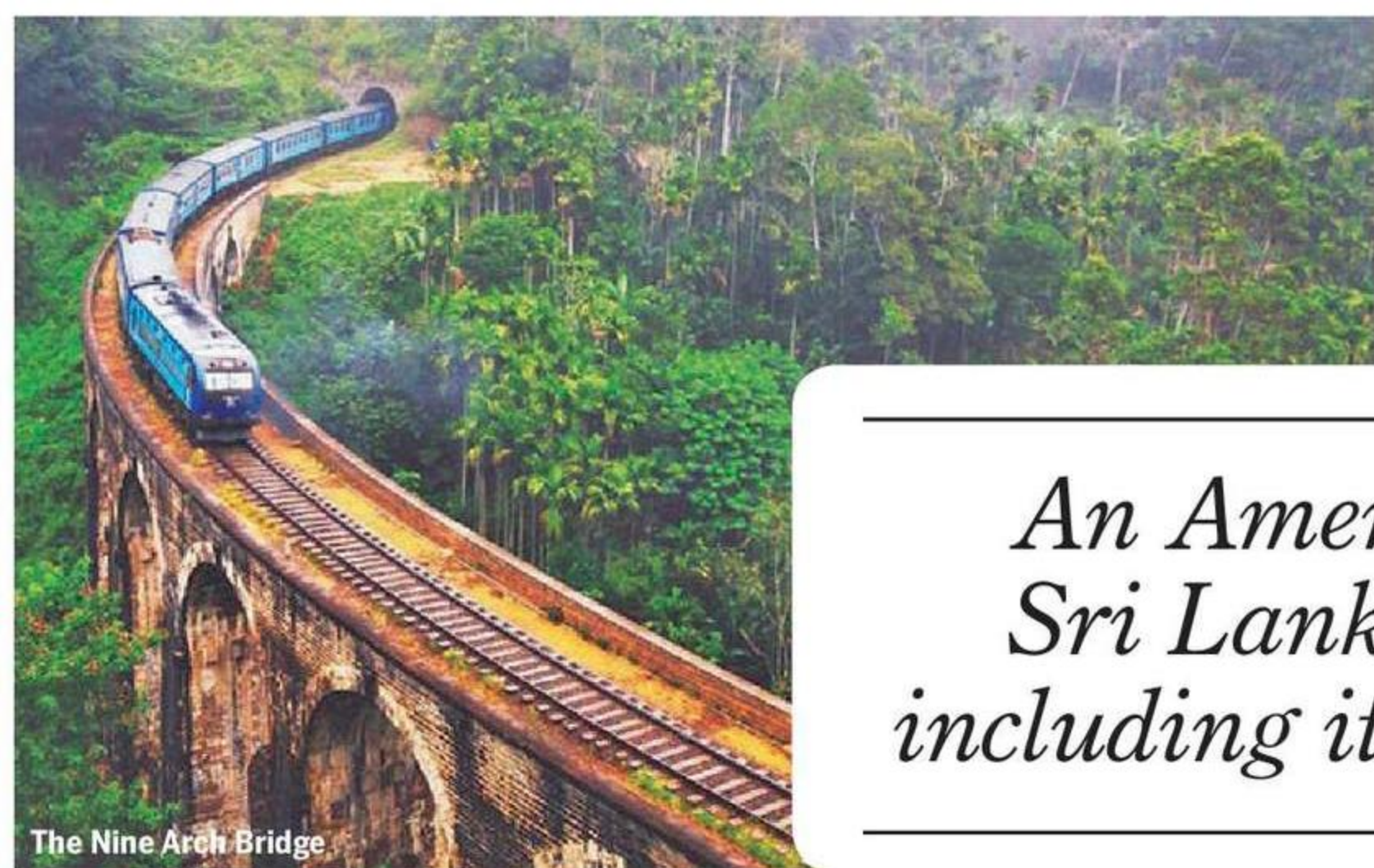


TRAVEL DURING THE PANDEMIC

SRI LANKA

A FABULOUSLY SERENDIPITOUS DESTINATION



The Nine Arch Bridge



The Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic

An American traveller shares a peek inside Sri Lanka during the COVID-19 pandemic, including its hotels, restaurants, and attractions.



A leopard at Yala

DAVID SWANSON

Leave it to an airfare sale to spark a bit of wanderlust. The cost of flights to far-flung points around the world plunged at various points in 2021. With a big anniversary to celebrate in October, last June, my husband, Chris, and I started looking at antipodal landings to which we could escape to experience something more exciting than the tired dregs of a pandemic at home.

With the benefit of refundable fares (at the time), the opportunity to dream big seemed fairly risk-free. Asia beckoned. But no sooner did we book flights for Sri Lanka than the Delta variant began to send the world on another COVID-19 spin. We held off cancelling, figuring the up-and-down nature of the pandemic might reset things.

Indeed, by October, Sri Lanka had a higher vaccination rate and lower infection numbers than the US. The Sri Lankan Government relaxed its quarantine requirement for fully vaccinated visitors, and the CDC lowered its advisory for the country from level 4 to 3. Sri Lanka reopened to tourism.

Our timing was fabulously serendipitous.

We landed at the Anantara Kalutara Resort, a sybaritic lodging an hour



The Peradeniya Royal Botanical Gardens

south of Colombo, the capital. Without exception, the resort staff all wore masks. This included the crew who welcomed us with a traditional dance, the gardeners and maintenance staff, and the resort's General Manager, Joao Corte-Real. Some even wore two masks.

We continued along the south coast to explore the Yala National Park, renowned for its elephants, water buffalo, sloth bears, and one of the highest densities of leopards in the world. A 6 am game drive confirmed that there were, in fact, other nationalities exploring the island. When we encountered a couple dozen safari trucks at a leopard sighting, this is where we started to hear other languages — Russian, German and perhaps an English couple.

We stayed nearby at the Jetwing Yala, an 80-room safari lodge set just behind dunes along a wild coastline. Here, the sea was just a couple of degrees shy of bathwater warm, but the tumble of waves meant a lifeguard kept his eye on us when we got in past our ankles. The hotel's enormous pool, measuring 250 feet from end to end, was ours for the wallow, with occasional visits by wildlife, and the swim-up bartender kept the ice-cold local Lion Lagers coming.

At either watering hole, we had the place to ourselves. Our trip took us into the island nation's mountainous interior, where I hoped to ride a Sri Lankan train past tea plantations, waterfalls, and steep vistas to the city of Kandy. At the town of Ella, we discovered that the rail network was only starting to come back to life following the pandemic shutdown. The famed route to Kandy was still days away from restarting, a railway guard told me.

Determined to explore the rail lore, I walked early the next morning from Ella's charming train station along the tracks to one of the country's most celebrated attractions: the Nine Arch Bridge, known locally as the *Demodara Paalama*. A group of Sri Lankans were posing for selfies, and then I overheard a trio of Irish voices, three travellers who were in their mid-20s.

I could not resist asking how they'd come to Sri Lanka, and one told me they chose the country only 10 days before booking round-trip flights from Paris for about US\$ 600. "We decided that we would go somewhere in Southeast Asia or South America," he continued. "But Sri Lanka was the only place that was fully open at the time that allowed us to travel around the country, without quarantine." As Chris and I had done, their accommodations and taxis were booked day by day, to give them flexibility, and they counted on getting a lot for their money. The only downside: They love going out to bars and socialising with other people, but the island had not delivered much of a party scene for them during their visit. What surprised them was the level of COVID-19 health protocols people adhered to.

"Sri Lanka is a lot stricter on the COVID policies than the E.U.," he

explained. "The three of us were so shocked to see that every single person without exception was wearing a mask on the streets."

In the city of Kandy, we hired a driver, Asanka, to show us around in a rustic tuk-tuk. We ascertained two must-see sights were the gorgeous 200-year-old Peradeniya Royal Botanical Gardens, a feast of tropical plants and trees, and the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic (Sri Dalada Maligawa), home to Sri Lanka's most important Buddhist Relic — Buddha's Tooth. The crowded temples and shrines were safely operated, with a gentleman in full PPE spraying the floors with disinfectant, which we walked upon with our bare feet.

To board our flight back home, Chris and I needed to get tested for COVID, and I asked Asanka if he could arrange this. We were glad to have him along, as the receptionist at the clean-looking Durdans Hospital in Colombo 3 did not speak much English. We paid her US\$ 32 apiece for our PCR tests, and the results were promised within 18 hours.

Asanka then shuttled us down the road to another building about a mile away — PCR Sample Location, a sign announced. A steep metal staircase led to a dingy room where three nurses in full PPE were available to perform the PCR test, which was quickly accomplished.

As I grabbed hand sanitiser on the way out — perhaps the only time in 10 days I had been anxious about sanitation — I asked Asanka why the tests were not done at the hospital itself.

"Much cheaper to do it here," he replied.

The next morning, Asanka delivered the printed test results and we glanced at them only long enough to read, "COVID-19 Viral RNA Not Detected."

Another driver took us on the three-hour trip to Colombo's Bandaranaike International Airport through unrelenting rain, the last gasps of the monsoon season. We checked in for our flight without any hassle, and before we knew it, we were on our way home.

In the rear-view mirror, the anniversary trip seemed so easy in so many ways. But I pinched myself to reckon with how fortuitous our timing had been. It was a moment, and a place that I would never dare try to replicate.

(David Swanson is a San Diego-based freelance writer-photographer and past president of the Society of American Travel Writers (SATW). (Source: Travel and Leisure Magazine)



A tea plantation

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