

Research Article 05

Spiritual Tourism and Rural Development in Sri Lanka: Potentials, Current Utilization, and Lessons from Global Experiences

G.G.T.Y. Gunathilake¹, S.P. Dodantenna², K.P.D.S. Kandangamuwa³,
R.H. Banduge⁴

¹*Department of Management, NSBM Green University, Sri Lanka*

^{2,4}*Department of Marketing and Tourism, NSBM Green University, Sri Lanka*

³*Department of Health Sciences, NSBM Green University, Sri Lanka*

¹<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4349-5838>

²<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-1492-9482>

³<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8084-2472>

⁴<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-9034-8384>

Abstract

Spiritual Tourism (ST) is one of the fastest-growing niches in global tourism, embracing pilgrimage, wellness, heritage, and transformational travel. It is predominantly rural in character, linking sacred landscapes, monastic retreats, and pilgrimage trails with peripheral communities. Sri Lanka has a comparative advantage with sacred sites like Sri Pāda, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Kandy, Kataragama, Madhu, and meditation centres in abundance. Moreover, despite this richness, ST generates under USD 50 million annually and accounts for under 0.5% of international arrivals, and local pilgrim flows remain poorly inserted into rural value chains. This article evaluates the potential of ST for rural development in Sri Lanka through a comparative and indicator-based approach. Drawing on secondary data, the article compares Sri Lanka with four similar cases: Spain's Camino de Santiago, India's Uttarakhand circuits, Japan's Shikoku pilgrimage, and Romania's Moldavia monasteries. These show how rural economies are benefited by MSME (Micro-Small-and-Medium-Enterprises), engagement, infrastructural development, and custodianship of culture. Prolific hotspots such as Saudi Arabia, Italy, and Israel are not regarded due to their negligible rural spillovers. Scenario modelling recommends that Sri Lanka could increase ST receipts from under USD 50 million to 218–571 million annually by prioritising enhanced branding, circuit development, credentialing systems, rural infrastructure upgrades, and MSME integration, while institutionalising stewardship frameworks. Outcomes position ST as an unrealised rural regeneration, social cohesion, and heritage conservation. The study contributes by placing ST at the intersection of economic, psychosocial, and cultural effects, and by mapping pathways for Sri Lanka to become a regional centre for transformative travel.

Keywords: MSMEs, pilgrimage, rural development, spiritual tourism, Sri Lanka

Introduction

For centuries, Tourism has been and certainly will be one of the most significant parts of national, regional, and in some cases rural economies around the world, having its impact on employment to small business development, and infrastructure establishment. It accounts for about 10% of world GDP and one job in ten, which indicates its structural role in development pathways (UNWTO, 2024). Within this vast industry, niche forms of tourism are taking on more prominence as destinations strive to diversify products, enhance resilience, and distribute benefits more equitably. Among them, spiritual tourism travel motivated by religious devotion, contemplative practice, or a desire for psychological transformation has emerged as one of the fastest-growing segments in the world (Buzinde, 2020).

The Global Rise of Spiritual Tourism

Spiritual tourism embraces a wide variety of practices from traditional pilgrimages to wellness breaks and transformative travel. Spiritual tourism intersects but differs from religious tourism, which is often restricted to ritual observance and institutional affiliation (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). Spiritual tourism, in contrast to religious tourism, integrates heritage, nature, and wellness, thereby appealing to both practising believers and secular meaning seekers alike (Singh, 2009; Norman, 2012).

Spiritual tourism's draw is that it provides integrated well-being care for physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs simultaneously (Smith & Puczkó, 2008). Contemporary issues such as high levels of stress, prevalence of crises and widespread disruptions, and consumer tiredness have made people increasingly seek authenticity, mindfulness, and immersion in nature and culture (Clerici et al., 2023; Ghimire, 2021). In turn, spiritual travel is expanding to new places of spirituality beyond established pilgrimage destinations, including meditation retreats, yoga resorts, pilgrimage circuits, and integrative wellness-spirit packages.

Economically, religious tourism generates massive spillovers in rural society. Spain's Camino de Santiago regenerated peripheral towns via hostels and crafts industries (Graave et al., 2017) while India's circuit schemes, particularly those in Uttarakhand, have diversified rural employment and increased household incomes, driven by pilgrim demand (Government of India, 2025). Romania's Moldavia monasteries illustrate how religious clusters reduce poverty and finance infrastructure in border areas (Guriță & Scortescu, 2023). Combined, these instances demonstrate that spiritual tourism is not merely a religious or cultural phenomenon but an actual instrument of rural regeneration.

Spiritual Tourism in the Sri Lankan Context

Sri Lanka is exceptionally well-positioned for spiritual tourism, boasting a multi-faith sacred geography and a long history of pilgrimage traditions. Sri Lanka's key spiritual tourism assets are both diverse and deeply embedded in its cultural and religious landscape. Sri Pāda (Adam's Peak) serves as a mountain pilgrimage site attracting over two million domestic devotees annually and is revered for its multi-religious significance. The UNESCO-listed ancient capitals of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa showcase Buddhist reliquaries and heritage landscapes, while Kandy's Temple of the Tooth Relic stands among the most significant Theravāda Buddhist shrines globally, anchoring the renowned Esala Perahera festival. Multi-faith shrines such as Kataragama, Madhu Church, and Koneswaram Temple reflect the island's pluralistic traditions, drawing Hindu, Buddhist, and Catholic pilgrims alike. Complementing these are meditation retreats such as Nilambe and Kanduboda, which welcome both international and domestic seekers of mindfulness, and rural Ayurveda and yoga

wellness retreats that integrate spiritual practices with holistic healing, thereby expanding Sri Lanka's appeal to wellness-focused travellers.

Despite this abundance, Sri Lanka's performance in spiritual tourism remains limited. SLTDA (2024) reports that of 2,053,465 international arrivals in 2024, only 0.2% (around 4,100 visitors) cited "Religious and Cultural" purposes as their primary motivation. In contrast, destinations such as India or Spain attract hundreds of thousands of international spiritual tourists annually. Domestic pilgrim flows, though large, remain poorly integrated into rural livelihoods. Vendors along the Sri Pāda trail or craft producers in Anuradhapura often operate informally, with minimal linkages to structured circuits, digital platforms, or international branding.

This underutilization is striking given Sri Lanka's recognition by the UNWTO (2011) as a leading Asian destination for religious and spiritual tourism. It also contrasts with its competitive position in adjacent niches such as wellness and nature tourism (Umashani & Jayawardena, 2025). The gap between potential and performance highlights the need for systematic analysis and policy intervention.

Post-Crisis Imperatives

The urgency of repositioning Sri Lanka's spiritual tourism is amplified by recent crises. The 2019 Easter Sunday bombings undermined religious tourism and revealed vulnerabilities in site security. The COVID-19 pandemic devastated international arrivals but simultaneously boosted global demand for wellness and mindfulness-oriented travel (Jayathilaka & Samarathunga, 2023; Choe & Mahyuni, 2023). Sri Lanka's 2022–2023 economic crisis further exposed the fragility of mass leisure segments and the need for resilient, community-centred alternatives.

Spiritual tourism is comparatively crisis resilient. Pilgrim practices such as Sri Pāda continue despite economic and political turbulence. Retreats and meditation centres provide psychological refuge during times of uncertainty. Globally, demand for wellness-spiritual travel has expanded as individuals seek healing from trauma, stress, and existential anxiety (Clerici et al., 2023). Leveraging this resilience positions Sri Lanka to diversify its tourism economy while contributing to rural regeneration and social cohesion.

Academic and Practical Contributions

This study addresses three key gaps. First, while Sri Lanka has abundant literature on cultural tourism and heritage preservation, few studies have systematically assessed the role and rural development potential of spiritual tourism (Jayasinghe & Wimalaratana, 2020). Second, global comparative lessons, particularly from destinations such as Spain, India, Japan, and Romania, have not been applied in a structured way to Sri Lanka's policy and practice. Third, despite international evidence on motivations, experiences and cultural meanings associated with spiritual tourism (Buzinde, 2020; Norman, 2012; Singh, 2009), most of the local scholarship remains descriptive, focusing on heritage significance, visitor perceptions, and site-specific narratives (Jayasinghe & Wimalaratana, 2020). Notably, no predictive or scenario-based modelling to estimate economic potential and rural spillovers was reported. Despite international evidence on the quantified impact of spiritual tourism on MSME (Graave et al., 2017; Ghimire, 2021; Guriță & Scortescu, 2023), no such attempts were found in the Sri Lankan context. This study addresses this gap by evaluating Sri Lanka's underutilised spiritual tourism sector through an indicator-based comparative analysis grounded in international best practices.

Accordingly, the paper makes three key contributions. First, it offers an empirical assessment by applying indicator-based analysis to quantify Sri Lanka's current underutilization of spiritual tourism and to model potential receipts under different capture scenarios. Second, it provides comparative learning by examining four high-relevance international cases: Spain, India, Japan, and Romania to identify transferable mechanisms such as credentialing systems, circuit investments, stewardship, and MSME integration. Third, it advances policy articulation by outlining concrete recommendations for the development of circuits, the introduction of credentialing, the empowerment of MSMEs, the use of digital facilitation, and the establishment of stewardship frameworks that preserve sacred integrity while fostering inclusive rural prosperity.

Research Objectives

The research objectives of the study were formulated as below;

- To assess the potential of spiritual tourism in Sri Lanka as a catalyst for rural development.
- To evaluate the current utilisation of spiritual tourism resources and identify key performance gaps.
- To compare Sri Lanka's spiritual tourism landscape with international best practices from leading destinations.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Spiritual Tourism - Scope, Boundaries and Evolution

The scholarly conversation on spiritual tourism has evolved from a narrow emphasis on confessional pilgrimage to encompassing a wide array of practices and motivations that sit at the intersection of religion, wellness, heritage, and personal transformation. Early work in tourism studies typically framed religious tourism as travel driven primarily by faith obligations, ritual observance, or affiliation with institutional religion (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). Over time, however, researchers observed a broader cultural shift in which seekers are often not strictly attached to institutional religion and travel to pursue meaning, personal growth, mindfulness, and well-being.

This broader phenomenon is captured under spiritual tourism, which scholars describe as holistic and hybrid in motivation and practice. Smith and Puczko (2008) locate spiritual tourism within holistic tourism that integrates body–mind–spirit outcomes; Singh (2009) define the spiritual tourist as a person who leaves the usual environment in search of spiritual meaning and/or development, which may be religious or non-religious in character. Norman (2012) proposes five archetypal experiences: healing, experimental, quest, retreat, and collective that span the spectrum from individual interiority to socially shared ritual life.

This conceptual expansion aligns with broader theoretical currents in tourism: the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), the search for authenticity (Wang, 1999), and re-enchantment in post-secular societies. In practice, spiritual tourism intersects wellness, heritage, and nature-based travel, and its spatiality is disproportionately rural monastic complexes, sacred mountains, forest hermitages, heritage towns, and dispersed pilgrimage trails. This rural emphasis renders spiritual tourism especially relevant to inclusive development agendas in peripheral regions where conventional mass tourism remains thin or volatile.

Branches and typologies - What Counts as Spiritual Tourism?

Typologies play a crucial role in clarifying the diverse and evolving field of spiritual tourism. Building on the frameworks proposed by Duran-Sánchez et al. (2018), Ghimire (2021) and, and Norman (2012), five overlapping branches can be identified. Pilgrimage tourism encompasses traditional and contemporary journeys to shrines and sacred sites, such as the Camino de Santiago in Spain or Sri Pāda in Sri Lanka, often structured around ritual milestones and symbolic credentialing. Retreat tourism, by contrast, emphasises immersive stays focused on meditation, mindfulness, silence, and spiritual instruction, commonly located in monasteries or natural sanctuaries, as seen in Vipassana or Zen retreats. A third branch involves wellness-spiritual fusions, where practices such as Ayurveda, yoga, and other therapeutic modalities are integrated with spiritual reflection to foster mind-body balance in tranquil environments. Heritage-spiritual encounters highlight engagements with sacred landscapes, temples, reliquaries, and ritual traditions as forms of cultural heritage, exemplified by UNESCO heritage cities such as Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, and Kandy. Finally, transformational journeys represent individualised quests for meaning, renewal, or existential recalibration, often combining elements of pilgrimage, retreat, and wellness. In the Sri Lankan context, all five branches are evident: Sri Pāda as a multi-faith pilgrimage, Nilambe and Kanduboda as retreat centres, rural Ayurveda-yoga retreats, heritage-spiritual encounters in UNESCO-listed sites, and nature-based itineraries that foster transformational experiences. Collectively, these examples suggest that Sri Lanka's comparative advantage lies not in privileging a single modality but in advancing an integrated portfolio of spiritual tourism products that can contribute meaningfully to rural development.

Demand Drivers - Motivations, Meanings, and Post-Crisis Dynamics

Spiritual tourism is driven by both push factors, such as stress, identity search, and the quest for meaning, and pull factors, including sacred landscapes, authenticity, and opportunities for ritual participation (Buzinde, 2020). Its appeal lies not only in economic benefits but also in psychological and social outcomes: evidence shows that meditation and retreat tourism enhance mindfulness, emotional regulation, and well-being (Manjula et al., 2024; Outschoorn et al., 2024), while pilgrimages foster social cohesion by bridging class, caste, and ethnic divides (Karthilingam & Kannan, 2020; Ramanujam & Sharma, 2024). These intangible benefits strengthen community resilience and stewardship, while post-crisis conditions such as the COVID-19 pandemic have further increased demand for wellness-oriented travel, highlighting spiritual tourism's relative resilience and strategic value for Sri Lanka (Clerici et al., 2023; Choe & Mahyuni, 2023).

Supply Side and Destination Design - From Routes to Credentialing

On the supply side, destinations that successfully translate spiritual flows into rural development often adopt a set of interrelated design pillars. Route design and wayfinding are particularly significant, as pilgrim circuits and trails distribute visitor flows across rural settlements, stimulating demand for small-scale services such as inns, cafés, and guiding, a strategy central to the revival of rural towns along the Camino de Santiago (Graave et al., 2017). Closely linked is the use of credentialing and ritual milestones, including passports, stamps, and certificates (e.g., the Compostela in Spain or temple stamp books in Japan), which provide a symbolic structure, enhance motivation, encourage repeat visitation, and generate word-of-mouth, while also offering destinations valuable data for management. Interpretation and curation further elevate experiences by moving beyond architectural appreciation to storytelling, cultural mediation, and the narration of living traditions, thereby strengthening both visitor satisfaction and community legitimacy. Stewardship and governance constitute

another critical pillar, whereby co-management models among religious custodians, local governments, and micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) safeguard sacred integrity, ensure equitable benefit sharing, and mitigate conflict. More recently, digital facilitation has emerged as a complementary mechanism, with tools such as e-registration, itinerary apps, credential tracking, safety alerts, and multilingual content enabling destinations not only large but also small-scale programs to reduce friction, monitor flows, and integrate MSMEs more effectively into tourism markets.

Rural Development Mechanisms - Value Chains, MSMEs, and Inclusion

Spiritual tourism's rural development promise rests on the structure of its value chains. Because pilgrim travel unfolds across dispersed rural geographies, expenditure naturally flows to micro and small enterprises rather than to urban enclaves. Empirical work shows the largest multipliers accrue through accommodation, food service, crafts, guiding, and local transport, all typically delivered by MSMEs (Graave et al., 2017; OECD, 2017). Key mechanisms through which spiritual tourism drives rural development include MSME income and employment, as family-run guesthouses and eateries capture nightly and daily expenditure, craft vendors and guides monetise cultural knowledge, and small transport providers such as three-wheelers, vans, and local buses gain steady demand. Pilgrim seasons also promote household diversification, providing counter-cyclical income for farming families and helping to smooth livelihood shocks (Government of India, 2025). Infrastructure spillovers are significant as well, with circuit upgrades in roads, sanitation, wayfinding, and connectivity benefiting residents year-round rather than only pilgrims (Guriță & Scortescu, 2023). Spiritual tourism also fosters gender inclusion, since women frequently lead activities in crafts, food service, and homestays, thereby enhancing their household bargaining power and community leadership. Finally, it contributes to cultural conservation by tying earnings to ritual continuity, which incentivises custodians to preserve temples, processions, and intangible heritage. Risks must be acknowledged: over-commercialisation can erode sacredness; unmanaged waste and crowding degrade environments; inequitable benefits may trigger community resistance. Effective carrying-capacity management, codes of conduct, and benefit-sharing agreements are therefore part of the development toolkit. Tourism MSMEs, like other service-driven enterprises, require strong employee competencies and focused work behaviours to deliver authentic experiences. Sri Lankan research on competency frameworks for site-based roles (Gunathilake & Jayasooriya, 2021) and on multidimensional employee work focus (Gunathilake & Jayasooriya, 2022b) highlights the importance of aligning individual and organisational capabilities with performance. These insights are relevant for spiritual tourism MSMEs, where service quality and authenticity are critical for sustaining visitor satisfaction.

High-Relevance International Cases

A substantial body of literature examines spiritual tourism across diverse contexts, yet for Sri Lanka's rural development agenda, four international cases provide particularly relevant insights. In Spain, the Camino de Santiago has become a paradigmatic model of route design and credentialing, where the Compostela certificate, combined with dense wayfinding systems and Albergue networks, effectively disperses flows. Official statistics recorded 446,338 Compostelas in 2024 (Oficina del Peregrino, 2024), with economic studies estimating €60–100 million in rural gross value added, largely concentrated in small inns, caf  s, craft workshops, and local logistics (Graave et al., 2017). The Camino illustrates how credentialing can foster community among pilgrims, generate predictable demand for MSMEs, and enhance the visibility of small towns. In India, the Uttarakhand circuits exemplify a policy-driven approach under the Government of India's PRASHAD program, which prioritises sanitation

infrastructure, shelters, and connectivity in pilgrimage towns. Surveys indicate that 44.2% of domestic visitors report pilgrimage as their primary motivation (Government of India, 2025), and outcomes include employment diversification, MSME growth, and improved amenities. Japan's Shikoku 88-temple circuit integrates custodianship of temples with modern facilitation mechanisms such as maps, transport networks, and stamp books, sustaining rural inns, buses, and crafts while safeguarding intangible heritage. This case underscores the importance of stewardship, ensuring sacred continuity and community legitimacy. Romania's Moldavia monasteries provide a further example, where research highlights poverty reduction and infrastructure upgrades in border regions associated with monastery tourism clusters (Guriță & Scortescu, 2023). Even at more modest volumes compared with the Camino or Hajj, the cluster-based design and local procurement strategies in Moldavia generate meaningful employment and amenity gains. Taken together, these cases reveal a common architecture of credentialing, circuit development, MSME integration, stewardship, and systematic measurement, elements that hold strong transferability to the Sri Lankan context.

Why Exclude Saudi Arabia, Italy, and Israel?

This study deliberately excludes three high-profile spiritual destinations as Saudi Arabia (Mecca–Medina), Italy (Rome–Vatican/Assisi), and Israel (Jerusalem), on methodological grounds relevant to rural development. In Saudi Arabia, the Hajj and Umrah are unparalleled in scale, yet the system is highly urban, state-managed, and corporate-serviced, with economic gains concentrated in Mecca and Medina rather than dispersed across rural supply chains (Henderson, 2011). Initiatives such as the Pilgrim Experience Program under Vision 2030 prioritise mega-infrastructure and digital facilitation within urban nodes, rather than developing rural circuits. In Italy, while Rome, the Vatican, and Assisi receive substantial religious visitation, the economic geography remains largely urban-heritage centric, and evidence of systematic rural spillovers comparable to the Camino is limited (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). Similarly, in Israel, faith tourism is focused on Jerusalem and major urban shrines, with the literature emphasising urban heritage management and political sensitivities over rural livelihood integration (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). These exclusions are not judgments on the importance of these destinations but reflect deliberate scope delimitations: the study aims to identify transferable mechanisms for Sri Lanka's rural development, justifying the focus on Spain, India, Japan, and Romania, where empirical evidence of rural spillovers is more robust.

Measurement, Indicators, and Data Challenges

Robust policy depends on robust measurement, yet spiritual tourism is difficult to quantify. National tourism surveys rarely disaggregate spiritual motivation beyond coarse "religious/cultural" categories; multi-purpose trips (e.g., culture + retreat + beach) complicate classification; and domestic pilgrim flows are often uncoun ted.

Comparative literature highlights the need for mixed indicators that capture visitor flows and motivations, site-level volumes such as pilgrim counts and credential issuance, expenditure profiles including length of stay, daily spend, and MSME shares, as well as rural livelihood outcomes, heritage conservation, and social cohesion. In Sri Lanka, however, the absence of a dedicated spiritual tourism module means that most available information is limited to aggregate SLTDA statistics, UNESCO site notes, and scattered academic studies. This restricts the precision of scenario modelling and underscores the importance of improved surveys, pilgrim credentialing systems, and MSME panels to generate more accurate and inclusive impact assessments.

Sri Lanka-Specific Literature - Assets, Constraints, and Gaps

Spiritual tourism is shaped by both internal push factors, such as stress, burnout, and the search for identity and meaning and external pull factors like sacred landscapes, perceived authenticity, contemplative atmospheres, and opportunities for ritual participation (Buzinde, 2020). Beyond its economic role, it provides important psychological and social benefits. Empirical studies show that meditation and retreat tourism enhance mindfulness, emotional regulation, and overall well-being (Manjula et al., 2024; Outschoorn et al., 2024), while pilgrimages act as social levellers, bridging divides of class, caste, and ethnicity to promote cohesion and collective identity (Karthilingam & Kannan, 2020; Ramanujam & Sharma, 2024). These intangible outcomes strengthen community resilience and support the stewardship of sacred landscapes, making spiritual tourism a uniquely multidimensional development pathway. Post-crisis dynamics further highlight its strategic value: following the COVID-19 pandemic, global demand for wellness- and meaning-oriented travel surged, underscoring the resilience of spiritual tourism compared to mass leisure tourism (Clerici et al., 2023; Choe & Mahyuni, 2023). For Sri Lanka, this convergence of psychological, social, and economic impacts positions spiritual tourism as both an underutilised resource and a potentially transformative driver of rural regeneration.

Ethical Stewardship and Carrying Capacity

The literature consistently warns that commodification and overtourism threaten the sanctity of sacred spaces, risking alienation of custodians and environmental degradation. To address these challenges, best practice highlights participatory governance involving religious custodians and community leaders, the enforcement of visitor codes of conduct, carrying-capacity planning to prevent congestion, and benefit-sharing mechanisms that sustain cultural custodianship and local livelihoods. Ultimately, ethical stewardship is inseparable from practical competitiveness: destinations that preserve authenticity and empower custodians not only safeguard sacred integrity but also secure greater legitimacy, visitor satisfaction, and repeat visitation (Collins-Kreiner, 2010).

Synthesis: Propositions for Sri Lanka

Synthesising the literature yields five propositions that inform both the empirical analysis and policy recommendations for Sri Lanka. First, a hybrid portfolio advantage suggests that destinations encompassing multiple branches of spiritual tourism, including pilgrimage, retreat, wellness, and heritage, can diversify markets and seasons, thereby enhancing resilience (Smith & Puczkó, 2008; Ghimire, 2021); Sri Lanka's diverse offerings imply that policy should integrate rather than silo these branches. Second, a circuit plus credential architecture demonstrates that way-marked routes combined with credentialing mechanisms reliably distribute economic benefits to rural MSMEs while generating actionable data (Graave et al., 2017; Oficina del Peregrino, 2024). For Sri Lanka, branded circuits such as the Sacred Cities Triangle or the Sri Pāda Trail, supported by digital or printed credentials, are recommended. Third, MSME-led inclusion emphasises that most rural spillovers accrue to micro, small, and medium enterprises, with targeted finance, training, and digital linkages amplifying inclusive impacts (OECD, 2017; Government of India, 2025); policy should therefore recognise MSMEs as the primary delivery channel. Fourth, stewardship for legitimacy highlights that custodian co-management protects sanctity and social license, preventing commercialisation from undermining heritage and market integrity (Collins-Kreiner, 2010); Sri Lanka should formalise temple, community, and state stewardship compacts. Finally, measuring what matters underscores the importance of tracking spiritual motivations, site visitation, MSME participation, and household outcomes to support

evidence-based policy (SLTDA, 2023, 2024), with credential data and focused surveys representing practical first steps. Collectively, these propositions map onto Sri Lanka's high-potential sacred geography, which currently underperforms due to weak conversion architecture, while international experiences highlight actionable levers that are both feasible and transferable

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a comparative case study design with indicator-based analysis and scenario modelling. The approach is rooted in applied tourism economics and comparative policy analysis, suitable for examining how spiritual tourism impacts rural development across contexts (Yin, 2018). The research design integrates three complementary components. First, a contextual analysis of Sri Lanka is conducted using data from the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA), UNESCO, and secondary academic sources to establish the national baseline. Second, comparative benchmarking draws on four international cases with strong rural spillovers: Spain, India, Japan, and Romania to identify transferable practices and lessons. Third, scenario modelling applies visitor and expenditure data to simulate potential revenue under different capture scenarios of 7, 10, and 15 percent. Together, this methodologically triangulated approach combines descriptive, comparative, and predictive elements, ensuring both scholarly rigour by enhanced validity and practical policy relevance.

Case Selection Rationale

The study focuses on four international comparators: Spain (Camino de Santiago), India (Uttarakhand circuits), Japan (Shikoku pilgrimage), and Romania (Moldavia monasteries). The rationale for selecting the four international cases is threefold. First, their rural development relevance is clear, as each demonstrates measurable spillovers into peripheral economies through MSME growth, infrastructure improvements, and livelihood diversification. Second, they represent diverse models: Spain exemplifies credentialing and route branding; India illustrates state-driven circuit investment; Japan highlights cultural stewardship and continuity; and Romania reflects cluster-based regeneration in low-income rural regions. Third, each provides mechanisms that are feasibly transferable to the Sri Lankan context. By contrast, Saudi Arabia, Italy, and Israel, while spiritually significant, are excluded because their impacts are largely urban-concentrated with limited rural spillovers (Henderson, 2011; Collins-Kreiner, 2010). Excluding them sharpens the analysis by focusing only on lessons that hold direct relevance for rural regeneration.

Indicators of Analysis

Indicators used in this study encompass several dimensions. Visitor flows and motivations are captured through international arrivals by purpose-of-visit (SLTDA, 2024), domestic pilgrim volumes at major rural sites such as Sri Pāda, and credential issuance mechanisms like Camino Compostela or Shikoku temple stamps. Expenditure and receipts are assessed by examining the average length of stay, daily spend in USD, estimated receipts attributable specifically to spiritual tourism, and the proportion of expenditure captured by MSMEs. Rural livelihood outcomes are reflected in household income diversification, employment creation in accommodation, food service, guiding, and crafts, as well as gender inclusion in MSME participation. Infrastructure and social outcomes are measured through improvements in roads, sanitation, signage, and digital connectivity, alongside enhancements in social cohesion, cultural pride, and heritage stewardship. Finally, carrying capacity and risks are

considered by analysing seasonal congestion, waste generation, and risks of cultural commodification, while also assessing stewardship mechanisms for long-term sustainability. These indicators mirror those used in international studies (Graave et al., 2017; Government of India, 2025).

Data Sources

The analysis in this study draws on a wide range of secondary data sources. Key inputs include the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) annual reports for 2023 and 2024, which provide information on arrivals, purpose-of-visit, and expenditure patterns, as well as UNESCO World Heritage Centre notes that record pilgrim volumes at sites such as Sri Pāda and Shikoku. Data on Spain's Camino de Santiago are taken from the Oficina del Peregrino, while figures for India's PRASHAD scheme and Uttarakhand pilgrimage circuits are drawn from the Government of India's 2025 reports. Additional insights come from peer-reviewed studies (Graave et al., 2017; Guriță & Scortescu, 2023; Buzinde, 2020), complemented by OECD (2017) for the conceptualisation of MSMEs. The triangulation of these diverse sources enhances the reliability of the findings, though limitations remain due to the lack of disaggregated statistics in Sri Lanka on spiritual motivations and MSME participation.

MSME Integration as an Analytical Lens

MSMEs are explicitly integrated as both an indicator and an analytical category. In rural tourism economies, MSMEs constitute most actors as family guesthouses, eateries, craft stalls, and local transport operators (OECD, 2017). Comparative evidence from Spain, India, and Japan confirms that MSMEs capture the largest share of pilgrim expenditure, embedding revenue directly in rural households. Sri Lanka's MSME ecosystem around pilgrimage sites (e.g., tea stalls along Sri Pāda; homestays near Anuradhapura) is currently informal, fragmented, and weakly integrated into formal tourism circuits. This study treats MSME participation as a key mechanism for inclusive rural development, and scenario modelling explicitly considers the implications of improved MSME integration.

Scenario Modelling: Estimating Potential Receipts

Scenario modelling applies SLTDA's (2024) arrival data, which reports 2,053,465 arrivals, an average stay of 8.42 nights, and a daily spend of USD 181.15. Current receipts attributed to spiritual tourism are estimated at less than USD 50 million (SLTDA, 2023). Three scenarios were developed to illustrate potential revenue outcomes. Scenario one assumes a 7 percent capture of arrivals for spiritual purposes, equivalent to Spain's Camino share of national arrivals. Scenario two assumes a more ambitious capture of 10 percent, reflecting enhanced branding and circuit development. Scenario three assumes a 15 percent capture, representing robust integration of MSMEs, credentialing, and supporting infrastructure. Potential receipts were calculated using the formula: arrivals multiplied by the share captured, length of stay, and daily spend. For example, under scenario two, $2,053,465 \text{ arrivals} \times 10 \text{ percent} \times 8.42 \text{ nights} \times \text{USD } 181.15 \text{ daily spend}$ yields approximately USD 312 million. While these estimates do not account for multiplier effects, they provide conservative, direct projections and highlight the scale of opportunity relative to the current baseline of under USD 50 million.

Results and Interpretations

Sri Lanka's Rural Spiritual Tourism Assets

Sri Lanka's spiritual landscape is both abundant and diverse, yet poorly integrated into structured tourism circuits. Table 1 maps major assets, their rural context, and associated development potential.

Table 1: Major Rural Spiritual Tourism Assets in Sri Lanka

Type of Asset	Key Sites (Rural Context)	Rural Development Potential
Mountain pilgrimage	Sri Pāda (Adam's Peak, Central Highlands)	2m+ domestic pilgrims annually; potential for rural lodges, food vendors, local transport
Ancient heritage cities	Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa (North Central Province)	Rural guides, handicrafts, homestays, and eco-tourism synergies
Multi-faith shrines	Kataragama (South), Madhu Church (Northwest)	Festival-driven trade, rural services, seasonal employment
Temple & monastic retreats	Nilambe (Kandy), Kanduboda (Western Province)	Meditation tourism: rural households engaged in supply chains
Ayurveda-spiritual retreats	Rural resorts (Kandy, Bentota, coastal hinterland)	Integration of Ayurveda supply chains (herbs, crafts, cuisine) with rural MSMEs

Source: SLTDA (2024)

Although Sri Lanka possesses a rich array of spiritual tourism assets across multiple regions, several structural weaknesses limit their contribution to rural development. First, there is a lack of integrated circuits: many sites are promoted individually rather than as part of coherent, branded journeys that could link multiple destinations and extend visitor stays. This limits the distribution of tourist flows and the associated economic benefits to rural communities. Second, MSME integration remains weak. While local vendors, homestays, and small-scale service providers exist, they operate largely informally with limited access to training, finance, or marketing support, reducing their ability to capitalise on spiritual tourism demand. Third, international branding is minimal: according to SLTDA, less than 0.5 percent of arrivals cite religious or cultural motivation, indicating that Sri Lanka's spiritual tourism potential is largely untapped in global markets. Collectively, these gaps, as fragmented circuits, underdeveloped MSME engagement, and weak international visibility, constrain the sector's ability to generate sustained rural livelihoods and maximise socio-economic impact.

Comparative Evidence - Rural Impacts of Spiritual Tourism

Comparative evidence highlights the mechanisms through which other destinations convert spiritual flows into rural livelihoods.

Table 2: Rural Impacts of Spiritual Tourism in International Cases

Country / Region	Pilgrim Volume/Data	Rural Development Outcomes
Spain (Camino)	446,338 Compostelas (2024)	€60–100m rural GVA; revival of small towns; growth of rural guesthouses & crafts
India (Uttarakhand)	44.2% domestic visitors for pilgrimage	Household income diversification; MSME growth; infrastructure investment
Japan (Shikoku)	88 temples across the circuit	Sustains rural inns, bus services, temple custodianship, and cultural continuity
Romania (Moldavia)	Religious tourism clusters (2023)	Rural poverty reduction; road and amenity upgrades in border regions

Source: Adapted from various sources

Key lessons transferable to Sri Lanka include the following: credentialing systems, as exemplified by Spain, generate motivation, legitimacy, and actionable data; public investment in circuits, as in India, catalyzes MSME activity and local economic multipliers; heritage stewardship, demonstrated in Japan, preserves authenticity while maintaining community legitimacy; and even modest flows, when organized in clusters as in Romania, contribute meaningfully to rural poverty reduction and infrastructure improvements. Collectively, these cases illustrate design principles and policy interventions that could strengthen Sri Lanka's underdeveloped rural spiritual tourism circuits and maximise socio-economic impacts.

Current Utilisation in Sri Lanka

Despite its assets, Sri Lanka's current utilisation is strikingly low, as presented in the following Table 3.

Table 3: Current Utilisation of Spiritual Tourism in Sri Lanka

Indicator	Data (2023–2024)
International arrivals (2024)	2,053,465
Primary-purpose “Religious & Cultural”	0.2% (~4,100 visitors)
Domestic pilgrims at Sri Pāda	~2 million annually (UNESCO WHC)
Estimated receipts	< USD 50 million (upper bound, 2023 baseline)
Potential receipts (10% capture)	~USD 312 million

Source: SLTDA (2024)

Three patterns stand out, namely international marginality (only 0.2% of arrivals cite religion/spirituality), Domestic vibrancy (millions of Sri Lankans continue pilgrim traditions, but these flows are informally monetised), and Revenue gap (<USD 50m current receipts compared to modelled potential >USD 300m).

Scenario Analysis

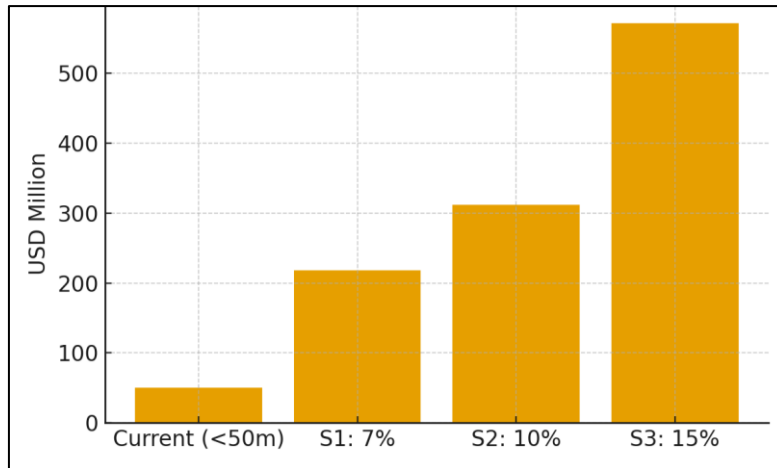


Figure 1: Illustration of potential receipts from spiritual tourism under three capture scenarios

Source: SLTDA (2024) and author's calculations

The results highlight the order-of-magnitude gap between Sri Lanka's current baseline and realistic capture scenarios. Even a 7% capture (below Spain's Camino proportion) would increase receipts fourfold.

MSMEs as the Missing Link

MSMEs, guesthouses, craft vendors, and transport providers are the backbone of rural tourism. In Spain, >70% of Camino expenditure accrues to MSMEs (Graave et al., 2017). In Uttarakhand, pilgrimage circuits supported thousands of small family enterprises (Government of India, 2025). In Sri Lanka, however, MSMEs remain informal, credit-constrained, and digitally invisible. For example-tea stalls along Sri Pāda employ families seasonally but lack licensing, finance, or safety standards, craft vendors in Anuradhapura operate informally with weak linkages to global markets, and homestays near Polonnaruwa lack digital booking systems. Without MSME integration, potential receipts leak to urban tour operators or foreign intermediaries. Empowering MSMEs is, therefore, central to embedding revenues locally. Developing MSMEs in rural pilgrimage towns also requires building a high-performance culture within enterprises. Gunathilake and Jayasooriya (2022a) emphasise the role of cultural frameworks in enabling sustained excellence, which could be adapted to spiritual tourism contexts through training, standards, and stewardship models.

Non-Economic Impacts

Beyond economics, spiritual tourism has social, cultural, and psychological dimensions. Social cohesion-shared rituals at Sri Pāda and Kataragama foster inter-ethnic solidarity (Jayasinghe & Wimalaratana, 2020). Cultural conservation: Earnings linked to temple rituals incentivise custodians to preserve traditions. Psychological well-being: Meditation retreats and Ayurveda-spiritual fusions enhance mental health (Manjula et al., 2024). International parallels reinforce this: Camino pilgrims report identity renewal (Graave et al., 2017), Shikoku preserves intangible heritage while Moldavian monasteries promote cultural pride (Guriță & Scortescu, 2023).

Risks and Stewardship

Risks include over-commercialisation, waste, and congestion. Evidence from India shows unmanaged pilgrim surges strain sanitation; Spain's Camino faces challenges of over-tourism (Duran-Sánchez et al., 2018). Best practices emphasise stewardship compacts involving custodians, local governments, and communities. For Sri Lanka, involving temple custodians and rural communities in co-management is vital to maintain sacred integrity and legitimacy.

Discussion - Lessons for Sri Lanka

The findings reveal a paradox. Sri Lanka possesses abundant sacred assets and significant domestic pilgrim flows, yet it performs poorly in international branding and in translating spiritual tourism into rural development linkages. International comparisons point to several clear levers that can address this gap. Credentialing should be introduced through mechanisms such as a Sri Pāda Pilgrim Certificate and a Sacred Cities Passport, which would provide both symbolic value and actionable data. Circuit development is equally critical; branded journeys such as a Sacred Cities Triangle or a Northern Devotion Circuit can disperse visitor flows and generate wider rural benefits. Micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) should be supported through credit facilities, training, and digital access to ensure that local communities capture value from increased tourism. Infrastructure upgrades, including rural roads, sanitation facilities, signage, and digital connectivity, are essential to facilitate access and enhance visitor experience. Stewardship mechanisms, particularly temple–community–government partnerships, must be formalised to safeguard authenticity and legitimacy. Finally, measurement through credentialing systems and targeted surveys is necessary to track pilgrim flows, motivations, and outcomes to inform policy. If these measures are implemented, Sri Lanka has the potential to reposition itself from a marginal player generating less than USD 50 million annually to a regional hub capable of generating over USD 500 million while simultaneously advancing inclusive rural regeneration.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Sri Lanka's sacred geography is of exceptional potential, yet spiritual tourism remains underexploited, generating less than USD 50 million compared to realistic estimates of USD 218–571 million under modest reform. Comparative evidence from Spain, India, Japan, and Romania points to a common “conversion architecture”: credentialing to motivate travel and yield data; branded circuits to disperse visitors and lengthen stays; MSME empowerment to embed spending locally; and custodian–community stewardship to safeguard authenticity and manage capacity. For Sri Lanka, a sequenced agenda is clear: launch circuits (Sri Pāda Trail; Sacred Cities Triangle), introduce a Sri Lanka Spiritual Passport, scale MSME in terms of finance, standards, and digital access, upgrade sanitation–signage–connectivity, and institutionalise measurement via surveys, credential analytics, and MSME panels. Cumulatively, these steps can increase foreign exchange, diversify rural livelihoods, conserve heritage landscapes, and strengthen social cohesion, shaping Sri Lanka's image as a regional hub of enriching, spiritually oriented travel.

This study provides several contributions to academic literature on spiritual tourism and rural development. First, it develops a hybrid framework that conceptualises spiritual tourism as a multifaceted domain integrating pilgrimage, retreat, wellness, heritage, and transformational travel. This perspective moves beyond conventional religious tourism scholarship and highlights the coexistence of multiple branches in Sri Lanka, offering a model applicable to other destinations with diverse sacred assets. Second, by emphasising the role of micro, small,

and medium enterprises (MSMEs), the research demonstrates how spiritual tourism generates localised economic benefits. Comparative evidence shows that MSMEs capture most rural receipts in structured spiritual circuits, a mechanism often underexplored in prior studies. Finally, the study identifies comparative propositions from international cases, including Spain, India, Japan, and Romania, which together form a “conversion architecture” for translating sacred capital into rural development outcomes. These mechanisms, encompassing credentialing, circuit development, MSME integration, stewardship, and systematic measurement, provide a conceptual framework for understanding how spiritual tourism can simultaneously deliver economic, social, and cultural impacts.

From a policy perspective, the study highlights actionable interventions to enhance Sri Lanka’s spiritual tourism potential. Developing branded spiritual circuits, such as the Sri Pāda Pilgrim Trail, Sacred Cities Triangle, and Northern Devotion Circuit, can distribute visitor flows, extend stays, and generate consistent demand for MSMEs. Introducing credentialing systems, such as a Sri Lanka Spiritual Passport, can motivate visitors, confer legitimacy, and provide data for effective management. Strengthening MSME capacity through microfinance, training, and digital integration ensures that local households capture tourism benefits, embedding revenues within rural communities. Infrastructure investments, including rural roads, sanitation, signage, and digital connectivity, are essential to improve accessibility and enhance visitor experience. Formalising stewardship and governance arrangements among temple custodians, communities, and local authorities is necessary to maintain sacred integrity and community legitimacy. Finally, systematic data collection and research through pilgrim surveys, credential tracking, and impact assessments will support evidence-based policy-making and adaptive management. Collectively, these measures have the potential to transform Sri Lanka from a marginal spiritual tourism player generating less than USD 50 million annually to a regional hub exceeding USD 500 million, while fostering rural employment, preserving cultural heritage, promoting social cohesion, and enhancing Sri Lanka’s reputation as a sanctuary of peace and spiritual well-being.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study provides valuable insights into the potential of spiritual tourism for rural development in Sri Lanka, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the analysis relies primarily on secondary data, scenario modelling, and comparative case studies, which may not capture micro-level household or MSME dynamics in rural pilgrimage towns. Second, the focus on selecting international benchmark cases may limit generalizability to other cultural and geographic contexts. Third, the study emphasises economic and structural factors, while psychological, social, and environmental dimensions are explored only indirectly. These limitations point to multiple avenues for future research. Micro-level investigations using household surveys could quantify income diversification, MSME performance, and livelihood outcomes in pilgrimage communities. Longitudinal studies could assess the psychological and well-being effects of meditation, retreat tourism, and transformational journeys. Empirical assessments of carrying capacity and environmental impacts at sacred sites would help guide sustainable visitor management. Finally, comparative research across South Asia, particularly examining Buddhist circuits in Sri Lanka, India, and Nepal, could provide cross-country insights into effective models of spiritual tourism and rural development. Collectively, such studies would deepen scholarly understanding and offer a stronger foundation for evidence-based policy interventions in the sector.

References

- Buzinde, C. N. (2020). Theoretical linkages between spirituality and tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 83, 102920. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2020.102920>
- Choe, J., & Mahyuni, S. (2023). Sustainable and inclusive spiritual tourism development in Bali as a long-term post-pandemic strategy. *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 11(2).
- Collins-Kreiner, N. (2010). Researching pilgrimage: Continuity and transformations. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 37(2), 440–456. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2009.10.016>
- Clerici, A. P., Murphy, C., & Almeida, N. M. C. (2023). The future of wellness tourism after COVID-19. *European Spatial Research and Policy*, 30(1), 103-122.
- Collins-Kreiner, N. (2010). Researching pilgrimage: Continuity and transformations. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 37(2), 440–456. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2009.10.016>
- Duran-Sánchez, A., Álvarez-García, J., de la Cruz del Río-Rama, M., & Oliveira, C. (2018). Religious tourism, pilgrimage and cultural tourism: A bibliometric overview. *Religions*, 9(9), 249. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9090249>
- Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. (2024). Spiritual tourism and peacebuilding in post-conflict societies. *FHSS Review*, 12(1), 55–70.
- Government of India, Ministry of Tourism. (2025). *Annual report 2024–25*. <https://tourism.gov.in>
- Graave, E. J. E., Klijs, J., & Heijman, W. (2017). The economic impact of pilgrimage in Galicia: Santiago de Compostela and beyond. *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 5(3), 46–58. <https://doi.org/10.21427/D7HX0N>
- Gunathilake, G. G. T. Y., & Jayasooriya, S. D. (2022a). Development of a theoretical model of high-performance culture. *Journal of HRM Perspective*, 7(1), 28–39.
- Gunathilake, G. G. T. Y., & Jayasooriya, S. D. (2022b). Employee work focus: Conceptualising and developing a multidimensional scale. *Journal of Management Matters*, 9(1), 101–134. <https://doi.org/10.4038/jmm.v9i1.134>
- Gunathilake, G. G. T. Y., & Jayasooriya, S. (2021). Development of a competency framework for site administrative officers in a Sri Lankan construction company. *Journal of HRM Perspectives*, 6(2), 85–110.
- Ghimire, H. L. (2021). Shikoku: Japan's Authentic Buddhist Pilgrimage Circuit. *Journal of Japanese Studies: Exploring Multidisciplinarity*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.55156/jjsem.dec2120>
- Guriță, D., & Scortescu, F. I. (2023). Religious Tourism and Sustainable Development of the Economy in the Context of Globalization in the Northeast Area of Romania. *Sustainability*, 15(16), 12128. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su151612128>
- Henderson, J. (2011). Religious tourism and its management: The Hajj in Saudi Arabia. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 13(6), 541–552. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.825>

- Jayasinghe, A. R. N. T., & Wimalaratana, W. (2020). Role of spiritual tourism to develop Sri Lanka tourism after COVID-19: Expertise perceptions based on meditation centres. *Journal of Tourism Economics and Applied Research*, 4(Special Issue), 83–97.
- Karthilingam, K. P., & Kannan, R. (2020). A perspective outlook to rejuvenate important global pilgrimage destinations and enhancing tourism attractiveness in India. *International Journal of Management*, 11(11), 3063–3075. <https://doi.org/10.34218/IJM.11.11.2020.291>
- Manjula, K., P. K., R. V., & Thirupathi, Dr. G. (2024). Yoga Tourism: A Journey towards Holistic Wellness. *International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Studies*, 4(5), 514–518. <https://doi.org/10.62225/2583049x.2024.4.5.3278>
- Ministry of Tourism & Christian Religious Affairs. (2017). *Sri Lanka Tourism Strategic Plan 2017–2020*. Government of Sri Lanka.
- Norman, A. (2012). The varieties of the spiritual tourist experience. *Literature & Aesthetics*, 22(1), 20–37.
- OECD. (2017). *Enhancing the contributions of SMEs in a global and digitalised economy*. OECD Publishing.
- Oficina del Peregrino. (2024). *Estadísticas 2024: Camino de Santiago pilgrims*. Santiago de Compostela, Spain. <https://oficinadelperegrino.com/estadisticas>
- Outschoorn, O., Herath, J., & Santushi Amarasuriya. (2024). Are long-term meditators more psychologically resilient, more mindful, less psychologically distressed and have enhanced perceived quality of life? A comparative preliminary analysis from Sri Lanka. *Ceylon Journal of Medical Science*, 61(1), 73–81. <https://doi.org/10.4038/cjms.v61i1.5077>
- Pine, B. J., & Gilmore, J. H. (1999). *The experience economy: Work is theatre and every business a stage*. Harvard Business Press.
- Ramanujam, R., & Sharma, V. (2024). Pilgrimage as a cultural leveller: Case studies from Hindu sacred towns. *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 12(1), 77–94.
- Jayathilaka, G. K., & Samarathunga, W.H.M.S. (2023). Tourism resilience and recovery: Spiritual tourism in Sri Lanka post-COVID. *Sri Lanka Journal of Tourism Research*, 4(2), 12–30.
- Singh, S. (2009). Spirituality and Tourism An Anthropologist's View. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 34(2), 143–155. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2009.11081586>
- Smith, M., & Puczkó, L. (2008). *Health and wellness tourism*. Elsevier.
- Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority. (2023). *Annual statistical report 2023*. <http://sltda.gov.lk>
- Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority. (2024). *Sri Lanka tourism year in review 2024*. <http://sltda.gov.lk>

- Umashani, A. L. A. P., & Jayawardena, H. (2025). Exploring the potential of promoting Sri Lanka as a meditation tourism destination in Sri Lanka's wellness tourism landscape. *Journal of Tourism and Heritage Research: JTHR*, 8(2), 35-45.
- UNESCO World Heritage Centre. (n.d.-a). *Central Highlands of Sri Lanka (Sri Pāda pilgrimage usage)*. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1203>
- UNESCO World Heritage Centre. (n.d.-b). *Sacred city of Kandy*. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/450>
- UNESCO World Heritage Centre. (n.d.-c). *Sacred sites and pilgrimage routes in the Kii Mountain Range (Japan)*. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1142>
- UNWTO. (2011). *Religious tourism in Asia and the Pacific*. United Nations World Tourism Organisation.
- UNWTO. (2024). *Tourism highlights: 2024 edition*. United Nations World Tourism Organisation.
- Wang, N. (1999). Rethinking authenticity in tourism experience. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 26(2), 349–370. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383\(98\)00103-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(98)00103-0)
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications* (Vol. 6). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.