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East opens its doors to safari tourism – more women to benefit

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Australian High Commissioner Bryce Hutchesson and Safari Panama owner Priyantha Pushpakumara open Safari Panama's refurbished office space. MDF Country Director Shahroz Jallil is also in the pic (R)



Australian High Commissioner Bryce Hutchesson ceremonially hands over a business agreement to a Panama homestay operator

Tourists who visit the Eastern Province often end up limiting their trip to surfing at Arugam Bay or travelling up the coast to scenic Trincommallee. But, with Australian Government support, a lesser-known destination is making its presence felt, and this week's ceremonial opening of tourism activity provider Safari Panama signals a change in Eastern tourism winds.

Panama is a small town about 14km from Arugam Bay and an eight-hour drive from Colombo. Safari Panama is one of the few tourism operators in the area, having built up a reputation for wildlife safari (at Kumana National Park) and beach camping among tourists who are looking for something more than catching the waves.

This, as well as the unique tourism model the town has developed – almost by accident – was identified as a potential change-maker by the



Safari Panama owner Priyantha Pushpakumara gives Australian High Commissioner Bryce Hutchesson a tour of premises

Australian Government's Market Development Facility (MDF) program, which is working to diversify tourism in Sri Lanka. Panama's fledgling tourism scene is capitalising on something visitors to Sri Lanka are now increasingly craving: 'authentic' Sri Lankan experiences.

"We have many homestays in Panama," explains Priyantha Pushpakumara, Safari Panama owner and the chief entrepreneur of the area's tourism scene. "Most of them are run by the women of the household, whose husbands work as day labourers and sometimes fishers. Tourists enjoy staying in these because they love the 'homely' experience, and especially the home-cooked food!"

The homestays add local flavour to a naturally appealing destination that is slowly gaining fame. Priyantha acts as tour guide cum travel agent for the Panama tourism scene, encouraging his wildlife and camping tourists to board at the homestays. Supported by MDF, Priyantha has been working to formalise his role, and at the opening ceremony signed agreements with seven female homestay owners who will be officially promoted by Safari Panama, with standardised rates and a more streamlined service offering. In addition, Safari Panama is creating a network of individual safari jeeps and tuk-tuks to offer safe and reliable transport for tourists interested in visiting the beach or Kumana.

Speaking at the event, Australian High Commissioner Bryce Hutchesson applauded the project for drawing the community into tourism gains: "For Panama, this is an excellent way to join Sri Lanka's growing tourism market, and for women a way to join an industry in which they often face many barriers to entry."

Tourism is notoriously low on female employment numbers, for a number of reasons including social perceptions relating to women working with foreign tourists and difficulties in managing household obligations with non-traditional work hours. Operating a homestay removes the mobility barrier, and having a group of women in the village running similar establishments has increased community buy-in in Panama, and reduced stigma.

MDF works in Sri Lanka to diversify the tourism offering. An important aspect of the model is to identify businesses like Priyantha's which are embedded into the community and have the potential to have a large impact on people who would not otherwise have the chance to

connect with, or benefit from, tourism.



Australian High Commissioner Bryce Hutchesson, Safari Panama staff and Panama town homestay owners and jeep drivers

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