

COLONIAL HERITAGE AS A DRIVER OF CULTURAL TOURISM: A CASE STUDY OF NUWARA ELIYA, SRI LANKA

Pushparaj Ushanthini, Mubarak Fathima Sasna

Department of Geography, Faculty of Arts and Culture, SEUSL

Correspondence: ushanthinipushparaj29@gmail.com

Abstract

Nuwara Eliya, often referred to as “Little England,” is a distinguished colonial-era hill station in Central Highlands of Sri Lanka, renowned for its British-style architecture, tea plantations, and temperate climate. This study critically examines the role of colonial heritage as a catalyst for cultural tourism and for both local and national economic development in Nuwara Eliya. Despite growing tourist arrivals, there is limited academic literature addressing the link between heritage preservation and sustainable economic outcomes in this postcolonial context. This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining primary data from structured field observations, visitor tracking at selected heritage sites, and semi-structured interviews with local tourism stakeholders. Secondary sources included records from the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA), district tourism reports, and peer-reviewed literature. This research focuses on key colonial assets, including Colonial Hotels and Residences (Grand Hotel, St. Andrew’s Hotel, Queen’s Cottage), Clubs and Social Establishment (Hill Club, Golf Club), Religious Structures (Holy Trinity Church), Administrative Buildings (Nuwara Eliya Post Office, Old Court Building), Tea Heritage (Labukele Tea Factory, Pedro Estate), Transport and infrastructure (Nanu Oya Railway Station) and Parks and Recreation (Victoria Park, Hakgala Botanical Garden). These sites are identified as cultural tourism assets based on their architectural features, historical relevance, and tourist engagement. In 2023, approximately 840,000 tourists (280,000 international and 560,000 domestic tourists) visited Nuwara Eliya. With nearly 48% motivated by heritage tourism, as indicated by site entry records and interviews. The total economic contribution of heritage-driven tourism was estimated at LKR 4.5 billion, covering accommodation, transport, site fees, and indirect spending. However, threats such as commercialization, underfunded conservation, and loss of authenticity have been noted. This study advocates for integrated heritage management strategies and sustainable tourism development models to preserve and leverage colonial assets. The findings contribute robust empirical evidence to the discourse on cultural tourism and heritage economics in postcolonial societies.

Keywords: colonial heritage, cultural tourism, Nuwara Eliya, heritage tourism revenue