

Developing sustainable tourism with local people in Sri Lanka

About Us

The Abode community project, set up in 2005 is the sister organisation of The Abode Trust formed in 2008. Both work together to support the aims and aspirations of The Abode and have been recognised for Ethical Tourism in 2009 and 2015 by Tourism Concern, who feature both Abode entities on their international website.



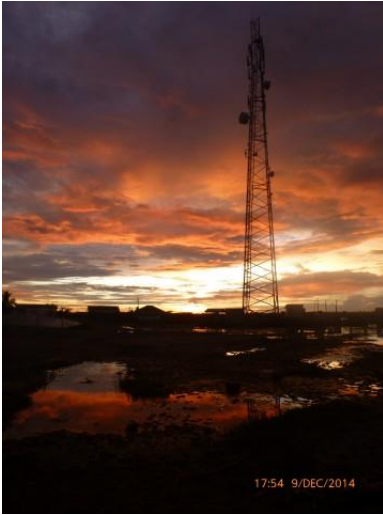
Sid Elikewela, Founder and Director of the Abode Trust and Abode Tours, has lived and worked with local people for many years and has developed an international reputation as an expert guide in Sri Lanka. He took some of the first visitors to the previously war torn north of Sri Lanka as early as a few months after the civil war ended, has escorted journalists from the Wanderlust Magazine, Daily Telegraph, the Guardian and The Geographical to remote areas of the country and shown the world through the resulting articles published internationally a truly authentic way of life that is very rare to find in today's westernised cultures.

We are named after a simple village house, The Abode, where it all began in 2005, which sits at the top of a remote valley in the Knuckles Mountains of Sri Lanka to the east of Kandy on the borders of a World Heritage Site. Our mission is to: 'Work with local people – learning about, enhancing and respecting each other's way of life.'

Abode Tours extended the work of the Trust in 2010 to develop sustainable tourism on Mannar Island which is off the north east coast of Sri Lanka and was in the forefront of the 26 year civil war which ended in 2009.

During that time Mannar had been almost totally cut off from the rest of the country and the world, faced continuous barrages of artillery and occupation by the military as shells ripped over and often landed on their small island.





We found a shattered community, wholly dependent on seasonal fishing, a stunning eco system of glorious beaches, salt flats and endless blue skies, untouched apart from the singeing of plantations of trees by mortar bombs. During the war, many of the



Tamil Christian community fled across the water 33km to India leaving behind their valuables, land and sometimes family members. Those who stayed faced losing their menfolk to the civil war, their lands being

confiscated and the terrible fear and uncertainty being on the front line brings to civilians.

Tourists were unknown in the area and when Abode Tours established links with the local fishing community in Pesali in 2010 as soon as the road bridge to the mainline was rebuilt and civilians were permitted to enter the area. We took the lead in working with local people, first renting out an abandoned house in Pesali from Shanthi, a war widow, who fled to India with three young children when her husband was killed and she spent years living off benefits in Madurai refugee camp in India.



It was the first homestay in this fishing village, and we restored it to its local style and glory with the help of the community. Not only was the new bridge necessary to access the island, many other bonds had to be built: of trust, cooperation and collaboration between Tamil and Sinhalese people to increase the self-confidence of the previously beleaguered neighbourhood.



It was not until 2012 Shanthi felt confident enough to come back to the island and take over the hospitality of Abode Tours homestay visitors in her home. Up until then a select few Westerners stayed in her home supported by Shanthi's extended family members and experienced living with local people, taking part in their lives, attending family weddings and sharing the joys and grief. As the years have passed, Abode Tours have seen the children born, watched them grow up and have become members of the extended family in Pesali.

Visitors to our homestay are discerning travellers are sensitive to their presence in the family home and neighbourhood. With them we have raised monies for local people, collected second hand glasses and hearing aids in the UK and donated them to the community and recently a donation allowed a thirteen year

old local girl with special needs, great niece of Shanthi, to go to school for the first time. Part of our homestay funds pay for the family's health, living expenses and home maintenance.

Our work has brought together Tamils and Sinhalese people and opened the eyes of western visitors to ways of life that are rarely found in the modern world. Everyone benefits from this familiar contact. By adapting tourism on a small scale to the local way of life and utilising available resources sustainably we are proud to have made an impact on lives of people emerging out of war.



After five years we enjoy a privileged place in the local communities of Pesali and Talaimannar, akin to 'Family Friend', and our visitors have had the unique experience of living and supporting this impoverished community to everyone's mutual benefit.

Preserving the eco system and beauty of Mannar whilst bringing work to local people



Mannar has empty wild beaches, rich bird life and palm fringe sandy terrain and our experience has shown that only carefully managed grass root projects will bring sustainable growth without sacrificing the eco system.

Known as the 'Blind corner of Sri Lanka', it has luckily missed out on mainstream tourism development. Whilst a few projects have sparked hopes employment, work is confined to menial jobs. Setting up a homestay in the rugged north of Sri Lanka therefore has been very challenging, but local people were impeccably friendly, engaging and warm, even after bearing the brunt of war.



In our first years, we faced the obvious presence of the military which hindered our progress. Military surveillance was rife and Shanthi's family have had many visits from men in uniforms. Weathering this oppression tested all our faiths but we have stood the test of time and our bonds have strengthen. As a result local people developed the confidence to speak and slowly shred the fear that had sapped the life out of them for decades.

The relatively few and privileged visitors we have hosted in the last five years have brought so much input to the community. Many local people lived in very depressed conditions, but today the global village has helped dispel a lot of notions about life outside Mannar and local people are slowly waking up to a somewhat different reality.

Our home stay project with Shanthi has been a tremendous success. We are now looking at sharing the fruits of responsible tourism with another family, that of Mr.Thangarasa in a sleepy fishing village called Talaimannar right on the tip of Gulf of Mannar. It is due to open in 2015, and is being built with the help of the fishing community to local designs, using traditional building methods, local labour and materials. It will bring financial and cultural benefits to another family and open up opportunities for people in this district.



Our objectives are to build a homestay using locally supplied material, engaging local skills and craftsmanship and empower local women like Shanthi to take part in tourism. We are taking Shanthi as a role model and an example of instigating this concept in the village. She will offer in situ training for the local women showing them methods of accommodating and living with visitors while harnessing limited resources.

Abode Tours along with The Abode Trust have shown that being simple and less known attracts responsible visitors and supporters who make a positive contribution to this fishing community. Local people use their school learnt English to good effect and our visitors have a visit of a lifetime and a unique chance to step outside the usual tourist offer and experience a unique reality on Mannar Island.

