

EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF PROMOTING SRI LANKA AS A MEDITATION TOURISM DESTINATION IN SRI LANKA'S WELLNESS TOURISM LANDSCAPE

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Abstract:

With the growing demand for health and wellness sector, travelers always consider balance between physical, mental, and, emotional well-being of their everyday life leading for meditation tourism to become an integral part of the wellness tourism sector. As Sri Lanka is a country that is uniquely positioned to leverage its cultural, spiritual, and, natural resources, this study explores the potential of promoting Sri Lanka as a meditation tourism destination by identifying its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, alongside with an examination on the roles played by its key stakeholders. This qualitative study which employs an exploratory strategy, underwent semi-structured interviews with 15 suppliers of wellness and meditation tourism, who are registered under the Sri Lankan government body of Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA), were considered as the sample. Afterwards, qualitative thematic analysis was conducted to analyze the collected data. The findings revealed that there are notable strengths and opportunities rather than weaknesses and threats in order to promote Sri Lanka as a niche meditation tourism destination. Most of the stakeholders have high power and interest in promoting Sri Lanka as a niche meditation tourism destination and it is noteworthy to state that several stakeholders are find it difficult in promoting Sri Lanka as a meditation tourism destination due to financial limitations, lack of resource flexibility, and constraint of culture. However, they pinpointed the necessity of coordination between the public sector, private sector, and non-governmental organizations to promote Sri Lanka as a niche meditation tourism destination. Overall, the study provides recommendations for improving Sri Lanka’s position in the global wellness tourism market and strategies to attract global tourists specifically for this emerging segment.

Keywords: Destination Promotion, Key Stakeholders, Meditation Tourism, SWOT Analysis, Wellness Tourism

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, tourism has been the most dynamic and fastest-growing industry in the world. With the development of niche market segments, the global wellness tourism market has experienced exponential growth in recent years, driven by increasing demand for wellness experiences, including meditation tourism (Perera, 2022). Meditation tourism, a subset of wellness tourism, involves travel for mental and spiritual renewal through meditation practices (Jayasinghe & Wimalaratana, 2025). Due to the global shutdown caused by the COVID-19 epidemic, people are more susceptible to emotional, mental, and physical difficulties. In order to assist their minds' relaxation, people began to practice yoga, workouts, and other gardening-related hobbies especially meditation practices (Samarathunga, 2015). The majority of Buddhists still reside in the Asia-Pacific area, where Buddhism and meditation practices associated with its origin. Cambodia, Thailand, Burma (Myanmar), Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Laos, and Mongolia are among the seven countries with a majority of Buddhists. In Europe and Asia, spirituality is quite popular and in high demand (Jayasinghe, R. 2022). Countries like India, Thailand, and Bali have already established strong reputations in this niche of meditation tourism. According to Sammani et al. (2020) with its proud history, Sri Lanka has already been identified as an ideal wellness hotspot among both national and international travelers. However, Sri Lanka, with its rich Buddhist heritage and serene landscapes, remains underutilized in this domain (Baum T, 2008).

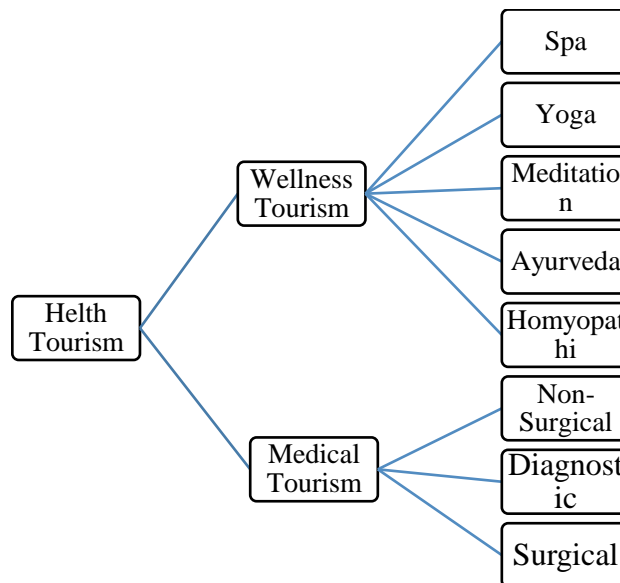
Hence, this study aims to explore the potential for promoting Sri Lanka as a top meditation tourism destination, focusing on its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT), and identifying key stakeholders and their roles. Specifically, it aims to evaluate what internal capabilities and external challengers exist in advancing Sri Lanka's positions in the global meditation tourism market and how different stakeholder groups support and impede these efforts. By identifying these critical aspects this study will contribute to the strategic development to the meditation tourism in Sri Lanka as a sustainable and authentic niche within the border wellness tourism landscape.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Global Wellness and Meditation Tourism

Health tourism can be categorized as one of the main niche tourism segments that involves professional and regulated practices of physical therapy and natural healing agents to preserve and improve living conditions and health (Barca et al. 2013). According to the Figure 1, This segment encompasses both wellness tourism, which is based on traditional methods like yoga, meditation, ayurveda, and spa, and medical tourism, which is based on western treatments (Khanal & Shimizu, 2019; Smith & Puczkó, 2008).

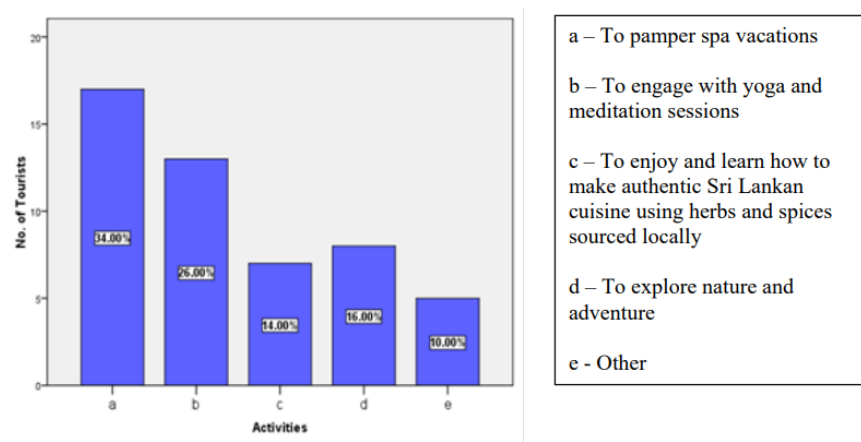
Figure 1. Components of health tourism



Source: Health and Wellness Tourism: A Study on Ayurveda Spa Treatment by Sadekar and Pereria (2018)

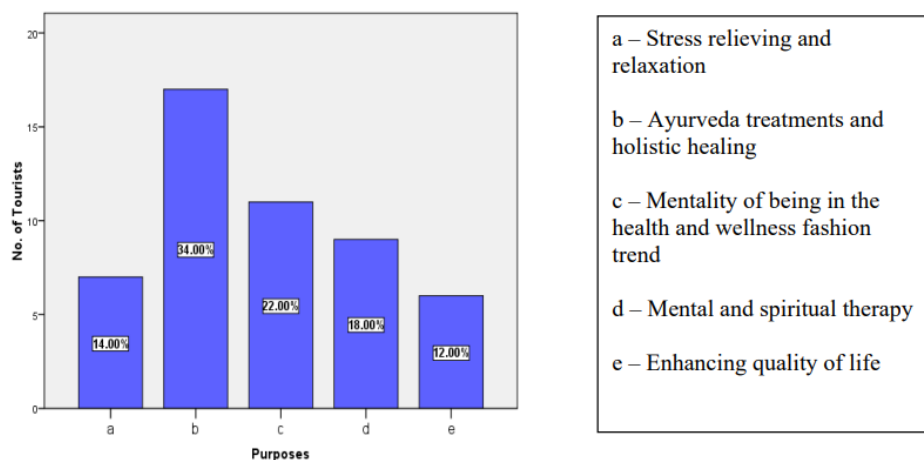
Wellness tourism has grown significantly in recent years, with consumers’ increasingly seeking experiences that promote physical, mental, and spiritual well-being (Fonseka & Pavithra, 2021). Meditation tourism is a key driver within this market, attracting travelers looking for spiritual enrichment and mindfulness experiences (Global Wellness Institute, 2022). Countries like India, Thailand, and Bali are leading destinations in this sector, owing to their established spiritual traditions (Liu et al, 2022). As shown in figure 2 and 3, according to the field survey conducted by Fonseka & Pavithra, (2021), it revealed that about 22% and 18% of travelers visit Sri Lanka with the mentality of being in the health and wellness fashion trend and to get mental and spiritual therapy as wellness tourists and around 26% travelers are engaging yoga and meditation sessions for being in the health and wellness.

Figure 2. Wellness tourists’ purpose of visiting Sri Lanka



Source: Field Survey: Analysis of the Potentials for Promoting Sri Lanka as a Wellness Tourism Destination by Fonseka & Pavithra (2021)

Figure 3. Wellness activities engaged by the tourists in Sri Lanka



Source: Field Survey: Analysis of the Potentials for Promoting Sri Lanka as a Wellness Tourism Destination by Fonseka & Pavithra (2021)

However, other countries, including Sri Lanka, have not yet fully realized their potential in this regard.

2.2 Sri Lanka’s Cultural and Spiritual Heritage

Sri Lanka, as a charming tropical island in the Indian Ocean, cultural and spiritual heritage is a key component to the growth of the tourism industry (Pattiyagedara and Fernando, 2020). Sri Lanka’s Buddhist history and serene landscapes make it a natural candidate for meditation tourism and Jayasinghe (2021) emphasized Buddhist tourism includes meditations, yoga, archaeological travel, history and pilgrimages, and Buddhist philosophy blends with Sri Lankan unique culture and heritage. Moreover, its ancient temples, meditation centers, and tranquil natural settings offer a peaceful environment ideal for spiritual retreats (Sugathapala, 2024). Despite these assets, Sivanandamoorthy (2022) asserted that Sri Lanka lacks a coordinated national strategy to market and promote meditation tourism internationally while findings of Baum (2008) verified efforts to develop meditation tourism are often fragmented with insufficient infrastructure and weak collaboration between stakeholders.

2.3 Stakeholder Roles in Promoting Meditation Tourism

Successful promotion of meditation tourism requires the involvement of various stakeholders, including government agencies, travel agents, local communities, and private tourism operators (Van Den Bergh, 2013). These stakeholders play different roles in promoting meditation tourism, from developing packages to marketing destinations (Nguyen, 2018). With the support of Sri Lanka's tourism bodies, many destinations have been identified to have potentials to offer travelers who are seeking relaxation and meditation a sense of the reality of life. Especially meditation is a main part of temple staying program in Sri Lanka which offers different meditation exercises for people’s lives and habits of their mind, and they practice different skills to cultivate positivity. However, according to Jayasinghe (2021), collaboration between the public and private sectors is essential to create a unified approach to promote Sri Lanka as a meditation tourism destination.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study depends on respondents’ behaviors, knowledge, and responses on exploring the potential of developing Sri Lanka as a meditation tourism destination. Hence, considering the objectives of this study, the researchers adopted a qualitative research method through an inductive approach. The population of this study consists of stakeholders who are involved in wellness and meditation tourism in Sri Lanka and among them 15 stakeholders under supplier-side are taken as the study’s sample, since the findings of Fonseka & Pavithra (2021) revealed tourists are categorized as stakeholders in the demand-side of the tourism industry. Hence, the sample of the current study consisted travel agents, government officials, and non-government officials through snowball sampling technique.

Table 1. Profile of the Respondents

Respondent of the study			
Respondent Code	Stakeholder Category	Organization	Occupation/Designation of the Respondent
RS 01	Public Sector	Ministry of Tourism	Information Officer
RS 02	Public Sector	Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority	Manager – Strategic Planning
RS 03	Public Sector	Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority	Junior Manager - Domestic Tourism & Community Relations
RS 04	Public Sector	Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau	Director- Strategic Planning and Research
RS 05	Public Sector	Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau	Director- Research and Development
RS 06	Travel Agents	Jetwing Travels	Senior Executive, Sustainable development Unit
RS 07	Travel Agents	Aitken Spence travels	Manager
RS 08	Travel Agents	Walkers Tours	Senior Tour Executive
RS 09	Travel Agents	Nkar travels & Tours	Senior Tour Executive
RS 10	Travel Agents	Tangerine Tours	Senior Tour Executive
RS 11	Meditation Centers	The Nisala Foundation	Secretary – Dayaka Saba
RS 12	Meditation Centers	Paramita International Meditation Center	President – Dayaka Saba
RS 13	Meditation Centers	Sri Subodharama International Meditation Center	President – Dayaka Saba
RS 14	Local Community		Community people and Corfu guide
RS 15	Local Community		Community people

Source: Survey Data, 2024

Thereafter, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather primary data using a structured interview guideline and interviews were audio recorded after obtaining the prior approval from the respondents. Accordingly, interviews were transcribed, and significant themes and codes were identified to analyze the collected data employing thematic analysis to achieve the objectives of this study.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To achieve the study's objective one, it was necessary to analyze strengths, weaknesses opportunities, and threats separately in exploring the potential of developing Sri Lanka as a meditation tourism destination to gain a successful outcome.

At first, several respondents emphasized Sri Lanka's rich Buddhist heritage as a key strength. With meditation practices deeply rooted in the country's spiritual traditions, Sri Lanka offers authenticity that can attract meditation tourists seeking genuine spiritual experiences. Consequently, the island's natural beauty with its beaches, tropical environments, and serene landscapes was often cited as a strength. The calm environment helps to provide a unique atmosphere that is perfect for meditation retreats. Furthermore, Sri Lanka's affordability was also highlighted as a key strength, making it an attractive destination for tourists seeking low-cost wellness experiences compared to other more expensive destinations such as Bali or Thailand.

Although there are many notable strengths, respondents also pointed out a few weaknesses that impede Sri Lanka's potential to develop as a meditation tourism destination. The lack of adequate infrastructure was the most frequently highlighted weakness. Most remote meditation centers are devoid of modern amenities that would satisfy international visitors. Additionally, respondents pointed out an inadequacy in brand awareness and worldwide marketing. Due to its lack of international recognition as a special destination for meditation tourism, Sri Lanka finds it a challenge to compete with countries like Thailand and India.

While Sri Lanka has notable strengths, Sri Lanka has an excellent opportunity to establish itself as a leading destination for meditation tourism as a result of the worldwide boom in wellness and mindfulness practices. Supporting, the growing popularity of meditation retreats and spiritual tourism were also mentioned by the respondents. As a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, there has been a noticeable uptick in this industry as more travelers are looking for spiritual, wellness, and health experiences. This shift presents a unique opportunity for Sri Lanka to attract tourists who are looking for mental and emotional well-being.

Despite the opportunities, respondents also acknowledged external threats that could hinder the growth of meditation tourism. Among them respondents expressed concerns about the political instability in Sri Lanka, which poses a potential threat to tourism in general. Apart from that, Sri Lanka faces competition from well-established meditation tourism destinations like India, Bali, and Thailand, which already have a strong global presence and attract large numbers of spiritual tourists.

Findings of the second objective of the study which was to identify the key stakeholders and their involvement in promoting Sri Lanka as a meditation tourism destination, As shown in table 2, the stakeholders identified were categorized into three main categories; Public Sector, Private Sector, and Non-Governmental Organizations.

The Ministry of Tourism, Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA), Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau (SLTPB), and local government bodies were consistently identified as the primary players in tourism development where their roles focus on creating policies that support meditation tourism. They establish guidelines for the development of wellness and meditation retreats and allocate funds for infrastructure development. Also, they are involved in national and international tourism campaigns. However, respondents indicated that currently there is limited dedicated marketing strategy specifically aimed for meditation tourism but Ministry of Tourism, SLTDA, and SLTPB have high power and interest in promoting meditation tourism.

Moreover, the other local government bodies in regional level and district level hold significant power over the development of tourism infrastructure but may have less interest in meditation tourism specifically, as their focus might be broader, covering general tourism development and other economic activities.

Travel agencies, tour operators, and hospitality businesses were highlighted as key contributors in marketing and delivering services for meditation tourists. They are responsible for creating and selling packages that align with the growing global demand for spiritual tourism. And it is noteworthy to mention that they are responsible for promoting Sri Lanka as a destination for meditation through online platforms and e-commerce. In addition, most of the travel agencies and private sector organizations have some kind of a low interest and low power to promote this kind of tourism package directly because of the lack of government support and they have identified travelers’ interest in meditation tourism may be secondary to their focus on other types of tourism such as beach or adventure tourism.

Table 2. Stakeholder Map

The diagram is a 2x2 matrix with 'Power' on the vertical axis and 'Interest' on the horizontal axis. The top-left quadrant (High Power, Low Interest) contains 'Other local government bodies'. The top-right quadrant (High Power, High Interest) contains 'Ministry of Tourism', 'Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA)', and 'Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau (SLTPB)'. The bottom-left quadrant (Low Power, Low Interest) contains 'Travel agencies', 'Tour operators', and 'Hospitality Businesses'. The bottom-right quadrant (Low Power, High Interest) contains 'Local meditation centers and community'.

Power	↑	Other local government bodies	Ministry of Tourism Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA), Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau (SLTPB)
		Travel agencies Tour operators Hospitality Businesses	Local meditation centers and community
		Interest	→

Source: Respondent Data, 2024

Table 3. Summary of Themes of Objective One

Objective One	Themes	Codes
To identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of promoting Sri Lanka as a meditation tourism destination.	Strength	Rich Buddhist heritage
		Island's natural beauty
		Affordable wellness experiences
	Weaknesses	Lack of sufficient infrastructure
		Lack modern facilities
		Lack of international marketing
	Opportunities	Global Demand
		Development of spiritual tourism and meditation retreats
	Threats	Political instability
		Competition

Source: Respondent Data, 2024

Table 4. Summary of Themes of Objective Two

Objective Two	Themes	Codes
To identify the key stakeholders and their role in promoting Sri Lanka as a meditation tourism destination.	Public Sector	The Ministry of Tourism
		Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA)
		Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau (SLTPB)
		Local government bodies
	Private Sector	Travel agencies
		Tour operators
		Hospitality businesses
	Non-Governmental Organizations	Local meditation centers
		Community groups

Source: Respondent data, 2025

Apart from that other related non-governmental organizations like local meditation centers especially those are linked with Buddhist temples and monasteries and local communities were

noted for their vital role in providing authentic meditation experiences. Community groups, including local meditation practitioners, also play a role in maintaining the authenticity and cultural value of the meditation retreats offered. They have a deep interest in promoting meditation tourism as it aligns with their mission to spread mindfulness and spiritual wellness though they have limited resources and influence in shaping national policy or marketing strategies.

Based on the respondent data gathered under the second objective, below map emphasizes the key stakeholders involved in promoting Sri Lanka as a meditation tourism destination with their power and interest.

Moreover, the following summary table outlined the key themes and categories, summarizing the main findings of the strengths, weaknesses opportunities, and threats, of developing Sri Lanka as a meditation tourism destination along with the key stakeholders' role.

5. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored the potentiality of promoting Sri Lanka as a meditation tourism destination emphasizing the strengths and opportunities over its weaknesses and threats. Also, this study highlights the importance of addressing infrastructure gaps, especially in rural areas where many meditation centers are located, and enhancing digital marketing efforts to reach potential international tourists. To sustain and enhance this growth, local meditation centers should receive more support to increase their capacity and resources. Moreover, the stakeholder alignment and continuous communication among key players will ensure that meditation tourism in Sri Lanka continues to thrive, catering to the growing global demand for wellness and mindfulness experiences. The findings of this study also suggest the ways including the requirement of the multi-stakeholder collaboration to effectively promote Sri Lanka as a meditation tourism destination. The leadership must be taken by the government in developing a clear policy and infrastructure strategy, whereas the private sector should keep developing customized products for meditation retreats. The gap between authentic meditation experiences and global marketing requirements can be bridged with collaboration between local communities, international travel agencies, and tour operators.

To successfully promote Sri Lanka as a top-ranked meditation tourism destination, a multi-faceted approach is required. To satisfy the comfort and accessibility needs of visitors, investments should be made to build contemporary facilities at meditation centers, especially in rural areas. Additionally, well-developed national and international marketing strategies should be implemented to raise awareness of Sri Lanka's unique meditation tourist offerings by capitalizing the country's stunning natural surroundings and deep Buddhist legacy. In order to develop adequate meditation tourism packages that meet worldwide growing demand for wellness experiences, collaboration between key stakeholders such as governmental organizations, travel companies, and local communities is essential.

Additionally, educational and training programs for local practitioners might be used to enhance the quality of the service by ensuring the availability of authentic meditation practices. It's important to highlight the post-pandemic wellness trends to position Sri Lanka as a sanctuary for mental and emotional rejuvenation and that can support to attract tourists who are seeking holistic healing experiences. Besides, efforts to improve digital marketing will increase visibility and interaction with prospective tourists especially through social media and

online platforms. Based on those factors, there is a high possibility that Sri Lanka can establish itself as a competitive and sought-after destination in the global meditation tourism market.

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