

COVID-19 Case Study

Resilience in the face of a pandemic

Resilience has been the guiding theme for Sri Lanka's tourism industry for the past two years. Just as the industry was starting to bounce back from the Easter Sunday attacks of 2019, COVID-19 brought global travel and tourism to a standstill in 2020. However, the sector's unwavering commitment to build resilience and tackle the challenges brought on by the pandemic is keeping businesses afloat and ensuring the industry's survival.

MDF has long recognised the need for coordination among tourism's private sector actors to overcome industry-wide problems. Between 2015 and 2020, MDF built relationships and advocated for improved collaboration. MDF's understanding of, and close connections with, the private sector helped MDF react quickly when the COVID-19 crisis struck.

As an immediate response, MDF partnered with The Hotels Association of Sri Lanka (THASL) on an island-wide campaign to raise awareness among tourist accommodation providers about the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) 'Sri Lanka Tourism Operational Guidelines with Health Protocols,' the blueprint for the sector to prepare itself for a safe reopening.

Harini De Costa, Personal Assistant to the General Manager of the Grand Hotel in Nuwara Eliya, says the hotel responded quickly when COVID-19 hit the country. She said, "the General Manager called a panel discussion with staff members to discuss how we were going to respond. Social distancing and other health and safety mechanisms were implemented immediately, as per advice from the local Public Health Inspector (PHI)."

Some hotels experienced more adverse consequences than others. Kasun De Silva, Assistant Resort Manager of Anantaya Resort and Spa in Chilaw, says the hotel closed down soon after the onset of the pandemic. The resort was careful to adhere to the quarantine process guidelines suggested by the local PHI strictly and promptly.

However, despite its best efforts and proactive measures, the hotel was stigmatised by the surrounding community because the virus was regarded as 'foreign' and tourism businesses were seen as contaminated. "We used to do a lot of Corporate Social Responsibility projects for the village, but we had to stop," said Kasun.

Both hotels participated in the THASL-MDF awareness workshops in their respective regions. The sessions aimed to help accommodation providers understand the importance and procedures of health and safety measures, enabling them to better prepare for and obtain SLTDA's 'Safe and Secure' COVID-19 safety standard certification. Properties are required to have this certification to receive international visitors when borders reopen.

Harini says the workshop acted as a welcome steppingstone for the hotel's recovery in this crucial and trying period.

"The workshop was an eye opener. Before the workshop, we were not aware of the visa process for foreigners or foreign reservations. We got vital clarifications directly from Dr. Prasad Jayasuriya [SLTDA's Director Tourism Planning and Development]," says Harini. "It was on that evening that we did the application for the Safe and Secure certification."

For the Anantaya Resort and Spa, Kasun says the workshops gave his team the confidence to go through the application process for the certification.



The workshop was very useful. Recently, we went through the first audit for the *Safe and Secure* certification. During the audit, we were confident that the staff were prepared and able to answer any questions.

Kasun De Silva,
Assistant Resort Manager,
Anantaya Resort and Spa, Chilaw.

The workshop helped the resort re-establish confidence in the community. Kasun said, "In the beginning, the fishing community in the surrounding area was not pleased with the resort being there, as they were concerned about being exposed to COVID-19 through tourists visiting the village. Since the program, even the PHIs have visited and informed the community that the resort is safe and that we are following the proper guidelines."

Following the workshop, The Grand Hotel and Anantaya Resort and Spa successfully earned Safe and Secure certification from SLTDA. Kasun and Harini say that their properties are hopeful for the future and are waiting to safely welcome tourists once travel resumes.

Since the emergence of COVID-19, accommodation providers in Sri Lanka, regardless of size and star-category, have been working tirelessly to adapt their properties to the 'new normal' and protect their staff. MDF's timely support via THASL, the leading Business Member Organisation for the accommodation sector, opened new opportunities for the sector to come together for a much needed dialogue. MDF will continue to partner with the tourism sector to strengthen industry coordination so that the sector can prepare and position for recovery.



Over **500** accommodation providers have been better informed of COVID-19 risk management following MDF-supported awareness workshops.



Starting with a successful workshop in Bentota, **12** workshops were carried out in six provinces in 2020.



The workshops are endorsed by the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority.



Dr. Prasad Jayasuriya, the Director of Tourism, Planning and Development of SLTDA, led the development of the COVID-19 safety guidelines. Alongside Mr. Srilal Miththapala, the THASL former President and MDF Senior Tourism Advisor, Dr. Jayasuriya conducted the workshops.

