and the income of the Sri Lankan middle class has always been rather low, chic modern areas that cater mainly to local *wealthy residents* as well as to tourists, such as one finds in Mexico, have not developed in Sri Lanka. Perhaps the establishment of tourist zones in cities like Colombo that would encourage modern shops, restaurants, night clubs, sports facilities and hotels to locate close to one another, would be one solution to the problem. Tourists could then make one stop, wander around without hindrance in a clean, well-lit and supervised area and profit from the *variety* of facilities.

As far as the host and guest country tourism industry is concerned, providing easily comprehensible information on the availability, quality and accessibility of the night clubs, restaurants and shops may partly meet the tourists' needs. In our data, it was found that excellence-oriented individuals who were knowledgeable about tourism were less negative about the availability of restaurants and shopping facilities.

According to the present research, it was felt that sports activities was the least important reason why tourists came to Sri Lanka. On the other hand tourists felt that by providing sports facilities, Sri Lanka could increase the revenue from tourism. As Goodrich (1979) points out, sports types are an important segment of the international tourist market. Because of the heat, and strong ocean currents on the beaches around the main tourist areas of the south and east coast, Sri Lanka is a less than ideal place at present to attract purely sports-oriented tourists. However, the possibility exists either for attracting tourists who would like to combine both sports and other sight-seeing activities or to increase the satisfaction and lengthen the stay of tourists who do enjoy such activities. As Goodrich (1977) points out, such individuals enjoy golf, tennis and water sports. Perhaps the most economical way to provide sports facilities would be to designate parts of Sri Lanka as sports tourism zones where sports-oriented tourist establishments may be encouraged. For example, the lakes in such inland areas as Nuwara Eliya, Pollonaruwa and of course the new dam sites in Mahawelli region could be designated as sports tourism areas. Given the very hot climate of Sri Lanka, it would seem that other sporting activities would be secondary to water sports. The very low level of belief shown by Sri Lankans in sports as a means of increasing tourism revenue is of particular concern. Given the limited land and water resources of Sri Lanka, diverting these resources from their present agricultural and other uses, would be likely to lead to opposition. Therefore, it is imperative that the local residents of the regions involved be made aware of why sports facilities will be of greater benefit to Sri Lanka than the present usage of the resources. In any case, given the Sri Lankan's low belief in the benefits of sports tourism, before any concrete action is taken, a thorough cost benefit analysis with public input must take place.



As noted earlier, tourists rank the availability of restaurants to be only average. Given the great variety of foods and types of restaurants that can potentially exist and the culinary habits of different tourist nationalities, it is essential that further detailed research be undertaken in order to pin down exactly what aspects of restaurants tourists are objecting to. Is it the unavailability of familiar fast food outlets, the ethnic or foreign varieties, the

**TABLE 1**  
**Comparison of Sri Lankan and Tourists' Perception of**  
**Tourism's Attraction to Sri Lanka**

<i>Opinions about Tourism in Sri Lanka</i>	<i>Tourist Mean Response</i>	<i>Sri Lankan Mean Response</i>	<i>Statistical Significance Level of Difference- One Tail</i>
<b>WHY TOURISTS COME<sup>1</sup></b>			
Natural beauty .. .. .	5.9	5.8	.686
Beaches and climate .. .. .	5.9	5.8	.774
Culture and dance .. .. .	4.6	4.1	.004
Historic sites .. .. .	5.1	4.6	.004
Affordable hotels .. .. .	4.2	4.2	.830
Friendliness .. .. .	3.7	3.4	.160
Outdoor sports activities .. .. .	3.4	2.4	.000
<b>ATTRIBUTES POSSESSED<sup>2</sup></b>			
Wildlife and game .. .. .	2.5	2.8	.041
Scenic beauty .. .. .	1.7	1.6	.219
Highways .. .. .	4.9	5.0	.555
Friendliness .. .. .	2.3	2.5	.240
Cleanliness .. .. .	4.2	3.9	.161
Tourist information .. .. .	3.4	3.5	.300
Historical sites .. .. .	2.2	2.1	.330
Sports opportunity .. .. .	3.8	4.2	.019
Beaches .. .. .	2.0	2.1	.515
Rest and relaxation .. .. .	2.4	2.4	.983
Climate .. .. .	2.6	2.1	.001
Sightseeing facilities .. .. .	3.0	2.8	.319
Hotels .. .. .	3.2	3.2	.951
Restaurants .. .. .	3.6	3.4	.157
Night life .. .. .	4.8	4.5	.043
Cultural events .. .. .	2.8	2.9	.389
Traffic congestion .. .. .	4.8	4.9	.638
Handicraft .. .. .	2.7	2.9	.259
Shopping facilities .. .. .	3.9	3.7	.153
Sports facilities .. .. .	4.2	4.4	.302
<b>CAN. INCREASE REVENUE BY PROVIDING<sup>3</sup></b>			
Hotels and restaurants .. .. .	5.3	5.0	.121
Night life .. .. .	4.7	4.1	.014
Cultural activities .. .. .	4.6	4.2	.040
Beach resorts .. .. .	5.3	5.6	.033
Nature sightseeing facilities .. .. .	5.0	5.1	.309
Historic siteseeing facilities .. .. .	5.0	4.9	.362
Sports facilities .. .. .	4.2	3.5	.001

1. 7 very important, 1 not important at all.
2. 1 very good, 7 very bad.
3. 7 very effective, 1 of no effectiveness.

quality of cooking, or the ingredients of the dishes ? More specific information can then be provided to the hospitality industry to help them plan their restaurants and menus. Sri Lanka is a former British colony. Therefore, its notion of Western food is coloured by its past. One would also expect that many of its cooks were trained to serve English foods. To temper this very strong British influence, it may be necessary to retrain the existing cooking personnel and to change the nature of training of future cooks. Large, international hotels are probably catering to their clients in an adequate fashion already. They are able to draw on their vast international experience and expertise. The problem then would seem to lie with smaller establishments. Perhaps, management training programs explaining the importance of conducting customer research before selecting menu items and carrying out taste tests to establish the proper method of cooking menu items should be made available to the Sri Lankan hospitality industry.

In future, Sri Lanka will be facing an increasingly competitive tourist market with many new countries offering benefits similar to those offered by her at present. China has been expanding its tourist capacity. At some future date we may see Indo-China (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos), Burma and North Korea entering into the tourism business. Therefore, if Sri Lanka desires to stay in the business, it is essential that steps be taken now to expand and consolidate the country's international tourism business. Foreign remittances are at present the second most important source of foreign exchange for Sri Lanka. But as the infrastructures in the Arab countries near completion, overseas demand for skilled and unskilled Sri Lankan labour is bound to diminish. Therefore, steps taken now to meet that eventuality, through the expansion of tourism revenue can be expected to pay significant dividends.

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