

Challenges and issues in promoting Buddhist tourism: A case of the North Central Province, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The tourism industry features prominently in the post-war Sri Lanka. International tourists largely visit Sri Lanka for the purpose of pleasure, business, visiting friends, and relatives. However, little attention is paid to religious purposes of foreign tourists visiting Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is an island which is rich in religious value systems, particularly related to Buddhism. The North Central Province, in particular, is rich in Buddhist heritages. Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, two World Heritage Sites, served as the ancient centers of the Buddhist civilization in the island. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to identify the prevailing challenges and issues in developing Buddhist tourism in North Central Province in Sri Lanka as a part of the national cultural tourism plan. The research was carried out using qualitative approach and 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted with academics, government authorities, tour guides and residents in the area to collect qualitative data. The thematic analysis of the collected data indicated that the key challenges and issues as lack of utilization of isolated Buddhist heritages for tourism industry, lack of community participation, limited visitor facilities, funding and access barriers. To promote Buddhist tourism in the province, suggestions can be made for encouraging a tourist-friendly community, enhancing socio-economic conditions, improving infrastructure/visitor facilities and efficient involvement by the authorities. The future research may consider the potential of untapped Buddhist resources to promote Buddhist tourism in the province.

Keywords: *Buddhist heritages, Buddhist tourism, Cultural tourism, North Central Province, Tourism industry*