

ABSTRACT

The tourism industry is one of the most successful and fastest-growing sectors in the world today. It generates a large amount of foreign exchange for the Sri Lankan economy. While this tourism industry has the potential to generate direct and indirect employment opportunities across the country, it has also helped to alleviate the poverty of the people as well as facilitate infrastructure development. Although the Sri Lankan tourism industry was hit hard by the terrorist attack on Easter Sunday. As the tourism industry began to rise in the aftermath of this attack, it became even more difficult due to the worldwide epidemic of COVID- 19. As a result of the global epidemic, countries around the world implemented travel restrictions, limited flights, and maintained social distancing, making it impossible to support the tourism industry. Tourist arrivals were low due to measures taken to control the epidemic. As a result, the rural tourism sector, including the Sri Lankan tourism industry, was severely affected. Hence, this study is especially focused on identifying the challenges & opportunities of rural tourism during the COVID -19 pandemic in Sri Lanka from the local community perspective. Furthermore, it explores the community expectations after a month of a pandemic. Primary data was collected by the researcher from 13 local community members in the Dambulla area of Sri Lanka. Semi Structured interviews were used with a purposeful sampling technique. A qualitative data analytical method was employed and the collected data were transcribed and analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The study revealed information regarding general and specific challenges, opportunities they have gained through it, and expectations from their point of view. The findings of this research will assist the Sri Lankan government and other institutions in better understanding how rural tourist activities engage with the epidemic and contribute to rural livelihoods. The Sri Lankan government and the National Tourism Development Authority can use the findings of this study to help them engage in rural tourism in the future. This research recommendation will help keep the rural tourism industry afloat in the future and introduce new innovative opportunities by instilling a positive attitude toward them.

Keywords: Tourism industry, Rural tourism, Community perspective, COVID- 19, challenges, and opportunities