

# Settler Tourism and the Threat of Terror

*Praveen Tilakaratne and Tamara Fernando*



## Terror at the coastline

On 23 October 2024, the American Embassy in Sri Lanka issued a statement restricting all embassy personnel from travelling to Arugam Bay, a popular beach town in southeastern Sri Lanka (The U.S. Embassy Colombo 2024). One piece of information central to this designation of an escapist, surf-oriented, foreign-friendly, beach town as “high-risk” is the fact that Arugam Bay has recently witnessed a large influx of Israeli tourists (Verses 2024). Although there was a brief dip in the number of Israeli tourists surfing, partying, digital working, or downward-dogging on the coast

after 7 October 2023, these numbers have picked up and, outside of peak season, Israelis are the largest demographic of holidaymakers in Arugam Bay.

This week, the Embassy declared that it had received “credible information warning of an attack targeting popular tourist locations,” but refrained from disclosing any further details. Soon after, the Israeli National Security Council advised Israeli tourists to avoid the eastern and southern coasts. Similar warnings followed from the Russian Embassy, and those of the UK, Canada, and Australia. Subsequently, the Sri Lankan state issued an official response, affirming that local police, intelligence personnel, and the Special Task

Force (STF) had been deployed in and around Arugam Bay. Statements confirmed that the state had been monitoring the situation since early October, and that a special security programme was in place to implement searches, roadblocks, and aerial surveillance, focusing on securing religious sites and areas with significant numbers of Israeli nationals.

Within a few hours, the vague prognostications of a possible attack were transformed into a discourse about incipient terrorism and protecting Israeli tourists from its reach. A shrewd observer will note how in this formulation, it is implied, by some sleight of hand or logic, that these suspected terrorists would be Muslim. In one version of this narrative, which was at least partially echoed by the new Minister of Foreign Affairs, the war in the Middle East had reached Lankan shores, replicated in pre-packaged form, into a familiar set-piece narrative of victims and perpetrators. This narrative both selectively silences and amplifies Lanka's own complicated histories of violence and terror. On the one hand, the discourse draws strength from recollections of the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings, when an Islamist militant group attacked churches and luxury hotels across the island, providing "evidence" of how local "terrorists" from eastern Lanka can perpetrate violence in the name of "foreign" interests. In the same breath, it silences the distinct legacy of the Sri Lankan state's own relationship with "terror," militarisation, and state power, particularly in the northeast.

The spread of information about this "threat" on social media followed an altogether different trajectory. On Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram, reports of the Sri Lankan police and STF guarding Israeli tourist-owned and tourist-run establishments including surf schools, bars, and the Chabad House, began to circulate several days earlier. Many Sri Lankans on X (a relatively

elite, English-speaking demographic on this platform) expressed discontent with how "white-owned," "illegal" establishments were receiving state protection while "locals" were being searched and surveilled. However, as the discourse shifted to increasingly specific, known, and identified allegations of a possible terrorist attack, opinions on social media increasingly replicated statist and colonial narratives on the need to rescue innocent tourists (who, in turn, save Sri Lanka's crisis-ridden economy) from Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism.

Ironically many locals from Arugam Bay (rather than those who visit or live part-time in Arugam Bay as tourists, business owners, or yoga practitioners) seem to have assumed that the heightened STF and police presence was due to the recent presidential and upcoming parliamentary elections. In other words, the "truth" of the situation circulated in channels set apart from those of east coast locals, mostly from Muslim and Tamil minority communities, who were searched, surveilled, and questioned without knowing the cause. For now, three people have been arrested (Moses 2024).

Here we want to push back against the narrative that the current tourism-related "emergency" in Sri Lanka is primarily about a benevolent state protecting Israeli tourists from Muslim Terror. Instead, we argue that these statist and colonialist narratives about security and terror invisibilise and obscure the workings of a longer-term phenomenon unfolding in southern and eastern Sri Lanka: a problem we term, *settler tourism*. As a concept, settler tourism allows us to shift away from the colonialist position that defends the inalienable rights of settlers and tourists, and to grapple with the political economic and psycho-social structures that adversely affect the lives, livelihoods, and lands of people caught both in the crosshairs of settler colonialism and the dark underbelly of global tourism.



### Tourists, settlers, or both?

Who is a tourist? And who is a settler? We are accustomed to thinking about tourists and settlers in oppositional and mutually exclusive terms. Settlers, we are told, migrate to new spaces, with the intention of occupying them permanently, or, at the very least, for a long or indefinite period. The “newness” sought by settlers, however, comes at a price: the laying down of new roots often accompanies the uprooting of the old and indigenous; and the figure of the settler is, today, inextricably bound to the history of Euro-American settler colonialism, indigenous dispossession, and genocide. By contrast, we imagine the tourist as a naïvely curious, innocuous, and fundamentally apolitical figure: one who passes through new spaces, experiencing new cultures and landscapes, with no intention of settling or of disrupting local life.

The new forms of contemporary tourism across the globe suggest that this distinction no longer holds. Whether in Sri Lanka, Bali, Hawai’i, the Caribbean, or Mexico, it is impossible to ignore how tourism radically transforms local communities and landscapes, bringing about a host of economic, political, cultural, and ecological problems. Trends such as that of the ‘digital nomad’ have made it impossible to delineate so neatly “home” and “away.” Indeed, perhaps the opposition between settlers and tourists has never held true at a deeper, structural, level. Modern tourism has always operated in a world marked by economic and geopolitical unevenness, unequal distributions in resources, and racial, sexual, cultural, and class-based stratifications. Indeed, the tourist industry itself depends on aestheticising and commodifying global difference (why travel if you cannot prove that you have not experienced the Other?).

Recognising settler tourism forces us to grapple with coloniality as an evolving, dynamic structure in the present, as part and parcel of our modern world. The tourist/settler opposition, however, is crucial in maintaining the fiction that colonialism is an evil that we can firmly date to the past or, in “exceptional” cases, to recent times. This fiction is maintained not only by empires and powerful colonial states; it is also reiterated by “post”-colonial states which benefit (or at least imagine that they would benefit) from international tourism, one of the largest global industries in terms of revenue (Lew *et al.* 2014).

There has been scant space in Sri Lankan public discourse for discussing the ills of tourism. Indeed, such an act is perceived as bringing disrepute to the nation, discouraging foreign travellers, and blocking a major revenue stream on which hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankans depend. The presumption here is that tourism

operates innocently and independently of communities, more or less circumscribed to a network of “attractions,” “sites,” and “resorts,” an actualisation of the fantasised “holiday package” found in travel brochures and promotional material.

While more “standard” modes of tourism, which conform to the state’s clean image of the industry, guilty at most of scopophilia and fetishism, are certainly operative in Sri Lanka, much of what penetrates the daily lives of locals, much of what has become controversial and politically pertinent, does not fit this mould. This latter controversial form warrants the term “settler tourism,” which, as indicated above, indexes the growing confluence of global tourism with settler colonial structures and ideologies.

Three distinguishing features of settler tourism stand out in the Lankan case: (1) a logic of racial segregation that is enforced both overtly and covertly; (2) contesting imaginaries of space and time, that conflict with local and national provisions and accommodations for tourists; (3) modes of informally and extra-legally bypassing and undermining state bureaucracy to access forms of power.

Racial segregation in Lankan beach towns has been a longstanding issue. Earlier this year, news of a “whites only” party (Fernandopulle 2024) organised by a Russian-led club on the island’s southwestern coast sparked controversy both locally (*Daily Mirror Online* 2024) and globally (Aggarwal and Radnofsky 2024). While this was portrayed as an isolated and easily remediable incident, enforced racial segregation along the southern and eastern coasts has become an enduring feature, popping up and disappearing, shifting from town to town. It ensures, nonetheless, that there will always be some place on the island free of local presence. Several clubs, restaurants, and events in Lankan beach towns are known to exercise “face control” measures either overtly or covertly, refusing entry especially to locals who lack elite class markers. Bouncers and some local police may serve corporate racial interests, enforcing this segregationist logic and the reproduction of rigid racial hierarchies. In most touristy beach towns, the only locals one encounters—barring a few local elites, usually from Colombo—are workers: small-scale surf instructors, cooks, waiters, cleaners, entertainers, and sex workers. Although there certainly are locals who own businesses that cater to tourists, especially in the south, and among these, few who tend to discriminate and racially profile “fellow” locals, the number of tourist-owned and tourist-run businesses along the coasts seem to have sky-rocketed in the past few years, especially after the economic crisis of 2022.



“Tourist-owned” is an oxymoron in more than one sense. Technically, there can be no tourist-owned or -run establishments in Sri Lanka. Indeed, ownership and paid work (Wijedasa 2024) indicate more permanent forms of habitation antithetical to the figure of the tourist, who is ideally conceived, not only as a temporary visitor, but also as one that desires rest and leisure. The label “tourist-owned” seems to have stemmed, in fact, from legal measures taken by the state, which reacted to the unprecedented increase in foreign purchases of prime beach-land after the end of the Sri Lankan civil war in 2009 by imposing the Restrictions on Alienation Act in 2014.<sup>1</sup> This measure seems to have paved the way for informal and unregulated settlements and business agreements—usually involving local signatories and the complicity of local authorities—which push tourist-run establishments outside the purview of the state and the law.

Especially in the east, further away from the bustling town of Arugam Bay, one finds more isolated enclaves—structures of semi-permanent settlement—where white digital nomads live in perpetual paradise, occupying public beaches that locals, especially fishermen, have been cowed out of. One even hears strange tales of dogs—calling to mind the spectre of South Africa’s apartheid dogs—guarding the beaches on behalf of the more “peaceful,” “animal friendly,” “environmentally cautious”, white settler tourists. These dogs chase away unsavoury locals who pollute the beaches, defile nature’s pristine beauty through their very presence, and mistreat animals. These enclaves often feature establishments centred on activities like surfing, yoga, and spiritual healing, and are sometimes managed and run entirely by foreigners (mostly white Europeans and North Americans) who stay on the island for relatively long periods of time.

In what we might call the “Official Tourist” imaginary, the ideal tourist subject spends at most a month in Sri Lanka, a reasonable time to get a glimpse of the beaches, the mountains, the wildlife, the culture, and the historical sites. Settler tourists, however, who form semi-permanent and informal property and labour relations, stay on for much longer durations: several months, or even years. Even if settler tourists, unlike traditional settlers, eventually leave, returning either to their homes or hopping to nearby tourist hotspots—Thailand, Bali, or the Maldives—they leave behind more long-lasting structures; structures based on work and ownership agreements and deals, that anticipate the perpetual presence of the settler tourist.

Consider that land is occupied, that racial policing is formally and informally enforced, and that several establishments are managed and run by settler tourists. Where is the state in this equation? These features of settler tourism raise critical questions on state legitimacy in coastal areas. It is significant that the problem of state legitimacy often came to the fore in Sri Lanka in sites that were overdetermined by colonialism: at the nexus of capitalism and empire. The arch form of this is the plantation, where the estate or planter replaces the state, undermining plantation workers’ claims to citizenship, sovereignty, and democratic representation. The port, such as the Colombo Port City and the Hambantota Port, is a similar site, where the state yields and retreats in face of corporate and geopolitical pressures. A final space on this list is the tourist enclave of the beach town—an island within an island.

Settler tourists who occupy beach enclaves negotiate ways of bypassing the state’s bureaucratic and legal processes. Visas, for instance, are a key area where links with middlemen allow settler tourists to broker visa extensions from state officials for a fee. The digitisation of the economy, whereby money can be discreetly transferred through apps without the state’s knowledge, and the emergence of a cash-based dollar economy has further helped this process. Settler tourists circumvent bureaucracy and the law (Wijedasa 2024), contesting “official” timelines, work norms, and property relations.

It is into this kind of structure that many Israeli tourists, especially on the east coast, have embedded themselves. Local resistance and opposition, we suggest, thus stem not from antisemitism, xenophobia, chauvinism, or religious fundamentalism, but from a place of discontent towards the increasingly colonial nature of tourism, the growing convergence between the tourist and the settler. Of course, it is true that Israeli presence on the island has come with a *specific* set of problems, especially given the war in the Middle East, the ongoing genocide of the Palestinian people, and the complicity of American imperialism. Vicious social media discourse is often drawn into these global conversations, and certainly, many of these comments bear the hallmarks of antisemitic valence.

The influx of Israeli tourists is inextricable to the Israeli settler state’s militarism and the compulsory conscription of its citizens. Through its “surf tourist” marketing, Sri Lanka ironically becomes the “other side” of militarism and war. A place with its own deep and searing histories of ethnic violence and war thus strangely emerges in a colonial cartographic imaginary as a paradise for rest and healing (the idea of an Island Eden is, of course, quite possibly the oldest colonial

<sup>1</sup> Land (Restrictions on Alienation) Act No. 38 of 2014.

trope to be applied to Lanka!). Framed through such colonial conceptions of space, the island becomes a site to which settler tourists feel entitled. A place they have a right to. This certainly echoed in the constant local complaint that Israeli tourists are entitled, disrespectful towards surfing etiquette and overall beach town etiquette, and racist towards locals.

This narrative is also echoed by Israeli voices. For instance, consider Israeli director Marco Carmel's 2023 film *Arugam Bay*, which begins with the inscription: "In Arugam Bay, Sri Lanka, it is often said that Israeli surfers feel entitled to every wave. Either because they're eighteen years old and they'll most likely get killed in the military service, or because they're twenty-two years old and they've managed to survive it." Carmel's film follows three young Israelis from Haifa, setting their PTSD and trauma from service in Lebanon against "this

tropical paradise" which offers "a cathartic odyssey". The tropical paradise, in turn, has been transformed by settler tourists into a home away from home: one is surprised to see the proliferation of Hebrew signs, Israeli surf schools and eateries, Israeli flags, stickers and slogans memorialising IDF soldiers, and two Chabad Houses (one in Arugam Bay, and one in Ella). Much of the Israeli settler tourist activity happens in areas where Muslims are—and have been—the local majority. It is ironic that the Sri Lankan state is currently denying the reality of Israeli settler tourism while providing protection to individuals who are complicit in its structure and functioning, while local Muslims have been regarded with suspicion and placed in the position of the adversary. Such positioning further coincides with the state's and broader society's discrimination and Othering of local Muslims, especially after the end of the civil war.



### The visible and the invisible

One of the most bizarre facets of this story is that the phenomenon of settler tourism remains invisible for many Sri Lankans. The exception here are locals who directly suffer its consequences and a group of globally mobile, relatively privileged younger Lankans (mostly from Colombo, who might themselves visit beach towns and mingle with tourists), and some returning expats, who document with mixed feelings the transformation

of the coasts each year. The state, of course, continues to de-emphasise settler tourism's significance, as though denial would lead to de-escalation.

Although it is difficult to determine with certainty as to why settler tourism still remains invisibilised, it is possible to speculate about some general causes. Firstly, as we have already mentioned, the lived realities in beach

towns and tourist enclaves contest the legitimacy of state power, and detailed exposés on such spaces could raise uncomfortable questions about the legitimacy and capabilities not only of a particular government or ruling party but of the state itself. The trivialisation of tourism—the promulgation of the idea that tourism is all about revenue and not about politics, society, or local culture—adds to this invisibilisation. Given that tourism is framed entirely through a pragmatic, economic lens, its impact tends to be measured statistically and articulated through the language of the state. Much of what falls under settler tourism thus flies under the radar, and its key distinguishing features—such as racial policing and segregation and cultural stratification—evade quantification altogether.

At a deeper level, given especially Sri Lanka's historical position as an island, a space overwritten with multiple legacies of colonialism, one wonders if the coast as such is nationally invisibilised because it is a site of potential historical contradiction and complexity. As the limit of land, the shoreline unravels land-centric oppositions and ideologies. It reminds us that what is local is not always national, that ethnicity and race are not always fixed by the state's official count, that identity can be as liquid as it is sometimes static. It urges us to reconsider the basis of colonial imposition, to understand that coloniality in Sri Lanka only rarely takes the form of direct military invasion, and instead more often manifests as a complicated and long-drawn process of fragmentation and co-optation.

On the coast, facing the ocean, we are constantly confronted with the fact that we are forced to share land, to cohabit, with multiple communities. This is a reckoning with different kinds of difference: with settlers, tourists, militants, citizens, locals, subalterns, and a host of non-human life forms. A politics from the shoreline is forced to grapple with such differences. Attending to the local—to specific forms of difference—does not detract from the idea that settler tourism is *colonial*. Indeed, it is only through the local, that these frightening but secure “grand narratives” on terror, nation, and foreign invasion can be avoided, and

that communities can be abided by. Forms of politics that abide by the local while contesting coloniality, which have been silenced and delegitimised through the discourse of terror, should proceed not from close mindedness, dogmatism, and hate, but through openness and understanding, and even love.

**Tamara Fernando** is an assistant professor of history at SUNY Stony Brook in New York.

**Praveen Tilakaratne** is a PhD candidate in comparative literature at Cornell University.

**Image credit:** Tamara Fernando

## References

- Aggarwal, Mithil and Caroline Radnofsky. (2024). “Party may be over for Russians in Sri Lanka after ‘whites only’ event fuels outrage.” *NBC News* (28 February): <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/sri-lanka-russia-ukraine-whites-only-party-fuels-outrage-rcna140640>
- Daily Mirror Online*. (2024). “Russian Embassy responds to controversial ‘white only’ party.” (25 February): <https://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking-news/Russian-Embassy-responds-to-controversial-white-only-party/108-277675>
- Fernandopulle, Sheain. (2024). “Controversial ‘white only’ party cancelled amid public outcry.” *Daily Mirror Online* (23 February): <https://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking-news/Controversial-white-only-party-cancelled-amid-public-outcry/108-277617>
- Lew, Alan A., C. Michael Hall, and Allan M. Williams (Eds.). (2014). *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Tourism*. West Sussex: John Wiley and Sons.
- Moses, Claire. (2024). “3 Arrested in Sri Lanka Over Possible Threats Against Israeli Tourists.” *The New York Times* (24 October): <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/24/world/middleeast/sri-lanka-israel-us-warning-arugam-bay.html>
- The U.S. Embassy Colombo. (2024). “Security Alert: Avoid Travel to Arugam Bay Due to Credible Threat.” (23 October). Available at <https://lk.usembassy.gov/security-alert-avoid-travel-to-arugam-bay-due-to-credible-threat/>
- Verses, Motti. (2024). “Is Sri Lanka the new luxury hospitality getaway for Israelis?” *The Jerusalem Post* (12 May): <https://www.jpost.com/j-spot/article-800786>
- Wijedasa, Namini. (2024). “All’s not sunny in booming foreign-run businesses.” *The Sunday Times* (4 February): <https://www.sundaytimes.lk/240204/news/all-not-sunny-in-booming-foreign-run-businesses-547451.html>