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35

# TRANSFORMATIONAL TOURISM: A VISIONARY APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE TOURISM?

G.L.W. Roshini N. NANDASENA [a],

Alastair M. MORRISON [a], Wenjie CAI [a], J. Andres COCA-STEFANIAK [a]

[a] University of Greenwich, Greenwich Business School, Old Royal Naval College, Park Row, London SE10 9LS, United Kingdom.

**Abstract**

The main purpose of this chapter is to propose a conceptual model of transformational tourism. The transformational process for tourists is explored through an analysis of tourism experiences in Sri Lanka. Based on a thematic analysis of in-depth interviews, two themes were identified: (1) The healing and inspiration of Sri Lanka; and (2) self-reflective actions towards encountering poverty in tourism destinations. Future trends and research directions for transformational tourism are proposed.

**Keywords**: Transformational tourism, memorable tourism experiences (MTEs), transformative learning theory (TLT), sustainable tourism, UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), interviews, Sri Lanka

## Introduction

Transformational tourism has the potential to generate meaningful tourism through memorable tourism experiences. The transformative potential effect of travel has been compared to therapy (Kottler, 1998) and education (Reisinger, 2013), as people engage in experiences that involve culture, nature and social encounters (Morgan, 2010). Similarly, transformational tourism experiences have been associated with various tourism typologies, including ecotourism, voluntourism, religious and pilgrimage tourism, backpacker and adventure tourism, cultural and heritage tourism, wellness and yoga tourism, and dark tourism (Nandasena *et al.*, 2022). The outcomes of these experiences include critical self-reflection, a greater understanding of society and the world, improved tourist-host relationships and a better appreciation of local culture. This chapter explores tourists' transformational process through their experiences in Sri Lanka. Based on an empirical study, two themes were identified: (1) The healing and inspiration of Sri Lanka; and (2) self-reflective actions towards encountering poverty. Additionally, this chapter outlines a number of future potential avenues for research and practice in this field and provides a better grounding for transformational tourism studies in sustainable development.

Kirillova et al. (2017) emphasised that transformations are highly personal, contextual and strongly influenced by motivations as well as experiences. However, and in spite of over three decades of research in this field, there is no consensus on a single accepted definition of transformational tourism experiences (TTE), possibly partly as a result of the myriad of disciplines of knowledge that have contributed to this field of research. For instance, focusing on the more psychological aspects of TTE, Reisinger (2013) argued that inner transformation is deeply situated and entangled with tourism destinations. From a mobilities perspective, Lean (2012) labelled TTEs as a "complex social phenomenon" (p. 169) and called for studies to investigate their impact beyond the individual. Kirillova et al. (2017) and Coghlan and Weiler (2018) suggested that emotional responses to extraordinary events tend to lead to critical self-awareness and reflections, resulting in personal change and a re-definition of the self. In turn, Sheldon (2020) described four tourism transformation scenarios - deep human connectivity, deep environmental connectivity, self-inquiry and engaged contribution - which provide opportunities for inner transformation. Additionally, the concept of the 'transformational moment' (p. 8) was posited by the same author, which is rooted in

consciousness. Building on this growing body of knowledge, this chapter aims to investigate transformational tourism through the lens of memorable experiences, which are seen as precursors to transformational ones. Similarly, it is argued that the exact time or place where a transformation may occur cannot be predicted, chiefly given that the passing of time plays a key role in processes of self-reflection, which may, in turn, last hours, days, months or even decades. Sterchele (2020) showed that after visiting a tourism destination, a memorable tourism experience (MTE), can be a catalyst for deeper and more lasting transformational processes. Duerden et al. (2018) asserted that some tourism experiences may evolve further over a period of time to become extraordinary as people continue to reflect on their experiences to integrate them further into their lives, regardless of whether those experiences were positive or negative. Similarly, tourism experiences in unfamiliar (Kottler, 1998; Morgan, 2010; Reisinger, 2013) and unexpected (Coughlan and Connolly, 2001) situations may also become memorable and emotionally charged (Jefferies and Lepp, 2012), and potentially life-changing. Thus, transformational tourism is defined here as the outcome of self-reflective processes among tourists as a result of memorable experiences, leading to changes in their view of the world around them, changes in their everyday behaviours and/or thinking, physical changes and changes in how they relate to others. This has been captured visually through an artistic rendering shown in Figure 35.1. Research by Yang et al. (2015), for instance, has shown how healing experiences arising from wellness tourism are key in the way that people transform mentally as well as physically. Phillips (2019) and Pung et al. (2020) suggested that travel offers unique contexts for individuals to learn new skills under differing conditions, and as a result, reflecting, challenging their worldviews, and enhancing their existential authenticity.

Since 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic greatly impacted the tourism industry and seemed to spur a new wave of transformational tourism studies (Ateljevic, 2020), positioning transformational tourism as a turning point for back to normal or the new normal in the re-built conception of a tourism sector that should re-assess its relationship with local communities. In spite of this, the majority of research to date in this field has tended to focus primarily on individual transformation, whilst local communities and the tourist-host perspective have been largely overlooked. The next section of this chapter analyses how perceptions and different dimensions of TTEs are

dealt with in scholarly studies. Although, this chapter acknowledges that transformative learning theory (TLT) (Mezirow, 1978) has provided the foundation for a great deal of research in this field, the dominance of this theoretical underpinning is challenged critically. Similarly, and based on an extensive literature review of TTE research, this chapter posits a new conceptual model for transformational tourism. Thereafter, aspects of this conceptual model are investigated through field research carried out in the form of semi-structured interviews with individuals who had visited Sri Lanka. This chapter ends with an analysis of future trends and research directions for transformational tourism.

## Transformational tourism experiences (TTE)

In the early days of research on TTE, academics tended to focus deliberately on **tourists'** perspectives, behaviours and transformation with Mezirow's (1978) TLT as the dominant theoretical framework for this research. This prevalence of Mezirow's theory is somewhat surprising, particularly given that it was initially developed for adult education and transformative processes that were arguably linked to education alone. In terms of focus on tourism typologies, a recent systematic literature review covering 42 years of research in transformational tourism (Nandasena *et al.*, 2022) showed that the fastest growth in scholarly activity in this field corresponds to the last 10 years. Tourism typologies such as pilgrimage, spiritual and religious tourism have attracted much attention from scholars for their transformative potential, followed by other typologies such as culture and heritage tourism and voluntourism, which were investigated in this context especially between 2013 and 2017. Today, other typologies such as ecotourism, wellness, wellbeing and yoga tourism are attracting much scholarly enquiry in this respect.

All in all, there is a large variety of factors involved in the development of a transformative experiences anchored in tourism. These include the full spectrum of the tourism system. In other words, developments, experiences and circumstances before, during and after the visit. Similarly, TTE outcomes such as risk taking, facing challenges, gaining confidence and personal development are often found in tourists who engage in adventure and backpacker tourism. Freedom, controlling negative emotions such as fear, anger and anxiety are discussed more in religious and spiritual

tourism types. For example, Song and Yan (2020) discussed three types of inner experiences, feelings, enlightenment or transformation and sensory awareness being in a Buddhist religious site. Ross (2013) investigated tourists' ability to extract meaning and personal wellbeing from their experiences, leading to enhanced levels of empathy and justice that resulted in changing views on the meaning of life as a result of religious and spiritual tourism. Similarly, Wearing and McGehee (2013) argued the case for voluntourism as an agent of change and a force for "personal growth and a change in worldview" (p. 126). In the context of adventure tourism, Folmer (2019) found that adventure tourists tend to find their inspiration in nature and that social relationships and personal achievements (e.g., improvements in self-control, resilience, joy and fulfilment) can be key ingredients for their transformative experiences.

From the host perspective, transformational tourism can be perceived as a sustainable ambassador (Lean, 2012) in a destination. It can empower local communities as well as help hosts and guests to reflect on their respective responsibilities. TT might be an advantageous supplement for sustainable tourism development. Sustainability in TT is an emerging topic. Kim et al. (2019), for example, illustrated the two-way link between community-based ecotourism and a sustainable transformative economy. Butcher (2011) suggested that ecotourism has the capability to tackle poverty and address the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Massingham et al. (2019) described personal aspects of experiences such as positive and negative emotions, connections, reflections, and elements of experience (e.g., animal encounters, educational shows) associated with ecotourism that supported different forms of conservation. Lyons and Wearing (2008) noted transformative experiences from volunteering and highlighted its privileges. Moreover, the benefits from TT can be further deepened through social inclusiveness, poverty reduction, and resource efficiency. Knollenberg et al. (2014) depicted volunteer tourist transformation through Taylor's (2008) three elements of self-reflection, engaging in dialogue, and intercultural experience that facilitate more sustainable outcomes. Transformative volunteering can lead towards the maximisation of positive impacts and the minimisation negative effects. However, these transformative experiences are yet to be fully linked with destination sustainability and its contribution to achieving the SDGs.

Academic studies on TTE thus far have a focus on theoretical debates about the concept, while personal and internal transformations are predominating the theoretical

based on the foundation of TLT. The impact of TT on destinations and local communities has started to attract academic attention, including within destination management and marketing. Less research attention is being paid to hosts and local communities. Also, host-guest relationships and the future trajectories of transformed individuals have not been sufficiently investigated. Another priority is to connect TTE with sustainable and responsible tourism in achieving the SDGs (UNWTO, 2018). These current priorities and future needs will be greatly facilitated by a sound conceptual model for transformational tourism and that is the next topic for this chapter.

## Conceptual model of transformational tourism

An artistic rendering of the proposed conceptual model is provided in Figure 35.1. Derived from a comprehensive review of the research literature on transformational tourism, the model envisages three types of experiences as non-memorable, non-transformational experiences (NMNTTEs), memorable tourism experiences (MTEs), and transformational tourism experiences (TTEs). The motivations for NMNTTEs include relaxation, leisure, and entertainment, and these trips do not necessarily become MTEs. MTEs can be the triggers for TTEs and tend to result from social interaction, knowledge acquisition, local hospitality, authenticity, and novelty. MTEs result in revisits, recommendations, and positive word-of-mouth (WoM). TTEs are definitely memorable and are from interactions with nature, local people, local culture, and from unity with others. Their outcomes are self-reflection, better understanding of others, knowledge gain, new and closer relationships, and a clearer understanding and vision of the world.

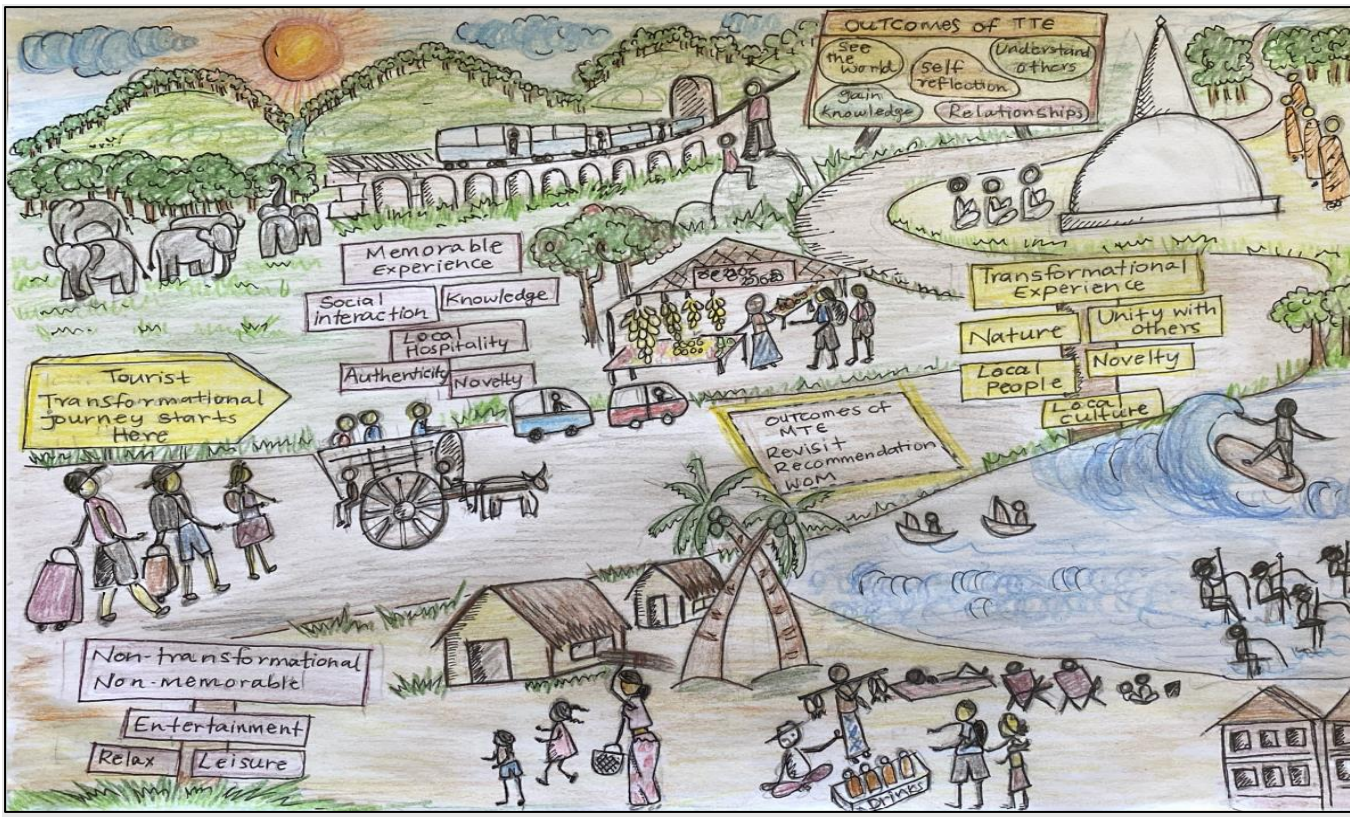


*Figure 35.1* Artistic rendering of transformational tourism conceptual model (authors)

## Transformational experiences in Sri Lanka

To further examine the conceptual model, an empirical study was conducted from September to December 2021. The U.K. is the one of top source markets of visitors to Sri Lanka (SLTDA, 2020). In line with this, British tourists who visited Sri Lanka were selected for data collection. Nine in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted, each lasting between 40 and 60 minutes. In addition, three YouTube travel vlogs published by British tourists after their visits to Sri Lanka were analysed. A total of 12 participants were recruited (Table 35.1). After thematic analysis, two themes emerged.

| Participant | Age | Gender | Education level | Job | Travel behaviour | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | Length of stay | Travel Frequency | Most interest destination/s to visit | Reason of visited Sri Lanka | Most memorable experienc got during the trip in Sri Lank |
| **P1** | 44 | Male | Diploma | n/a | Most 3-10 days | Any time | Anywhere in the world; Domestic | Explore Buddhism | Visit Buddhist temples and place engage with Buddhism relat |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | | | cultural events, communicate wi the local community |
| **P2** | 25 | Female | Undergraduate | Management consultant | 5 days-2weeks | 3 times a year | Europe | Volunteer | Local people; Local culture; foo |
| **P3** | 25 | Female | Masters | Content Manager in a small business | Depends on the purpose | Anytime | Europe | Volunteer | New relationship; local peopl local culture |
| **P4** | 68 | Male | Masters | Retired Teacher | 10-14 days | Several times a year | Europe | Leisure | Meet local people, local cultu food |
| **P5** | 56 | Male | Masters | Operational support manager | 10-14 days | 5-6 times a year | All over the world | Exploring culture; visiting friends | Local culture; Food |
| **P6** | 64 | Male | Diploma | Retired Dental Surgeon | 1-3 weeks | At least 3 times a year | UK, Dubai, Singapore, France | Revisit | Build new relationships; loc people; local culture |
| **P7** | 28 | Male | Undergraduate | Company Director | 4-10 days | 3-4 times per year | Europe | Leisure | Food, need more time f experience |
| **P8** | 26 | Female | Diploma | Animal carer | Long-time stay (6 months) | Once a year | Anywhere | Working | Beaches, local people, loc culture |
| **P9** | 28 | Female | Undergraduate | n/a | Depends | Depends | Anywhere | Solo traveller/ backpacker | Friendly people, nature, sceneries |
| **P10 (YouTuber)** | 28 | Female | n/a | n/a | Long stay | - | Asia | Working | New relationships, local peopl beaches |
| **P11 (YouTuber)** | - | Male | n/a | - | - | - | travel all around the world | exploring my love for language, culture, spirituality | Explore the Vedda Tribe |
| **P12 (YouTuber)** | - | Male | - | quit my job | - | - | - | Meet friends | Local people, local cultu sceneries, train trips, food |

*Table 35.1* Participant information

### *The healing and inspiration of Sri Lanka*

The participants found trips to Sri Lanka helped them to heal from unexpected major life events and inspire them to make changes. Respondent P6 decided to revisit Sri

Lanka after his wife passed away. For P6, Sri Lanka is the place where they shared many cherished memories as a couple. Revisiting Sri Lanka is considered his own way to mourn for his late wife:

> *"I was terribly struggling my life after her death. I wanted to go to Sri Lanka and see the places again where I spent with her last time… I used to walk on the beach every morning and evening, remembering our old things."*(P6, M).

While mourning for his late wife, he also took his time in Sri Lanka as an opportunity to reflect and figure out the future. The short trip turned into long-term healing in Sri Lanka.

> *"I understand the reality of life, I understand I really need a change … I decided to stay in Sri Lanka, I did not think forever, but nice people were there. They smiled at me, said good morning, hello. Neighbours sent food sometimes […] you know unknowingly I started to talk to them […] Sometimes they did not understand what I said. I did not fully understand what they told me (laughing)"* (P6, M).

The genuine hospitality of the locals and the healing power of Sri Lanka played a significant role in navigating P6 through troubling times. Now, after 15 years, he has permanently settled in Sri Lanka with a relationship that ended up in a marriage and two children.

P10 also found healing and inspiration in Sri Lanka. After an unexpected life event, she found herself somewhat lost:

> "*It wasn't really me. I feel lost in different ways."* The trip in Sri Lanka helped him to take back control of his life: "*(from) the journey I find empowerment, confidence and stay away from control, take back control of my life and next steps that I should take."*

Participants explained the healing and inspirational power of Sri Lanka was attributable to its beautiful nature and spirituality. Participants indicated that the unexpected beauty and serene nature helped them to be calmer, and present. The engagement with nature made them feel genuinely relaxed and happy:

> *"I felt like you know I fly over the mountains, just feel free… (deep breath) you know I don't know how to explain it, but I feel happy in myself" (P9, F).*

Complementing the beautiful nature, participants also explored the meaning of spiritual happiness from Buddhism. Sri Lanka is an open society and extends religious freedom, whether Sinhala Buddhists, Tamil, Muslims, or Christians, Sri Lanka has inclusivity in its religious prospects. P1, with the aim of exploring the path of Buddhism, highlighted his experience in Sri Lanka as a country practising Theravadin Buddhism, and recognised the devotion and the amicability of the Sri Lankan Buddhist community:

> *"The massive Stupa in Anuradhapura, no words to explain it, the relief I got from being in that place and spending time meditating was immense."* (P1, M).

As a transformative result, P1 developed knowledge of new lifestyles such as calm kindness and hospitality by engaging with Buddhism and cultural events.

### ***Self-reflections and actions when encountering poverty***

The lived experience of poverty when travelling in Sri Lanka left an impression on participants coming from the U.K., a developed economy. P5 recalled the interactions with local children, and was shocked and saddened by the poverty in Sri Lanka:

> *"You know I saw barefoot children, people in dirty clothes [...] its poverty [...] they don't have even basic things […] food [...] clothes. Their living condition is so bad, I feel I need to help them. I gave them some money several times, just very small, 500 rupees [...] just less than two pounds. Once a small boy, he gave me a big smile. I still remember how his eyes twinkled…" [low voice]*

Despite the struggle, locals still provided the most genuine hospitality beyond the barrier of communication that really touched the participants:

> *"Sitting down with the local people was a different experience. I couldn't talk with them, I didn't know the language, but they smiled with me in friendly ways and offered me food and snacks". (P6, M)*

Also experiencing poverty in his travel, P4 saw the segregation of rich and poor and how the poor suffer because of unfairness even within the rule of law:

> *"I heard that ... (He told the story about a truck accident, that it caused the death of a couple who were driving on a tuk tuk) it's upsetting […] for the people*

*in the road because he was a very nice man and there's no justice, well everyone just seems to accept it, but it doesn't sit with well Westerners because it's unethical and goes ignored, nothing is done about it."*

With his experience, P4 saw through the society, the parity between powerful and powerless people and unfair treatment of the general public because of politics in countries like Sri Lanka. Such experiences helped P4 to form a more embodied and comprehensive understanding of poverty and social classes in Sri Lanka. It also challenged his taking-for-granted view of justice and law and led to a more critical and reflexive worldview.

After returning from her trip, P3 compared her life in the U.K. with people's living conditions in Sri Lanka:

*"I offered them (locals) two big Nescafe (instant coffee and milk powder). It was like five pounds, but it wasn't cheap for them, you realised how much more it values for them. This comparing to me when I'm back here, I heard my sister talking about an apartment that she wants to rent, my brother wants this watch and already had one for Christmas, this and that […] Like it made you question why she wanted to talk about her apartment? Do you really need this watch while you have one? It made me realise how people consume their basic needs"* (P3, F).

The embodied experience of poverty, and interactions with locals made P3 question the capitalist lifestyle in her social circle and reshaped her perceptions towards materials.

Some participants determined to help locals by engaging in voluntourism (Figure 35.2). P2 found joy by teaching children:

*"One of my powerful emotional and memorable things is working with children. They were very happy to see me, you know […] you feel that you can make a difference to that, that was very rewarding to be helping and supporting people who might not otherwise have that help, you know they are really enjoying meeting me, I feel they need my help, it's something you get joy out from that too […], I want to continue doing that where I can".*

Such overwhelming and powerful emotions that P2 experienced through helping local children were a transformational and meaningful experience not only for herself, but also for the local community. For P2, the experience has inspired her to help more disadvantaged people in the future; whilst children in the local community are equipped with the knowledge, which is the first step of getting out of poverty.


*Figure 35.2* Volunteers working alongside local teachers to deliver basic and interactive English lessons at pre-schools in the Hikkaduwa area of Sri Lanka (https://travelteer.co.uk/programmes/english-development).

The findings suggest that the calming nature, spirituality, and genuine hospitality of Sri Lanka serve as a destination to heal from unexpected life events, and to reflect on personal purposes, take control of one's life, and make changes. Whilst some transformations are internal, some resulted in staying in Sri Lanka for the long term. In addition, the poverty in Sri Lanka was a shock for participants travelling from the U.K. It offered them an opportunity to reflect on their lifestyles, understand the fairness (or unfairness) of justice, and engage in real change within local communities through giving and teaching. Such embodied experience of poverty could potentially make a real difference in participants, such as actions for justice and fairness for the Global South, co-transformations with locals, and re-examining the capitalist lifestyle and the real meaning of happiness.

Figure 35.3 is a depiction of images from Sri Lanka and how they fit with the three types of experiences in the conceptual model. These are accompanied with descriptions of the photos and, in some cases, with quotes from the British tourists interviewed in the pilot study.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |
| Sacred Tooth Temple in Kandy, Sri Lanka<br>Found in Google own by A. Savin, WikiCommons. | The Kandy Esala Perahera (Dalada Perahera). It showcases ancient Buddhist rituals, hundreds of traditional dancers, drummers, music and chieftains in elegant outfits with jewelled majestic elephants.<br>Source from Google | "*It wasn't really me. I feel lost in different way. The journey find empowerment , confidence and stay away from control, take back control of my life and next steps what should I take*." (P10,F)<br>Surfing at Arugam bay; Tourist's one of most popular events including the World Surf League (WSL) in Sri Lanka.<br>Source from Google |
|  |  |  |
| "*beautiful beaches, I enjoyed walking on the sandy beaches, loved watching the sun go down*"(P10, F)<br>Pictured by author | A foreigner enjoying stilt fishing; Traditional fishing method in Sri Lanka: Source from Google | "*I felt like you know I fly over the mountains, just feel free… (deep breath) you know I don't know how to explain it but I feel happy myself.*" (P9, F)<br>The view from the top of Sri padaya (Adam's peak an ancient pilgrimage site in Sri Lanka) by author |
|  |  |  |
| "*I wanted a break from work, busy life sometime, it's good, when I go back to work, I feel relax refresh and happy to work. I like to get sometimes to go somewhere, stay relax, free from work*". (P7,M).<br>Tea plantation in Ella; | "*I really enjoyed the blue train trip sceneries and the mountain areas are so beautiful*". (P12, M)<br>One of most beautiful train trips in Sri Lanka: source from Google | "*The massive Stupa in Anuradhapura, no words to explain it, the relief I got from being in that place and spending time meditating was immense*." (P1,M)<br>Ruwanweli Maha stupa, Anuradhapura: Source from TripAdvisor |

| pictured by author | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Non-memorable, non-transformational tourism experiences (NMNTTE)** | **Memorable tourism experiences (MTE)** | **Transformational tourism experiences (TTE)** |

*Figure 35.3* Depiction of tourism experiences and quotes about travel in Sri Lanka

With a recognition that transformational tourism is an emerging construct, the next topic in this chapter is a discussion of future trends and research directions for transformation tourism.

## Future trends and research directions

Five future trends and research directions are proposed (Figure 35.4). First, studies on transformational tourism so far mostly focus on the individual tourist perspective, with limited studies investigating the host and destination perspectives (Isaac, 2017; Wanitchakorn and Muangasame, 2021). Future research should contribute to broadening the scope of transformational tourism with discussions on the forms of tourism, and the ways they can transform quality of life in the host communities. In this case, pro-poor tourism, voluntourism, and community-based tourism can be considered as forms of transformational tourism. However, how do the transformational experiences of these tourism typologies differ? Even within the same tourism typology, transformational experiences may be influenced considerably by the value system and cultural background of each individual. For instance, how would the transformational experience of an adventure tourist on the path to Santiago de Compostela (Spain) differ from that of a religious pilgrim and what implications should this have for the management and marketing of other long-distance pilgrimage paths around the world walked by secular and religious travellers? Future conceptualisation and synthesis are required to understand the transformative elements in these forms of tourism. In addition, responding to Teoh et al. (2021) co-created perspective of conceptualising transformative tourism experiences, future studies are encouraged to focus on the transformative experiences from the host-guest perspective. Researchers can explore how meaningful interactions between hosts and guests facilitate two-way transformational experiences for both parties. Future studies focusing on tourist transformations should also consider the contextual aspects of destinations, particularly, how unique destination offerings can afford certain types of transformative

experiences. Furthermore, this broadened scope of transformational tourism should be studied within the framework of SDGs, particularly focusing on the wellbeing of tourists, long-term social and economic impacts on local communities and destinations through a long-lasting, transformative lens. Such discussion will also contribute to the fusing of transformational tourism and meaningful tourism.

Second, the gap between how transformational tourism is studied in academia and how it is leveraged in tour packaging and destination promotions should be further explored. Questions such as how practitioners understand and use the term of transformational tourism, and how they develop a transformative experience is worth further investigation, especially from the perspective of meaningful tourism experiences (Sterchele, 2020). Building on Sheldon (2020) and Soulard *et al.* (2019), questions such as if the transformative outcomes are measured and monitored by these operators and destinations, and if they are engaged in the process of transforming tourists and the host communities should be asked. Tour operators and DMOs can play crucial roles in facilitating the development of transformative experiences. Therefore, there is a need to bridge the gap between academic research and industrial practices by encouraging knowledge exchange and delivering genuine transformative experiences that benefit tourists and host communities.

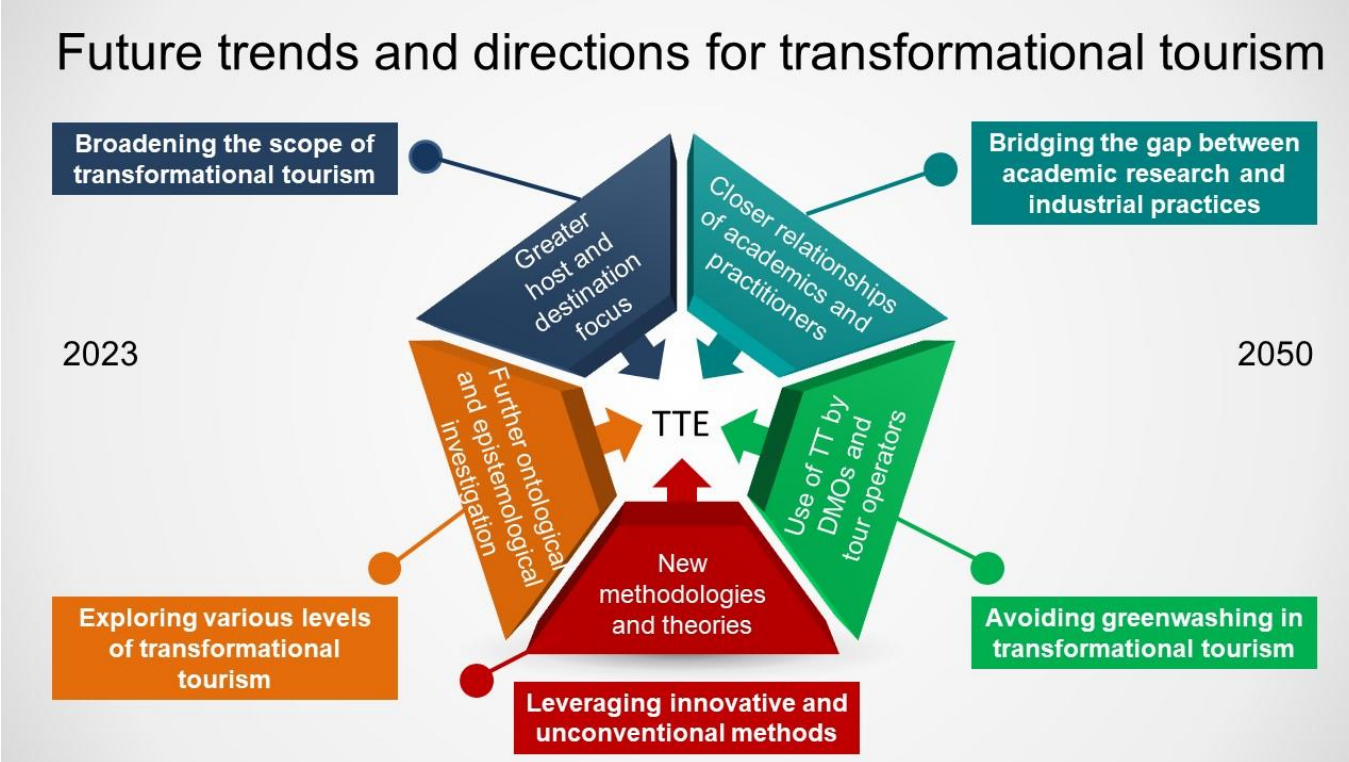

*Figure 35.4* Future trends and research directions for transformational tourism

Third, future research should investigate how the terms 'transformational' and 'transformative' have been used by DMOs and tour operators. In recent years, transformation has become a buzzword for tourism marketing as tourists are looking for more meaningful and in-depth experiences with long-term impacts. As a result, the TT concept has been adopted in many promotional materials. With the current trends of greenwashing in marketing and public relations, it is worth exploring if 'transformation' is also used for such purposes without much engagement with experience design for the transformative activities. Future research can investigate how DMOs and tour operators are using transformation as the key marketing focus and how they are delivering TTEs. It is also interesting to see how the various stakeholders perceive and understand TTEs. Indeed, it is important that tour operators avoid the use of the term "transformational" to describe visitor experiences and services where transformative outcomes *per se* have not been purposefully embedded in the design of the visitor experience. Transformational tourism should not be allowed to turn into a fad - perhaps in an analogous way to greenwashing claims by some organisations - and this is an issue that some tourism practitioners have already raised (see, for instance, Baginski, 2020). Conversely, scholarly research also has a responsibility to investigate this phenomenon in a similar way to how greenwashing practices have been not only denounced by scholars but also researched extensively as regards their impact on consumer perceptions and actual behaviours.

Fourth, new methodological approaches and new theories are called for to investigate the process of transformation. Most studies reviewed are qualitative by nature and predominantly use transformative learning theory (Reisinger, 2013). Innovative and unconventional methods need to be leveraged such as combining physiological measurements (including emerging technologies in this respect such as neurological sensors, smart clothing or the Internet of the Senses, to mention but a few) and subjective narratives to unpack the triggers and effects of the transformational process. Furthermore, and adopting a tourism futures perspective, what will be the impact of the Metaverse on memorable or even transformational tourism experiences? Will the Metaverse merely create an alternative reality or will it develop to a stage

where it could become altogether transformational? If that is an option, how should immersive experience design in the Metaverse differ from the more familiar paradigms currently adopted in the physical world, given the known differences in neurological processes involved? (Bratu and Sabau, 2022). One of the challenges to exploring transformational experiences is the nature of the complex, individual, and internal processes (Coghlan and Weiler, 2018), which sometimes can be challenging to articulate and recall. Future research should focus more on embodied and situated experiences and use methods such as autoethnography and interpretative phenomenological analysis to understand the sense-making and self-change in the experiences. It is also suggested that the theoretical contributions of transformational tourism should go beyond transformative learning theory from the adult education discipline, and engage theories from sociology, psychology, and anthropology to enrich the knowledge production. Similarly, although our understanding of the neurological processes involved in learning are relatively well understood, our understanding of the neurological triggers of transformative experiences remains in its infancy. Research to bridge this gap could have major implications for experience design in tourism. Fifth, the term "transformational tourism" requires further ontological and epistemological investigation given the inconsistent and even conflicting interpretations in various studies. On the one hand, any life event, regardless if big or small, can be considered transformational, as Heraclitus stated: "no man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man"; on the other hand, most existing transformational tourism studies are related to life-changing outcomes (Noy, 2004) or explicit perceptual changes through learning (Robledo and Batle, 2017; Sin, 2009). Therefore, if all tourism experience is understood as transformational, various levels of transformation should be explored (e.g., physical, cognitive, and life transformations). In addition, different types of tourism (e.g., backpacking, volunteering, and spiritual tourism) can link to various levels of transformation. Future conceptual and empirical research should push the scope of transformational tourism studies and develop a system linking various forms of tourism and levels of transformations for future investigations. Moreover, should transformational tourism be limited to physical experiences? Indeed, in a wider arena, transformational tourism may have a major role to play in the development, management and marketing of the emerging concept of wise destinations (Coca-Stefaniak, 2020), which bridges slow tourism and smart tourism to deliver personalised visitor experiences at an individual level. Similarly, it

could be argued that transformational tourism remains to be researched from the perspective of medical, health and wellness tourism, where this element of the experience remains somewhat side-lined (see, for instance, a recently published literature review on this by Zhong *et al.*, 2021).

### Stakeholder actions, initiatives, and the SDGs

Table 35.2 provides recommendations for actions and initiatives to be undertaken by these stakeholders in the future.

| Stakeholders | Required actions and initiatives |
|---|---|
| Tourists | • Co-create transformational tourism experiences<br>• Engage in responsible travel<br>• Interact more with local people and cultures |
| Tourism operators and organizations | • Add to knowledge on transformational tourism<br>• Provide transformational tourism experiences |
| Community | • Co-create memorable and transformational tourism experiences<br>• Engage more with tourists |
| Government | • Develop policies in support of transformational tourism<br>• Provide industry training on transformational tourism |
| Environment | • Encourage pro-environmental behaviour<br>• Prepare guidelines for protection and conservation of natural areas |

*Table 35.2* Recommended stakeholder actions and initiatives

Earlier in the chapter, it was stated that research linking the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and transformational tourism is scarce and transformative experiences are yet to be fully linked with destination sustainability and its contribution to achieving the SDGs. It was recommended that a broadened scope of transformational tourism should be placed within the framework of the SDGs, with a focus on the wellbeing of tourists, long-term social and economic impacts on local communities and destinations through a long-lasting, transformative lens. Table 35.3 takes this

recommendation one step further by outlining the potential contributions of transformational tourism to the 17 SDGs.

| SDG numbers and titles | SD goal explanations | TT potential contributions |
|---|---|---|
| **SDG 1. No poverty** | End poverty in all its forms everywhere | Creating greater awareness an understanding of poverty |
| **SDG 2. Zero hunger** | End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture | Promoting food safety and security |
| **SDG 3. Good health and well-being** | Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages | Encouraging local people an communities to improve lifestyle and well-being |
| **SDG 4. Quality education** | Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all | Volunteering to teach children an others in communities in need |
| **SDG 5. Gender equality** | Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls | Supporting women-owned an managed tourism enterprises |
| **SDG 6. Clean water and sanitation** | Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all | Reducing use of water |
| **SDG 7. Affordable and clean energy** | Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all | Using alternative and clean energ sources |
| **SDG 8. Decent work and economic growth** | Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all | Supporting community-based an pro-poor tourism businesses an projects |
| **SDG 9. Industry, innovation and infrastructure** | Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation | Using infrastructure wisely and in sustainable manner |
| **SDG 10. Reduced inequalities** | Reduce inequality within and among countries | Discouraging all forms o discrimination |
| **SDG 11. Sustainable cities and communities** | Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable | Encouraging sustainable actions an initiatives within cities |
| **SDG 12. Responsible consumption and production** | Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns | Purchasing and consumin responsibly |
| **SDG 13. Climate action** | Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts | Reducing carbon footprints |
| **SDG 14. Life below water** | Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development | Following environmental guideline and protocols in water |
| **SDG 15. Life on land** | Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss | Following environmental guideline and protocols on land |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **SDG 16. Peace, justice and strong institutions** | Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels | Advocating peace and harmony<br>Supporting effectively governe organizations |
| **SDG 17. Partnerships for the goals** | Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development | Co-creating innovations and projec that support achievement of th SDGs |

*Table 35.3* SDGs and potential contributions of transformational tourism

## Conclusion

The transformative lens has major implications for every element of the tourism system (Morrison et al., 2018) - from the development of destinations to their management, marketing, strategic positioning and future-proofing. Furthermore, it could be argued that the recent COVID-19 pandemic has effectively resulted in an inflexion point or catalyst for transformational tourism (Buhalis, 2022; Soulard et al., 2020). The development of transformational tourism experiences should be embraced by key decision makers at tourism destinations not as a convenient - and somewhat manipulative - marketing ploy, as posited earlier, but as a genuine strategic positioning to develop positive impacts for tourism, which has often been much maligned as a sector of the economy for contributing little in exchange for substantial negative impacts on local communities and the environment. The role of local communities in the tourism system could be reinvented, as communities play a key active role in transformational processes by providing meaning, purpose, reflection, interconnection and, ultimately, much needed face-to-face relationships in a world where people have never been more connected (technologically) and yet feel lonelier than ever before. Furthermore, transformational tourism could and should become a key channel for countries to deliver on the SDGs. Indeed, the emerging results from this on-going research have shown that it was exactly some of the key challenges of SDGs such as the reduction of poverty, zero hunger, good health and wellbeing, quality education, and gender equality, to mention but a few, that were often the triggers for transformational experiences among tourists. Overall, and if transformational tourism should evolve from a niche or add-on element of the service offer of destinations to a more strategic positioning paradigm, would the tourism sector and destination

managers be ready for this fundamental long-term shift? Moreover, given the intricacies of experience design and the fact that experiences are highly personal, would it be realistic to suggest that all tourism experiences and all destinations offering them should aim for some level of transformation among their customers as one of their success criteria? Realistically, that may not always be possible. However, it is important to reassess how tourism destinations should rise to the challenge of changing people in a meaningful, lasting and inspirational way, one at a time.

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