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Feature Article

The Local Alternative in Sri Lanka

A New Responsible Travel Map of the Resplendent Isle


By [Ethan Gelber](#)



Sri Lanka's tropical harmony is being dealt some bruising blows. Its forests and wildlife habitats are shrinking, undermining its reputation as a biodiversity hotspot. Traditional culture and a diverse heritage are wilting in the face of urban expansion, modernisation and debilitating conflict.

So, in the face of such corrosion, can travellers really help? In a word, yes. And it's as easy as spending money wisely and/or volunteering time and skills. Now let's see how you can get the dirt under your fingernails.

The LOCALternative Approach



In 2007, a novel new map called [LOCALternative Sri Lanka – A Responsible Travel Map](#) was created. In a nutshell, this map helps connect travellers with conscience to projects with heart. It looks at local initiatives that follow alternative pathways to beneficial ends. It's a map for travellers who seek outlets for nature conservation, biodiversity preservation and community development and demonstrates the capabilities of tourism as a stalwart force in environmentally sound, pro-poor programming.

The map highlights 170 points of interest - pristine and manmade natural areas, unorthodox lodging options, cultural and religious heritage spaces and projects under the guidance of community groups. The map focuses on proactive collective endeavours, whether fostered by small business groups, women, craftsmen or those united by geography, vocation or environmental, animal or community concerns. Many of these projects are otherwise unknown and, without the map, would be unlikely to attract much attention.

The [Sewalanka Foundation](#), for example, is an organisation that works with poor rural communities to address their development needs. It runs Sewalanka's Sustainable Tourism Unit which supports the development of community-based

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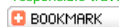
[More on volunteering](#)

The map highlights 170 points of interest - pristine and manmade natural areas.

homestays, guide associations, crafts making and sales, ecotours and other local initiatives. Structures are already up and running in palm-fringed coastal villages near the south-western city of Galle and Arugam Bay in the south-east, as well as around Sinharaja Forest, a Unesco World Heritage Site and Sri Lanka's richest concentration of endemic flora and fauna.

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Volunteering in Sri Lanka

Everyone can do their bit for responsible tourism but for travellers with time on their hands and a craving for direct engagement, volunteering can be a serious consideration.

On occasion, several of the community groups listed on LOCALternative Sri Lanka request skilled and unskilled volunteer support. Below is a brief assortment of such organisations, so why not join the concerned cavalry?

In a nutshell, this map helps connect travellers with conscience to projects with heart

People-oriented groups:

- [Responsible Tourism Partnership](#) often has volunteer opportunities with projects linking tourism to surrounding communities.
- [Sarvodaya](#) 'Shramadana' programs welcome volunteers to villages to work on local projects.
- [Sewalanka Foundation](#) accepts volunteers who assist with aid and development projects and build the capacity of local staff. Contact hr@sewalanka.org.
- [Woodlands Network](#) currently seeks six-month volunteer commitments from people who can teach English and computer skills to children in the Hill Country.

Nature and animal-oriented groups:

- [Animal Welfare and Protection Association](#) shelters animals in need.
- [Millennium Elephant Foundation](#) relies on volunteers for community work and daily management of the charity's primary concerns. Click on the 'Volunteers' section of their site.
- [Rainforest Rescue International](#) is currently geared to bring in volunteers specialised in conservation or forestry.
- [Sri Lanka Wildlife Conservation Society](#) volunteer programs range from animal field research to training, building, forestry and farm projects.
- [Turtle Conservation Project](#) has a wide range of tasks suitable for different trade skills, including working with turtles, educating people and promoting responsible tourism practices.

Ethan Gelber



Ethan Gelber has written numerous articles about Sri Lanka. Full disclosure: He is the force behind *LOCALternative Sri Lanka*. A devoted sojourner and professional freelance writer, he has co-authored Lonely Planet's *Cycling Italy*, as well as contributing articles to several trade and reference titles. He currently lives in Sydney.

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