

The tourist's perception and uniqueness of the Sri Lankan tea tourism experiences with reference to Nuwara Eliya District in Sri Lanka

by

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Abstract - Sri Lanka is a famous tourist destination around the world. The scenic beauty, cultural heritage, abundant wildlife, substantial wildlife, and toasty climate provide enormous value to "The Pearl of the Indian Ocean," making it a world-famous tourist destination (Jolliffe et al., 2022). With that, even though there were lots of ups and downs in the Sri Lankan tourism industry in recent years, Sri Lankan tourism recorded a remarkable over 1.9 million tourist arrivals in 2019. According to DailyFT, (2023), Sri Lanka is ranked as one of the top places to visit in the Europe and Asia region for 2023 DailyFT (2023). The tourism industry is one of the fastest-growing economic sectors. In Sri Lanka, this has contributed directly and indirectly to economic development (Punchihewa, 2020). As a result of British colonial growth, the tea industry emerged in Sri Lanka, with historical places in scenic hill country tea estate surroundings (Aslam and Jolliffe, 2015). When developing teabased tourism, it brings double economic benefits to Sri Lankan tourism, and this industry will be strengthened by more promotion and the consumption of tea and authentic tea culture experiences in Sri Lanka (Jolliffe and Aslam, 2009). Tea tourism experiences have been identified as one niche tourism segment under the emerging novel concept of nature-based tourism (Fernando et al., 2017). Tea tourism in Sri Lanka is one of the niche markets to support economic development, and it has attracted different market segments. Instead of only being consumed, the tea product is presented as a unique opportunity for tourists to be engaged in an authentic, immersive experience, where the journey from leaf to cup is showcased within the

factories where it is produced. By combining tea-producing and tourism, tourists create a stronger connection to the destination and enhancing the area's attractiveness and reputation.

Key words - Tea industry, Tea Tourism, Ceylon Tea, Tourist Perception, Tourist Satisfaction

1.Introduction

Tea tourism in Sri Lanka is a unique and well-known segment of the country's broader tourism business. The purpose of the study is to illuminate the complexities of tourists' perspectives and to identify the unique value proposition hidden in the Sri Lankan tea tourism experience. The study travels across the stunning tea estates of Nuwara Eliya, focusing on qualitative data collected data from structured interviews with tourists drawn in by the attraction of tea tourism. The study identifies critical gaps in the tea tourism sector, emphasizing the importance of developing an extensive understanding of travelers' perceptions. The article focuses on the industry's issues, such as the inability to properly market the legendary Ceylon Tea. In addition, the study descends into the joint efforts of many stakeholders including the need for customer feedback channels to improve the entire tea tourist experience. According to the findings, tourists highly value engaging in activities such as tea cultivation processes, tea tasting sessions, and

cultural events, emphasizing the importance of these immersive experiences in fostering enhanced brand loyalty and positive word-of-mouth promotion for the tea tourism sector. The thematic analysis of structured interviews revealed that Sri Lankan tea tourism is distinguished by its scenic beauty, educational value, and historical significance. Significant impacts on tourists' expectations were noted from visual materials. The appeal of tea production and Ceylon Tea's historical context enhanced the experience, highlighting the need for authenticity and improvement.

Research Questions

What is the tourist's perception on the Sri Lankan tea tourism experience?

What is the unique value behind the Sri Lankan Tea Tourism experiences?

Research objectives

To identify the tourists' perception on the Sri Lankan tea tourism experiences.

To recognize the unique value behind the Sri Lankan tea tourism experiences

2. Literature review

The literature reviews of the tourist's perception on the Sri Lankan tea tourism experience and the unique value behind the Sri Lankan tea tourism. Tea tourism has been defined as a means of generating local revenue and reducing poverty (Jolliffe and Aslam, 2009). According to the Sri Lankan context tea tourism is a niche tourism industry as a unique segment of the tourism industry, and tea tourism has product diversification under the niche tourism industry (Herath and Munasinghe, 2014). By providing experiential exposure to Sri Lanka's comprehensive tea culture, tea tourism serves as a strategic facilitator for the promotion of Ceylon Tea's brand image (Dissanayake and Koththagoda, 2017).

Tea can be used as a commercial hospitality product, and it represents a potential income-generating product (Jolliffe and Aslam, 2009). Therefore, the motivation of the tea related products and the activities play a big role in improving the tourist's attraction to tea tourism. Tea tourism directly involves existing tourism practices of small tea holders and indirectly involves existing tea tourism products of small tea holders such as providing homestay and other accommodations, tour guiding, safari jeep service, community-based eco-camping and food, and shopping (Dedunu and Aslam, 2022). It is crucial for the stakeholders to appropriately improve and align tourism-related products, considering the impact of tea on tourists' inclusive satisfaction and fulfillment (Gupta et al., 2020). Through tea, travelers are able to revisit how the self and the world interact in a calm environment that differs from their hectic everyday routines (Su & Zhang, 2020). Tourist perceptions of tourism are guided by the emotional connection with the residents in a particular destination (Joo et al., 2019). The perception of the tourists can be

improved further by improving the quality and standards of the destination-related factors (Gnanapala, 2015). After the arrival of James Taylor in Sri Lanka, the commercial tea plantation has developed. Tea tourism has provided the natural environment for tea plantation activities such as tea leaf plucking, tea production, packing, and the culture of tea labor (Datta, 2018). Therefore, Sri Lanka's tea industry varies in quality, taste, and aroma based on agro-climatic conditions, but companies lack of effective marketing strategies to gain a competitive advantage (Hilal and Mubarak, 2016).

The tourists have arrived in Sri Lanka with an awareness of Ceylon tea. Further, the tourists have a big image of Ceylon tea (Fernando et al., 2017). With the enhancement of the travel experiences and changes to the gradual lifestyle of the tourists, the cultural and leisure tourism experiences of the tourists become more popular. Therefore, tea industry-based experiences have been accepted by tourists as ways to relax (Zhou et al., 2023). Furthermore, tea tourism-related activities can be increased to enhance visitor attraction to the tea tourism industry. Railway transportation has operated in tea-producing communities, and tea growing communities included railways to provide tea and other services before serving tourists (Jolliffe, 2007). According to the above facts, in Sri Lanka's central province, tea plantations and the history of railway transportation have combined. Considering the qualitative characteristics of this study, a thorough and complete assessment of relevant literature is required to establish a sound theoretical foundation and contextual understanding. By examining previous studies, the study can obtain insights into the topic, find gaps in the literature, and establish a sophisticated understand of the subject matter. The community livelihood diversification in tea tourism destinations is developed through their engagement in tea growing and processing to provide tea tourism experiences (Su et al., 2019). The community can engage to provide authentic tea related experiences to the travel and tourism industries. The stakeholders in the tea tourism industry can use local community engagement to promote the industry. Tourists looking for relaxation and pleasure are said to enjoy tea industry-related experiences. However, it is crucial to evaluate if these experiences contribute to tourism practices and meaningful community engagement.

3. Research methodology

The most scenic tea plantations are located in Central Province; hence, the sample has been chosen from Nuwara Eliya district tea estates. Lee Jolliffe's journal has identified the use of tea in hospitality in Sri Lanka. It has mentioned tea-related tourism experiences in Sri Lanka. This tea destination has cultural and geographical value for the tourism industry. Qualitative data is collected in this study through questionnaires and interviews. To carry out this research using qualitative data to discover tourists' perception of tea tourism experiences. Participation in the research will be voluntary for all participants. The research philosophy for tourists' perceptions of the Sri Lankan tea tourism experience corresponds with interpretivism. Interpretivism, which is frequently referred to as constructivism, is a philosophical approach that emphasizes the importance of understanding the subjective meanings and interpretations that people make about their

experiences. Interpretivism is appropriate for the context of this study due to its ability to enable an in-depth investigation of tourists' perceptions, feelings, and interpretations of tea tourism experiences in Sri Lanka. Interpretivism supports a qualitative research approach, which allows for in-depth interviews, observations, and textual data analysis to reveal the hidden complexities of tourist perspectives. The tourist's perception of tea tourism is being investigated in this study. Structured interviews are designed to collect standardized information from participants by asking an organized set of questions. In the framework of this study, structured interviews are considered a great method for systematically analyzing tourists' perspectives on tea tourism in Sri Lanka. Using a qualitative research approach, the study aims to reveal hidden aspects of travelers' opinions and observations, providing significant insights into the particular context of tea tourism in Sri Lanka. The research strategy offers a qualitative approach to investigating tourists' perceptions about Sri Lankan tea tourism. Data is gathered primarily using structured interviews, providing a targeted and methodical approach to obtaining information. The interviews are aimed at eliciting thorough responses from travelers regarding their experiences and perspectives on tea tourism. Thematic analysis is employed as the primary data analysis technique to identify patterns, themes, and meanings in the qualitative data. This method provides for a thorough examination of the distinct values related to Sri Lankan tea tourism, resulting in a deeper appreciation of the tourists' perspectives. All ethical considerations, such as informed consent and participant confidentiality, are carefully followed throughout the research procedure. The research uses a qualitative method, including structured interviews and theme analysis, to unravel the complicated patchwork of experiences and values associated with this specialized tourism market. The findings have the potential to provide significant insights for policymakers, government organizations, travel agents, tea estate owners, and practitioners as they develop strategies to improve the attractiveness and long-term development of Sri Lankan tea tourism. The study's selection is consistent with a comprehensive exploration, providing a deeper knowledge of the

According to SLTDA (2022), Nuwara Eliya District has reported the highest tea production district in Sri Lanka. Therefore, Nuwara Eliya district can be the study area of this research. Upcountry agriculture plays an essential role to the local and global markets because it produces a wide range of unique items, including fresh flowers, exotic vegetables, fruits, and the world-famous highland Ceylon tea (Ranagalage et al., 2019).

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

The study explores tourists' perceptions of tea tourism in Sri Lanka, focusing on Nuwara Eliya. It uses thematic analysis to examine data from 13 structured interviews, identifying key themes and patterns. The impact of pre-existing visual representations, such as pictures and videos, on the establishment of expectations before engaging in tea tourism activities is investigated. The role of social media in spreading these visual representations and their impact

on tourist expectations is also analyzed. A limited picture of tea tourism in Sri Lanka is held by tourists before experiencing it. In addition, participants actively participated in the commercial component, indicating a greater desire to participate in purchasing tea products than observed. Tourists have had a desire to see around and touch tea even before coming to Sri Lanka. Tourists are motivated by curiosity about Ceylon tea's history and production when engaging in tea tourism in Sri Lanka. The discovery of the tea-making process and new experiences are sought, along with an understanding of the cultural significance of tea. Satisfaction and empathy for workers are felt, enhancing the overall experience, with educational and meaningful engagement being highlighted. The unique cultural elements of Sri Lankan tea tourism were appreciated, with the distinctiveness of the experience, exceptional hospitality, and high-quality tea being praised. Positive feedback highlighted the tea-making process, the welcoming atmosphere, and the authenticity of freshly sourced vanilla tea, contributing to a highly satisfying and memorable visit. Dissatisfaction was noted with rushed tea factory tours and limited engagement during processing. Memorable aspects included the discovery of unique tea varieties, witnessing traditional machinery, and experiencing the lush environment. Tourists emphasized the unique value of Sri Lankan tea through its historical production, high quality, and distinct fragrance. These elements contributed significantly to the perceived uniqueness and authenticity of the experience. Sri Lankan tea was compared favorably to teas from other countries, with its superior taste and distinct aroma being highlighted. The detailed and fresh explanations provided during the visit were also noted as distinguishing features. Recommendations included expanding tea flavor options, extending safari durations, and enhancing transparency in tea processing. The need for less commercialized and more immersive experiences was also emphasized. Tourists expressed a strong desire to return to Sri Lankan tea tourism, driven by positive experiences and satisfaction with the unique aspects of the visit. Tourists suggested offering a wider variety of tea flavors, prolonging safari experiences, and providing deeper insights into tea-making processes. Concerns about the commercialized nature of the tours indicated a preference for more authentic experiences. The interest in Sri Lankan tea tourism was driven by the appeal of the tea production process and the historical significance of Ceylon Tea. The lush landscapes and expansive tea fields were noted for providing a visually captivating backdrop. The complexity of tea-making and the historical context were recognized as enhancing the experience. For tea tourism operators, addressing these expectations and enhancing authenticity is deemed essential for creating a more engaging and meaningful experience. Future studies that can explore the uniqueness of tea could involve comprehensive investigations of various tea flavors, production procedures, and historical contexts, offering light on the aspects that distinguish Sri Lankan tea. In addition, future studies might concentrate on marketing tactics and product development in the tea tourism sector, identifying novel techniques to attract and engage travelers.

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Appendix

Annexure 01 - Interview guide
 I would like to express my appreciation for your participation and cooperation in this survey. This survey is conducted by H.Y.M.Sankalpama, an undergraduate student following a BSc Travel & Tourism Management Degree at SLTC Research University as a partial fulfillment of the requirement of the Degree. This interview prototiles was prepared as a tool to gather relevant data for the research under the aforementioned title and your kind co-operation in filling this questionnaire is important and highly appreciated. The data will be used anonymously and exclusively for scientific research purposes only and treated as strictly confidential.

Before getting the Sri Lankan Tea Tourism Experience what were your expectations about it?

What motivated you to choose a Sri Lankan tea tourism as a recreational activity in your vacation?

Are you satisfied with the experience?

[If yes / No to the above question] How would you describe your experience? Can you tell How did you feel? And emotions you have felt during the tea tourism experience you had?

What were the most memorable or surprising aspects of Sri Lankan tea tourism experience?

What do you see as the unique value of Sri Lankan authentic tea experience?

Do you think Sri Lankan tea tourism experience is different and has unique features compared to other countries?

Would you recommend the Sri Lankan tea tourism to others? Why?

Will you come back to Sri Lanka for getting a tea related tourism experience again?

What kind of suggestions do you have for improving the Sri Lankan tea tourism?

Annexure 02 - Themes and Codes

Themes and Codes

Expectations	Tourists' Satisfaction and Emotional Responses Positive Emotions: Sensory Experience: Cultural Appreciation: Interest in Process: Desire for Interaction: Health Perspective:
Motivations	Recommendation and reason
Satisfaction	
Memorable and Surprising Aspects of Sri Lankan Tea Tourism	
Unique Value	
Comparison with Other Countries	
Return Intentions	
Suggestions for Improvement	