News



Austrian tourists Gabin Thomas and Thomas Mittet recently visited St. Sebastian's Church in Negombo, Sri Lanka. Some Catholic nuns interact with tourists in Sri Lanka when they visit bookstalls attached to churches. Some churches in Sri Lanka offer daily Mass in English and cater to the spiritual needs of foreign tourists. (Thomas Scaria)



by Thomas Scaria

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Austrian couple Gabin Thomas and Thomas Mittet say they rediscovered their Christian faith in Sri Lanka, an island nation in the Indian Ocean, after interacting with Catholic nuns there.

"We were impressed by people's simple faith and the hospitality of the Catholic nuns managing church stalls," Thomas told Global Sisters Report as she came out of St. Sebastian's Church in Negombo, a Catholic stronghold about 25 miles north of Colombo, the nation's capital. Catholics make up 7% of Sri Lanka's 22 million population.

Thomas said they went to the Negombo church to take photographs, "but we returned with spiritual nourishment."

The couple was among nearly 500,000 tourists who visited Sri Lanka Jan. 1 to Feb. 28 this year, according to the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority.

Nearly 989,000 tourists had visited the country this year as of May 21, the agency reported.

Salvatorian Sr. Selvarani Fernandopulle, who assists with pastoral services, said the church has no special programs for foreign tourists but is indirectly influenced by Catholic hospitality and faith.

Fernandopulle told GSR that Catholic churches, shrines and historical sites offer a unique blend of cultural and religious tourism. She said most Christian centers welcome tourists, and churches on the beach are open throughout the day. Some offer daily Mass in English and cater to the spiritual needs of foreign tourists.



The 200-year-old St. Xavier's Church in Nuwara Eliya is a popular Sri Lankan tourist destination known for its history and architecture. (Thomas Scaria)

Catholic nuns interact with tourists, such as the Austrian couple, when they visit bookstalls attached to churches. Fernandopulle, who manages a community development project at Boscopura, a tsunami rehabilitation village in Negombo, said tourists often seek counseling from the nuns.

The 56-year-old nun said they actively prepare youngsters with hospitality skills and Christian values to serve the tourists, identifying and motivating young people to join an adjacent Salesian vocational training center.

Fr. Reginald Fernando, the principal of the Don Bosco Technical Centre in Negombo, said the center has trained hundreds of youngsters for work in Sri Lanka's tourism industry.

They train youth in skills like pastry making, housekeeping, gardening, electrical and plumbing, driving and as tourist guides, he said.

"In the process, we prepare them as good Christians to witness their faith while carrying out their various roles in [the] tourism industry," Fernando said.

An elderly German couple in Negombo said they were curious to watch people praying before Jesus' statue after lighting candles. "Their faith is impressive," said the husband, who did not want to be named, after the couple spent an hour in silence at St. Sebastian's Church.

Catholicism was introduced by the Portuguese when they colonized Sri Lanka in 1505. Christian boys and girls are known to entertain guests with Baila, a unique music and dance art form that originated in the Portuguese colonial era.

Sumith Priyantha, a Catholic who manages the Sea Breeze resort in Negombo, said that his guests enjoy singing and dancing Baila with him.

The Baila songs are in Sinhala, the national language, "but we explain its meaning in English, and they are always excited to understand its Christian message," Priyantha said.



Charity of Jesus and Mary Sr. Rupika Perera manages a guest house for tourists in Nuwara Eliya, a hill station in Sri Lanka. Her community started the guest house to generate income, but it eventually turned into a ministry. (Thomas Scaria)

Some Catholic religious congregations also manage guest houses and homestays in tourist locations.

One is in Nuwara Eliya, a hill city 100 miles east of Colombo. A major tourist attraction there is the 200-year-old St. Francis Xavier's Church, known for its history and architecture.

The city also offers several homestays managed by Catholic families.

Thomas said that she and her partner spent time in a homestay owned by a Catholic family and ate in a restaurant that displayed a crucifix and a picture of Mother Mary.

"Most locals we met were Catholics who rejuvenated our faith life," she said while holding her husband's hands.

Catering to the tourists are the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary, Sisters of the Holy Cross Menzingen and the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, all near the church.

Sr. Rupika Perera, local superior of the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary, told GSR that they converted part of their convent into a guest house to welcome tourists.

"We started it as an income-generating program to sustain our mission in Sri Lanka but eventually turned into a ministry," said Perera, who serves as a counselor and spiritual assessor for tourists.

Perera said she charges less than hotels or resorts, but that is not the only attraction for tourists. "Many want to convert their trip into a retreat or spiritual experience," she said.

Perera has prepared a team of lay associates, mostly youth, to attend to the tourists. "If we give them the Christian values of love, respect and care, we can call it a ministry," she said.

Her nuns also fight against human trafficking and exploitation of women.

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Fernandopulle said her Buddhist-majority country experiences its biggest tourist rush during the Christmas and Easter seasons. "It is an opportunity for us to witness our Christian faith to them."

The airport, major hotels and tourist locations play Christmas songs around the clock in December, and Santa Clauses greet tourists.

Thomas said she and her partner were in "a spring oasis" when they visited the Negombo churches after touring several Buddhist temples and heritage centers in Sri Lanka.

Emma and Nova, two women from Germany who stayed at Perera's guesthouse, said they were refreshed by the sanctity, serene atmosphere and the nuns' loving presence.

"We have visited many Buddhist heritage centers and temples, but here we are experiencing Catholic hospitality," Emma said.