Alumni

Exploring the Hidden Gems of Rural Sri Lanka

How entrepreneur Charles Conconi ’92CC is driving more economically sustainable tourism on the South Asian island.

By
Julia Joy
|
Fall 2025

The Pekoe Trail (The Pekoe Trail Organization)

When Charles Conconi ’92CC fell in love with Sri Lanka back in 2001, he fell hard. An international-development worker from Washington, DC, he visited the small island nation off India’s southeast coast for a short-term project on export

competitiveness. “I was drawn to the people, the weather, the stunning beauty of the place,” says Conconi. He ended up staying for a couple of years. In 2004, when the country was struck by the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami, Conconi returned to help with relief efforts. This time, he found a way to keep coming back. “I developed a fantasy of going up into the highlands and doing a tourism venture,” he says.

Today, Conconi is living his dream life in Sri Lanka’s Uva Province, a mountainous southern region known for its lush scenery, national parks, and historic tea plantations. As a cofounder and co-owner of Amba Estate, a revived nineteenth-century tea farm and guesthouse, and as a cofounder of the Pekoe Trail, a two-hundred-mile hiking trail that passes nearby, among other projects, Conconi is helping lead Uva’s transformation from a historically impoverished agricultural region into a destination for economically sustainable tourism.

Amba Estate, which supplies tea leaves for the American brand Harney & Sons and other companies, employs approximately sixty workers from surrounding villages. “Our staff have been an important part of our development and helping us figure out new ideas,” says Conconi, who has lived in Sri Lanka full-time since 2017. Those new ideas include ways to help drive Uva’s tourism sector so that the region is less dependent on the tea industry, which is gradually waning due to global competition from cheaper sources. Traditional tea production in the highlands takes years, and harvesting the leaves is an arduous process, Conconi explains. “My grandfather was a coal miner, and he never wanted his son to be a coal miner. No mother wants her daughter to be a plantation tea plucker.”

Charles Conconi

The Pekoe Trail, which was built with funding from the European Union and USAID and completed this past March, has enabled the rise of dozens of new businesses and created hundreds of jobs along its route. “It’s giving people a lot of opportunities to get involved in tourism,” says Conconi, who says that locals have transformed homes into lodgings, opened restaurants and shops, and started businesses offering guided tours along the trail.

Snaking through hills, forests, farmland, and towns, the Pekoe Trail serves to bring travelers out of over-touristed coastal areas and into the countryside. “Sri Lanka is stunningly beautiful, but people tend to hit the same five or six places — mainly beaches and cultural sites,” says Conconi. “The rest of the country doesn’t benefit from the tourism dollars coming in. Seeing Sri Lanka on foot gives you an entirely new relationship with communities, and it supports businesses along the way. Ninety percent of the money spent in rural areas stays within ten kilometers.”

For Conconi and his peers in development and tourism, including his wife, Orzu, the tourists with the highest value are not necessarily those with the most money to spend but rather curious people who, like Conconi, are drawn to new discoveries off

the beaten path. “We’re looking at hikers, adventure seekers, birders, and people who enjoy tea and walking,” says Conconi. “They aren’t just looking and taking pictures but immersing themselves in a local and authentic experience.”

This article appears in the Fall 2025 print edition of Columbia Magazine *with the title* "*The Road Less Touristed.*"

Read more from ***Julia Joy***

Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >

Read more from ***Julia Joy***