
Softer sell on the golden mile

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'Massage, cola, coconut' - the incessant hassle is gone, thanks to a project to boost hawkers' wages and lure tourists back to this Sri Lankan beach

Peace dividend ... Beruwala beach in Sri Lanka. Photograph: Alamy'

Our job was always seen in negative terms," said Siggie. "But now we can feel some dignity in what we do. And we make more money than before, without fighting over it."

We were sitting in a palm thatch lean-to on the "golden mile" of beach stretching from Beruwela to Bentota on Sri Lanka's south-west coast. To our left, an impeccably clean stretch of sand was given added colour by artistic displays of hats and sarongs hanging from wigwam structures of sticks and driftwood. To our right, a tall green fence separated us from the Riverina Hotel's swimming pool, where two English families were playing water polo. "One day we hope the fences will come down," added Sujit Yamasinghe, the young sociologist spearheading the LINC (Learning Involving Nurturing Communities) project which has elevated Siggie from "beach boy" status to "beach operator", boosted his income and prospects, while simultaneously improving his relations with foreign guests, local people and the management of the Riverina Hotel. On busy tropical beaches, from Bali to Barbados, the scene is familiar: an almost incessant stream of hawkers, "beach bums" in regulation surf shorts, Bob Marley T-shirts and crowned with dreadlocks, offering everything from massages and sunglasses to boat trips and local tours. Although their exchanges can be friendly and engaging, they are often regarded with suspicion and can become irritatingly persistent. Having lived the last four years in south Sri Lanka, I know how family trips to the beach can be marred by these interruptions. There are only so many times you can say no to the same toy wooden boat and sarongs. Until recently, this stretch of Sri Lankan coast, an area badly affected by the 2004 tsunami, was no exception. Hundreds of "beach boys" gathered outside the hotels, hassling their prey on the other side of high green fences. At the Riverina Hotel, the problem had become so severe that tourists rarely ventured to the beach from the hotel compound. Even locals and hotel staff kept their distance, for fear of the friction that might ensue. One hotel operator had likened the informal industry to "a mafia". Now, thanks to an initiative implemented by Sri Lanka's Responsible Tourism Partnership (RTP) and sponsored by the UK Travel Foundation and tour operator Kuoni, the situation has been reversed. Noisy hordes of hustlers, who previously secured their game by pestering the loudest, have been replaced by teams of Beach Operators (BOs), dressed in official T-shirts, their names embossed on the sleeves and seated in the shade under palm frond beach huts. Tourists now come to them, rather than the other way round. Of the 72 originally trained under the scheme, 65 are now operating in teams of four or five. The proceeds from their commissions, sales and tips are then pooled and split equally between the group. "The first thing we did was replace the term 'beach boys' with 'beach operators', providing a link between the formal and informal tourism industries," said Sujit. And since only one representative from each group needs to be on the beach at one time, you'll often find just 14 BOs on the golden mile, rather than a swarm of 70. This informal industry has a long history and some of those working the beach are continuing a family profession stretching back generations. Many are eager to point out that some local politicians and successful businessmen started their careers by selling trinkets and tours on this strip of beach, while hotel managers accept that the local knowledge and foreign language skills of the BOs are often superior to that of their own staff. All too often however, large hotel developments have ignored the needs of the local community and left many unemployed, thereby creating the sort of tension that evolved at the Riverina. Now local community activities, ranging from New Year and Independence Day celebrations to cricket matches, integrate foreign guests with hotel staff and the BOs. Unlike two years ago, when hotel staff would hardly dare venture to the beach, the BOs actively promote the Riverina among their contacts. A Community Fund has been established, creating a welfare system that helps pay for funerals and other events that can financially cripple poor families. The positive results of the LINC project have been systemic, stretching to beach-cleaning and tree-planting programmes to combat erosion, with BOs working alongside hotel employees. The neighbouring Neptune Hotel, a white concrete complex designed by the celebrated Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa in the 1970s, has also signed up to the project. "We always had a good rapport with the BOs and are the only hotel not separated from the beach by a fence," said general manager Samantha Gunaratne. "But after seeing the success of the Riverina pilot project, we invited Sujit to replicate it here and relations have become even better." The hope is that the model will now be rolled out on other Sri Lankan beaches. Back at the Riverina, instead of feeling enclosed and intimidated, tourists walked undisturbed to the beach. One or two stopped to chat with the BOs assigned to them, discussing the details of impending excursions to local markets and temples. Gone are the cries for "massage", "sarong" and "coconut". Rory Spowers runs Samakanda "bio-versity" (samakanda.org) where the bungalows cost from £40 per night. A Year in Green Tea and Tuk-Tuks, Rory Spowers' book about moving to Sri Lanka, the 2004 tsunami and the creation of Samakanda, is published by Harper Element, priced £8.99. (Courtesy : Guardian.co.uk)