A practical guide to help tourists make informed choices about the human rights impacts of their travel spending in Sri Lanka.
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1. The problem

Sri Lanka is one of the world’s most beautiful countries, and a booming tourist destination. It is also the site of some of the worst atrocities of the 21st century.

We are not opposed to people visiting Sri Lanka. Indeed, we think much good can come of such visits and that some harm could result if Sri Lanka were to become further isolated. But given the very disturbing human rights situation there, we don’t think anyone should take the decision to visit Sri Lanka lightly.

This campaign is designed to help you, the tourist, make informed choices; to explain when your spending might end up benefitting human rights abusers or contributing to a worsening of the human rights situation, and to provide advice about how you can mitigate against those risks and support ethical tourism in Sri Lanka.

1.1 DON’T HOLIDAY WITH WAR CRIMINALS OR HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSERS

The Sri Lankan armed forces, along with members of the current and former regime, are responsible for some of the most appalling human rights violations in recent history. Multiple investigations by the UN\(^1\) have documented how, during the final stages of the war in 2009, many tens of thousands of Tamil civilians were killed after the humanitarian ‘safe zones’ in which they had been encouraged to gather were repeatedly shelled by advancing government forces. Despite credible allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity – charges also levelled at members of the defeated LTTE (‘Tamil Tigers’) – no one has yet been brought to justice.

Despite the end of the fighting, serious human rights violations - including extra-judicial killings, torture, sexual violence, abductions, arbitrary detention and land-grabbing - have persisted. These abuses, and the culture of impunity that enables them, are a result of the lack of accountability for what happened at the end of Sri Lanka’s long and bloody civil war. This means that despite the recent change of regime in Sri Lanka, the root causes of oppression and repeated mass violence remain intact.

Today, the armed forces and other human rights abusers are deeply embedded in the tourism industry and poised to benefit from your spending. We believe it is the duty of the ethical traveller to ensure they are not supported, and to deny the military the financial resources with which they have been able to maintain a tight grip over civilian life, particularly in the war-affected north and east of the country.


A still from the award-winning documentary, ‘No Fire Zone’. Inside an officially designated humanitarian zone, two young girls are held back inside a bunker by a tearful woman trying to stop them from running to the aid of their mother, who has just been terribly wounded by a government shell.\(^2\)
In order to help tourists to live up to that ethical duty, we have compiled a list of tourism ventures that we think tourists should consider avoiding. It includes, most importantly, ventures that are owned by, or have financial links to, the military or other individuals believed to be complicit in grave human rights violations. But it also includes those whose operations have been linked with specific kinds of exploitation (such as land grabbing), as well as those whose record is problematic for other reasons (such as because they are involved in the white-washing of human rights abuses).

1.2 CAUSES FOR CONCERN

The infographic below provides an illustration of the some of the key ways in which tourism ventures might be a cause for ethical concern. It is important to understand that a particular venture might fall into more than one of these categories, and that the gravity of the ethical concern may vary significantly from case to case. Our objective is to help you to identify the issues, and ultimately to make an informed choice of your own.

Tourism in Sri Lanka has been vastly developed since the end of the armed conflict in 2009. As well as helping to reinforce the presence of the military (in areas where they have begun to operate tourism ventures), tourism has frequently been used by the government as part of its strategy to distort the past and to deflect attention from ongoing human rights violations.
Planning a holiday to Sri Lanka is in each case a personal decision and we don’t claim that any particular trip to Sri Lanka is ‘ethical’ or ‘unethical’. This is because we recognize that, on the one hand, no trip to Sri Lanka is without negative consequences – they all support the current regime to one extent or another, even if it is just through airport taxes – and that, on the other hand, only the most isolated of tourists could visit Sri Lanka without providing some sort of social benefit.

The resources in this report will help you understand both the negative and positive impacts of your trip and how, with thought and planning, you can better manage them.
2. Who to avoid

Many tourism companies in Sri Lanka are associated with individuals and organizations implicated in war crimes or serious human rights violations. Others are problematic because they are complicit in the white-washing of human rights abuses. Please visit our online database and interactive map\(^3\) to find out more about the companies which we believe pose ethical concerns and that you may wish to avoid as a result. An abbreviated version of our latest findings can be found in Annex 1.

Generally, these tourism companies fall into the following categories:

- Airports and flight providers
- Hotels and resorts
- Military-run chains
- Restaurants and food stands
- Sights and attractions

\(^3\)https://www.srilankacampaign.org/ethical-tourism/avoid/
3. Ethical alternatives

3.1 KNOW WHO TO AVOID

When travelling in Sri Lanka, there’s a real risk that the money you spend could help line the pockets of war criminals and human rights abusers. Visit our online database\(^4\) for more information about companies that you might want to avoid.

3.2 UNDERSTAND THE SUPPLY CHAIN

When you book a holiday to Sri Lanka, it is important to understand exactly where your money is going. If you book a package holiday, you will most likely deal with a tour operator. But that tour operator will in turn use an inbound agency who will arrange bookings with various hoteliers and transport providers.

There are multiple links between all of the various tour operators, inbound agencies, hoteliers and transport providers operating in Sri Lanka. This means that even if you are on a tour package which includes only ‘ethical’ hotels, you could still be using an operator or inbound agency which offers less ethical products. In other words, you might - despite your best intentions - form part of a supply chain that benefits individuals in the tourism industry who are linked to human rights abuses.

The best thing you can do to minimise the risks is to do your research. A good place to start is to check what kinds of companies your tour operator is using and to see if they appear on our list of companies to avoid. But you can go further too: by asking your tour operator which inbound agencies they use, or whether they have conducted a human rights risk assessment. One of the most useful things that you can do is to use your power as a consumer to hold tour providers to a higher standard of ethical conduct.

Of course, one of the simplest ways to take control of your role in the supply chain is to tailor your own itinerary, and to make use of the kinds of ethical alternatives that we outline below.

\(^4\)https://www.srilankacampaign.org/ethical-tourism/avoid/
3.3 USE ETHICAL ALTERNATIVES

For tourism to be ethical it must not be exploitative, and it must ensure that local people get a fair share of the economic benefits. Though we are unable to provide a comprehensive list of ‘ethical’ tourism companies – and while we refrain from endorsing, or vouching for, any particular provider - below are some pointers and resources that might help steer you in the right direction.

- Sri Lanka hosts many fantastic family-run hotels and local businesses, which offer experiences far more personal and intimate than any of the big resorts. When using accommodation search engines, try to keep an eye out for these and, where it’s due, be sure to give positive feedback and encourage others to stay too.

- In many parts of the country you can find community projects that provide fair employment to local people. If you want to visit a tea plantation while in the hill country, try to find one that operates to Fairtrade standards, and ask about the working conditions for tea pickers.

- Justice Travel is a social impact travel company that works in partnership with human rights defenders, community leaders and journalists. They are currently developing a range of projects in Sri Lanka.

- There are a wide variety of organisations that offer volunteer placements in Sri Lanka, including on issues related to human rights and in aid of war-affected communities. Examples of these include Comdu.it, the UK-Sri Lanka Trauma Group, and SLVGlobal, to name but a few.

- Finally, some organisations sometimes offer homestays with human rights defenders. These can offer a way of seeing what the country is really like, as well as (depending on the circumstances) providing the individual in question with a degree of protection. It’s not for everyone, but if you are interested please get in touch with us.

3.4 GET INFORMED

One of the most important things you can do is to get informed about the situation in Sri Lanka. Not only will this allow you to better navigate some of the ethical risks related to your spending; it will also provide you with the opportunity to engage in some enlightening and rewarding conversations with those who live there.

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5 https://www.fairtrade.org.uk/What-is-Fairtrade
7 http://comdu.it/
8 http://uksrilankatrauma.org/
9 https://slvglobal/
10 https://www.srilankacampaign.org/about-us/contact-us/
There is much in Sri Lanka’s recent history that the regime would prefer tourists not to know or talk about. Indeed, tourism itself appears to have been a major component of the government’s attempt to white-wash the past and to project an image of itself as an island ‘at peace’ following a triumphal (and clean) victory over terrorism. One only needs to scratch the surface to see that this narrative of events doesn’t quite stack up, and that the reality today is not quite as straightforward or idyllic as the Sri Lankan Tourism Board would like to project to the outside world.

There are a wide range of resources which we would recommend prospective tourists dip into before thinking about a trip to Sri Lanka. Here is a non-exhaustive selection of the highlights:

- **Videos**: before you visit Sri Lanka, we strongly recommend watching *[No Fire Zone]*, an award-winning documentary about the final stages of the civil war. It remains to this day one of the most powerful and informative resources for those seeking to gain an understanding of Sri Lanka’s recent history. A range of shorter topical videos, including recent news pieces and short films, can be found on our website.  

- **Books**: Books like *[Still Counting the Dead]* by former BBC journalist Frances Harrison, *[The Cage]* by Gordon Weiss, and *[Seasons of Trouble]* by Rohini Mohan offer some important—and often times very disturbing—accounts of the end of the war through the eyes of those who lived through it.

- **News, opinion and comment**: for recent information about the human rights situation in Sri Lanka, a good place to start is our blog and Twitter feed. You might also want to spend some time looking at one of the many (English language) news, opinion and citizen journalism websites on Sri Lanka, including for example, [Groundviews], [Tamil Guardian], [Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka], or [Colombo Telegraph] to name but a few.

- **In-depth reports about the war and human rights violations**: if you are interested in digging a little deeper about the war, or wish to know more about a particular human rights issue, there are a number of substantive reports that can be accessed online. These include the findings of major UN investigations (such as the ground-breaking *[OISL report]*) as well as various

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11 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zTRXAkU1XZ4  
12 https://www.srilankacampaign.org/about-us/reports/  
16 https://www.srilankacampaign.org/blog/  
17 https://twitter.com/SLcampaign  
18 http://groundviews.org/  
19 https://www.tamilguardian.com/  
20 http://www.jdslanka.org/  
21 https://www.colombotelegraph.com/  
22 https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/OISL.aspx
materials by international and Sri Lankan civil society organisations, some of which we mention on our website.  

- **Reports about tourism and the military**: there have been a number of good recent reports about the impact of the Sri Lankan military’s involvement in the tourism sector, as well as the broader effects of ongoing militarisation in war-affected areas. These include reports by the Society for Threatened People’s, the South Asian Centre for Legal Studies, and by People for Equality and Relief in Lanka and the Adayalaam Centre for Policy and Research.

### 3.5 ENGAGE

One of the main reasons that we do not advocate a boycott of tourism to Sri Lanka is that we believe further isolation could cause harm to many of its most vulnerable citizens - depriving them not only of socio-economic benefits, but also of opportunities to exchange information with outsiders. The flipside is that we believe there are many ways in which tourists can proactively engage with ordinary people in ways which are positive and productive.

An important thing you can do as a tourist is to simply talk to people about their situation. Ask them how they feel about the war, about their views on the government (past and present), or about relations between ethnic communities. This has to be done with a certain degree of care and sensitivity. Your role here is not to judge or to educate (Sri Lankans know far more about their situation than you do), but to listen and share information.

Be aware that you need to be conscious of the safety and security of those who you talk to. Discussing sensitive subjects - particularly in war-affected areas of the country where widespread surveillance is carried out by the army, police and networks of civilian informants - can result in people getting into trouble if those conversations are overheard. While there may be little risk to you, the government of Sri Lanka being generally reluctant to cause problems for foreigners, you should always think about the risk to others.

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23 [https://www.srilankacampaign.org/about-us/reports/](https://www.srilankacampaign.org/about-us/reports/)
4. Visiting Sri Lanka’s north and east

Sri Lanka’s north and east are areas in which the ethnic minority Tamils form a majority, and which, together, form a territory that many Tamils regard as their rightful national homeland. These parts of the country bore the brunt of the fighting during Sri Lanka’s civil war, large sections having been under the shifting control of the rebel LTTE forces (‘Tamil Tigers’) in the three decades prior to 2009. Significant populations of Sri Lankan Muslims also live in the north and east of the country, in some places forming a majority.

Visiting the north and east can be a very different experience to visiting the rest of Sri Lanka. As an outsider, it is important to be attuned to, and mindful of, the specific issues and challenges that the civilian populations in these areas face. **We believe it is the duty of the ethical tourist not to shy from the reality; but rather to observe, learn and engage in ways which recognise – and where possible, support – the struggles faced by those living in these parts of the country.**

Below we briefly summarise some of the main issues and challenges in these two areas (many of which, it should be noted, overlap).

### 4.1 THE NORTH

For many people visiting the north for the first time, one of the most striking features is the vast scale of the military’s presence, despite a decade passing since rebel LTTE forces were defeated there in May 2009.

The change of government in 2015 resulted in some of the heavily guarded checkpoints that previously lined the roads throughout the north being dismantled, as well as a slight decrease in the visible presence of soldiers in the streets. However, the landscape continues to be marked by dozens of army barracks and training centres, and it is not uncommon to see large numbers of soldiers deployed in public, particularly on politically sensitive dates.

Thousands of acres of lands, seized over the course of the war and its aftermath, remain under occupation by the military. This includes many lands illegally grabbed from civilian owners, some of whom have participated in lengthy protests demanding their return. Although some small pockets have been restored to their rightful holders in recent years, **much remains to be done.** Many of those who have returned to their lands have complained of property damage (for which there has mostly been no compensation), and of being forced to live in threatening proximity to soldiers on adjacent lands.

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29 [https://www.srilankacampaign.org/take-action/current-campaign/](https://www.srilankacampaign.org/take-action/current-campaign/)
The militarisation of the north of the country goes further still, reaching into the economy and encompassing the provision of many public services. As we have seen, this includes the military’s extensive involvement in the tourism sector. But it also includes the running of farms and shops (with which many local providers struggle to compete on price) and even the provision of pre-school education through the army’s ‘Civil Security Department.’ Despite the slight shift in approach that followed the change in government in 2015, it is clear that the military still very much regards itself as a legitimate provider of economic (and indeed social and cultural) development in the north of the country – despite the fact that many living there regard it as a threatening and exploitative force. The Army’s website regularly and proudly boasts of its active role in civic life, ranging from running music festivals to organising body-building competitions.

Less visible to tourists, but often very apparent to those living in the north, is the widespread use of surveillance by the security forces, carried out not just by the military and police, but also un-uniformed members of Sri Lanka’s various intelligence agencies and the deep networks of civilian informants that they maintain in communities. The brunt of this continued surveillance architecture is especially felt by war-affected individuals, former LTTE cadres and human rights activists, who regularly complain of threats, intimidation and harassment as they go about their lives and work. Recent reports by Freedom From Torture and the International Truth and Justice Project indicate that even more serious violations, including abduction, torture, and sexual violence, continue to be carried out at the hands of the security forces, particularly against former members of the LTTE.

As discussed elsewhere in this resource pack, many of those living in the north of Sri Lanka complain of the ongoing project of ‘Sinhalisation.’ Although there is no precise and agreed upon definition of this term, broadly-speaking this is the process by which the government, with the support of the military and hard-line nationalist groups, has sought to re-engineer minority areas in the image of the majority Sinhala Buddhist community. ‘Sinhalisation’ manifests itself in a variety of ways, including through the exclusion of the Tamil language from official usage, through programmes to settle Sinhala people in traditionally Tamil areas, and through the building of Buddhist shrines where few Buddhists live.

The process of ‘Sinhalisation’ is viewed by many as closely linked to the process of ‘Militarisation.’ This is perhaps most symbolically apparent through the widespread construction of crass war victory monuments across the north by the government forces. Many of these paint a deeply one-sided and
distorted version of the war; portraying the government’s actions as a ‘zero-civilian casualty’ humanitarian rescue operation to liberate the civilian population, rather than the bloody and brutal onslaught that it was.

Space for Tamils to mourn their loved ones through commemoration and memorialisation initiatives remain heavily restricted to this day. Many who have led such efforts in recent times have found themselves subjected to aggressive campaigns of *intimidation and harassment*\(^{36}\) by the authorities.

The absence of spaces to grieve and remember has been one factor that has compounded the very serious psychological and social trauma of individuals and communities living in the north. Some experts have spoken of a *mental health crisis*\(^{37}\) in war-affected areas in Sri Lanka - the result of years of war, social upheaval, and exposure to serious human rights abuses – manifested in alarmingly high rates of family breakdown, substance abuse and domestic violence, for example.


It is women, and in particular widows and female former LTTE cadres, who have disproportionately impacted by the war and its aftermath. Today, there are estimated to be approximately 60,000 female headed households in the Northern Province alone. The challenges they face include the lack of access to jobs, social stigmatisation, and the threat of sexual abuse and exploitation by members of the security forces. At the same time, many war-affected women have been actively spearheading campaigns to claim their rights and to demand truth and justice. This includes the many mothers of the disappeared who from February 2017 onwards began protesting continuously at various locations across the north and east.

4.2 THE EAST

Life in the east of Sri Lanka remains deeply divided between its three main ethnic communities - Tamil, Muslim and Sinhalese – who are more evenly proportioned here than in any other province in Sri Lanka.

Since 2006, when the war effectively ended in the east, an appearance of ‘normality’ has steadily returned and tourism is once again thriving. However, many Tamil people in east feel a strong sense of anger and resentment at what they see as the erosion of their culture through state-sponsored ‘Sinhalisation’ efforts (most visible when it comes to the treatment of religious shrines), as well as the uneven manner in which the financial benefits of peace have been distributed. Despite significant investments over the past decade, and a booming tourism industry, the east remains one of the least economically developed areas of the country.

In recent years, there have been worrying signs of growing tensions between communities in the east. The reasons for this are complex, but include the array of land disputes caused by multiple war-time population displacements, and issues around identity. Many of these tensions have been fanned by hard-line groups (left unchecked by successive governments), the ongoing


39 https://www.srilankacampaign.org/take-action/release-the-list/

presence of local strongmen and former paramilitary leaders in politics, and the failure of the
government to establish mechanisms for dealing with the past.

In early 2018, false claims that the Muslim owner of a restaurant in Ampara was forcibly sterilizing his
customers – playing on bogus anxieties among sections of the Sinhala majority community about the
disproportionate growth of the Muslim population in Sri Lanka – prompted Sinhala mobs to launch a
series of violent attacks against Muslim shops in the surrounding area. There are indications\(^41\) that the
attack had been pre-planned and carried out by Buddhist militants mostly from outside the area.

\(^41\) https://www.dw.com/en/islamophobic-narratives-inflame-sri-lanka-communal-tensions/a-42868563
5. Annex 1: a list of tourism companies which we believe pose ethical concerns

Detailed information about the companies below, and our reasons for their inclusion in this list, can be found on our [website](#).

**Disclaimer:** as explained above, the gravity and nature of the ethical concern that has resulted in a company being included in our list may vary significantly from case to case. Users of this resource pack are encouraged to read the further information provided on our website and to come to an informed judgement of their own about whether it is ethical or unethical to use a particular company.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Company Name</th>
<th>Location</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Airports and flight providers</td>
<td>Air Travel Services (PVT) Ltd</td>
<td>Various Locations</td>
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<td>Batticaloa Airport</td>
<td>Batticaloa</td>
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<td>Helitours</td>
<td>Various Locations</td>
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<td>Hotels and resorts</td>
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<td>Golf Link Hotel</td>
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<td>Green Jacket Resort</td>
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<td>Hayleys Group (<a href="#">see website for further information</a>)</td>
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<td>Lake Front Rest</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Marble Beach Air Force Resort</td>
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## A GUIDE TO ETHICAL TOURISM IN SRI LANKA

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<tr>
<th>Nature Park Holiday Resort</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ocean View Holiday Bungalow</td>
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<td>Sober Island Resort</td>
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<td>Thalsevana Army Resort</td>
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<td>Some Luxury Developments in Passikudah <em>(see website for further information)</em></td>
<td>Batticaloa</td>
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<td>Weligambay Villas</td>
<td>Mirissa</td>
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### Military run chains

- Malima Resorts | Various Locations |
- The ‘Laya Group’ | Various Locations |

### Restaurants and food stands

- Army Eateries | A9 Highway |
- Eagles’ Restaurants | Colombo |
- Light House Galley | Colombo |
- Malima Club House | Uswetakeiyawa, Colombo |
- Rice Bowl (AKA ‘Yodha Wewa’) | Mannar |
- Waters Edge | Colombo |

### Sights and attractions

- Buddhist Stupas in politically sensitive areas *(see website for further information)* | North and East |
- Chundikkulam Bird Sanctuary | Chundikkulam, Jaffna |
- Some Cricket Stadiums *(see website for further information)* | Various Locations |
- Eagles’ Golf Courses | Trincomalee and Anuradhapura |
- Kirinda Diving Center | Kirinda, Hambantota |
- Kokkilai Lagoon Sanctuary | Mullaitivu |
- Laksala (State Gift and Souvenir Boutique) | Various Locations |
- Pigeon Island *(see website for further information)* | Nilaveli, Trincomalee |
- Somawathiya National Park | Polonnaruwa |
- Sri Lanka Air Force Museum | Ratmalana, Dehiwala-Mount Lavinia |
- Sri Lankan Navy Ferry | Delft Island |
- Sri Lankan Navy Whale Watching Tours | Various Locations |
- Thoppigala Heritage Park | Batticaloa |
- Triumphalist War Monuments and Information Centres *(see website for further information)* | Various Locations |
- Wilpattu National Park | Western Coast |