

Capability Analysis of Airbnb Experiential Tourism in Sri Lankan Spice Gardens

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Abstract

Sri Lanka's tourism, the third-largest source of foreign exchange, has been affected by COVID-19, the Ukraine-Russian conflict, and the local economic crisis. The digital transformation of tourism has had a positive impact, facilitating global connections between businesses and travelers. Platforms like Airbnb have surfaced, providing online experiences. These platforms enable individuals to share their expertise and earn income from home. With its favorable climate and geography, Sri Lanka is a sought-after destination for spice tourism. However, the Sri Lankan tourism industry has been limited to physical interactions and is seldom been available online. This study investigates the potential of integrating 'Airbnb's experiential tourism' for spice gardens (SGs) in Sri Lanka. Primary data was gathered from 23 SGs to evaluate potential online experiential activities. The study found that about 70% of SGs are over an acre in size, and the staff is multilingual with ten languages. The main method of attracting tourists (over 80%) is through personal contacts and tour agents, while less than 13% use digital channels. None have adopted the Airbnb digital platform to share the spice garden experience. Concurrently, 20 tour guides from the Matale district were interviewed to assess tourists' willingness to participate in available spice garden activities. As a result, the 'Tourist Preference Index' (TPI) was developed. Data from Airbnb listings was analyzed to investigate the feasibility of earning revenue from spice garden activities through online experiential tourism. Utilizing Airbnb to match the high tourist demand with Sri Lanka's spice garden activities could stimulate the economy through foreign exchange. If these gardens offer excellent online experiences, it may promote physical visits. This mutually beneficial situation allows tourists to enjoy unique experiences and helps garden owners grow their businesses.

Keywords: Experiential tourism, Online experience, Spice tourism, Sri Lankan spice gardens, Tourist Preference Index

Introduction

The Fourth Industrial Revolution, marked by emerging technologies, is shaping societies in new ways. Tourism was one of the first sectors to digitize business processes on a global scale. Digitization has a positive environmental impact, and innovation in manufacturing, smart assets, and efficient use of resources contribute to a more sustainable industrial footprint (The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 2023). The top most popular Travel and Tourism Platforms in the world are booking.com, tripadvisor.com, Airbnb.com, expedia.com, and agoda.com (Similarweb, 2024). In addition to staying, Experience and Online Experience are the new trends in the tourism Industry. Airbnb's (Air Bed and Breakfast) new goal is the 'experiences' feature in Tourism. Hosts can offer various tours, events, and things along those lines in addition to booking places to stay (Lynley, 2016).

Tourism, a multifaceted event involving travel beyond one's usual environment, integrates social, cultural, and economic aspects for personal enjoyment or professional commitments (The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 2023). South Asia, as a region, heavily relies on the travel and tourism industry, especially when it comes to job creation. In 2019 (Ward & McComb, 2020), it was projected that approximately 47.7 million. In the context of Sri Lanka, tourism ranks as the third-highest contributor to foreign exchange earnings. The country generated a revenue of \$5.61 billion from tourism in 2018 (ITA U.S. Department of Commerce, 2022), marking a record with 2.5 million tourists visiting. Moreover, tourism significantly aids in job creation and reduces regional income disparities in the country (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2021).

Sri Lanka boasts a plethora of attractions for tourists, including its beaches, wildlife, rainforests, tea estates, ancient ruins, and Buddhist cultural sites. These, coupled with its unique geographical location and pleasant climate, position it as a competitive destination for tourism. Sri Lanka, known for its spice trade, has a cuisine and medicine shaped by centuries of spice trading (Thushanga & Piyadasa, 2021; ITA U.S. Department of Commerce, 2022; Fernando et al., 2015). Spice tourism is a form of Agri-tourism that allows visitors an educational and experiential journey through the Matale district's spice gardens (Weerasingha & Ransi, 2015). Spice tourism allows tourists to witness spice processing, purchase products, stay in farm accommodations or cabanas, and indulge in spicy cuisine and Ayurvedic treatments. As such, spice tourism contributes to Sri Lanka's promotion as a diverse and

unique destination, offering tourists an unforgettable and unique experience through its spice gardens (Malkanthi, 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic has dealt a significant blow to the global tourism sector, with Sri Lanka experiencing a 50% loss in income. Sri Lanka, which is heavily reliant on tourism revenue, has been hit by a series of setbacks, including the 2019 Easter Sunday attack, the 2023 Ukraine-Russian war, and an ongoing economic crisis since 2020. These events have led to a 73% decrease in tourist arrivals in 2020 compared to 2018 (Keerthisinghe, 2022; SLTDA, 2023). The trend of tourists preferring coastal areas over inland trips has further affected the central region's tourism and, consequently, the spice industry. The situation poses significant challenges for tourism Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) (SLTDA, 2023). This paper investigates the current scenario of spice garden tourism and explores digital marketing opportunities for these struggling MSMEs.

Review of Literature

Digital platforms provide global access to consumers and allow service providers to improve the development of the tourism sector and its competitive standards. Thus, low-income economies can benefit from this digital transformation (The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 2023). As the tourism industry embraces digitization, numerous hosts and guests are turning to digital platforms for their business operations and global travel. A primary solution to this transition is the application of digital marketing strategies, coupled with the maintenance and assurance of sustainable tourism practices (SLTDA, 2023).

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, 'Airbnb' emerged as a popular digital platform due to restrictions on physical movement. This online marketplace provides short-term and long-term accommodation and dining experiences. Besides lodging, it has introduced 'experiences' and 'online experiences', marking new trends in the tourism industry. These experiences include a variety of tours, events, and similar activities, in addition to accommodation bookings. In 2020, Airbnb launched 'online experiences' as a novel way for individuals to connect, travel virtually, and generate income during the pandemic. This initiative proved to be a successful and valuable innovation in the tourism sector. As per Airbnb's data, travelers can book experiences without needing to rent accommodations on the platform, and hosts offering these experiences don't necessarily have to provide accommodations. 'Online Experiences' quickly became Airbnb's fastest-growing product, enabling some hosts to earn nearly \$500,000. The pandemic led tourists to embrace virtual

tourism and online experiences as alternative travel methods. Airbnb's online experiences, which are activities and events conducted by expert hosts via Zoom, foster human connection and community among hosts and guests. Consequently, online digital platforms have ushered in experiential tourism as a new facet of the tourism industry. The popularity of online experiences during the pandemic could potentially enhance tourists' loyalty and pique their interest in visiting the destinations physically (Zaidi, 2023; Airbnb, 2023; Sthapit et al., 2021; Capineri & Romano, 2021; Zhang & Qiu, 2022).

In Sri Lanka, a significant number of spice garden owners have established their websites to draw in tourists. This allows them to advertise their locations globally with relative ease. Consequently, half of the spice gardens in Sri Lanka have started utilizing online platforms for site promotion via social networks (Weerasingha & Ransi, 2015). These platforms enable spice gardens to offer activities as Airbnb online experiences, leveraging their potential. However, the integration of these facilities into the Sri Lankan spice tourism sector is still an area that requires further development. This research aims to identify the potential and tourist willingness to connect spice gardens and Airbnb online experiences.

Research Objectives

The research primarily aims to investigate the potential of integrating Airbnb's experiential tourism into Sri Lanka's Spice Gardens. This involves three specific objectives for the sake of clarity and convenience. Firstly, the research seeks to determine the viability of conducting Airbnb's experiential tourism within these Spice Gardens. Secondly, it aims to gauge the interest and willingness of tourists to engage in the array of activities offered by the Spice Gardens. Lastly, the research intends to explore the potential of generating foreign exchange earnings through Airbnb's experiential tourism in the Spice Gardens of Sri Lanka. Each objective contributes to the overall goal of enhancing tourism and economic growth in the region.

Research Methodology

This study focused on the leading spice garden district in Sri Lanka. A multistage sampling design was employed, encompassing the selection district, the Divisional Secretariat division (DS), and Grama Niladhari divisions. Additionally, a simple random sampling technique was applied to select regional tour guides, resulting in a sample of 23 spice gardens and 20 regional tour guides for the study.

To meet the objectives of this research, a mixed-method approach was used. The primary data include qualitative and quantitative data, which were collected from spice garden owners' questionnaires. In addition, regional tour guides provided data online. The secondary data came from the 'Airbnb' digital platform.

Data was descriptively analyzed. During the pre-visit, 11 variables were determined to be important activities. Eight variables were determined to be important variables after an enhanced version of the spice garden owners' questionnaire was given out based on the prior visit: V1, V2, V3, V4, V5, V7, V9, V10. Based on two questions, the choices (one to eleven) were obtained, and points (zero to ten) were allocated based on a choice made for each variable. To gauge tourists' willingness on the eight variables, the questionnaire was distributed to twenty local tour guides (experts). Points were assigned to the variable based on the established scoring standards. The variable was then ranked and the Tourist Preference Index (TPI) was computed.

The model can be specified as the equation below;

$$\text{Tourist Preference Index (TPI)} = \sum_{i=1}^n \left[\frac{W_i L_i}{n} \right]$$

W_i is the mean weightage given by the experts for the i^{th} parameter, L_i is the score for each variable. The i and n are the numbers of variables.

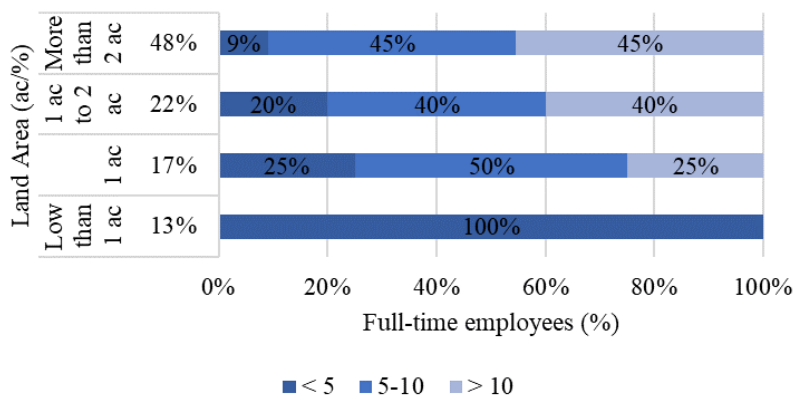
Take note of the following variables: V_1 : spice garden tour experience, V_2 : spice cultivation tour experience, V_3 : spice harvesting experience, V_4 : spice processing experience, V_5 : value-added spice processing experience, V_6 : spice garden stay experience, V_7 : ayurvedic medicinal treatment experience, V_8 : hela medicinal treatment experience, V_9 : cooking experience, V_{10} : traditional spice food restaurant experience, and V_{11} : sales of various products such as spices, cosmetics, and medicinal products.

Analysis and Discussion

The study findings are divided into three sections: potential in spice gardens, a Tourist Preference Index, and increased economic status via Airbnb. The potential of spice gardens was assessed by examining both the spice garden factors and their online presence through digital features. As spice garden factors: the size of the land, a cross-tabulation between the land size and the number of full-time employees, the acquisition of consultancy support, the language proficiency of the employees, the types of crops grown, the activities conducted in

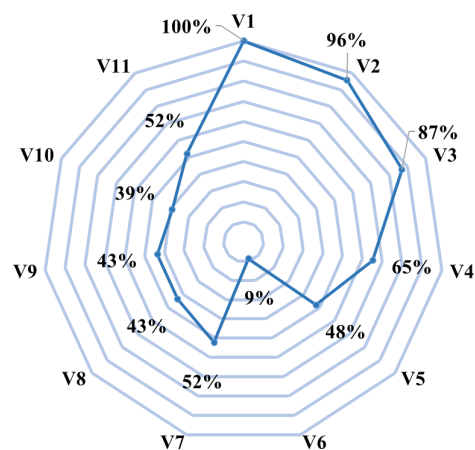
the spice garden, and the number of tourists who visited in the past year. As digital features: the tourist attractions ways, utilization of reservation platforms, the use of social media, sharing spice garden experience and ways of sharing, types of experiences that sharing and platforms, reviews received from digital platforms, knowledge and awareness of experience-sharing platforms, willingness to create platforms for sharing experiences, and technical ability to manage digital platforms were studied.

Figure 1. Cross-tabulation on land size vs. full-time employees



According to the cross-tabulation analysis of land size and full-time employees (Figure 1) 48% of spice gardens covered an area of more than two acres. 22% of spice gardens spanned between one to two acres, while the remaining 30% were one acre or smaller. Moreover, spice gardens with an area larger than one acre employed more than ten full-time workers, a percentage it is 40%. These gardens also had more than 40% of their employees consisting of 5 to 10 full-time workers. On the other hand, 13% of spice gardens were less than one acre in size, and these gardens employed fewer than five full-time workers.

Figure 2. Spice garden activities



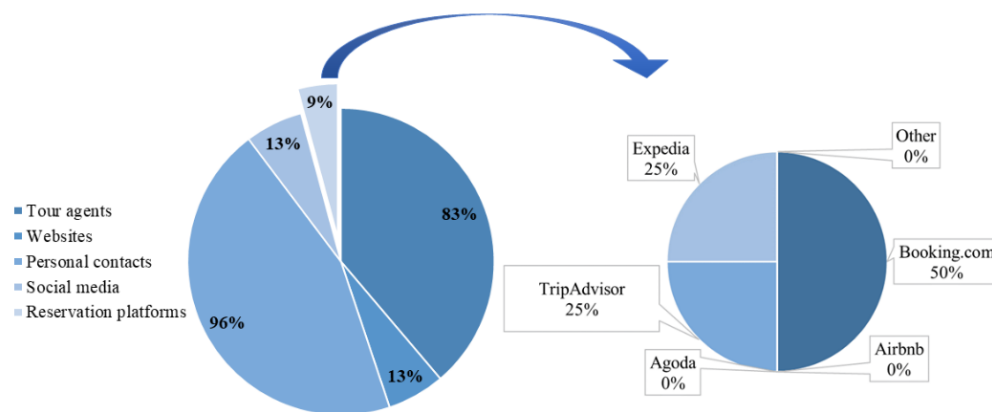
The research findings reveal that all the spice gardens have established spice crops such as cinnamon, clove, nutmeg, pepper, cardamom, and so on. Additionally, 96% of these gardens cultivate herbs, and crops with export value like coffee, cocoa, etc. However, only 57% have cultivated plantation crops like coconut and tea. This has led to a keen interest among tourists in purchasing herbal coconut oils, coconut-related products, and particularly, Sri Lankan tea products. As Figure 2 shows that, over 80% of spice gardens offer experiences such as spice garden tours, spice cultivation tours, and spice harvesting. Furthermore, between 40% and 70% of these gardens provide experiences in spice processing, ayurvedic medicinal treatments, value-added spice processing, hela (local) medicinal treatments, and cooking. Traditional spice food restaurant experiences are offered by nearly 40% of these gardens, while a mere 9% provide the experience of staying at the spice gardens.

Employees at the spice gardens are multilingual, with proficiency in ten languages - English, French, Russian, Chinese, Korean, German, Spanish, Japanese, Hindi, and Italian, in addition to Sinhala and Tamil. This allows the spice gardens to conduct their activities online in the native languages of the tourists. Furthermore, a significant majority (87%) of the spice gardens have sought expert consultancy support, leaving only 13% that have not. The owners of the spice gardens have found that these consultants introduce new technologies and methods. They are also adept at understanding the preferences of travelers and often serve as guides in some spice gardens.

The findings further reveal that in the past 12 months (2022), only 52% of spice gardens had more than 60 foreign tourists, while the remaining 48% saw fewer than 60 foreign tourists. When it comes to local tourist visits, only 30% of spice gardens had more than 60 visitors. The majority of spice gardens, making up the remaining 70%, experienced a lower influx of local tourists, with numbers less than 60. The COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing economic crisis have had a significant impact on these spice gardens. Many have had to downsize their staff and operations due to the reduced number of foreign tourists. This has also led to inadequate maintenance in many of these spice gardens.

The study found that the (Figure 3) majority of spice gardens relied on personal contacts (96%) and tour agents (83%) to attract tourists. A smaller percentage (13%) used websites for promotional activities, while another 13% leveraged social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok.

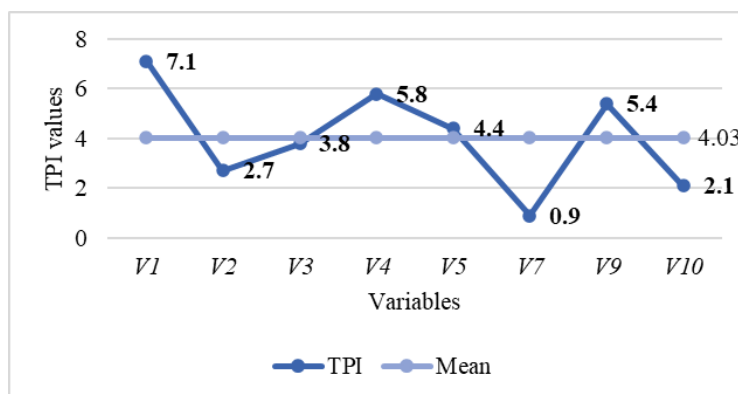
Figure 3. Tourist attraction ways and use of reservation platforms



A mere 9% made use of reservation platforms such as Booking.com (100%), TripAdvisor (50%), and Expedia (50%), with 83% of them receiving reviews. It's noteworthy that popular platforms such as Airbnb and Agoda were not used in their promotional strategies.

It was observed that a majority of the respondents, 74%, did not utilize a web application (either a web-based system or a web-based platform) to share their experiences from the spice garden. However, 26% did use such a web application. Among those who used a web application, the vast majority, 83%, chose social media, while the remaining 17% used TripAdvisor. The focus was on providing an online experience (67%) and marketing the physical experience online (33%). Even though 83% of the respondents were aware of web applications that could share their experience, 17% were not. Despite this, all respondents expressed a preference for establishing a web application to share spice garden experiences. Furthermore, the majority, 82%, felt confident in their technical ability to manage web-based activities.

Figure 4. TPI values moving with TPI mean



The TPI was used to analyze the tourist community's willingness to engage in various spice garden activities (Figure 4). The highest preferred activity among tourists was V_1 . This was followed by the V_4 , V_9 , V_5 , V_3 , V_2 , V_{10} , and V_7 , in that order. To identify the top five activities preferred by the tourist community, the mean value of the TPI was computed, which was 4.03. The activities V_1 , V_4 , V_9 , and V_5 surpassed this mean value, indicating a strong correlation between these activities and tourist willingness. As the V_3 is very close to the mean value, it can be inferred that it holds similar appeal to tourists as the aforementioned activities.

Airbnb is a unique global platform offering live online experiences via Zoom. It allows worldwide interaction in small groups, creating personal and memorable experiences. Accessible on PC, tablet, or mobile. This feature distinguishes Airbnb, making it ideal for those seeking intimate, unforgettable experiences. Anyone can become a host for an experience by signing up for free and sharing their skills. There are numerous categories for sharing online experiences, such as cooking, entertainment, drinks, history and culture, social impact, wellness, etc. (Airbnb, 2023).

Table 1 below outlines the foreign exchange earnings of selected Airbnb experiences. The primary source of their revenue is the price charged per guest.

As depicted, "Go on Leopard Safari in Sri Lanka" costs \$14 per person for an hour. Started in 2020, it has 600 reviews and earns about \$4,200 yearly. "Animal Sanctuary Virtual Experience" is a 30-minute session hosted by a woman from the US. It costs \$19 per person and has received 419 reviews. The estimated yearly income is approximately \$3,980. "New Zealand Nature Highlights" is a 60-minute experience by a New Zealander since 2020. It has 937 reviews and costs \$22 per person. The annual income is about \$10,227.

Moreover, A South African hosted "Meet a Real-Life Shark Scientist" since 2020. It has 1231 reviews, costs \$20 per person, and generates about \$12,145 annually. Since 2021, an Indian guide has been offering a 60-minute virtual tour of "Walk into the Taj Mahal with a professional Tour Guide" for \$5 per person. With 260 reviews so far, the annual income is approximately \$1,300. A woman from Portugal has been running a 60-minute virtual tour called "Meet My Bees" since 2020. She charges \$21 per person while receiving 385 reviews. Her annual income is approximately \$4,096.

Cooking has become a highly popular virtual experience worldwide. Many people host online cooking sessions on platforms like Airbnb, where they offer a wide range of cuisines to explore. An Indian chef based in Germany offers a 60-minute experience called "Spice it up with Dancing Indian Chef". She uses a range of spices in cooking. Since 2020, has received 165 reviews and earns an annual income of \$1,843, charging \$22 per person. A Mexican woman hosted "Make Mexican Street Tacos with a Pro Chef," since 2021, for 4566 reviews. Reported a yearly income of \$ 127,848. It charged \$28 per person for 90 minutes.

Table 1. Foreign exchange earnings via Airbnb

Experience name	Country	Time duration (min)	Starte d year	Price/Per guest	Total reviews	Total income	Income per year
Go On a Leopard Safari in Sri Lanka	Sri Lanka	60	2020	\$14	600	\$8,400	\$4,200
Animal Sanctuary Virtual Experience	United States	30	2020	\$19	419	\$7,961	\$3,981
New Zealand Nature Highlights	New Zealand	60	2020	\$22	937	\$20,455	\$10,227
Meet a Real-Life Shark Scientist	South Africa	60	2020	\$20	1231	\$24,349	\$12,175
Walk into the Taj Mahal with a professional Tour Guide	India	60	2021	\$5	260	\$1,300	\$1,300
Meet My Bees	Portugal	60	2020	\$21	385	\$8,193	\$4,096
Spice it up with Dancing Indian Chef	Germany	60	2020	\$22	165	\$3,686	\$1,843
Make Mexican Street Tacos with a Pro Chef	Mexico	90	2021	\$28	4566	\$,127,848	\$,127,848
Pasta with the grandmas	Italy	90	2020	\$36	3550	\$127,800	\$63,900
E-Cook - Indian Food with Number One Class in Delhi	India	120	2021	\$55	1285	\$70,675	\$70,675
Chai Tea Masterclass - Vegan Friendly	India	30	2021	\$15	320	\$4,800	\$4,800

Source: Airbnb, 2023

“Pasta with the Grandmas” costs \$36 per participant for a 90-minute. From 2020 she got 3550 reviews and a year income of around \$63,900. Neha is a woman in India. She has received 1285 reviews for "E-Cook - Indian Food with Number One Class in Delhi" from

2022. Its revenue is \$70,675 with \$55 per person for a 120-minute. "Chai Tea Masterclass - Vegan Friendly" is a 30-minute experience by an Indian. His income was around \$4,800/year with 320 reviews Since 2021. "Chai Tea Masterclass – Vegan Friendly" is a 30-minute experience by an Indian. His income was around \$4,800/year with \$15 per person with 320 reviews Since 2021 (Airbnb, 2023).

Conclusions

Sri Lankan spice gardens have a significant potential to offer Airbnb Online Experiential Tourism, with a high demand among tourists. The multilingual staff and consultancy support, which provides knowledge of new technical and scientific methods, are key assets. Spice garden tours, spice processing, cooking, value-added processing, and harvesting experiences are the activities with the highest tourist demand. However, more focus is needed on cooking and value-added spice processing experiences.

Given the popularity of Sri Lankan spice products among foreign tourists, high-quality production and packaging are crucial for attracting tourists. Tourists nowadays are more inclined towards using digital applications for their travel needs. However, spice gardens seem to avoid using digital applications due to many reasons. These reasons include a lack of knowledge about such applications, trust issues, and the absence of reliable, user-friendly, and dedicated digital applications. To offer the activities of spice gardens as online experiences, a different approach is required as compared to the traditional approaches.

Training or awareness sessions are needed to equip spice gardens for delivering online experiences attractively and entertainingly. Given the significant tourist interest in spice garden activities and the ample capacity to cater to this interest, Airbnb online experiences could be used as an effective conduit linking this demand and supply. This initiative would not only bolster the national economy and address the foreign exchange crisis, but it could also reignite the interest of foreign tourists in visiting Sri Lanka. In essence, it's a thrilling prospect, and this creates a win-win situation, providing unique experiences for tourists and business expansion opportunities for spice garden owners.

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