

BARRIERS TO REALIZING TOURISM POTENTIAL: INSIGHTS FROM SIGIRIYA, SRI LANKA

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Tourism is a global economic and cultural exchange, fostering socio-economic development and cross-border understanding. Sri Lanka holds immense potential in international tourism due to its rich biodiversity, cultural heritage, and historical landmarks. However, this potential is constrained by barriers, particularly at Sigiriya, a UNESCO World Heritage Site renowned for its cultural significance. The challenges visitors encounter at Sigiriya provide a basis for evaluating barriers in Sri Lanka's tourism sector and examining factors influencing tourist satisfaction. Based on this background, the primary objective of this research is to identify obstacles faced by foreign tourists visiting Sigiriya. A sub-objective includes analyzing tourist satisfaction. Primary data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, and participant observations, while secondary data included tourist arrivals and revenue at Sigiriya from 2018 to 2023. The sample comprised 200 foreign tourists, who were selected via random sampling. Descriptive statistics and econometric analyses, including Pearson correlation and a Probit model, were used to evaluate the relationships among key variables influencing tourist satisfaction. Findings reveal significant issues such as overcrowding, difficulties in accessing the destination, high costs of tour guide services, and challenges with sanitation and waste management. Pearson correlation analysis indicated a strong association between tourist satisfaction and factors such as accommodation costs, food and beverage expenses, transportation fees, tour guide charges, security, hospitality, and hygiene. Among these, hygiene standards ($r = 0.71$, $P < 0.01$), accommodation costs ($r = 0.63$, $P < 0.05$), and transportation expenses ($r = 0.81$, $P < 0.05$) were significant. Probit model results indicated that sanitation facilities, waste disposal, and transportation costs significantly affect tourist satisfaction. Additional barriers include limited banking services and restricted online payment options complicating international tourists' experiences, especially with public transport and purchases. Recommendations include implementing a visitor limit time slot entry system to manage overcrowding, upgrading infrastructure, and incentives for off-peak visits. Prepaid travel cards, local mobile payment apps, and enhanced cash accessibility for the areas without electronic payment options are proposed. An eco-friendly cable car system connecting Sigiriya to Pidurangala is suggested to reduce overcrowding and vehicle congestion, while also saving tourists' time. Strengthening the informal sector, improving rural public transport, and promoting culinary tourism through food festivals and local recipes can further enhance accessibility and sustainable tourism growth in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Tourism barriers, potentials in tourism, tourist satisfaction, sustainable tourism