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SRI LANKA'S TOURISM: AVOIDING BALI 2.0 BY BALANCING GROWTH WITH PRESERVATION

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Madura Thivanka Pathirana

INTRODUCTION

After being ravaged by the Easter Sunday attacks, the global COVID-19 pandemic, and the subsequent economic crisis, Sri Lanka's tourism sector is starting to bounce back (Furkhan, 2025). Tourism remains one of the major contributors to the country's GDP. It has a critical impact on the economy of the country, especially in foreign exchange earnings and employment generation (Jayasinghe, 2024). The Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) reported that tourist arrivals in 2024 grew by 38.07 percent compared to the previous year, surpassing two million, which marks the highest visitor arrival rate since 2019 (Daily FT, 2025). This increase in international visitors is alleviating some of the pressure being faced by the economy and reigniting hope for the future of the tourism industry (De Silva, 2025a).

The government of Sri Lanka has actively participated in the branding of the country as a tourist hub through several marketing initiatives (Furkhan, 2025). The deployment of ad campaigns, construction development, and changes in tourism legislation have significantly aided Sri Lanka in capturing new tourism markets. Emerging markets such as Poland, Bangladesh, and China have significantly contributed to the growth of tourists visiting Sri Lanka, helping to diversify the origins of international visitors and reduce dependence on traditional markets like India and Russia (Aktaş Çimen et al., 2024; IMF, 2024; Kumari, 2024; Wasantha & Dinushi, 2024).

Regardless of these positive trends, the nation is confronted with considerable challenges concerning its economic recovery, particularly the threat of over-tourism and commercialisation. Sri Lanka has always been a prize destination due to its cultural heritage, breathtaking natural beauty, and exceptional history. These alluring features of Sri Lanka could begin to fade due to the recovery of tourism in the country, which could result in the loss of the very essence that constitutes Sri Lanka's appeal. The experience of other nations with environmental degradation, overcrowding, and cultural desecration serves as a wake-up call highlighting the unsustainable nature of mass tourism. Sri Lanka, blessed with similar beauty and charm, risks being trapped in an unsolicited cage of automatic growth unless certain measures are adopted to promote sustainable economic development (Daily FT, 2024).

Sri Lanka's temples and tea plantations can be extremely appealing, but there is an emerging risk that these attractions will be converted into resources for mass tourism (Muthunaidelage & Vithanawasam, 2025). Jumbo-sized luxury hotels and all-inclusive resort-style developments targeted to foreigners are popular for business but usually do not blend into local cultures (Kangara et al., 2025). These resorts may overshadow the unique cultural and ecological aspects of the island (Abeyrathna et al., 2025). These projects, and many others concentrated on mass-market tourism, greatly endanger Sri Lanka's rich culture, traditions, and beautiful nature (Gajapathy et al., 2024; Sauf et al., 2015).

Excessive commercialisation undermines both the local way of life and the Sri Lankan experience. The increasing number of foreigners can at times create tension among the locals, especially when big international hotel companies and resorts begin to overpay local businesses for land, water, and other resources. If too loose

regulations are implemented that cater to the demands of foreign travellers and do not consider the locals, Sri Lanka could easily lose its allure as one of the most exceptional tourist locations in Asia (Daily FT, 2024).

Sri Lanka's tourism has previously relied on its cultural and ecological features, but it must use these features cautiously as the sector grows (Furkhan, 2025). The influx of tourists provides Sri Lanka with an excellent chance to improve its global reputation. Nevertheless, there is the risk of growth occurring at the expense of what makes Sri Lanka unique. Responsible policies and sustainable tourism can help protect Sri Lanka's natural and cultural resources for future populations (De Silva, 2025b).

THE RISK OF SRI LANKA BECOMING BALI 2.0

The tourism industry of Sri Lanka is on the brink of collapse if something is not done immediately. The country could travel down the path of massive over-saturation that leads to loss of culture, much as Bali did some years ago (ABC News, 2025). The island of Bali attracts large numbers of tourists, which has resulted in an overabundance of pollution, the destruction of coral reefs, and an overall loss of local identity due to commercialisation. Sri Lanka is beginning to face the same issues (Muthunaidelage & Vithanawasam, 2025). In Sri Lanka, the Southeast region, which was breathtakingly beautiful, has been transformed into an overly commercialised region. No longer are the beaches splendid; rather, they have turned into sites for an idealised version of tourism where local culture is obliterated by pointless consumerist culture. Sri Lanka is in dire straits due to the rapid transformation into a tourism driven economy (ABC News, 2025).

There is a growing sense of discontent among Sri Lankan citizens as well as underlying conflict, which can be traced back to the consequences of overzealous tourism development (Sooriyabandara & Hettiarachchi, 2024). Such development has increased pollution, and transformed national parks such as the Yala National Park, and the cultural city of Kandy, into commercialised sites of tourism. This has led to increased discontent amongst the citizens, which has put a strain on the already fragile infrastructure and deepened the erosion of the identity and nature-defining boundaries of the country (Muthunaidelage & Vithanawasam, 2025).

Bali's experience serves as an important lesson. In order to prevent Sri Lanka from heading in the same direction, the country needs to adopt a more proactive approach (ABC News, 2025). Sri Lanka's tourism should not be overly commercialised, while the positive effects of tourism must also be enjoyed socially and economically. As Sri Lanka develops, it is crucial for the government to impose regulations that prevent infrastructure development in ecologically sensitive areas. Striking a balance between tourism revenue and sustainable efforts will be critical for Sri Lanka's future (ABC News, 2025).

The phenomenon of over-tourism is a challenge for the Sri Lankan tourism sector as it exerts strong pressure on the country's natural and cultural capital. Sri Lanka needs to adopt sustainable tourism policies that encourage the protection of the environment and cultures as soon as possible.

METHODOLOGY

To effectively tackle these concerns around over-tourism and create an actionable plan, a framework was developed through a model capturing real-world insights from experts. This section describes how that model was built.

For the construction of the "Sustainable Tourism Model for Sri Lanka to Avoid Bali 2.0," a stakeholder consultation approach using focus group interviews was adopted with the intent of maintaining credibility and transparency. Data were collected to represent the critical constituents of the tourism industry in Sri Lanka. Semi-structured interviews were prepared to address issues revolving around the impact of tourism on local residents, the local environment, and the corresponding framework for development planning. The interview questions and guidelines were developed through a literature review on sustainable tourism, and overtourism and other tourism problems associated with Bali.

A total of 37 interviews were carried out from January to February 2025 with selected participants including members of the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA), local tourists and tourism officials, representatives from environmental NGOs, community leaders, and citizens living close to tourism hotspots. These people were invited to participate for their expertise and hands-on experience and to cover the diverse perspectives that were essential to the study. The focus group interviews were intended to develop an in-depth understanding of the gaps and possibilities of the tourism industry in Sri Lanka, and to ensure practical lessons to improve the model. The consultations were essential in making sure the model addressed the issues faced by people who were directly affected by tourism. They helped shape the model to be constructive in theory and in practice, advocating for sustainable tourism which could help manage future development and preserve the rich cultural and environmental heritage of Sri Lanka.

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM MODEL FOR SRI LANKA TO AVOID BALI 2.0

The model developed for this research, the Sustainable Tourism Model for Sri Lanka to Avoid Bali 2.0, reflects stakeholder input and integrates global best standards for sustainable tourism. The model shows ten core pillars that would enable Sri Lanka to strive for resilience and inclusivity in tourism. As presented in the model, each component has been translated into specific actions which are outlined in the later section entitled “Strategy Implementation Advice.” To operationalise this model, the next section presents foundational proposals from international experiences—especially those of Bali—tailored for Sri Lanka.

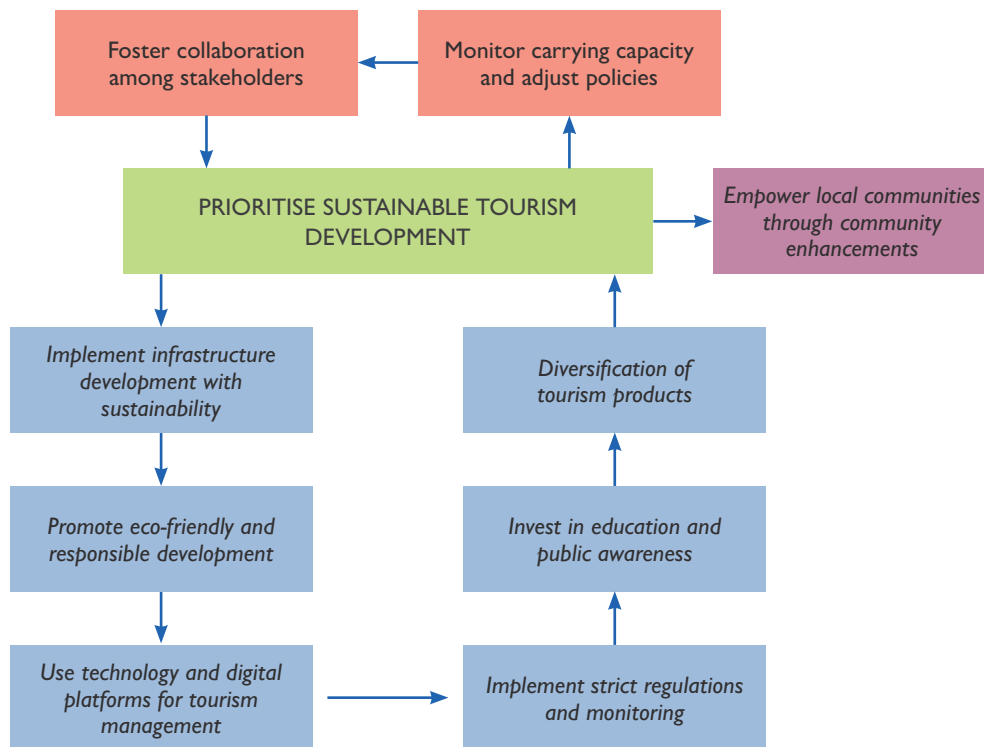


Figure 1. Sustainable tourism model for Sri Lanka to avoid Bali 2.0.

LESSONS FOR SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

One of the most crucial lessons we can learn from Bali is how to maintain a balance between tourism and the environment. Bali has suffered from excessive tourism which has caused water scarcity, land erosion, and the destruction of coral reefs (Utama et al., 2024). To avoid such scenarios in Sri Lanka, it is vital to focus on eco-tourism, alongside stringent measures that protect the nation's biodiversity by safeguarding its beaches, national parks, and forests, among other areas. Sri Lanka could also establish caps on visitors to certain sensitive regions (Suardhana et al., 2024). In addition, Sri Lanka could adopt green measures in the hospitality industry by promoting the use of renewable energy, minimising waste, and endorsing the production of sustainable food (Lestari et al., 2024).

Community-based tourism (CBT) has been very effective in combating overtourism in Bali. In this system, residents actively participate in managing tourism and ensure they receive profits from it (Utama et al., 2024). Sustaining Sri Lanka's tourism requires the local communities to be empowered similarly, which will help to distribute the profits more fairly. This might require educating the local people about tourism management, hospitality, and cultural preservation while offering services to tourists (Lestari et al., 2024). Moreover, CBT could be further implemented in rural and less popular regions, which would contribute to the development of these areas and alleviate the concentration of tourists in popular areas.

Sri Lanka needs to start focusing on alleviating the destructive impacts of mass tourism by varying its tourism products. Bali's over-dependency on luxury beach tourism, for instance, has been to the detriment of its society and environment. To mitigate similar problems, Sri Lanka can consider niche areas of the tourism market such as adventure tourism, cultural tours, wellness retreats, and eco tours. The cultural heritage and scenic beauty of Sri Lanka offer a strong base for such diversification. Instead of chasing mass tourism, the country should focus on sustainable, high-end tourism. These types of services can aid in the even distribution of tourism-generated revenue, minimising the negative effects associated with tourism in Sri Lanka (Lestari et al., 2024).

To cater for the flow of visitors into Sri Lanka as well as tourism diversification, specific sustainable infrastructure goals must be set to lay the groundwork for the country's future development. These goals focus on reducing ecological damage, mitigating climate change through equitable tourism access, and promoting pedestrian-friendly infrastructure with eco-friendly construction. Equity of access ensures that all individuals, regardless of background, have equal opportunities to benefit from tourism, while sustainable infrastructure helps protect the environment and fosters climate resilience (Jayasinghe & Walpola, 2024; Kumudhini & Vijesandiran, 2024). As emphasised in recent literature, Sri Lanka's tourism future depends not only on expanding physical access but also on integrating environmental and social safeguards into development decisions (Jayasinghe & Walpola, 2024; Kumudhini & Vijesandiran, 2024). How these sustainable goals could steer infrastructure development is discussed in the subsequent sections.

LESSONS FOR INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT WITH SUSTAINABILITY IN MIND

Sustainable tourism infrastructure development will mean constructing systems and facilities that have the least negative environmental impact and provide unrestrained aesthetic value for present and future generations of Sri Lankan society. In this case, this means improving land cover (in particular, limiting the range of tourism development), adopting eco-friendly construction standards and energy and water conservation. It also involves ensuring growth and development in rural and underdeveloped areas on the outskirts, helping to balance the benefits of tourism more evenly across the country. In addition, the government should also proactively support green infrastructure developments, such as waste management systems and renewable energy facilities, to ensure the environmental impacts of increased tourism will not be detrimental to the natural ecosystem.

In this regard, these aims, which highlight the need for economic change based on emerging literature and stakeholder criticism of the policy, should be integrated into this phase of planning. (Jayasinghe & Walpola, 2024; Kumudhini & Vijesandiran, 2024). The strategies discussed below show how Sri Lanka can step towards these goals in infrastructure planning.

Sri Lanka has the ability to advocate for responsible tourism by promoting sustainable modes of transport like bicycles, electric vehicles, and public transport (Suardhana et al., 2024). Tourists need to be made aware of how to lower their carbon emissions, appreciate local cultures, and refrain from unhealthy interactions like discarding waste or disturbing nature. Sri Lanka can also create “green” lodging certificates to identify “eco-friendly” establishments so that tourists can easily recognise those who comply with sustainability criteria.

Digital technologies can be very important in controlling the movement of tourists and making sure that the industry is preserved. In Bali, the absence of real-time information on the numbers and activities of tourists created problems in managing the flow of visitors (Rumani et al., 2024). Sri Lanka is in a position to introduce smart tourism via booking engines that could monitor visitor counts and offer real-time information regarding the occupancy of hotels and the availability of other services. This information can be utilised to impose quotas on visitors for delicate areas, disperse tourists among various regions, and issue tailored recommendations to avoid excessive concentrations of tourists. The Sri Lankan Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) or a designated government agency would oversee the implementation and management of this system, ensuring that data is acted upon effectively to promote sustainable tourism practices.

In order for the tourism sector in Sri Lanka to be sustainable, the country needs to set regulations and monitor the environmental and social costs of the industry. Regulations have always been an issue in Bali, especially with the growth of unregulated property rentals through platforms such as Airbnb (Lestari et al., 2024). Sri Lanka should develop regulations that reach even informal accommodation providers so as to maintain safety and environmental standards. There should also be periodic monitoring and evaluation of tourism activities so that their harmful consequences are limited and the positive impacts on the local community are guaranteed (Salam et al., 2024).

Education is a key component of a sustainable tourism system. In Bali, chronic ignorance among tourists and locals of the consequences of visitors for the environment and culture has hurt Bali tourism (Suardhana et al., 2024). Sri Lanka needs to design and implement public awareness initiatives to teach foreigners and residents alike about the country’s environment and culture and why they need protective measures. These campaigns could be implemented through collaboration with schools, local communities, and tourism bodies to make sustainability a distinguishing feature of Sri Lankan tourism.

In sustainable tourism, destinations have a defined “carrying capacity” which refers to the maximum number of visitors that a place can sustain without compromising its culture, environment, or economy (Zekan et al., 2022). Sri Lanka, like any other country with a developing tourism industry, needs to constantly review its tourism carrying capacity, which may include modifying policies to ensure that tourism growth does not exceed the limits which can be sustainably managed by the environment and local people.

Collaboration is a multi-dimensional process which Sri Lanka needs to encourage from different fronts such as government, program implementers, local people, and tourists. As observed in Bali’s mass tourism struggle, uncoordinated strategies can have the opposite result to that intended; in Bali’s case, inefficiency (Widiati et al., 2021). Sri Lanka should formulate and implement a multi-stakeholder policy geared towards the sustainable development of tourism so that all sectors of the tourism industry, including the government, private sector, society, and tourists are encouraged to participate in joint decision-making processes. This kind of dialogue would enable the active involvement of diverse representatives.

If Sri Lanka avoids becoming Bali 2.0, the country can become a model for sustainable tourism on a global scale. By proactively engaging local communities and practicing responsible tourism, planning and development in Sri Lanka will aid in the sustainable growth of the tourism industry without losing the country’s heritage and authenticity.

The recommendations above provide a general framework, but the following section aims to provide detailed guidelines on how to implement the model with practical measures for Sri Lanka.

STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION ADVICE

The model (Figure 1), Sustainable Tourism Model for Sri Lanka to Avoid Bali 2.0, focuses on community-based tourism, responsible asset development, and the preservation of nature and culture. The model's step by step guide will focus on the main pillars listed in Figure 1.

The first step of the model is to implement a self-sustainable tourism development strategy, which corresponds to the pillar, "Prioritise Sustainable Tourism Development." This is defined as creating a plan that ensures tourism will not harm the ecology or the culture of the area. Sri Lanka's tourism authorities need to embed sustainability into the heart of the strategic planning process. Every single detail of tourism development, from infrastructure projects to marketing campaigns, needs to not only consider but also integrate environmental protection as well as cultural preservation. New developments in the tourism sector should embrace—rather, require—sustainable measures centred around waste reduction, carbon footprint minimisation, and use of sustainable energy. For instance, recently constructed resorts, as well as other infrastructure, ought to be compliant with green building regulations. Additionally, there needs to be a system to ensure the sustainable management of water and energy resources.

Once sustainability is achieved, the next priority to address is community-based tourism for self-empowerment. This correlates with the pillar, "Empower Local Communities Through Community Enhancements" in Figure 1. During this phase, local communities should fully participate in planning and have control over the activities related to tourism development and management. Community-based tourism increases the income earning potential of the local community and encourages the protection of their heritage. To achieve this, vocational training in hospitality, tourism management, and sustainable practices needs to be implemented. Locally participating as artisans, farmers, and small entrepreneurial businesspeople provides opportunities for these people to be incorporated into the tourism value chain, which in turn enhances the distribution of tourism revenue so that culture and the economy are impacted positively.

It is clear that Sri Lanka still relies heavily on traditional tourism options such as resorts and luxurious star-class hotels. Rather, the focus should be on developing cultural heritage tourism, adventure tourism, eco-tourism, wellness tourism, and other specialised types of tourism. Specialised marketing is needed that will promote, for instance, trekking in the central hills, exploring the island's ancient temples, and eating marvellous food as experiences in Sri Lanka.

For this stage of development, an additional critical milestone is "Implement Infrastructure Development with Sustainability." To meet the increasing demand from tourists visiting Sri Lanka, there is a need for roads, airports, and utilities. Planning and development of such infrastructure should take into account the concepts of sustainable development, which includes the development and expansion of public transport, energy-efficient accommodation, and modern multi-purpose eco-friendly waste disposal facilities. Furthermore, the government needs to collaborate with the private sector to make prospective development initiatives more nature-friendly and conservation-focused. The principles governing urban development should be improved, and regional policies should ensure that all feasible building ventures undergo additional environmental scrutiny for compliance.

The objective for the fifth step, "Encourage Green and Responsible Eco-Tourism," corresponds with Figure 1, "Promotion of Eco-Friendly and Responsible Tourism." This step is dependent on the success of the previous steps, putting the responsibility on tourists for self-regulation. Furthermore, it would be important that the tourists are welcomed to observe and participate in local customs and traditions in a way that fosters sensitivity and respect among tourists and the host country.

As Sri Lanka moves towards sustainable tourism, the country is putting greater focus on technology and digital platforms for tourism management, as advocated by "Use Technology and Digital Platforms for Tourism

Management" in Figure 1. There is also the option to develop pre-trip experiences using augmented or virtual reality technologies, where prospective tourists can view and interact with several of Sri Lanka's attractions prior to traveling. These systems could help manage tourism demand in real time and reduce the risks of overtourism.

It is recommended that governments monitor and regulate tourism for sustainability. This corresponds with "Implement Strict Regulations and Monitoring" in Figure 1. This requires creating a systematic approach for managing the waste, construction, and other environment-related activities. There should also be complete checks and audits on tourism companies to ensure that such businesses observe the protective laws associated with the environment and people. The effectiveness of these regulations would depend on the Sri Lankan government adopting a system of stiff penalties for infringements against protective legislation and ensuring adequate enforcement resources and personnel.

In addition, the government should promote education at all levels and through public campaigns, consistent with the "Invest in Education and Public Awareness" part of the model. The general public, tourism sector employees, and tourists should be educated on the importance of sustainable tourism. Educational campaigns aimed at parents who are visiting with their children can also alter their behaviour towards the use of plastics, lodgings, and local customs. Other government branches can collaborate with the school system to develop seminars, lectures, and other information materials devoted to ecology and the protection of culture heritage.

To achieve a sustainable model, Sri Lanka needs to monitor its tourist carrying capacity and adapt government strategies accordingly, as depicted in Figure 1, "Monitor Carrying Capacity and Adjust Policies." This requires estimating the degradation thresholds for various tourist regions and sites, meaning how many visitors can be managed without any environmental, social, and economic impacts. Such assessments could help control the number of visitors to prevent over-tourism while ensuring that tourist attractions remain functional and valuable in the future.

Achieving sustainable tourism development requires integrating diverse groups, including government, local communities, businesses, and tourists. This step corresponds with "Foster Collaboration Among Stakeholders." Working together ensures the integration of all stakeholders' interests which would be vital for responding adequately to the populations where tourism is being developed and serves the national interest. Joint workshops and stakeholder meetings would make sure that all efforts directed toward sustainable tourism were successful in the long term.

CONCLUSION

Sri Lanka's tourism industry has positive prospects, despite great difficulties in recovering from the effects of the Easter Sunday attacks, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the economic crisis. On one hand, the development of tourism is aiding the economy, but on the other hand, there is a danger of excessive commercialisation and environmental damage. Sri Lanka risks becoming like Bali, which was once a greatly admired destination but has lost its charm due to poor planning and degraded authenticity and cultural richness. With properly implemented sustainable tourism policies, infrastructure improvements, and increased investment in eco-tourism and luxury tourism, Sri Lanka can avoid the worst-case scenarios of excessive visitor numbers and overexploitation. Sustainable tourism is what Sri Lanka needs to continue being a recognised tourism destination. The country can adopt responsible growth and diversify the eco-tourism and development of the regions, while still preserving its cultural and environmental resources.

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