Ayurveda Tourism: Prescription for Kerala's Tourism Development

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ABSTRACT

Kerala, for many centuries, has been acknowledged as the land for alternative medical systems like Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Sidha and Naturopathy and also for its medical pluralism. Inspite of the fact that Ayurveda is being practiced as an alternative medicine all over globe, Kerala is the only place where this stream of medicine still follows age-old traditional texts for treatment and preparation of Ayurvedic medicine and as recently emerged as the hub for Ayurvedic treatment for the wellness seekers across the globe. Kerala has successfully developed a paradigmatic shift in the way Ayurveda is branded globally, from “medication to medicinal services resulting in “wellness” from “illness”. Globally Ayurveda is gaining popularity as many consider this “science of life” as alternative solution for multiple ailments due to the side effects of the modern drugs and the levels of their toxicity. The objective of this study is to explore the concept of Ayurveda tourism in Kerala and the competitive advantages of Kerala as an Ayurveda tourism destination.

Keywords: Seasonality, medical pluralism, destination attractiveness, tourism landscape

INTRODUCTION

The growth of disposable income, advancements in various modes of accessibility, increased leisure time and paid holidays have resulted in Tourism transforming as a major industry across globe. India, the second most populous and seventh largest country in the world, has emerged as one of the leading tourist destinations of the world recently. India’s rank in the international tourist arrivals has moved from 41st rank in 2013 to 22nd rank in 2018 is testimony for this [1]. Similarly Kerala has also recently emerged as most sought after tourist destination among Indian states. Internationally acclaimed as ‘God’s Own Country’, Kerala was adjudged by the National Geographic Traveller as one of the 50 must see destinations in one’s lifetime and also rated as one of the thirteen paradises in the world. Blessed with nature, culture, cuisine and incredible life experiences, Kerala has been perceived as a major tourist destinations on the global tourism landscape. [2]. Department of Tourism, Government of Kerala tourist statistics reveal that 16.7 million domestic and foreign tourists visited Kerala in 2018. Tourism and allied sectors nearly accounts 10% of Kerala’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and 23.5% of the total employment opportunities in the state. The growing acceptance of Kerala as a destination for holiday is witnessing sustained growth momentum in the last two decades. [3]

The exponential growth of tourism also enabled Kerala to significantly enhance the revenue generated from tourism. In 2018 the Foreign exchange earnings (FEE) has crossed Rs.10,000 crore for the first time registering a considerable growth compared to the year before. In 2018 the revenue from tourism was Rs. 36,528 crore which registered an increase of Rs. 2,874 crore over 2017. [4]

Kerala has also redefined itself as an up-market tourist destination compared to other Indian states. Ayurveda or Wellness tourism is perceived as a powerful vertical to lure more holiday makers, enhancing their length of stay and more spending during their stay. Inspite of being one of the smaller states in terms of geographical area in India, with a population of 33.3 million, Kerala has four state – of the art international airports in Thiruvananthapuram, Kochi, Kozhikode and Kannur having direct air connectivity with all GCC countries and most Asian
countries [5]. Also the state ranks seventh in terms of foreign tourist arrivals (FTA) in India in 2018. Kerala has also become global leader in implementing sustainable tourism practices throughout its destinations.

Branded internationally as “Destination for Ayurveda”, international and domestic tourists flock to Kerala to avail the Ayurveda treatment packages. As the wellbeing of an individual is multidimensional- ranging from the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual domains, Ayurveda tourism is also multifaceted. It include a wide and varied set of regimes which include preventive and curative health services, spa, beauty and yoga and meditation.

Ayurveda Tourism

The travel of an individual/s outside his/her own place of residence to a destination for maintaining or enhancing ones well being and becoming healthier rather than curing a specific disease/s is termed as Ayurveda/Wellness tourism. Wellness Tourism is "a specific division of the global tourism industry defined by the common goal of marketing natural assets and activities primarily focused on serving the wellness-minded traveler and those who want to be" opined Wellness Tourism Association (WTA). [6]

Global Wellness Institute has defined wellness as “the active pursuit of activities, choices and lifestyles that lead to a state of holistic health”[7]. Dunn (1959) defined wellness is a “state of health, which comprises an overall sense of well being and sees a person as consisting body, mind and spirit. [8]

Ayurveda tourism offers traditional, holistic medical treatment which is considered as the perfect solution for holistic health making use of therapeutic medicinal recipes prescribed in ancient texts of Ayurveda. Ayurveda tourism comprises of two aspects - inner wellness and physical wellness. The inner wellness vertical aims to enhance the mental, emotional and spiritual well-being of Ayurveda tourists and it includes yoga and meditation, aroma therapy whereas physical wellness tourism involves Ayurveda treatments, like Panchakarma, Nasyam, Pizhichil and detoxification treatments. Ayurveda treatments seldom use technology for treatment and based only on the tenants of natural ways of medication made from medicated oils and Ayurvedic powders.

Ayurveda, as a wellness way of life, has evolved over decades from a traditional, preventive and curative healing system to an individual’s multi-dimensional physical, mental and emotional well-being solution. Health of an individual is now viewed not as the mere absence of diseases but as total well being of body and mind. Ayurveda treatment systems endeavor to maintain the balance and preserve health (mental and physical) through traditional and natural practices making use of medicinal herbs sourced locally and processed traditionally.

It is estimated that global wellness industry is worth US Dollars 3.7 trillion with a growth rate of 10.6% from 2013-2015 and the Indian wellness market is worth US Dollars 13 billion in 2014 and expected to grow at a Compounded Annual Growth Rate of around 12% to reach US Dollars 23 billion by 2020. [9]

Ayurveda Tourism in Kerala

Kerala, with its rich treasure of medicinal plants and herbs has a long history of traditional healing practices. For centuries traditional Ayurveda physicians, also known as Vaidyars, were the only contact points for those seeking treatment for all kinds of diseases before the advent of modern medicine. More over it was the lone treatment system available in the state prior to the advent of hospitals and doctors. These traditional physicians not only interpreted the age old Ayurveda texts and but also translated them into effective treatment systems for individuals. The well kept secret behind the success of Ayurveda system of treatment in Kerala lies in the fact that the state has pleasant weather conducive for the administration of various Ayurveda therapies. In Kerala the temperature normally never exceed beyond 38 degrees
in summer and winter will never fall below 10 degree, except in few high altitude destinations. Kerala is also frequented with South West and North East monsoons for nearly five months in an year is also one of the reasons for its Ayurveda success. Kerala is also home to numerous medicinal plants and herbs required for the preparation of Ayurveda medicines. The presence of high alkaloid presence in the soil nurtures their growth and ensures availability of the medicinal plants and herbs. This soil constitution also increases the potency of Ayurvedic medicines made from these plants compared to other states with a different mix of soil constitution. The availability of professionally qualified, multilingual Ayurveda doctors and well trained and skilled Masseurs ensures Ayurveda treatments are administered in its pure and traditional style. The availability genuine medicines prepared by Ayurvedic experts based on the ancient scripts and therapies performed by skilled and trained physicians and masseurs in the Government of Kerala accredited Ayurveda health centres and hospitals ensure genuine treatments for the tourists. Though many countries like Sri Lanka and other states in India also offer similar treatment system Ayurveda tourism has been acknowledged as the Unique Selling Proposition (USP) of Kerala. It is fact that the availability of English and other foreign languages speaking professionally qualified doctors and masseurs, ideal weather, genuine medicines and Government accreditation of treatment centres enable Kerala to be the most sought after Ayurveda tourism destination in the world.

Kerala as Ayurveda Tourism Destination

There are many features which enhance the attractiveness index of a destination which influence tourists choice of their tourist destination. The attractiveness index for Ayurveda tourism include accessibility, accredited treatment centres, availability of trained, multilingual and experienced human resources, genuine medicines and thematic accommodation units with affordable cost both for stay and treatment. Kerala is perfectly blessed with the all the above indexes which ensure this land as must visit destination for Ayurveda.

Ayurveda Tourism provides benefits to allied businesses and stakeholders beyond the Ayurveda sectors and if properly developed, can deliver maximum benefits to destinations with minimal negative impacts. It also facilitates the following benefits to Kerala.

**Ayurveda Tourism reduces seasonality and ensure year round tourists**

Tourism is seasonal in nature and it involves concentration of tourists in a destination for brief span of time in a year. This seasonality in tourism lead to marginal/under utilization of the physical and human resources during the off season and its optimum utilization during the peak season in a destination. This swing of tourist arrivals affects the livelihood of the multiple stakeholders who solely depend on tourism,

| Month wise percentage of Foreign / Domestic Tourist arrivals 2018 |
|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Month               | Jan  | Feb  | Mar  | Apr  | May  | Jun  | Jul  | Aug  | Sep  | Oct  | Nov  | Dec  |
| Percentage of foreign tourist arrivals | 15.32 | 13.9 | 11   | 7.8  | 4.14 | 3.35 | 6.3  | 5.5  | 4.1  | 6.7  | 9.1  | 12.9 |
| Percentage of domestic tourist arrivals | 9.1  | 7.9  | 7.9  | 9.4  | 10.2 | 6.9  | 7.5  | 6.4  | 7.2  | 8.2  | 8.7  | 10.5 |

Source : Kerala Tourist Statistics 2018 (Department of Tourism, Govt. of Kerala) [10]

From the above table it is evident that both foreign and domestic tourists mostly visit Kerala during the months from December to May. The months of June, July and August, often
mentioned as lean tourist season, arrivals of both domestic and foreign arrivals are minimal leads employment reduction and livelihood issues for of the stake holders.

These lean months, during monsoon are normally regarded as the ideal time for Ayurveda treatment. The abundance of medicinal plants and herbs and presence of moisture during monsoon makes this the apt time for availing the Ayurveda treatment. Moreover as it is lean season the tariff of accommodation units will also be lower thereby making the visit cost effective. Considering this Ayurveda tourism has the potential to transform Kerala as a year long destination whereby optimum utilization of various resources and livelihood of stakeholders could be ensured.

b. Extension of average length of stay of tourists to leverage maximum tourists

Tourism is perceived as an instrument for economic development and employment generation across destinations. In order to leverage the maximum benefits of tourism either the footfalls of tourists arrivals or the length of their stay have to be increased. Ayurveda tourism normally insists a minimum period of treatment to get optimum results. It varies from minimum of one week to four weeks. If a tourist product, like Ayurveda tourism, can extend of length of stay of tourists at destinations it can ensure extended occupancy at destinations. Longer stay of tourists can also result in savings in administration costs and promotional campaigns.

c. Ensuring quality and authenticity of service providers.

Quality, authenticity and reliability are often viewed as the trinity for the success of Ayurvedic treatment. The elevation of 'Ayurveda' as the USP of Kerala's tourism and the branding of Kerala as “Worlds Wellness Hub” resulted in the mushrooming of Ayurveda treatment centres in and around all the tourist destinations. Many centres operates flouting the basic hygiene and compromising health and safety standards. This could adversely affect the image of the state as an authentic wellness hub. To combat and to regulate these centresand to maintain a uniformity of practice, and standards Department of Tourism, Government of Kerala has brought out regulations and laws to ensure quality, authentic service delivery and care of the Ayurveda Centres.

A committee constituted by the Government classifies these centres into three categories by introducing clear guidelines as Ayur Silver, Ayur Gold and Ayur Diamond. The Ayur Silver category has minimum facilities and Ayur Diamond have the best facilities. This enables customer to differentiate between an authentic wellness service provider and a mediocre one and avail the treatment from the best based on their budget and requirement.

In addition, the Government of India has taken an important step by introducing quality management through Quality Council of India to extend the National Accreditation Board for Hospitals and Wellness Centres (NABH) certification for spa and wellness centres.

d. Facilitates follow up/repeat visits

A satisfied tourist or a tourist who require a follow up treatment visit the same destination once again or multiple times. In order to leverage the desired outcome from Ayurveda treatment the tourist is advised to avail annual rejuvenation treatments. This prompts tourists to avail the treatments on an yearly basis and promotes repeat visitation till the desired results are achieved. Repeat visitors will acts as brand ambassadors for the Ayurveda tourism when they share their experiences to their friends and relatives.

e. Ensuring employment for Ayurveda professionals

Kerala has 17 Ayurveda colleges, both in government and private sector, and nearly 800 Ayurveda doctors are added annually to the Ayurveda sector. It is estimated that Kerala has around 17,000 qualified Ayurveda doctors as per the figures from Directorate of Indian System (ISM). Ayurveda tourism provides employment not only to these Ayurveda doctors but also to multitude of nurses, therapists and masseurs. This sector also ensures employment in Ayurvedic medicinal farms, medicine manufacturing factories and in also in the Ayurveda pharmacies.
Conclusion
Medical pluralism or coexistence of traditional medical treatment systems together with the mainstream modern medicine healthcare is becoming a reality across the world. Ayurvedatourism provides an integrative multi dimensional medicine paradigm where age old and traditional treatment system could provide robust healthcare to the visitors along with their holidays.
Ayurveda tourism, if promoted and marketed well, could be the prescription to assure perennial tourist arrival to Kerala addressing the off season seasonality issues and contribute to the economic development, employment generation.

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