

Sri Lanka Travel Grant Report

When researching areas to explore for my dissertation, one country which I found particularly striking was Sri Lanka. Here is a country experiencing rapid development since the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004 and the end of the Civil War in 2009; and much progress is evident in terms of social indicators such as literacy rates which are comparable to developed countries. However, as encountered by many emerging economies, inequality has been exacerbated between those who directly benefit from greater investment, and (often) residents who are excluded from such benefits. As tourism is a major source of income to Sri Lanka, I wanted to investigate whether or not sustainable tourism could offer a plausible solution to alleviating poverty and reducing magnitude of income inequality.

To observe contrasting results, I travelled to three different areas: Colombo, Nuwara Eliya and Hikkaduwa. I was based in Colombo, the largely developed commercial capital where poverty levels are relatively low (in comparison to Hikkaduwa and Nuwara Eliya). Since the end of the civil war, development has particularly accelerated, attracting much investment to evolve into a fast growing metropolis.

I then took a seven hour drive in-land to Nuwara Eliya, also known as 'Little England' where former British Civil Servants ran tea plantations due to the more temperate climate and fertile soils. I resided in a renovated tea factory atop a hill looking over various tea estates. I delved into their local traditional culture by plucking and processing our own tea leaves and trekking through the jungle where I gained valuable insight from interviewing various residents. Had I not visited the eco- resort, I would not have been able to witness how well it has thrived not just commercially, but also in the spirit of sustainability. I found true commitment, involvement and gratitude of villagers who either worked for the hotel or were supported through projects executed by the staff e.g. staff wage donations to reconstruct surrounding houses that were damaged after a landslide.

The final part of my journey was to the coastal area of Hikkaduwa and Galle in order to observe what developments have occurred since the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004. Upon observation, both Hikkaduwa and surrounding areas have largely recovered and built greater resistance to any potential disasters that may impact the area in future. Interestingly, as I wandered down the coastline it became apparent that a form of 'dark tourism' developed, which has now become a key part of my dissertation research, where attractions such as Tsunami Museums retell the accounts of those who were hit by the tsunami.

In the coming weeks, I hope to collate the information received from the various interviews I conducted with hoteliers, sustainability engineers, local residents, the Director General of Tourism and the Minister of Tourism; next year I will present my final findings. Had I not travelled to Sri Lanka, I would not have been able to immerse myself in its rich culture and gain unique insight from such a wide range of people; and so I am very grateful to the B M Rowe Fund, and to all of those that have helped me along the way, thank you.