



Possibilities of Popularizing and Commercializing Hitchhiking Tourism in Sri Lanka

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Hitchhiking defines as strangers asking for free rides to reach their desired destinations. Hitchhiking tourism is a relatively new phenomenon in Sri Lanka and yet widely used in the western world and popular among young travellers. The concept became more popular with the advancement of social media which allows travellers to share their experiences and adventures with a larger audience. However, limited studies have focused on hitchhiking tourism in Sri Lanka even though it is one of the popular and affordable tourist destinations in the world. The purpose of this research is to identify the experiences of hitchhiker tourists and explore the possibilities of popularizing and commercializing hitchhiking tourism in Sri Lanka. Qualitative research methodology has been used in the research and Netnography was the data collection tool. The study analyzed the data collected from an Indian tourist's hitchhiking experience from Weligama to Ella, Sri Lanka and comments from 698 people all over the world. Thematic and SWOT analysis was employed to analyze the data. Some of the significant strengths were Sri Lankan people's friendliness and hospitality, opportunity to explore unpopular tourist destinations, tourists' enthusiasm with the local culture and high potentiality of hitchhiking as a sustainable transport method in Sri Lanka. Weaknesses are poor awareness of hitchhiking, miscommunication prejudices of locals on tourists. Among Opportunities hitchhiking was found to be the easiest ways to promote Sri Lankan tourism to a larger audience; the experiences seem more real and authentic. The unwarranted safety of travellers, especially for females, fuel crisis and poor infrastructure, bad experiences and comments of former travellers were among the identified threats. In conclusion, awareness of hitchhiking will have a profound impact on Sri Lankan tourism. Further, there is a possibility of developing a mobile application for hitchhiking which commercializes the nonprofit activity and enhances the safety of the travellers.

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