Rise of Spiritual Tourism in India: A Glimpse

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been an increased emphasis on spiritual tourism as a result of the increase in tourists worldwide. Spiritual tourism combines spirituality and tourism. It offers enlightenment and entertainment, as well as education, as visitors learn many new things. The purpose of spiritual tourism is to travel to find meaning and purpose. Through it, you are able to boost your physical, mental, and emotional energies. It nourishes, maintains, and improves your spirit, mind, and body. In a nutshell, it connects your mind, body, and soul. Hence, spiritual tourism can be defined as traveling on pilgrimage to acquire enlightenment, entertainment, and education to leave your footprints and carry your memories back to your home by expressing your gratitude to God.¹

There is no specific religion associated with spiritual tourism. Spiritual tourism is not religious tourism. Spiritual tourism is to connect your body, mind, and soul, whereas religious tourism is seeking blessings from God based on your religious faiths and beliefs. It is a broader concept than religious tourism. Religious tourism is just one subset of spiritual tourism. The types of tourism include spiritual tourism, adventure tourism, cruise tourism, eco-tourism, event tourism, medical tourism, sex tourism, special interest tourism, volunteer tourism, wedding tourism, and rural tourism.²

Spiritual tourism is beneficial for the services sector, especially in terms of employment and GDP growth. In addition to providing inner peace and purpose, it promotes local cultures and traditions while ensuring their natural gifts, talents and arts are safeguarded. With heightened technological advancement comes the risk of disrupting natives, but with a rise in spiritual tourism certain measures can be taken to preserve their environment and unique talents. As a result of staying in their native places, local communities are able to observe various cultures and customs, and feel empowered because they take pride in their cultures and customs, and become more concerned about preserving their history, traditions, and environment. They become more engaged and integrated into mainstream society as a result.³

Foreign investment is indirectly encouraged by spiritual tourism as tourists bring foreign exchange. Despite this, spiritual tourism has several disadvantages. It increases crime and sexual exploitation. It destroys nature and disturbs the environment. Overall, the benefits outweigh the disadvantages. To enhance empathy, compassion, peace, and prosperity, spiritual tourism must be encouraged. Globally, spiritual vacations are becoming increasingly popular. They help employees reflect and acquire peace, solitude, and relaxation. They also improve their decision-making and leadership abilities and skills.⁴

Keywords:
Spiritual Tourism, Pilgrimage Tourism, Sacred Tourism.

REFERENCES

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⁴ “Philip, L. (2022, August 27). No turning back: Spiritual tourism is booming in India post-pandemic. Economic Times.”
1. Spiritual Tourism in India

There is no doubt that India is the 'Land of Faith'. Traverse the mighty mountains and experience God's presence or traverse the meandering alleyways where you can find spirituality combined with history to quench your thirst for spirituality. It is India's abundance of temples, mosques, churches, Gurudwaras, and monasteries that entice travelers to visit a country that is tolerant, spiritual, and most importantly diverse yet united.5

Many ordinary Indian destinations have been transformed into significant religious sites by spirituality. As a result, along with a large number of pilgrims who visit these religious destinations once a year, many travel enthusiasts have started to throng these hubs. Tourism has grown manifold and India's fame has gone up.

Some of the spiritual destinations of India are,

- **Vaishno Devi Temple in Jammu & Kashmir:** Located the Trikuta Hills in Jammu, the abode of Mata Vaishno Devi is one of the most popular pilgrimages in India. Take an arduous trek to the caves where the goddess bestows countless blessings on you and your family. This journey in India will remain etched in your memories forever as it is blessed with beautiful landscape, pervading divinity, and thrilling adventure.6

- **Golden Temple, Swarn Mandir/Harmandir Sahib in Amritsar:** An unmatched reflection of the pious golden edifice on the ambrosial nectar (lake) and the horde of pilgrims loitering around the shrine complex compel one to visit this popular religious place in India. A holy Sikh pilgrimage site in India, Gurdwara Harmandir Sahib was built by the fourth Sikh Guru, Ramdass Sahib Ji. A bringer of peace, the Golden Temple is nothing short of a legacy in India for the Sikh community. The golden gilded temple commemorates a number of Sikh historical events.7

- **Odisha’s Konark Sun Temple:** As a masterpiece of Indian architecture, the Sun Temple is the epitome of exquisite design and unmatched spirituality. It is located in Konark, Odisha, and boasts of a massive size and is an incredible example of the human spirit. King Narisimhadeva I (who defeated a number of Muslim invaders) is depicted sitting on a majestic chariot with the Sun God. Art lovers and travel enthusiasts who visit the Sun Temple have been captivated by its incredible architecture, which features 12 pairs of carved wheels, a hall of offering, an imposing pyramidal roof, and erotic scenes, making it one of the best places in India to visit on a religious tour.8

- **Puri’s Jagannath Temple:** Jagannath Temple in Puri is known for its marvelous architecture and as one of the main pilgrimages of the Char Dham Yatra. There are many pilgrims and devotees visiting the temple throughout the year. If you wish to visit the temple, don't miss the Rath Yatra festival in June. It is one of the most spiritual places in India, and you shouldn't miss it.

- **Kumbh Mela (Haridwar, Prayag, Nashik, Ujjain):** There are four major cities in the country that host the Kumbh Mela, Haridwar, Prayag, Nashik and Ujjain, on a rotational basis. One of the most popular spiritual experiences in the country, it attracts the biggest crowds every time it is held. More than 30 million pilgrims visited the Kumbh Mela that was held in 2013 in Prayag. On a single day, the event had over 30 million pilgrims pay their respects.

- **Thanjavur’s Brihadeeswarar Temple:** In Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, the Brihadeeswarar temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva. As well as being one of the largest temples in South India, the temple is also an architectural marvel. It is built in such a way that its shadow does not fall on the ground. Every time tourists visit the temple; they marvel at the fact that it does not cast shadows.9

There are numerous destinations as India is a holy land and such spiritual places are enormous in India.

Rise in Spiritual Tourism

Spiritual travel has seen a surge in popularity, particularly among the younger generation of working professionals. The pandemic has opened people's eyes to the importance of mindfulness, yoga, meditation and taking time for themselves. These practices help combat both personal struggles and global issues such as Covid19. Stress being at an all-time high is

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likely a contributing factor to why spiritual attractions continue to be more sought after than other holiday spots.10

The post-pandemic era has seen a notable rise in conversations about mental health. People are actively responding to the growing tensions and stress by taking necessary steps to maintain their physical and emotional wellbeing. This focus on spiritual growth has become more prominent in India, with people going on short retreats to reconnect with nature and restore harmony in their lives. An emerging trend is destination weddings at spiritual venues, allowing celebrants to acquire insight into their experiences in an idyllic setting.

In addition to the divine bond of holy matrimony, the added charm of tradition and spirituality at the destination adds to the D-Day experience. We have seen an increase in demand for wedding packages at our properties in Shirdi and Tirupati, as a result of unifying the ‘Made in Heaven’ matches on earth in a divine and serene setting.11

The post-pandemic period has provided a major boost to domestic tourism, with spiritual and religious locations likely to be major beneficiaries. Small businesses in such locales have flourished, ushering in an exciting new trend for Indian Tourism. Furthermore, the Government of India is keen to develop this sector, with PRASAD (Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive) amongst other initiatives, and recent budget allocation being a testament to this dedication. In addition, many people from around the globe come to India seeking peace and tranquility at these sites.

The divine atmosphere of Shirdi, renowned for housing Sai Baba, to the solemn city of Tirupati dedicated to Lord Venkateshwara; India is peppered with spiritually captivating hotspots. It is heartening to witness how the tourism market has changed in regards to sacred and faith-based attractions. Nowadays, many tourists can enjoy plush amenities and explore spirituality in revered temples due to high-end hotels that provide extraordinary services for visitors to make their trip memorable.12

In a survey of over 2,000 travellers by Thomas Cook India-SOTC, 55 percent said they took a religious/spiritual tour or trip as soon as they could; 22 percent said they took a spiritual trip to seek blessings for a rebound in their work-life; and 21 percent visited religious destinations for gratitude for a wedding or childbirth. The pandemic prevented many people from leaving their homes, according to Neeraj Singh Dev, Thomas Cook India & SOTC Senior Vice President - Ecommerce India & Shorthaul Holidays. A lot of people were trying to reconnect with their spiritual connections. They were visiting their favourite shrines for many years or aspiring to visit them.

Following the end of curbs, Neeraj Singh Dev stated, "Compared to pre-pandemic levels (in February to June 2019), we have grown by over 30 percent in the first four months (February to June 2022) after curbs ended. "This is due to the way development is taking place in these religious circuits,” added Dev, who believes the segment will grow 20-30 percent every year for the next five years.13

As Rajiv Mehra, President of the Indian Association of Tour Operators (IATO) and Secretary of FAITH, noted, it remains to be seen if this demand will continue next season or plateau down. The industry hopes that international tourists will be exposed to religious/spiritual tourism in the coming years because of the increasing infrastructure in this segment.

Yatra, a Gurugram-based online travel agency, gets 20-30 percent of its domestic business from religious or spiritual tourism. Yatra.com only saw a lull in business at religious destinations, said Aditya Gupta, Senior Vice President, Hotels & Holidays. There has been an 80-90 percent increase in booking demand from Rishikesh, Dharamshala, Haridwar, Dalhousie, Ladakh, Varanasi, Alappuzha, Kumarakom, Coimbatore, Amritsar, Chardham circuit, Puri, and Pondicherry. A 100 percent increase in hotel bookings has also been observed around Tirupati Balaji, Haridwar, Rishikesh, Venkateswara, and Dakshineshwar Kali temple. For India to reach global levels, apart from improving infrastructure, it is important to develop these religious or spiritual destinations as 365-day destinations. In order to rejuvenate your mind, a spiritual journey can open doors of opportunity and help you find the calm and solace you need amid the hustle and bustle of city life.14

CONCLUSION

Also, spiritual tourism provides a great opportunity for community empowerment and development. Tourists’ interest in local values and communities helps them develop a sense of empowerment and pride in their local community, culture, and history, making India an ideal destination for spiritual souls with wanderlust. From the edge of land at

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Kanyakumari to where the earth touches the skies in the Himalayan ranges, it is abundantly speckled with spiritually magnetic places, people and practices. A total of 33 million gods are worshiped in India, home to 4 of the world's major religions, Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism and Buddhism. For spiritual souls with a wanderlust, India is the ideal place. From Kanyakumari to the Himalayan ranges, there are places, people, and practices that are spiritually captivating. It is the mystical traditions of this land and its inhabitants that have surpassed the test of time to immortalize our age-old practices that draw people from the far corners of the globe who wish to quench their spiritual curiosity that attract them.