

Backpacker Tourism in Sri Lanka's Sustainable Frontier: Exploring Motivations, Preferences, and Challenges

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Abstract

Backpacker tourism in Sri Lanka is an emerging yet underexplored segment with significant potential to support sustainable tourism development. This study explores the motivations, preferences and challenges of backpacker tourists visiting Sri Lanka, along with their contribution towards environmental, social and economic development. An exploratory qualitative research design was adopted, using an inductive approach to capture authentic insights directly from backpackers. Data were collected from 11 international backpacker tourists through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. Findings highlight that backpacker tourists' motivations are driven by "push" factors such as cultural immersion, social connection, adventure seeking and escapism, and "pull" factors including scenic landscapes, affordability, authentic experiences and local hospitality. Preferences focus on budget accommodation, public transport, nature-based activities and local cuisine, while challenges include infrastructure gaps, safety concerns and limited affordable sustainable options. The concept of "Incidental Sustainability" emerged as a result of the study, which describes the unintentional contributions to sustainability through backpacker travel behaviour. Overall, this study highlights the untapped potential of backpacker tourism in Sri Lanka. It encourages tourism authorities and businesses to understand, support and include backpackers in national tourism plans, making backpacker tourism a key path for Sri Lanka's sustainable tourism growth.

Keywords: backpacker tourism, incidental sustainability, sustainable tourism, tourists' motivations, travel preferences