

# Wellness Tourism in India During Post COVID-19 Era: Opportunities and Challenges

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## Abstract

*The highly infectious novel coronavirus has hit hard the various segments within the tourism industry and raises questions on their survival. While the COVID-19 had severely impacted the tourism industry globally at the same time it has developed the importance of maintaining health and wellness among people. India is home of various ancient practices such as Ayurveda, Yoga, and other practices that come under AYUSH, therefore, both domestic and international tourists visit India to undertake medical and wellness tourism. This paper explores the opportunities and challenges of wellness tourism in India in the post- COVID-19 times and it further aims to provide a way to conduct future research. This paper is based on the secondary data which was accumulated through sources like newspaper articles, magazines, books, internet and the media reports. The finding of the study reveals that medical and wellness tourism is expected to rise and recuperate the Indian tourism sector in the post-COVID-19. The study also identifies the potential of the Indian wellness tourism industry and government initiatives to develop this sector in the post-pandemic times.*

**Keywords:** health tourism, wellness tourism, post-COVID-19, opportunities, challenges

## Introduction

For a decade, India has been continuously experiencing growth in the tourism industry. Health tourism is one of the latest emerging branches of tourism in India. The second most popular destination for health tourism in Asia is India after Thailand for modern surgeries (medical) and traditional Ayurveda, and Spa (wellness) (Brotman, 2010; Burns, 2014; Kim et al., 2013; Sultana et al., 2014). The wellness centres and hospitals are increasing in great number in the world and this is happening because of the growing number of consumer interest in the health industry. Medical and wellness activities are often represented by health tourism. Medical tourism happens when people travel to different destinations to seek medical treatment for diagnosed diseases (Smith, Puczko, 2008) whereas wellness tourism is undertaken by healthy people to strengthen their wellbeing. Earlier in the year 2019, FICCI and IMS

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Health India reported that the medical sector might boost up by 200% by 2020, hitting \$9 billion and accounting for a 20% share in the global market. Further, (Global Wellness Institute, 2021), stated that the global wellness economy has risen by 6.6% yearly from \$4.3 trillion in 2017 to \$4.9 trillion in 2019, a rate much greater than global economic growth (4.0%). However, the numbers have now been changed as the coronavirus pandemic hit the world. The wellness economy rate fell by 11.0% to \$4.4 trillion in 2020 (while world GDP reduced by 2.8%) (Global Wellness Institute, 2021).

Since COVID-19 was declared as a pandemic by World Health Organization (WHO), tourism has been one of the worst-hit sectors. In the previous decades, there were similar epidemics such as Ebola, SARS, MERS (Gössling et al., 2020) but the world has never faced any disaster such as COVID-19 which has caused massive destruction to the economy and society (Naumov et al., 2020). While few industries can continue to struggle for their survival by adapting digital platforms (Mehroliya et al., 2020), some industries encountered unprecedented failure of survival during the pandemic because of travel restrictions and social distancing. Surviving without the mobility of people is just not possible for the tourism industry. The measures that have been applied in a phased manner have halted the economic activity as a result of which the tourism industry appeared to be the biggest loser of the crises (Gössling et al., 2020). The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) research reveals that because of COVID-19 global travel and tourism industry suffered a loss of almost \$4.5 trillion. The pandemic has also affected allied industries that are directly or indirectly linked to the tourism sector such as hospitality, transport, accommodation, etc.

The world is witnessing profound changes in people's behavior, attitudes, and economic life (Ahmed, et al., 2020; Faulkner, et al., 2020). The COVID-19 has changed people's attitudes towards life and shaken people to their core. People become more responsible towards their health and well-being during the pandemic. Amid the crises, economic fall, dissatisfaction, and social discontent there is risen in people's interest towards relaxing mind, body, and soul within tourism (Koncul, 2012). Most of the studies mentioned that wellness is going to be a top priority in post-covid-19 travel (Samarathunga, Gamage, 2020; Wen et al., 2020). Before the pandemic arose in 2020, people during their travel increasingly started turning towards health and wellness activities especially tourist activities to achieve health (Csirmaz, Peő, 2015). International tourists were coming to India for tried and tested healthcare remedial AYUSH medicines before the pandemic.

Even though wellness tourism was one of the fastest-growing sectors in the tourism industry in India and has gained so much importance in the recent past the pandemic has not spared it. The year 2020 and 2021 has raised many questions about how to relaunch and rebuild the tourism industry in post-pandemic time but less emphasis has been given on rebuilding the wellness industry. This study aims to reduce this gap.

The study discusses the opportunities and challenges of wellness tourism in India in the post-covid-19 era which was suggested as a future study in the latest publication by (Choudhary, Qadir, 2021), and also identifies the potential of the Indian wellness tourism industry and government initiatives to develop the wellness sector in the post-COVID-19 period.

## Concept of Health, Medical and Wellness Tourism

Health tourism has two major subcategories – wellness and medical tourism (Mueller, Kaufmann, 2001; Voigt et al., 2011). Health tourism is defined as a form of general tourism in which tourists travel to seek specific healing treatments or for enhancing their mental, physical or spiritual well-being (Chang, Zee, 2013; Yang et al., 2015). Health tourism is traveling to a place away from the residence intending to seek medical services or to improve physical or mental state which leads to consumption of various travel services (Lunt et al., 2011).

People often get confused between the terms medical and wellness. Sometimes health is used as a substitute for medical whereas sometimes with wellness. But these terms are not the same. Medical tourism is a form of tourism in which tourists travel to another country to cure illness or to access medical treatments (Connell, 2013). Medical tourism is when a person travels to international borders to pertain medical services include, full range of services but it very often includes dental care, orthopedic treatment, cosmetic surgery (Uygun, Ekiz, 2018). Wellness tourism is undertaken by tourists to enhance or maintain their health and well-being through services offered by “wellness centers” (Hritz, Sidman, D’Abundo, 2014). Wellness tourism is described as a holistic approach that emphasizes tranquillity and restoration or improving the mind, body, and soul (Smith, Kelly, 2006). Some of the desired outcomes of wellness travel are relaxation, escape, self-indulgence, novelty, self-esteem, transcendence, physical health, and appearance (Voigt et al., 2011).

In the discussion of health and wellness tourism, Mueller and Kaufmann (2000) advocate that wellness is pursued by healthy individuals with the primary goal of prevention and cure for those required to be healed. Mueller and Kaufmann (2000) further discussed the complexity of the definition of health and wellness. The authors stated that the usage of the terms varies in different countries because of different cultural, linguistic, and historic understandings. For instance, in Finnish, no term can simply be translated to wellness, the closest term translates to is well-being and in Hebrew, the word “wellness” doesn’t exist and is translated to “health” (Mueller and Kaufmann, 2000). But from a global perspective, the term wellness is widely used. Wellness has a different meaning across different countries and cultures. Malaysian associate wellness with well-being and lifestyle, and also stress release for the working-class. Their wellness activities are the spa, cosmetics and beauty products, body treatments for well-being (Chan, 2007). In some European countries, wellness focuses on spas, physical fitness, air, sunshine, and the sea (Koncul, 2012). In Asian countries, wellness is associated with yoga, meditation, massage as daily wellness activities (Koncul, 2012).

### Medical Tourism Vs Wellness Tourism

From the various literature, it is understood that medical tourism and wellness tourism are different from each other. Medical tourism is in which tourists travel to different places for the treatment of various diseases or cosmetic surgery which involves invasive treatment techniques (Global Spa Summit, 2011), on other hand, wellness tourism involves traveling to different places to rejuvenate or to maintain or enhance person well-being using non-invasive techniques or holistic approaches. The below-mentioned figure will differentiate between both medical tourism and wellness tourism.



**Scheme 1.** Medical Tourism Vs Wellness Tourism

Source: Charak (2019)

## Indian Wellness tourism industry: An overview

### Potential of Wellness tourism in India

India is ranked seventh as a wellness destination in the year 2017 with the expenditure of \$16.3 billion on wellness tourism, which directly provides 3.8 million jobs (Global Wellness Institute, 2018) which is 14% of all employment. India has always been recognized for Yoga, Ayurveda, and meditation and is a preferred wellness destination in the world (Charak, 2019). The Indian Himalayas has become an epicenter of wellness tourism because of its rich culture, diversity, flora and fauna, diverse landscape (Manhas, Kaur, 2014).

One of the most famous groups named the Carnoustie Ayurveda and wellness resorts in India is popularly known for its wellness and Ayurveda resorts in India, particularly in Kerala. Kerala is one such state which has developed an authentic and place-based wellness product and brand. Two decades ago, Kerala has branded itself as the “land of Ayurveda” (Wayne, Russell, 2020) and has been rated by BBC as the most popular and preferred tourist destination among international tourists (IBEF 2018). The backwaters of Kerala are one of the important wellness retreats and attract tourists from all over the world. Kerala differentiates itself from other Indian states (Bandyopadhyaya, Nair, 2019) by offering wellness packages that blend new-age Ayurveda with a relaxing vacation under the palm trees (Kannan, Frenz, 2019). As per (Kerala Tourism Statistics, 2018), the state of Kerala has witnessed more than 1.09 million international tourists and 15.60 million domestic tourists in the year 2018. Despite flood and Nipah virus, Kerala has recorded a 6% increase in its tourist arrivals in 2018 (The Hindu, 2019). Kerala, India’s tourism super brand, is seen to strive to be an international wellness brand by researchers, branding professionals, and wellness service providers (Ravisankar, 2018).

Ayurveda is being branded globally as from medication to medicinal services which are resulting in wellness from illness. Also, it is expected that people will opt for holidays focus-

ing on wellness in the post-COVID-19 period, and because of various wellness offerings such as Ayurveda, yoga, meditation, etc, India could become the pioneer in this field (Lamba, Mohan, 2021).

## Methodology

In this study, the secondary research method was used to fulfill the stated objectives. The research is carried out in three steps – identification of research topic, identification of research sources and collection of existing data, combining the data, and analyzing the data. Firstly, the topic of the research was identified along with its objectives and attributes. Secondly, the research was narrowed down by collecting the relevant data from online databases using pertinent keywords such as wellness industry and post COVID-19, wellness tourism in India, Challenges and Opportunities, Tourism, and COVID-19. Thirdly, the data collected were combined and analyzed by reviewing data available in the public domain. The secondary data sources included published articles in journals, websites, newspaper articles, reports, etc. The study begins with the selection of relevant secondary sources from online databases. Further, the online database search was carried out in case of opportunities and government initiatives to rebuild the medical and wellness tourism industry in the post-covid-19 era. The aforementioned relevant data sources included recently published articles and research work on electronic databases- Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, PubMed, Sage.

## Results and Discussions

### Opportunities and Challenges for Wellness Tourism in India: Post pandemic

India is one of the oldest and leading wellness tourism destinations that attract wellness tourists from all over the world (Global Wellness Institute, 2018). The Indian wellness industry was growing at a great pace in pre-pandemic times. The number of wellness tourist arrivals in India was 56 million in 2017, out of which 51% were domestic tourist arrivals (Global Wellness Institute, 2018). However, the data has been drastically changed because of the covid-19 pandemic.

Like other countries, the Indian government has closed its borders to reduce the spread of the highly contagious virus. The cancelation of flights, restrictions on travel, lockdown, issue of travel advisories are some of the measures taken by the Indian government with immediate effect (Ghosh et al., 2020). The travel restrictions in India during the pandemic made it impossible to travel not just for foreign tourists but for domestic tourists as well. This has drastically impacted wellness tourism in India. The COVID-19 crises have both negative and positive outcomes on wellness tourism globally.

Wellness can open a series of opportunities in current tourism, mainly because of its tangible and intangible resources. The wellness industry has witnessed a tremendous shift in post-covid-19 times. One such shift is wellness became extremely important (Yeung, Johnston, 2020) because people are now more focused on maintaining their health. The demand for wellness activities is expected to rise in the post-pandemic period. The countries are easing the travel restrictions, people are looking for holidays to benefit from emotional and physical wellness. The rising demand for wellness-focused holidays creates a huge opportunity for wellness stakeholders to develop wellness products.

India is a home to numerous traditional wellness practices such as Ayurveda, yoga, meditation that concentrates on holistic health and well-being in pre-pandemic times and is well-positioned to grasp this demand in the future (Economic Times, 2021). To fight against this deadly disease immune system plays a critical role and to boost the immunity system people are relying on Ayurvedic immunity-boosting measures. Ayurveda is the oldest traditional system of medicine which is accepted worldwide (Jaiswal, Williams, 2017). It was originated in India and is 5000 years old system of natural healing which is traditionally originated from Vedic culture in India. The Ministry of AYUSH, Government of India, 2020 recommended self-care guidelines for preventive health measures and boosting immunity which is supported by Ayurvedic principles and literature. The prime minister of India has also mentioned improving immunity against covid-19 using Ayurveda medicines while addressing the nation. It further led to a surge in demand for Ayurvedic medicines. The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the meaning of health and wellness among people. This creates the opportunity for Ayurveda and wellness tourism to market itself in the post-pandemic period

India is a well-known wellness destination, it still has not fully utilized its potential like its competing Southeast countries (Travel Trends Today, 2021). The pandemic has created an opportunity for India to create its distinguished brand of wellness tourism products. It is the best time for Indian wellness service providers to ensure to hit the reset button and re-strategize to strengthen their competitive capabilities in comparison to their Southeast Asian competitors. To begin, India must create marketing efforts that position the country as a worldwide wellness tourist destination in the post-covid-19 era. According to the latest report by the Indian market research firm, Numb Research, the Indian (443 million) millennials spend an average of INR 4,000 per month on seeking health and wellness services (Media India Group, 2021).

Wellness retreats were always there but were known to upper-class people and are more prevalent in international tourists. Thousands of foreigners visit Rishikesh every year just to practice meditation, yoga and stay in retreats (Hindustan Times, 2018). For Ayurvedic purposes, Kerala is the first choice among foreigners in India (Rao, 2007). Wellness tourism was considered a niche concept in pre-pandemic times however, now it becomes mainstream because of drastic changes in people's lifestyles. The wellness segment's growth was hampered in the past because wellness tourism operators focused on international travellers. This created an opportunity for wellness service providers to shift the focus from international tourists to domestic tourists as the number of Indians traveling for wellness purposes is expected to grow in the post-pandemic period. Most wellness and spa centres across the country focus on international tourists, their pricing strategy and packages dissuade domestic tourists. Hoteliers must modify their wellness programs as per the demand of their guests while adhering to pandemic-related safety and sanitization standards. The wellness treatments required close interaction, hotels management needs to implement tougher rules and regulations to protect their customers and staff. The virtual shift is the latest emerging trend during the pandemic, the hotels have options to organize virtual sessions on self-care, immunity-boosting methods, meditations, fitness, etc through their social handles. The data shows that the Indian tourism sector has tremendous potential to develop in the upcoming time as people continuously adapting a healthier lifestyle and look for a personalized travel experience in the post-pandemic times.

In the post-pandemic era, Indian wellness tourism is expected to face various challenges, the major challenge that India is facing is the lack of skilled manpower in the wellness tourism segment. The unskilled manpower can cause a severe effect on the quality of services provid-

ed to wellness tourists. Another challenge for the Indian wellness segment is the lack of awareness about the therapies and benefits of Ayurveda and Yoga. However, people are already much aware of the wellness practices as compared to pre-pandemic times but still, more awareness can be created by organizing virtual programs and online sessions on the benefits of Ayurveda and Yoga.

**Table 1. Opportunities and Challenges**

Opportunities	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>rising demand for wellness activities as health becomes extremely important for people, creating huge opportunities for stakeholders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>lack of skilled manpower</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>people are moving towards alternative healthcare systems to maintain and boost immunity, resulting in creating opportunities for Ayurveda</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>lack of awareness about the benefits of Ayurveda and yoga to a large audience</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>opportunity for India to re-strategize its strength and competitive capabilities as a wellness tourism destination</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to create a positive image of India as a wellness destination to boost the tourism industry</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>time to focus on domestic tourists to rebuild the wellness tourism industry</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>wellness centres can focus on organizing virtual sessions on self-care, immunity-boosting methods, meditations, fitness, etc through their social handles</li> </ul>	

## Government Initiatives

The government of India has recognized medical and wellness tourism as one of the important sectors having enough potential to accelerate the country's development in attaining the objective of Aatmanirbhar Bharat. The government of India has recently prepared a national strategy and roadmap for medical and wellness tourism to maintain the country's competitive advantage. The roadmap aims to provide an institutional framework, develop a brand to ensure quality assurance. To promote India as Medical Value travel, the government of India has set up various ministries which are the ministry of tourism, ministry of commerce, ministry of health, ministry of Ayush, ministry of external affairs, National accreditation board for hospitals (NABH). Each ministry has a separate role to play in promoting medical and wellness tourism.

Currently, India is being promoted under the term Incredible India. The government of India has considered that there is a need of promoting and highlighting wellness offerings of the country. In this respect, in upcoming years India will be marketed under the "Heal in India" brand. It will be considered as a sub-brand of Incredible India on all global media campaigns and digital platforms of ministry.

The government of India's national roadmap mentioned that the previous portal set up by Services Export Promotion Council will be revamped to provide a one-stop solution for international travellers. The portal will help them in all services such as exploring, planning, booking, etc. It will ease the process of medical booking, payment, and post-operative services for medical travellers.

The government of India has already introduced e-VISA for medical tourists to visit India. The government is aiming to further liberalize to make it more friendly to medical tourists.



The government of India has launched NDHM (National Digital Health Mission) for addressing the country's health emergency. The major components of this mission are tele-medicine, health records, health IDs, e-pharmacy, and Digi-doctor services.

## Conclusion

India's wellness tourism has great capacities and significant positive components to grow rapidly in post-pandemic times. The identified opportunities can be used by major tourism players and marketers to encourage wellness tourism in India after COVID-19. These can act as a pull factor to attract tourists for wellness purposes in India once the pandemic is over. The study reveals that medical and wellness tourism is expected to rise and recuperate in India after the pandemic because of the level of trust and familiarity with the destination among the tourists. However, the wellness service providers at their end need to come forward and assure the tourists about following proper measures and guidelines in regard to safety and security from the COVID-19 diseases.

The study further discussed the Indian governments' initiatives to rebuild the medical and wellness industry. The various challenges need to be tackled after COVID-19 as the pandemic has created a negative destination image of India to date India is being on the second number in the COVID-19 cases tally. The loss of trust among the travellers can be regained by proper marketing and branding wellness products on a global level. The study recommends an insightful study about the rebranding of the medical and wellness tourism industry.

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