

Unveiling the Potentials and Challenges of Ella as a Tourist Destination

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Abstract

Tourism significantly contributes to the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental development of countries worldwide, making it important to focus on the potentials and challenges for tourism. Ella, a captivating city in the Badulla District, is growing as a leading tourism destination in Sri Lanka, with different attractions like the Nine Arch Bridge, Little Adam's Peak, Ravana Ella Falls and Cave, Ella Rock, and many more, offering tourists a wide range of activities to experience. The accelerating demand for tourism in Ella emphasizes the need to assess its potential more specifically, as well as the challenges that might hinder the realization of the potential for tourism development. Therefore, this study attempted to analyse the potential and challenges of Ella for a better understanding of potential developments. A descriptive research design was utilised based on the qualitative and quantitative data collected from a convenient sample of 138 residents and 150 tourists through a semi-structured questionnaire, along with the secondary data to assess the potentials and challenges. Results drawn indicate Ella's massive potentials for tourism development. Among such potentials, its strategic location, higher government attention and support as a major tourist destination, positive attitudes and active engagement of the host community towards tourism, availability of infrastructure and other supportive facilities, diversity in attractions, possibility for promoting alternative types of tourism, and unexplored historical legacy of the area are some key factors. At the same time, it was found that several circumstances obstruct the realization of potential opportunities, such as inadequate transport facilities, inadequacies in destination management measures, poor promotional efforts, unacceptable business practices of locals, overcrowding, and the long distances between attractions. The study recommends implementing adequate destination management measures, improving the entire transportation system, and establishing a regulatory or monitoring mechanism to ensure fair business practices by locals.

Keywords: Destination management, Tourist destination, Ella Tourism Area, Strategic location, Tourism industry

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry is one of the fastest-growing sectors in many countries of the world, including Sri Lanka. It started to expand from the beginning of the 20th century, accordingly, the number of total global international tourists arrivals reached 25 million in 1950, which was influenced by technological development, air travel, increased personal income, and availability of free time (Tamir, 2015). By the beginning of the 2000s, it had risen to 687 million, showing massive and rapid growth in the tourism industry globally (Sharpley, 2009; UN Tourism, 2024). According to the data by UN Tourism (2025), the total number of global tourists reached 1.4 billion at the end of 2024 and is expected to grow by 3%- 5% by 2025. Accordingly, tourism has become one of the fastest growing and strongest economic contributors for to the global economy (Subash, 2015; World Travel & Tourism Council, 2025), which makes a significant contribution through employment opportunities, entrepreneurial opportunities, infrastructure development, and earning foreign exchange. Nevertheless, the scope of tourism contribution cannot be restricted to economic development, also it can also contribute to political, cultural, and environmental development (Gabayo, 2020; Okhareedia, 2017). However, the continuous growth of tourism now conflicts with the scarcity of resources as well as the limited capacity of available resources. Consequently, the negative impacts of tourism can also be seen through all the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions, as the resources cannot be increased at the speed of tourism expansion. Hence, the tourism industry has raised concerns about the long-term impact on the economy, society, and environment (Wanigawitharana & Jayathilake, 2023).

Sri Lanka is a globally renowned island as a tourist destination in the South Asian region. It is reputed for its natural and cultural distinctiveness. Sri Lanka is a globally renowned island as a tourism destination, which is in the South Asian region with a reputation for natural and cultural distinctiveness. The country's opulent cultural legacy, stunning natural environment, and warm hospitality have caused significant growth in the tourism industry of Sri Lanka recently (Wanigawitharana & Jayathilake, 2023). Amidst these kinds of recognitions, the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA), the government body established for managing, regulating, and promoting tourism in Sri Lanka, has pinpointed multiple tourist destinations that can attract tourists. Among those, "Ella" has been identified as one of the most outstanding and attractive destinations in Sri Lanka. Being a destination with a great variety of natural and built attractions, it shows great

potential as a tourist destination (Bandusena et al., 2023). Being Also, as a popular destination for both local and foreign tourists, it attracts 6% of foreign tourists out of the total tourist arrivals in Sri Lanka (UDA, 2020). Particularly, it holds It particularly has a great reputation as a backpacker's paradise, recording 90% of backpackers arriving having finished higher studies or engaged in higher studies (UDA, 2020). Moreover, Ella shows a huge tourist demand from European tourists, mainly from young and middle-aged adventure-seeking tourists (Damunupola et al., 2021). However, it was identified that there are several man-made risks like political risks, financial risks, social and cultural risks, and natural risks like biological risks, hydrological and geological risks in the tourism area of Ella (Ranasinghe et al., 2022), which may give rise to challenges that hinder the potential of tourism development in Ella. This intersection between high attraction and obstructed capacity has made the tourism industry of Ella a critical scenario for exploring the sustainability of tourism growth in emerging tourist destinations. Moreover, existing literature lacks emphasis on both development potentials and challenges in Ella, using real estate perspectives. Therefore, it is imperative to evaluate the political, economic, social, technological, legal, and environmental potentials more specifically and challenges of tourism development in the Ella tourism area, under the framework of PESTEL, which was used in similar studies (Kara, 2018; Hassan, 2022). The identification of both potentials and challenges will provide insights regarding overcoming challenges using the existing opportunities, as well as making decisions on transforming Ella into a competitive tourist destination. The findings of the study will provide useful insights to urban planners and policy makers regarding sustainable tourism planning while addressing potential challenges in emerging tourism destinations. In a situation where no study has explored the potentials and challenges that Ella tourism development has, this study aims to explore specific potentials in Ella tourism area and challenges that might disturb the realization of such potentials of Ella. Thus, this study aims to examine the potential and challenges in Ella tourism development.

■ 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining tourism is not an easy task. It is subjective from one to another, as the preferred consumption patterns in tourism are not the same for all (Zaei & Zaei, 2013). It is one of the dynamic industries in the world as it is highly connected with the behavioural elements and attitudes of people. Accordingly, the definition of tourism has also changed significantly over time. Initially, tourism is recognized as a bundle of relationships and phenomena that emerged from the trip and stay of non-residents, insofar as a stay does not lead to permanent residence and is not associated with any kind of financial gain. This was accepted for a certain period until it was replaced by a definition that addresses economic activities related to the tourism industry. Recognizing the intricate and interconnected system in tourism, it was defined as the system involving unrestricted travel and transitory stay of individuals away from their residence for one or more days, apart from tours with the purpose of gaining a remuneration" (Leiper, 1979). Importantly, five critical elements have been recognized in identifying and defining tourism by this definition, namely: tourists, generating regions, transit routes, destination regions, and the tourism industry. Moreover, it emphasized the need for a holistic definition of tourism rather than an economic or technical definition. Consequently, tourism was identified not only as an economic activity, but also through social and cultural elements as well (Murphy, 1985). The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism, 2005) has introduced a comprehensive and holistic definition as "a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes". Furthermore, with the popularity of the sustainability concept worldwide, the tourism industry is also required to be sustainable. At present, the industry has focused on sustainable tourism, which is an extension of tourism that takes "full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities" (UN Tourism, 2015).

Based on the evolution of the identification of tourism, key elements of tourism can be recognized clearly. According to a study by Andreis and Carioni (2019), there are five key characteristics of tourism. It is a complex network of incidents and relationships between the host community and tourists. Moreover, it consists of both a dynamic component, which is the journey of tourists, and a static component, which is the stay at the destination. Both these dynamic and static components happen outside the usual place of residence and work, generating activities beyond those of the residents and workforce in the locations frequented by travellers and their destinations. Tourists will be in the destination temporarily, and their purpose of visiting is related to leisure, experiences, or other motives other than financial motives.

The definitions and characteristics imply that the tourism industry isn't a single unit, but a combination of multiple elements. All these tangible and intangible elements play a crucial role in determining the success or failure of tourism development. Accordingly, the entire tourism industry depends on seven key elements, namely: accommodations, attractions, tour operators, careers, promotions and distributions, coordination agencies, and retail service supports (Zaei & Zaei, 2013). Even though the term 'tourism' is used for the entire industry, there are several categories. Particularly, the increased comprehension of complex relationships between businesses, travellers, and the local communities that provide the context of tourist experiences has caused the tourism industry to be seen from different perspectives (Ramesh, 2022), and allowed tourists to choose among different forms of tourism as per their preferences. Accordingly, it is classified as mainly mass tourism and alternative tourism/ special interest tourism/ responsible tourism (Dowling & Newsome, 2002). Mass tourism is characterized by a large number of tourists seeking replicas of their own culture within structured environments, resulting in limited cultural and environmental engagement. However, alternative tourism modes prefer more engagement with host communities, their cultures, and environmental elements. Over time, alternative types of tourism have become more popular than conventional mass tourism. Consequently, different facets of tourism have been rising, and tourists now can choose among coastal, green, historical, cultural, winter, and adventure tourism (Skendo, 2021).

Tourism may create diverse opportunities for a country (Rohanadeera & Ariyawansa, 2017) while making various impacts in economic, socio-cultural, and environmental terms (Işık et al., 2016) either positively or negatively. It can generate positive economic impacts such as the creation of employment opportunities, earning foreign exchange, and increased tax revenues (Andereck & Nyaupane, 2011; Cao, 2015; World Bank Group, 2025). Moreover, it can have indirect effects through successive rounds of business transactions caused by tourist

spending and induced impacts on income and jobs through spending money earned by involvement in the tourism industry (Slee et al., 1997). However, it may bring some negative impacts too for the community through the seasonal nature of tourism (Sharpley, 2002). Seasonal tourism brings economic uncertainties to the local communities once the peak period is over. Moreover, according to Sharpley (2002), governments may impose environmental taxes to address the negative environmental impact, and consequently, the energy price may increase. Also, the individuals in the community may have to bear the effects of congestion caused by tourism (Stynes, 1997). Furthermore, it may cause opportunity costs in allocating resources to tourism, as well as economic imbalances due to unnecessary importance given to the tourism industry over other contributors (Dwyer et al., 2004). Moreover, the social and cultural impact of tourism is also critical. For instance, it reconstructs social and cultural elements and revitalizes traditional arts (Zhong et al., 2011). Further, the development of social infrastructure, including schools and hospitals, may improve the levels of health and education of the host community, leading to enhanced well-being (Maksimović et al., 2015). Also, the increased opportunities for leisure activities will enhance the psychological well-being of individuals (Tovar & Lockwood, 2008). On the other hand, degraded cultural identity, decreased housing affordability, diversion of public money, beggars, individual crimes, organized crimes, degraded cultural sites, sexuality, drug addiction, child abuse, and other unethical activities may come into the local culture (Gunasekara, 2016; Mbaiwa, 2005; Milman & Pizam, 1988; Tovar & Lockwood, 2008). In terms of the environmental impact of tourism, its contribution to enhancing community well-being, conserving wildlife and the environment, protecting endangered animals and plants, enhancing the quality of life, and motivating residents to protect the environment voluntarily is significant (Zaei & Zaei, 2013; Zhao & Min Li, 2018). Conversely, increased energy consumption, increased automobile exhaust emissions, destruction of geological landscapes, water pollution, and air pollution (Liu et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023; Zhao & Min Li, 2018) affects the community and the environment negatively. Although literature discusses the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental impacts of tourism in broad sense, it remains a lack of empirical studies focusing on how these impacts affect emerging cities like Ella, through the interplay between potentials and challenges. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the specific potentials and challenges of the Ella tourism area, along with localized insights.

■ 3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Methods

A descriptive research design was adopted as suitable to describe a context about which little is known, and to recognize emerging events in the area (Dulock & Hodgson, 1993; Nassaji, 2015). To evaluate the existing conditions, challenges, and potentials of the area, primary data was collected from a convenient sample of 150 residents and 138 tourists in Ella, which was determined by saturation of responses. A semi-structured questionnaire, was used to collect data, which contained both quantitative and qualitative questions, allowing for detailed responses while enabling structured analysis (Kallio et al., 2016). The responses for qualitative questions were transcribed, and significant statements were identified based on their frequency, relevance to the study, and results of quantitative analysis. As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics, and qualitative data was analysed by adopting thematic techniques, by arranging and categorizing them under the potentials and challenges of tourism development in Ella. The interpretations of qualitative data were validated or rejected in every possible circumstance using the quantitative data to ensure the validity and triangulation of data (Fetters et al., 2013).

3.2 Area of Study

Ella and the vicinity have become a top-ranked tourist destination in Sri Lanka over the last ten years. Ella is a small town situated in the Badulla District of Uva Province of Sri Lanka at the local coordinates, N 6°52'0.33 and E 81° 2'48.02 (Please, see Figure 1 for the map of the study area). Hali-Ela, Bandarawela, and Passara are the immediate town centres for Ella. Ella is about 200 kilometres east of Colombo and is located at an altitude of 1,041 meters above sea level, where it is considered an extremely sensitive area of national highlands, comprising rich biodiversity and scenic beauty in the misty valley.

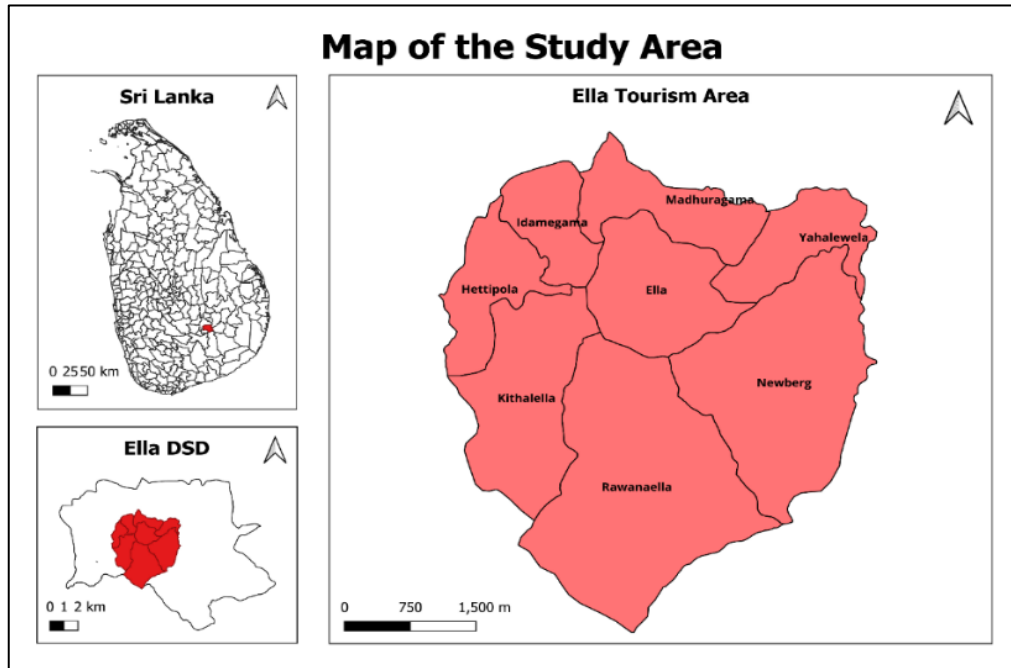


Figure 1 Study area
(Source: Author, 2025)

The natural landscape of the area consists of scenic mountain ranges, valleys, and steep lands. Ella inherits its natural climate due to its unique location between the upcountry wet zone (Nuwara Eliya) and the low country dry zone (Wellawaya). The Ella tourism area consists of Ella, Hettipola, Idamegama, Kithalella, Madhuragama, Newberg, Rawana Ella, and Yahalewela Grama Niladhari Divisions.

Ella is attracted mostly by foreign tourists from European countries who are fascinated with rock climbing and nature-loving. During July – September and November – February 2020, approximately 450 tourists visited Ella town daily, while 280- 300 visitors visited the area during January - June and October- November in 2020 (UDA, 2020). The number of tourists arriving in Ella has been increasing steadily over the past few years, particularly since 2008, denoting the exceptional attractions of the area. It has a 26% annual average growth rate from 2012 to 2018. Ella tourism area has recorded 126,200, 199,000, and 210,000 tourist arrivals per annum respectively in 2016, 2017, and 2018, as shown in Figure 2. Under normal circumstances, it is expected to achieve a tourist volume of 2,400,000 per annum in 2030 (UDA, 2020). France, Germany, Australia, China, and India are the main source markets of the Ella tourism industry. Nine Arch Bridge, Little Adam's Peak, Ella Rock, Ravana Ella Falls and Caves, and Dowa Temple have become the most stunning tourist attractions in Ella. On the other hand, the train from Ella to Nanu Oya, higher up in the mountains, is known to be one of the most scenic train rides in the world, enhancing the tourist attraction of the area.

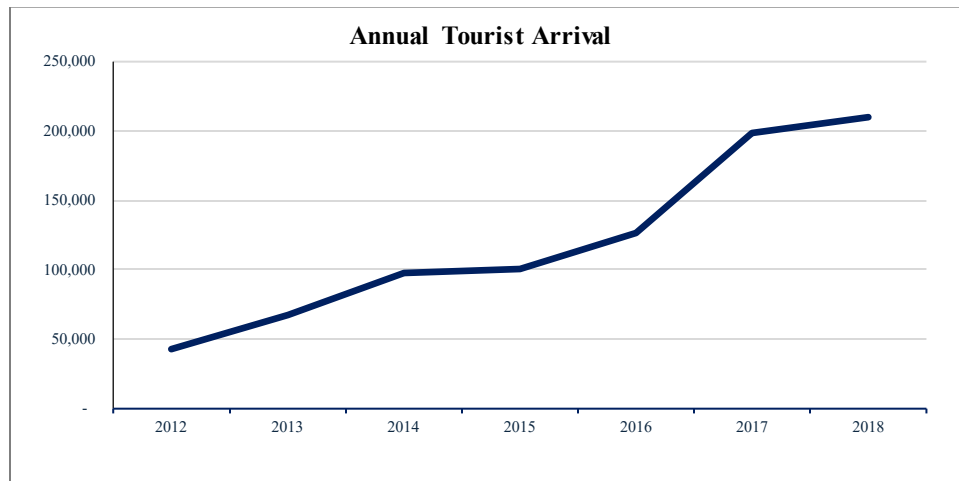


Figure 2 Annual tourist arrival to Ella
(Source: Author, 2025)

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Development Potentials of the Ella Tourism Area

4.1.1 Strategic Location of Ella

Ella is a city, well connected with surrounding major cities, which can be accessed through the Colombo-Badulla Road (A16) and the Ella-Wellawaya Road (A23), two of the prominent Grade A Roads in Sri Lanka. A hefty traffic flow can be identified in Ella as 165 buses, including 97 short-distance buses and 68 long-distance buses pass through the city daily (UDA, 2020). Short distance buses facilitate moving between nearby towns, while long-distance buses connect Ella with the major cities of the country. As shown in Figure 3, all the major cities of the country can be accessed through the Grade A road network from Ella town, showing greater connectivity. Consequently, the overall vehicle traffic has also become significant, with a total of 3,602 vehicles passing through the city daily, including 1,916 vehicles that enter Ella and 1,686 vehicles that exit the town, indicating that Ella is a vital traffic junction (UDA, 2020).

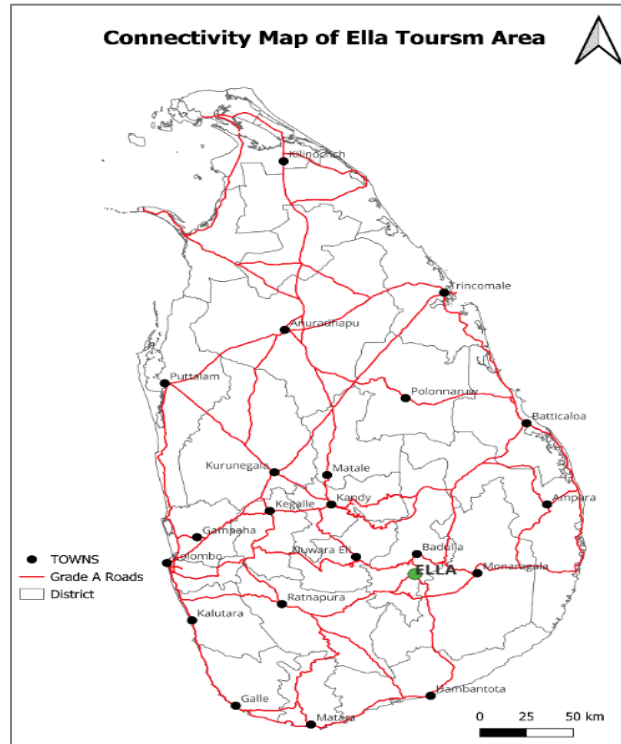


Figure 3 Connectivity map of Sri Lanka
(Source: Author, 2025)

The locational advantages have enabled tourists to reach the Ella tourism area easily from anywhere in the country. Additionally, the transport network of Ella has been strengthened by the railway network, which provides access to Ella through the ‘Main Line’, which connects the Western and Central parts of the country. By being such an easily accessible destination and a strategic location with multiple access points, the Ella tourism area has gained the potential of becoming a highly attractive tourist destination in the global tourism industry.

4.1.2 Government Support and Focus

As a legal component, the National Physical Plan 2050 has proposed to improve and maintain several selected highways that connect metro regions with main cities, with the aim of improving the regional connectivity and speedy access. One of the highways that has been given priority is the Hambantota-Wellawaya-Batticaloa (A2) highway, which facilitates direct access to the Ella tourism area as well. Also, an extent of 109.37km² of the Ella Grama Niladhari Division comes under the ‘Central Fragile Area’ recognized by the National Physical Plan 2050, which consists of areas with sensitive natural ecosystems. The long-term conservation of those areas is ensured. Moreover, Ella is identified as an area that belongs to the development corridor proposed by the National Physical Plan 2050. Being an area of development corridor, railway transportation is proposed to be developed and promoted as one of the most economical and sustainable modes of transport, where the train rides in Ella already hold a huge popularity among tourists. Simultaneously, interconnected water supply, gas, and electricity distribution networks, fed by multiple sources located at different points, will be implemented under this plan, which will enhance the basis of tourism. Additionally, the Urban Development Authority (UDA) has prepared the Ella Tourism Development Master Plan 2020-2030 as an assignment from Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, with the purpose of “preparing a comprehensive Tourism Development Master Plan for Ella and its surrounding tourism functional area by integrating tourism development aspect with overall physical, social and economic development and environmental management aspects to promote Ella as a sustainable tourism destination”. It proposes long-term strategies for the development of tourism in Ella.

This strong national focus on Ella as a prime tourism area, supported by initiatives such as the National Physical Plan and targeted development projects, significantly enhances the potential for sustained growth in the tourism industry. This attention from the government will ensure infrastructure development, environmental sustainability, investment attraction, and ultimately improvement of the entire tourism industry in the Ella tourism area.

4.1.3 Attitude and Engagement of Community

The attitudes and the level of engagement of the local community in the tourism industry are significant social factors on which tourism development greatly depends. They are interconnected with each other and are able to make significant impacts on the overall satisfaction of tourists. In evaluating the potentials that emerged from the local community's attitude and involvement in the tourism industry, the study used the responses obtained from residents of the Ella tourism area. They were asked to rate their perception of tourists, particularly regarding the number of tourists and their behaviour.

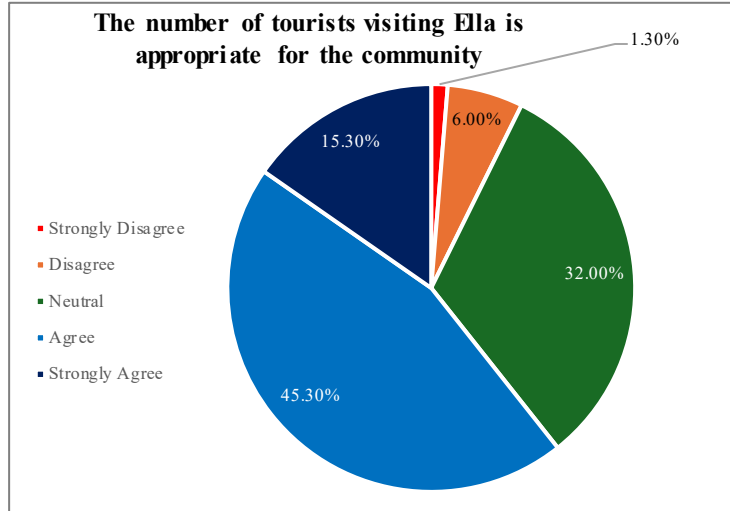


Figure 5 Attitude towards number of tourists
(Source: Survey data, 2025)

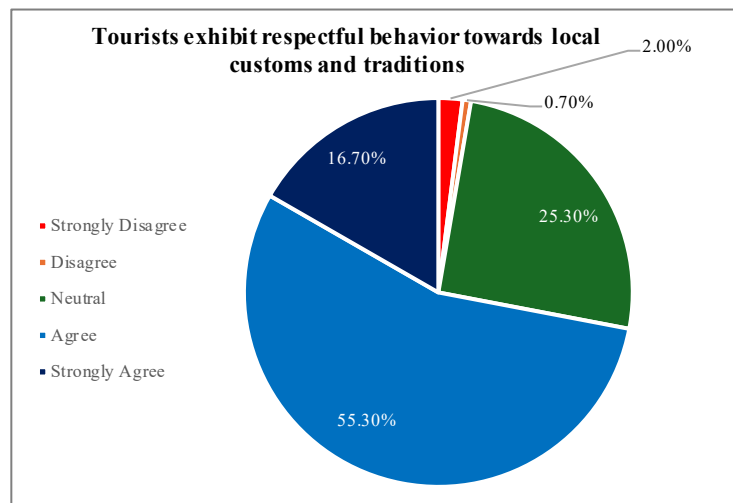


Figure 4 Attitude towards the behaviour of tourists
(Source: Survey data, 2025)

As per the above Figures 4 and 5, the local community holds a positive attitude towards tourists and the tourism industry in Ella. More than 60% of residents were satisfied with the number of tourists, while more than 70% are satisfied with the tourists' behaviour. However, it is worthwhile to examine why the other 40% are not happy with the number of tourists, and 30% are not happy about the behaviour of tourists. The positive attitude of the host community will always allow tourists to experience great hospitality and feelings of belongingness. Moreover, residents were asked to rate their relationship with tourists, which is a fair measurement of the overall attitude of tourists. The results, as shown in Figure 6, revealed that nearly 70% of respondents have made positive relationships with tourists, particularly indicating their attitudes.

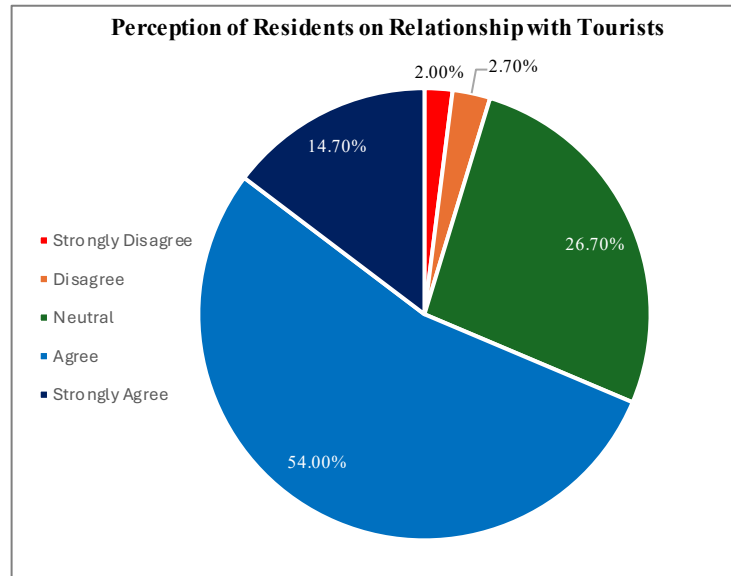


Figure 6 Overall relationship with residents
(Source: Author, 2025)

On the other hand, the attitude of residents towards tourists was evaluated using the responses collected from tourists as well. As per them, they believe the local community is treating them with kindness, resulting in a great level of hospitality, which was proven by the following responses made by tourists in their own words.

“The kindness of people is definitely a plus. Everyone offers help.”

“Our homestay has nice people, lots of stuff to do.”

“People are very welcoming and helpful. I would recommend focusing on more locals and authentic experiences.”

“People are always very helpful and welcoming, I’m super happy.”

Focusing on the level of involvement in tourism by residents, as observed during the survey, 85 out of 150 residents (57%) have already engaged in economic activities related to the tourism industry in Ella, indicating a higher level of acceptance of tourism and incorporating it into residents’ livelihood. Altogether, positive attitudes, hospitality, and active engagement of residents in tourism in Ella create a favourable background for the development of tourism. This harmonious relationship assists Ella in long-term tourism growth.

4.1.4 Being a Tourism Hub of Alternative Tourism Types

The uniqueness of the array of environmental and physical attractions and experiences in Ella has allowed the area to be developed as a tourism hub, which facilitates different types of alternative tourism modes, including eco-tourism, adventure tourism, agri-tourism, wellness tourism, cultural tourism, and community-based tourism. Opportunities for hiking and trekking experiences provided by Ella Rock, Little Adam’s Peak, and Flying Ravana show massive potential for adventure tourism in Ella. A strong preference for visiting those mountainous areas was also observed in the survey, with 88 out of 138 (64%) visitors having visited those two destinations, which provide adventurous experiences, indicating a significant preference towards adventure tourism. Moreover, tea estates cover a significant amount of land, numerically 18% of the total land of Ella (UDA, 2020), enriching the green view while reflecting the potential of promoting agri-tourism. Also, it was found that the tourists visiting Ella love the local culture of the area, especially Sri Lankan cuisine and the local community of Ella. The following words are from one of the respondents’ experiences.

“I appreciate the relaxed vibe of the city and restaurants, where I could enjoy local cuisine and interact with fellow travellers.”

Tourists are seeking to follow the local cultural practices. For instance, homestays become more popular in Ella, as tourists want to spend their time there. According to UDA (2020), 14% of tourists use homestays for accommodation, and only about 5% are seeking star-category hotels. These indicators reveal the potential of the Ella tourism area to be developed as a destination for community-based tourism and cultural tourism. Furthermore, the scenic natural environment of the area is enhanced by comfortable weather conditions, and the existence of Ayurvedic spas, yoga classes, and healing centres makes it more suitable for wellness tourism. Thus, Ella shows an immense potential for transforming into a tourism hub that serves a wide range of visitor preferences by promoting itself as a destination for alternative types of tourism instead of focusing solely on mass tourism.

4.1.5 Strong Foundation Provided by Infrastructure and Facilities

The availability of fundamental infrastructure and facilities has a huge impact on tourism development (Mustafa, 2019). A quality physical environment empowered with facilities plays a key role in enhancing the potential for tourism by making visitors satisfied. Discussing the infrastructure of Ella, it is a well-connected city with the surrounding major towns by an ‘A’ grade and ‘B’ grade road network. Namely, Ella-Wellawaya Road (A23), Colombo-Badulla Road (A16), and Ella-Passara Road (B113) provide access to the area (as shown in Figure 7). Moreover, railway roads also provide access to the area from Colombo, which is also considered one of the most scenic train rides in the world (Curious Goose, 2023).

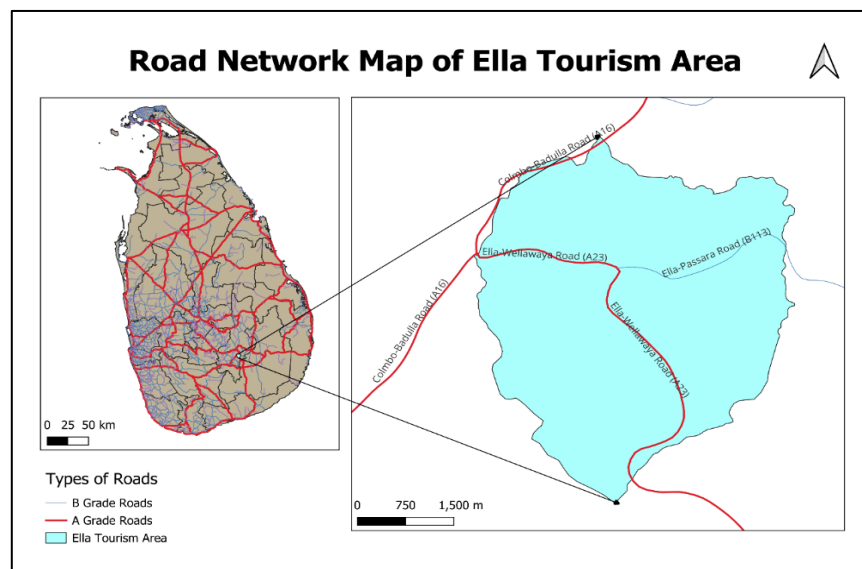


Figure 7 Road Network of Ella Tourism Area
(Source: Survey data, 2024)

Drinking water requirement is fulfilled by the National Water Supply & Drainage Board and well water. The Ceylon Electricity Board supplies the required amount of electricity for the entire area (UDA, 2020). Solid waste collection and disposal have been undertaken by the Ella Local Authority (Pradeshiya Sabha). Accommodation facilities for tourists are provided by private firms and family-based suppliers in several forms, such as hotels, guest houses, private cottages, villas, bungalows, cabanas, tourist hostels, homestays, and so on. Online platforms that are popular in Sri Lanka, such as Booking.com, Airbnb, Agoda, Expedia, and TripAdvisor, are active in Ella in providing convenient accommodation options with better connectivity and communication facilities for tourists (Munasinghe et al., 2022). For instance, these online booking facilities have enabled tourists to find accommodation that is closer to cities, shops, restaurants, and other facilities, fostering a positive experience for tourists (Munasinghe et al., 2023). It was recognized that 14% of accommodation demand is fulfilled through homestays in the Ella area, ensuring wider community engagement in the tourism industry in the area. The following table No.01 shows the available rooms in the formal hotel sector by the year 2020.

Table 1 Accommodation facilities in Ella

GND	No. of Hotels	No. of Rooms
Ella	169	510
Kithal Ella	193	215
Rawana Ella	6	37
Yahalawela	13	29
Hettipola	9	26
New Burge	2	27
Idamegama	1	15
Maduragama	4	8
Total	393	859

Observations confirmed that food and restaurants are adequately available along the Ella-Wellawaya Road and Badulla-Passara Road, with a great variety of designs, themes, and foods. Those restaurants have made Ella town a vibrant, active, and appealing city centre dedicated to tourists. Proving the quality of services provided by those restaurants, ‘Café Chill’ has received global recognition by being included in the list of ‘Travelers’ Choice Awards for the Best Restaurants in casual dining’ (Andrew, 2024). All infrastructure and other facilities provide the foundation for the tourism development of Ella by ensuring accessibility, convenience, and a pleasant experience for the visitors.

4.1.6 Wide Range of Attractions and Activities

Ella consists of a number of tourist destinations within its limited geographical area, as shown in Figure 8. The existence of all kinds of historical, cultural, environmental, and recreational attractions within its limited area has made the Ella tourism area even more unique. It has transformed Ella into a paradise for tourists, especially for backpackers who prefer to explore the natural environment, historical values, local culture, and authenticity.

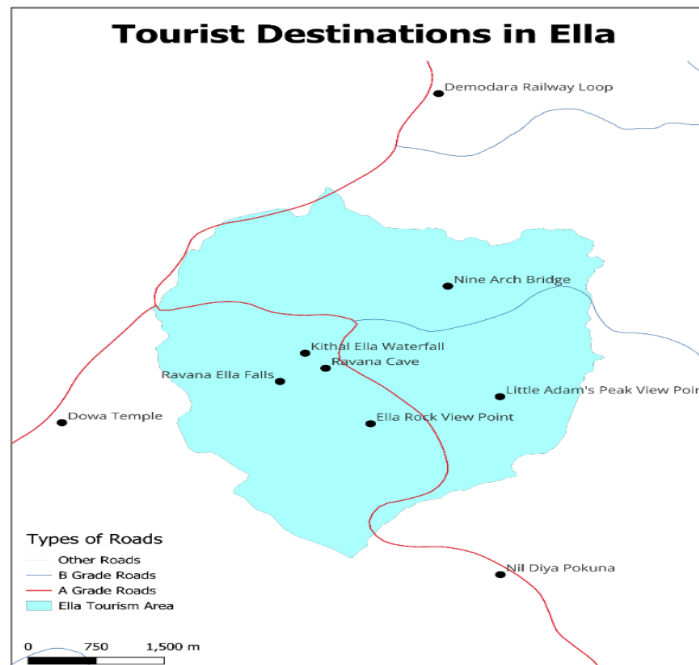


Figure 8 Tourism destinations of Ella
(Source: Survey data, 2024)

Nine Arch Bridge, also known as the ‘Bridge in the Sky’, is one of the most attractive tourist destinations in Sri Lanka. The Nine Arch Bridge is the most visited destination in the Ella tourism area (UDA, 2020). It holds a reputation as a destination for photography, watching train rides, and experiencing the lush green environment of the surroundings. Simultaneously, train rides through the Nine Arch Bridge have become a major part of the Sri Lankan tourism industry. To utilize the huge potential associated with it, the Department of Railways has introduced two special train rides through this iconic bridge, namely, the “Ella Odyssey train” and the “Calypso special train”, to promote the entire tourism industry in Ella. For instance, a respondent expressed his level of satisfaction by stating;

“The town offers scenic transportation through the train ride, which is an unforgettable part of the journey.”

Little Adam’s Peak, which is known as ‘Punchi Sri Pada’, is a part of a mountain range and a popular viewpoint with an impressive view embellished by tea estates, the natural landscape of the valley, Ella Rock, and Ella Gap. Ravana Ella Falls and Ravana Cave are two destinations with high tourist intensity and entangled with the Indian epic, Ramayana. The waterfall, which starts from the Ravana Ella Wildlife Sanctuary, adds a massive value to the Ella tourism area, as no tourist misses visiting Ravana Falls. Kithal Ella Falls is another waterfall in the Ella tourism area, which is hidden from the motorways. However, now it is gaining popularity among tourists as Kithal Ella Falls offers a feeling of natural beauty as well as an adventure experience. Reflecting the religious and historical values of Ella, Dowa Temple has become a popular tourist destination due to the massive 38-foot Buddha Statue carved in the granite rock. Also, there are interesting historical stories entangled with this temple as well as with Rakkithakanda Raja Maha Viharaya, showing the potential of Ella to be promoted as a historical and archaeological site as well.

The survey shows that the aforementioned destinations, along with others, are given priority by tourists when visiting Ella. Figure 9 shows the number of tourists (out of a sample of 138) who visited each destination, highlighting the popularity and appeal of these attractions. Moreover, the recently introduced Flying Ravana, Sri Lanka’s first zip-line starting from Little Adam’s Peak, which is more than 0.5km in length, has attracted the attention of tourists who prefer adventures while experiencing the undisturbed natural environment. Thus, the Ella tourism area provides an impressive variety of attractions and activities, serving a wide range of tourist interests and preferences.

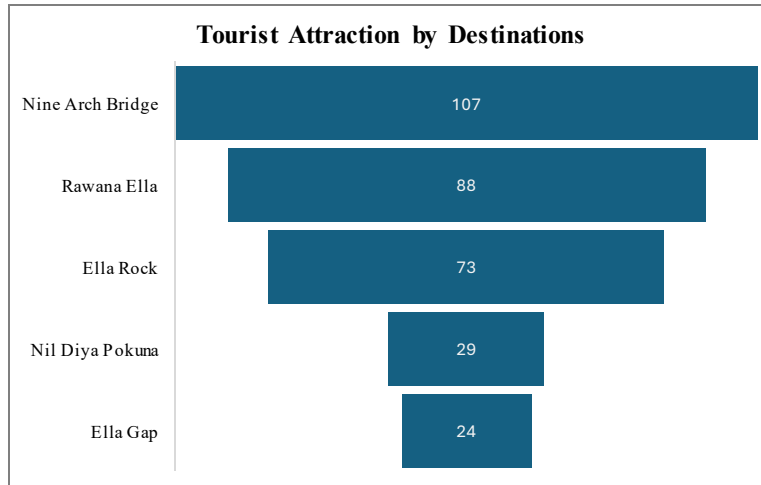


Figure 9 Tourist attraction by destinations
(Survey data, 2024)

4.1.7 Hidden Historical Legacy of Ella

Ella is an area with a great history. An interesting historical discussion on the Great King Ravana, who is still moving between myth and truth, lived in Ella. When he kidnapped Queen Sita, she was retained in the Ella area. Also, many stories are entangled with multiple places in the area, such as Ravana Ella Falla, Ravana Cave, etc. An entrance to an underground tunnel discovered in Ravana cave is also believed to have been built by the Great King Ravana. “Dowa Temple” and “Rakkithakanda Raja Maha Viharaya” were used by King Walagamba to protect himself and set his forces. The history of Ella is greatly influenced by the Colonial Era, as the area gained massive development with the establishment of railway roads and tea plantations. With a history that belongs to multiple eras enriched by significant milestones, Ella has immense potential to promote the area with regard to its historical significance.

4.2 Challenges for Tourism in Ella

4.2.1 Underdeveloped Transportation Network

Infrastructural facilities act as the foundation of tourism development. (Gabayo, 2020). The accessibility of tourist destinations almost totally depends on the existing transportation system and related infrastructures. As per the data collected from tourists, it was revealed that there are several issues regarding the transportation facilities of the area. Although the area has a good road network with ‘A’ and ‘B’ grade roads, the condition of the ‘C’ grade roads, as well as other minor roads leading to destinations, is observed to be in poor condition. As emphasized by several tourists, they have suffered from these low-quality roads.

“Improvements like more public transport, better-maintained roads, and clearer signage at attractions would make exploring easier.”

“Sometimes the paths are not that good, and it is quite dangerous sometimes.”

“The roads to some attractions were a bit rough, bumpy roads made travel uncomfortable, and better paving would enhance the experience.”

Moreover, the limited transport modes available in the area were also highlighted by tourists as a challenge they had to face while visiting Ella. When travelling from the southern part of the country to Ella, inadequate transportation options have made them suffer. Uncomfortable facilities in public transport options, unsafe rides, traffic, as well as delays and sudden cancellations have put tourists in trouble. These disruptions are especially impactful regarding the train rides in Ella, one of the most celebrated tourist routes. Tourists expressed their dissatisfaction regarding these issues as follows;

“To arrive in Ella from the South is difficult and only possible by Uber, unfortunately.”

“Finding a bus is crucial; should develop infrastructure for public transportation.”

“Introduce a more reliable and extensive public transportation network, keep the train services more reliable, and add more comfort features. Also, there should be an online timetable for the bus.”

“The possibility for transport is quite good, but the traffic is horrible. Not that safe like in Europe.”

“The public buses drive too fast, and it is really crazy and dangerous.”

Critically, the issue has run beyond public transport. The absence of ridesharing platforms in Ella has made the case worse, as most of the tourists are used to using ridesharing platforms for short trips. Moreover, the safety of pedestrians is not ensured by the transportation infrastructure in Ella. Pavements are too narrow, and in certain places, there isn't even a pavement. Street lines weren't drawn properly in certain places, leading to unsafe walking routes for tourists. The negative consequences of those weaknesses may weaken the potential of tourism development in the area.

4.2.2 Inadequate Destination Management

The ability of management systems of a particular tourism site to manage tourism activities and destinations while minimizing negative impacts on visitors, residents, and the environment is crucial for tourist arrival and development (Abeyasinghe & Ariyawansa, 2017). Ella Pradeshiya Sabha is primarily responsible for managing the Ella tourism area along with other institutions. However, the tourism industry of Ella has faced several challenges due to inefficiencies in managing tourist destinations and the unavailability of proper facilities. Mainly, it was observed that the sanitary facilities at destinations aren't good enough. Particularly, public toilets are not well-maintained. It was crucially highlighted as a critical issue faced by tourists, which can give tourists unpleasant experiences.

“Public amenities such as toilets in certain public areas could use more maintenance and regular cleaning.”

“Public restrooms were poorly maintained.”

Another issue that was severely criticized by tourists is the absence of safety measures. Management processes should give higher priority to the safety of tourists and the host community. Signage plays a critical role in ensuring the safety of tourists as they use it frequently while travelling. Additionally, the survey identified that there are some other issues regarding the medical facilities.

“More signs to the tourist sites would be very helpful and will ensure tourists don't get lost.”

“Need to improve medical facilities”.

Managing waste at tourist destinations is crucial in sustainable tourism and ensuring tourist satisfaction. Even though the waste collection is performed by the responsible authorities properly, at the bottom level, there should be more facilities to get the contribution of communities in managing garbage. As it was observed, no adequate trash bins are installed in destinations to facilitate visitors in dumping their waste properly. Moreover, tourists mentioned that the lighting facilities are not adequate at night in certain places, as tourists prefer to have nighttime walks in Ella City.

“Good in general, but lights on roads during the night aren't there.”

It was noted that some of the public places in Ella do not look attractive, since places that could have been made beautiful have been covered with grass and other types of vegetation due to inadequate management. Moreover, it has recently been reported that landslides around the Nine Arch Bridge have destroyed the area considerably, washing away the vegetation and ruining the natural beauty of the location. To preserve Ella's iconic characteristics and its appeal as a premier tourism destination, the relevant authorities need to make an effort through proper landscaping and prevent environmental disasters.



Figure 10 Landslides in Ella
(Daily Mirror, article by Nisal Baduge, 2024)

4.2.3 Ineffective Promotional Effort

To become a well-recognized tourist destination, Ella needs to be promoted in a focused manner towards certain tourist segments, along with providing information that is accurate and freely accessible. Current promotional activities for the area and its activities seem inadequate, even though Ella has been recognized internationally. Effective promotion of Ella should capitalize on those recognitions to attract more audiences. In addition, sufficient and accurate information should be readily available to tourists for better decisions and experiences. As per observations, both promotion and information distribution are not at their best in the Ella tourism area. As tourists address this issue;

“I had experienced some difficulties with the transport information. More information about it would be useful.”

This is a challenge for the development of the tourism industry in Ella, which acts against the potential it has to evolve into a tourism hub with alternative types of tourism. Nevertheless, it remains relatively unpopular due to a lack of marketing and promotion efforts, as discussed above. Consequently, its reputation is limited to only a few types of tourism. The survey revealed that 45% of tourists are not satisfied with the communication and promotional material available at the Ella tourism area, while more than 50% of tourists are not satisfied with the availability of information regarding tourist destinations in Ella. Most importantly, tourists suggested establishing tourist information centres in Ella to provide them with more information they require. Such an incomplete promotional effort may obstruct the tourism development of Ella from achieving its full potential.

4.2.4 Unethical Behaviour of the Local Community

Tourism is the major economic activity in the Ella tourism area. Therefore, residents engage in various forms of economic activities related to the tourism industry in the area. Engagement of community members in tourism makes positive impacts on the overall industry, and on the community itself indirectly, as long as they do it in a professional manner which do not hinder tourist activities or their freedom. However, it was identified that the host community's unprofessional and unskilled economic activities affect the tourism industry negatively. Particularly, charging higher prices for goods and services to tourists was observed frequently, which generates a negative image of the country. Unacceptable high prices aren't limited to a particular good or service, but to a wide range of commodities. Tourists revealed their views as follows.

“Don't change the entrance fee from day to day.”

“Nature and the whole surrounding are stunning. Because of being a tourist, the prices are absolutely high.”

“Leisure places are so good, but some foods are so expensive.”

“We have to get a Tuk-Tuk, which is really overpriced.”

Moreover, some of the selling strategies by locals have disturbed the freedom of tourists. Making efforts to sell goods with aggression makes huge losses to the host community by making the tourists unsatisfied. Those kinds of conflicts due to the unacceptable behaviour of residents stand out as a challenge for the tourism industry. Also, communication between locals and tourists in making transactions can be controversial due to a lack of language skills of either party. In the study, tourists have explained their experiences as;

“Many locals wanted to make money; you cannot walk without people asking you to buy something.”

4.2.5 Overcrowding

Once the capacity of resources cannot bear the number of tourists reaching a particular area, overcrowding can be seen. In Ella, overcrowding could be observed in several circumstances, though not to a critical extent. Particularly, in tourist destinations that hold a massive attraction of tourists, such as the Nine Arch Bridge and Ravana Ella Falls, an excessive number of visitors is present. It shrinks the available space for tourists to interact freely while restricting mental freedom and the level of satisfaction. Moreover, public transport modes, including trains and buses, also undergo this severe issue.



Figure 11 Overcrowded Nine Arch Bridge
(Source: Daily Mirror, article by Shantha Chandrasiri, 2024)

According to tourists, the study revealed that:

“Some places are overcrowded, especially during peak hours.”

“Buses are overcrowded.”

“Popular spaces like the Nine Arch Bridge can get overcrowded.”

A considerable level of overcrowding may generate negative effects on the local community through social, cultural, and environmental dimensions, making the tourism industry of Ella unsustainable.

4.2.6 Long Distances Between Destinations

Even though there is a unique mix of tourist attractions in Ella, their geographical locations are not that beneficial as a whole for the tourism development of the area. Considerable distances could be observed from one destination to another, requiring a higher time and cost to move from one destination to another. To analyse the distances between destinations, the study has collected the distance data using Google Maps, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Distance between destinations

Location \ Distance in km	Nine Arch Bridge	Ravana Ella Falls	Ella Rock Viewpoint	Little Adam's Peak	Dowa Temple	Nil Diya Pokuna	Kurullangala	Rakkithakan da Raka	Demodara Railway	Ravana Cave
Nine Arch Bridge	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ravana Ella Falls	8.30	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ella Rock Viewpoint	5.30	7.30	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Little Adam's Peak Viewpoint	2.40	6.60	5.70	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Dowa Temple	7.50	8.40	8.60	7.90	-	-	-	-	-	-
Nil Diya Pokuna	14.8	16.8	9.50	15.2	17.1	-	-	-	-	-
Kurullangala	18.5	20.5	13.2	19.0	21.9	9.40	-	-	-	-
Rakkithakanda Raja Maha Viharaya	16.5	18.5	11.2	16.9	19.9	7.30	2.00	-	-	-
Demodara Railway Loop	9.10	12.5	10.2	9.50	9.00	19.7	23.5	21.4	-	-
Ravana Cave	4.30	6.30	2.30	4.70	7.70	11.8	15.6	13.6	9.20	-
Kithal Ella Waterfall	3.80	5.90	1.90	4.30	7.20	11.4	15.1	13.1	8.80	0.45

Table 2 shows, there are considerable distances between every single destination, making it hard to access and explore. The condition becomes even worse for Ella as the availability of transportation options is also inadequate. All these circumstances restrict the free access of tourists to destinations, making them dissatisfied (Biswas et al., 2020). Also, budget and time-conscious tourists may be discouraged from exploring sites, as they may have to spend a significant amount of money and time to reach the location.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Ella is a renowned tourism destination in Sri Lanka with rich tangible, intangible, natural, and man-made resources, which give rise to the potential for continuous sustainable development in the tourism industry. Geographically, the strategic location of Ella, along with accessibility, has significantly increased the potentials of Ella. High attention from the government, along with the wide range of attractions in Ella, have boosted its potential to become a top-tier tourism hub. Most importantly, the community's acceptance and active involvement in the tourism industry have opened the doors for continuous tourism development, while the available resources and unexplored historical legacy indicate Ella's ability to diversify its reputation beyond mass tourism. Despite these opportunities, several challenges hinder the full exploitation of its benefits. Undeveloped transportation networks, insufficient capacity in destination management, and less effective and less focused promotional efforts have been identified as some of the challenges. Moreover, the unacceptable behaviour of locals, overcrowding, and the geographically dispersed nature of destinations should also be addressed and rectified to unlock the full potential of the tourism industry in Ella.

The combined overview of the potentials and challenges of Ella highlights several key considerations. Identified potentials show that Ella benefits from its strategic location, well-connected main road network, government support, positive perspectives of the host community, and sufficient infrastructure facilities. Nevertheless, transportation facilities within the Ella tourism area remain a major area for improvement. While the main road network ensures easy access to Ella, internal circulation for tourists has become less satisfactory. The need for a developed internal transportation network, including upgraded roads and sufficient transportation modes, has further increased with considerable distances between attractions. Hence, it is recommended to enhance the quality of the entire transportation system within Ella. Moreover, despite limited promotion as a tourist destination, Ella is already struggling to manage the crowds and facilities in the destination, which gives visitors unpleasant experiences. Therefore, the study recommends that the relevant authorities take proactive actions to manage future tourist volumes and ensure adequate maintenance of facilities in destinations. Although the host community has been showing a positive attitude towards the visitors of Ella in general, certain unethical business practices have made the tourists dissatisfied as they were overcharged for goods. Accordingly, the establishment of a regulatory or monitoring mechanism is recommended to ensure fair business practices within the Ella tourism area.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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