‘Give us your money. That’s all we want’

Can the charming locals in exotic holiday spots spoil your fun? Richard Paris, veteran of a recent trip to Sri Lanka, says yes.

Exotic Third World destinations have never been marketed more successfully to British holiday makers than they are today, yet behind the façade of the elegant brochures promising paradise lie many pitfalls.

The more publicized negative aspects of tourism in developing countries focus on the harm affluent Western visitors do to the social fabric of poor societies. But spare a thought for the unsuspecting visitor who arrives to find that he is a victim.

Just back from a package tour to the land which the Arabs called Serendip, Sri Lanka, I am still reeling from the exposure to a culture engaged in conflict with tourism, where the relentless harassment and manipulation of visitors for money overshadows what would be one of the world’s most beautiful resorts.

In the new field of tourism anthropology Sri Lanka makes an interesting case study. Its people typically have an income of between £33 and £45 a month and yet they are among the most literate in Asia and command a high proficiency in English. On the surface it would appear that the civil war poses the main obstacle to Sri Lanka’s becoming a major tourist destination. In fact it is not the Tamil Tigers whom visitors fear.

The first sign appeared shortly after we drove out of Colombo, when our tour guide explained at length his views on tipping. It did not take an accountant to conclude that he could be making an untaxed £7,000 or £8,000 a year on top of his pay.

The driver would also expect a pound a day from each person, and so would his assistant. There would also be lug. gage boys, room boys, mosquito net boys, and guides at historical sites and temples. There would be tips for those who watched our shoes outside temples, and those who put out our deck chairs or handed us towels.

And then for our tour guide, there were the commissions to be earned by arranging frequent stops at a range of dubious establishments a batik factory, a phony spice garden, jewelers, a wood carving center all staffed by aggressive sales- men.

It is the preponderance of sellers, beggars and commission earners in relation to the tourists that favors neither side and results in disappointment for one and disillusionment for the other.

Try parting with your group to undertake independent expeditions and you must endure persistent badgering. Most guidebooks insist that this is a minor irritation but, if so, one is compelled to wonder if the author and reader are in the same country.

That touts come in many forms, from innocent looking schoolboys to hardened old men, from avaricious tour guides and trishaw drivers to the friendly person listening to cricket on his radio and sitting opposite you on the train.

The beaches, powdery white and ringed with coconut palms and adorned with domesticated elephants are as tantalizing as the posters suggest but they are not to be enjoyed in a stationary state. Nor is any scene with human or animal movement to be captured on film without demand for payment.

Even inside hotel compounds, everyone is on the make. Restaurant waiters, already recipients of substantial service charges, brusquely demand your tips. Room boys not only make your bed, they flog toiletries and brushes. Bar staff appear thunder struck when you refuse expensive wines. For- get to put your watch and the cash buried at the bottom of your luggage into the hotel safe and you may find such items disappearing from your room. Exchange pleasantries with life- guards, security staff or gardeners and the not-so-subtle-at- tempts at relieving you of your rupees gather momentum.

As the holiday unfolded, the tension in our group mounted. Surprise turned to hurt, and hurt to outrage; when the time came to leave there was palpable relief but there was also an air of open anger. The Sinhalese majority that makes up the population of Sri Lanka are deeply religious. Historically, they have always had a reputation for being a people of dignity, tolerance, warmth and friendliness. The establishment of a tourism industry has obviously failed to bring prosperity to most.

As we approach the new millennium, what kind of experience can wealthy holiday-

makers expect, as they set off into ever more impoverished regions of the world?

Courtesy: Independent