

# BENEFITS OF AYURVEDA HEALTH TOURISM: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON HEALTH TOURISTS VISITING SOUTH KERALA

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## ABSTRACT

Ayurveda health tourism is emerging as a niche segment in the tourism landscape across the world. Ayurveda wellness therapies provide holistic and long-lasting health benefits to health and wellness seekers. The preventive, curative, relief and rehabilitative nature of ayurveda coupled with culture, tradition and local services provide various tangible and intangible benefits to tourists who demand such tourism services from ayurveda health Centres. Ayurveda is practised in its purest form in the Indian state of Kerala which inherited the traditional 'Vaidya' system of ayurveda, scenic beauty, the blend of tourist attractions and rich cultural heritage. The ayurveda health Centres in Kerala are emerging as the hub of wellness Centres with global access and brand image. The paper looks into various types of benefits received by Ayurveda health tourists visiting ayurveda Centres in southern Kerala. Data was collected from 500 health tourists using a structured interview schedule on 28 tourism attributes using 5 point Likert scale during the period September to April 2019. The important

factors influencing the benefits of wellness tourists are identified through explorative factor analysis. Health outcome, Uniqueness, Novelty, Mental well-being and Physical appearance are the benefit factors identified in this study. The benefits identified in the study are important in designing customized services and expanding the health tourism market in Kerala.

**Keywords:** *Ayurveda, Health Tourism, Tourism Benefits, Kerala Tourism*

## INTRODUCTION

Health and wellness tourism is fast emerging as an important niche segment in tourism both domestically and internationally. The growth of this segment of tourism is significantly augmented by the rapid rise of modern and stressful lifestyles. Ayurveda is an important segment of health therapies carried out from the historical ages and predominantly found in the Indian tradition. Kerala follows traditional Ayurveda in its purest form and attracts a large number of domestic and foreign visitors, emerging as an important Ayurveda health tourism destination in the country. There are

many push and pull factors operating for the development of Kerala as an Ayurveda tourism destination. The diversity of tourist attractions and unique socio-cultural diversity also enhances the attractiveness of Kerala Ayurveda. In this context, it is pertinent to understand the various benefits received from Ayurveda health therapies accrued to these tourists visiting the state.

### **EMERGENCE OF HEALTH TOURISM AND AYURVEDA HEALTH TOURISM**

Health tourism, Medical Tourism and Wellness Tourism are used loosely in the common parlance even though there are a lot of differences between them. Healthcare tourism can be broadly classified into three categories namely Medical tourism, Cosmetic Surgery and Spa and alternative therapies. Medical tourism refers to the movement of people from one place to another for some medical purpose which may involve surgery. It may be elective surgery/non-cosmetic or cosmetic surgery. Kerala has perfected the knowledge of the Ayurveda system of medicine through its traditional vaidya system and the prevailing geographical, agro-climatic conditions and socio-cultural factors nurtured it to the level of high perfections where a large number of foreign and domestic tourists visit the state to seek medical treatment and wellness therapies. Lifestyle and self-responsibility for health are paramount in the quest for a better quality of life. Wellness is the optimal state of health of individuals and groups. In Ayurveda health tourism, tourists seek medical treatments as well as wellness therapies as Ayurveda health Centers take into consideration integrated wellness and prevention approaches to improve

their health/quality of life. Wellness tourism involves people who travel to a different place to proactively pursue activities that maintain or enhance their personal health and well-being, and who are seeking unique, authentic or location-based experiences/therapies not available at home. It provides total rejuvenation of their mind, body and soul through traditional, culturally based products.

### **KERALA - THE AYURVEDA DESTINATION**

Ayurveda is one of the great gifts of the sages of ancient India to mankind. It is one of the oldest scientific medical systems in the world, with a long record of clinical experience. 'Ayurveda' literally means "science of life". It adopts a holistic approach and aims at restoring and constantly maintaining the body's natural equilibrium through the judicious application of herbal massages, special diets, body therapies, etc., accompanied by special diet/dietary restrictions, appropriate rest and a regimen of approved/non-approved activities. Treatment and medication are to be individualistic, based on an understanding of the person's constitution. An ideal Ayurvedic regimen is to be followed for at least two to three weeks. Ayurveda offers treatments for ailments such as arthritis, paralysis, obesity, sinusitis, migraine, premature ageing and general health care. Ayurveda is also a way of life that teaches us how to maintain and protect health. It shows us both how to cure disease and how to promote longevity. Ayurveda treats man as a "whole" – which is a combination of body, mind and soul. Therefore it is a truly holistic and integral medical system. Ayurveda is the most important alternative system of medicine

which is a complete science of life and body. Ayurveda wellness tourists are travelling to seek traditional health services like curative therapies and wellness therapies in the traditional form by specialized providers who mostly have inherited their expertise and specialization rather than acquiring qualifications. These health tourism destinations are born a few centuries ago and the specialized services offered cannot be so easily transferred to any other part of the world as there is a close relationship between the services offered and the natural setup of that particular place. For instance, Panchkarma Centers in Kerala provide health solutions in the ancient form through Ayurveda as a major treatment method. Usually, a health tourism destination will have a locational advantage. Though the service providers use modern facilities like lighting, A/C rooms, hair dryers, etc., the basic services are provided mostly using traditional tools, age-old medicines and also in the traditional form.

To sustain Ayurveda in its original form and so ensure the survival of the unique tourism product, Kerala Tourism has brought out a classification scheme for Ayurveda Centers, whether established in hotels, resorts or hospitals in the state. The quality, safety and service standards of the Ayurveda Centers would be evaluated in terms of the authenticity of the treatment provided, the training of the staff, the conveniences and amenities, and the quality of furniture. The tourism department of Kerala initiated a lot of projects to attract tourists and its experiments with niche tourism turned out to be a huge success. Ayurveda the traditional medical system was revived and there emerged a lot of Ayurveda resort spas. The specially tailored tourism packages too became a huge success.

## **REVIEW OF STUDIES ON THE BENEFITS OF HEALTH TOURISM**

The concept of “benefits” is widely used in tourism research; however, there is no single definition of this construct. The International Spa Association (ISPA) (2004) suggested three major benefits of spa visitors, namely (1) escape (i.e. from pressures of everyday life), (2) indulgence (i.e. pleasurable fun, appealing to the senses) and (3) self-improvement (i.e. on some aspects of their body, their emotional state or their long-term spiritual dispositions). In the tourism context, benefits mean an improvement in a condition or at least the maintenance of a desired condition must have occurred because one has had a tourism experience (Mannell & Kleiber (1997). Frochot and Morrison (2000) distinguish between a functional or attribute-based understanding of benefits (e.g. service quality, price, and specific destination features) and a psychologically based conceptualisation of benefits. Palacio and McCool (1997) segmented eco-tourists travelling to Belize according to the benefits the tourists sought. Instead of asking tourists about their benefits, the authors pre-selected items from the literature and thereby risked omitting important benefits relevant for eco-tourists in that specific context. Naylor and Kleiser (2002) reported benefits such as self-discovery, improving fitness, losing weight, making lifestyle changes and feeling pampered and cared for. Voigt (2011) through an exploratory qualitative study segmented participants of wellness tourism into three broad types namely Beauty Spa Visitors, Lifestyle Resort Visitors and Spiritual Retreat Visitors. There are a large number of studies exploring the travel from the global north to the global

south for wellness tourism and there is scant attention to south-to-south travel or intra-regional studies on health and wellness tourism (Laura Kemppainen et.al; 2021). A review of the studies of health benefits identified by studies carried out between 2002 up to present identified four dimensions of health benefits from wellness tourism namely physical fitness, psychological fitness, quality of life (QOL), and environmental health (Liao C, Zuo Y, Xu S, Law R and Zhang M (2023). A similar study in the literature on Health and Wellness Benefits of Travel Experiences showed positive effects of travel experiences on perceived health and wellness (Chun-Chu Chen and Petrick) but the benefits gradually diminish after vacation.

Kerala's tourism sector has been observed to be dynamic and innovative, combining various tourism attributes (cultural, spiritual, culinary, and backwater) and offering a unique experience to its visitors (Bipithalal BN (2019). Edward and George (2008) in their paper gave the context and framework for assessing the destination attractiveness of Kerala, an emerging tourism destination in a developing country. The study revealed its strengths and weaknesses from the demand side perspective and suggests several valuable implications for destination marketing efforts. Thanuskodi, S (2016) found that the quality of health care offered by the doctors, nurses and support staff, makes Medical Tourism in Kerala attractive and showed that the presence of an alternative system of medicine makes Kerala a competitive wellness destination. Padmasani and Remya. V (2015) identified quality of service and opportunity as the main destination attributes responsible for the development of Ayurvedic

health tourism in Kerala. To tap the full potential of Ayurveda destination, the service providers should focus more on developing a well-planned promotion campaign with a focus on the quality of services and opportunities available in the state. Romão et.al. (2022) observed that despite the abundance and quality of resources and services provided by Ayurveda healthcare providers, Kerala lacks a branding strategy differentiating from international wellness destinations. The paper finds the high attributes of Kerala Ayurveda wellness are 'Fits with strategic priorities of the organisation' and 'Ability to integrate into wellness tourism packages'.

## RESEARCH GAP

A major contributor to Kerala's tourism growth in the last few years has been the development and refinement of its Ayurveda tourism products. There is a growing demand for health and wellness holidays in the state to explore the Ayurveda medicines claims, to rejuvenate the mind and the body or simply for rejuvenation and relaxation from both western and Asian tourists. With the active support of modern communication means the health and wellness holidays package are publicized by the Centers to attract both domestic and foreign tourists. As Kerala Ayurveda is directly competing with well-developed spas and wellness Centers of the developed world on one side, there is also competition from other domestic Ayurveda destinations and Ayurveda destinations from southeastern Asian countries. There is an urgent need to study the types of benefits received by health tourists visiting Ayurveda Centers in the state. Also, there is a paucity of studies

on the Ayurveda health tourism potential for destinations as most of the studies are done about Spas in developed regions of the world. Spas are positioned well through their branding and organized marketing putting additional pressure on Indian Ayurveda tourism destinations like Kerala. It is also important to understand how inherent tourism diversity can help attract health tourists by providing a wholesome experience to visiting tourists. This present study is directed towards answering these pertinent questions by identifying and measuring various benefits received by Ayurveda health tourists visiting the southern districts of Kerala which is the Ayurveda tourism hub of the state.

## DATA AND METHODS

The study uses both descriptive and analytical methods to study the objectives. Both primary and secondary data are used in the study to explore the objectives of the study. South Kerala being the most important destination for Ayurveda therapy, it is selected for the study area.

Primary data is collected through a structured interview schedule. Sample respondents were selected as per the availability of tourists at the Centers. Primary data was collected from 500 tourists which include both domestic and foreign tourists. This study mainly uses exploratory factor analysis. The important questions raised in the study are

(i) What are the visit motivations and health status of Ayurveda health tourists visiting south Kerala?

(ii) What are the main benefit factors responsible for the growth of Ayurveda health tourism in south Kerala?

(iii) Is there any significant difference in the benefits received based on the demographic characteristics of respondents in the state?

There are diverse motivations responsible for the visit of Ayurveda Centers in the state. These motivations are closely related to the current state of health of the respondents. The important motivations as stated by the sample respondents and their health status are provided in table-1.

**Table 1: Profile of the Ayurveda Health Tourists.**

Attributes		Frequency	Per cent	Attributes		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	204	40.8	Marital Status	Single	148	29.6
	Female	296	59.2		Married	352	70.4
Age	20-29	65	13.0	Nationality	Foreign	305	61.0
	30-39	105	21.0		Domestic	195	39.0
	40-49	90	18.0				
	50-60	120	24.0				
	Above 60	120	24.0				

Source: Primary Data

Health tourists visiting South Kerala seeking Ayurveda health therapies are found to be more females (59.2) than males (40.8). The majority of the visitors are belonging to the age category of above 50 years (48 per cent). Marital status found that 70.4 per cent of health tourists are married and 61 per cent of tourists are foreign nationals.

## VISIT MOTIVE OF AYURVEDA HEATH TOURISTS

**Table 2: Visit Motivation and Health Status of the Respondents.**

Visit Motivation	Health Status					Total
	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Poor	Bad	
Treating Illness	21	46	54	38	20	179
Rejuvenation	29	69	47	10	0	155
Yoga	5	29	6	2	2	44
Beauty Therapy	2	9	2	0	0	13
Relaxation	21	60	13	5	0	99
Others	1	4	5	0	0	10
<b>Total</b>	79	217	127	55	22	500

Source: Primary Data

Table-2 indicates that 179 tourists (35.8 per cent) are visiting these Centers for treating illness. A total of 121 tourists (24 per cent) are of excellent, good and satisfactory health status. Whereas 58 tourists (12 per cent) belong to poor and bad health status. Of the tourists whose visit motivation is rejuvenation 145 tourists (29 per cent) are also in excellent, good and satisfactory health condition. From the table, it is understood that only 15 per cent of tourists are in poor and bad health condition. The majority of health tourists are visiting these Centers with the motivation of treating illness, Rejuvenation, yoga beauty therapy, and relaxation followed by other motivational aspects. To identify major benefits received from Ayurveda tourism, exploratory factor analysis was used in the study and the results are provided below.

## FACTOR ANALYSIS OF BENEFITS OF AYURVEDA HEALTH THERAPIES

**Table 3: Benefit Factors of Ayurveda Health Tourism.**

Measure Items	Alpha	Initial egenvalue	Variance Explained %	Factor Loading
F1: Health outcome	0.920	9.471	36.426	
Experienced reduction in discomfort				.868

Relieved from pain				.832
Overcome health problems completely				.809
Cured health problems				.785
Body feeling fit and fine				.722
Feeling Rejuvenated				.628
F2: Uniqueness	0.807	2.293	8.820	
Helped to detoxify my body				.756
No side effects from Ayurveda therapies				.721
Got good sleep after Therapies				.668
Felt refreshed and renewed				.645
Learnt about healthy life style				.617
Learned about healthy food habits				.603
Received value for money spent on Ayurveda				.536
F3: Novelty	0.736	2.272	8.737	
Learnt new culture				.756
Learnt Yoga and meditation				.721
Enjoyed the scenic beauty of Kerala				.668
Got new experiences				.645
F4:Mental wellbeing	.645	1.375	5.290	
Helped to overcome mental worries/problems				.730
Overcome unpleasant memories				.665
Experienced calmness of mind				.597
Feeling more confident about myself				.590
Enhanced my outlook towards life				.562
Helped me to become active				.541
F5:Physical appearance	0.628	1.261	4.849	
Able to maintain body weight				.788
Learnt to maintain proper body weight				.786

Improvement in appearance				.593
KMO Sample Adequacy	.892			
Chi Square	7487.804			
Df	325			
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	.000			

## FINDINGS OF THE STUDY AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

Exploratory factor analysis provided major factors influencing the benefits of Ayurveda health tourism in the state of Kerala. Responses from the respondents were ascertained on 28 attributes using a five-point Likert scale. Factor analysis carried out on these attributes provided 5 factors which are named 1)Health outcome 2) Uniqueness 3)Novelty 4) Mental well-being 5) Physical appearance.

The first benefit factor, Health Outcome explained 36.4 per cent of the variance, the second factor Uniqueness explains 8.8 per cent of the variance, third-factor Novelty explains 8.7 per cent of the variance, fourth-factor Mental well-being explains 5.2 variances and the fifth-factor Physical appearance explains 4.8 per cent variance. The analysis found that Ayurveda health tourists benefited both physically and mentally from the Ayurveda therapies provided at the Centers as they received a holistic approach to their ailment through therapies.

To understand how the benefit factors differentially influence male and female tourists, the following hypothesis is framed and tested using the student-independent sample 't-test.

**Ho:** There is no significant difference in the benefits received by male and female health tourists.

**Table 4: Test of hypothesis between benefits received and Gender of Ayurveda Tourists.**

Benefits	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-Value	Sig.	Mean Difference
Health outcome	Male	204	3.9257	.69129	-2.068	.884	-.14248
	Female	296	4.0681	.79957			
Uniqueness	Male	204	4.2283	.59361	-3.286	.001	-.16505
	Female	296	4.3933	.52135			
Novelty	Male	204	3.7463	.93557	-1.227	.298	-.10080
	Female	296	3.8471	.87918			
Mental Wellbeing	Male	204	3.9869	.58847	.305	.557	0.01677
	Female	296	3.9702	.61445			



Physical Appearance	Male	204	1.8766	.37891	-.329	.498	-0.01188
	Female	296	1.8885	.40820			

Source: Primary Data

It is found from the table-4 that there is a significant difference in the benefits received with respect to males and females for the second benefit factor namely 'Uniqueness'.

**Ho: There is no significant difference in the benefits received by foreign and domestic tourists.**

**Table 5: Results of Tests of Hypothesis on benefits received between Domestic and Foreign Ayurveda Health Tourists.**

Description	Nationality	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-Value	Sig.	Mean Difference
Health outcome	Foreign	305	4.0607	.68523	1.869	.004	.12989
	Domestic	195	3.9308	.85950			
Uniqueness	Foreign	305	4.3040	.62421	-1.105	.001	-.05646
	Domestic	195	4.3604	.43183			
Novelty	Foreign	305	4.1549	.57136	12.333	.000	.89466
	Domestic	195	3.2603	1.04654			
Mental Wellbeing	Foreign	305	4.0033	.60061	1.218	.069	.06738
	Domestic	195	3.9359	.60711			
Physical Appearance	Foreign	305	1.9038	.40695	1.424	.560	.05169
	Domestic	195	1.8521	.37755			

Source: Primary Data

With regard to health outcomes, uniqueness and novelty there is a significant difference between foreign and domestic tourists.

**Ho: There is no significance difference in the benefits received by married and single health tourists.**

**Table 6: Results of Test of Hypothesis on benefits received by married and single health tourists.**

Description	Marital Status	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-Value	Sig.	Mean Difference
Health outcome	Single	148	3.8885	.67718	-2.329	.384	-.17257
	Married	352	4.0611	.78727			
Uniqueness	Single	148	4.0849	.69724	-6.527	.000	-.34241
	Married	352	4.4274	.45079			

<b>Novelty</b>	Single	148	3.9240	.69660	1.899	.000	.16759
	Married	352	3.7564	.97354			
<b>Mental Wellbeing</b>	Single	148	3.8266	.63677	-3.659	.936	-.21367
	Married	352	4.0402	.57820			
<b>Physical Appearance</b>	Single	148	1.7500	.41672	-5.009	.024	-.18987
	Married	352	1.9399	.37376			

It is pertinent to look at whether the benefits received by the respondents vary between the single and married groups. Benefits factors namely Uniqueness, Novelty, and Physical appearance has a significant difference between married and single.

## CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The study concluded that there are five major factors responsible for the benefits received by Ayurveda health tourists in Kerala. They are Health Outcomes, Uniqueness, Novelty, Mental well-being and Physical appearance. These five factors are derived from 28 health-related attributes associated with the respondents. These factors are the qualitative expression of benefits received by health tourists in the state.

An independent sample t-test is used to test whether there is any significant difference in the benefits received from the Ayurveda therapies based on their demographic profile such as gender, marital status and nationality. It is found that there is a significant difference in the benefits received with respect to males and females for the second benefit factor namely uniqueness. The study also found that there are significant differences between male and female respondents with regard to benefit factors namely uniqueness, Novelty and physical appearance. There are also significant differences found between domestic and foreign tourists with regard to factors such as health outcomes, uniqueness and novelty.

The benefits identified in the study are important in enhancing the visit satisfaction of the tourists. There are multiple observed variables responsible for these factors identified in the study. These benefits factors help to understand what health benefits tourist are seeking from their visit to ayurveda health centres in Kerala. They are also important to formulate relevant policies for developing this tourism segment.

The identified benefits are important in designing suitable Ayurveda health packages and formulating policies to attract both domestic and foreign tourists.

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