

THE CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL TO PROMOTE AYURVEDIC TOURISM IN SRI LANKA DURING THE POST-COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism comprises the activities of persons traveling to and staying at places outside their usual permanent places of residence for a period not exceeding 12 months for leisure, business, and other purposes. Which is one of the world's largest industries and the economies of many nations. COVID-19 was first identified in Wuhan, China 2019, and was soon declared to be a global pandemic. The travel and tourism industry is one of the most badly affected industries in the world due to the pandemic. With the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, international tourist arrivals dropped by 74% in 2020, causing a loss of USD 1.3 trillion in export revenues. According to the World Tourism Organization data, in 2020, International arrivals dropped by 74%, causing a loss of USD 1.3 trillion in export revenues.

During the COVID-19 revival phase, Alternative tourism has a significant role to play instead of mass tourism. Even though there was a rapid decline in arrivals in 2019, tourist arrivals for Health purposes in Sri Lanka have slightly increased. According to the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (2019), the visit for Health purposes in 2019 was 0.6%, an increase of 0.1% compared to the previous year. According to the statistics of the Survey of departing foreign tourists from Sri Lanka, 2018-19, among the other popular activities, 26.6% of tourists have visited for Ayurveda/spa/wellness purposes. Ayurveda is one of the oldest and most famous natural health care systems primarily practiced in the south Asian region. It originated in India and has developed in different countries through the religious and cultural background of the local society (Sathiyaseelan & Gnanapala, 2015). Ayurveda body massage, facial treatment, herbal steam bath, nasal treatment, and head oil application are a few treatments performed in Ayurveda. As soon as the Corona epidemic recovers, consumption changes can be expected. According to Ranasinghe (2020), Ayurveda and indigenous medicine are immediate opportunities to be seized. Health and wellness will become the main travel purpose among western tourists, and alternative tourism demand will be increased (Samarathunga, 2020). Furthermore, Sri Lanka is one of South Asia's best options for ayurvedic tourism. Sri Lanka has a competitive advantage in grabbing this market associated with deep-rooted Buddhism and Hinduism philosophies and Ayurveda in Sri Lanka. According to Samarathunga (2020), with the expansion of COVID-19, Travel restrictions and distance maintained led to a decline in the desire of the people to travel to more frequented, crowded destinations. Under this situation, alternative tourism forms received attention, and it is assumed that alternative tourism can be utilized as a tourism resource and protect the tourism industry of Sri Lanka. Therefore, promoting Ayurveda and indigenous medicine can be considered a short-term strategy to boost the demand for Sri Lanka Tourism during the post-COVID revival phase (Samarathunga, 2020).

Medical tourism has also been identified as a developing industry by the government of Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is well known for Ayurveda medicine and treatment because of its traditional background and availability of plenty of natural herbs (Arachchi & Kaluarachchi, 2019). Sri Lanka's approach to health and well-being includes Ayurveda. However, the country adheres to a different theology than surrounding countries. Ayurveda has been blended with local traditional knowledge in Sri Lanka. It is also an integral element of the country's culture. This offers every invention based on or inspired by Ayurveda a unique foundation. This is what distinguishes Sri Lankan traditions. Furthermore, a wellness segment has been identified as an essential strategy in the National export strategy for 2018-2022. In order to promote this type of product essential to explore the current challenges faced by the Ayurveda resort operators and identify the opportunities for promoting Ayurveda tourism. However, there is a dearth of literature promoting Ayurvedic tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this study mainly focuses on; examining the potential to develop Ayurvedic tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic, examining the barriers and challenges to promoting Ayurvedic tourism in Sri Lanka, and analysing the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities to promote Ayurveda tourism in Sri Lanka.

METHODOLOGY

The main focus of this study is to explore the challenges and the potential to promote Ayurvedic tourism in Sri Lanka during the COVID-19 epidemic. To achieve the study's objective, this research was developed based on constructivism philosophy and an inductive research approach, which involves searching for patterns from observation and developing explanations and theories for those patterns through a series of hypotheses.

To achieve the study's objective, this research requested wide-ranging information and experiences from stakeholders in the Ayurvedic tourism sector. Anyhow the difficulty of quantifying, it is necessary to obtain well-defined stakeholder responses. As a result, qualitative research is the most appropriate strategy for this study. The study population includes all Ayurveda hotel managers and owners in Sri Lanka who operate the hotels under Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) registration. According to research objectives, data was collected from Ayurveda hotel managers and owners in the Southern province, as most of the Ayurveda hotels are located in this province. The sample size was selected using a purposive sampling method to achieve the purpose of the study. Accordingly, seven (07) managers/owners of safe and secure certified Ayurveda hotels in the Southern province were selected for data collection. For this study, structured interviews were used to collect the primary data, and secondary data were gathered from research articles, annual reports, and internet resources. The questionnaire consisted of 13 questions relevant to this study. Interviews were done via telephone, and the duration of the interviews was about 20min – 30min. Content analysis was used to analyze data to achieve the objectives of this study. Content analysis is a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit coding rules. It is a widely used analytical method of qualitative research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Out of the 07 respondents, 06 were managers with more than 05 years of experience in Ayurveda tourism. The primary objective of the study was to identify the challenges of

promoting Ayurveda tourism in Sri Lanka. According to the study's findings, the five significant challenges for promoting Ayurveda tourism were identified as:

1. Less government engagement in promoting Ayurveda Tourism
2. Fraud and illegal activities in some Ayurveda centers
3. Language barriers of the traditional Ayurveda practitioners
4. Insufficient workforce
5. Lack of Ayurvedic medicines.

Similar challenges were found according to research conducted by Khanal and Shimizu (2019) in Nepal Ayurveda tourism, that Poor cooperation and coordination between the health and tourism ministries, a lack of specialized human resources in the health tourism business, and a legal framework for the development of health tourism all limit Nepal's health tourism industry's development. Previous researchers have also identified less workforce in the health and wellness tourism sector. One of the challenges for Ayurveda tourism will be to develop a trained and certified workforce. Khanal and Shimizu (2019) also stated that the lack of a professional workforce for health tourism is a considerable challenge. Furthermore, researchers also have provided evidence for the Lack of medicine for Ayurveda. Extant studies stated that the shortage of herbal drugs, even the quality of the product, will be disabled and adversely affects the Ayurveda sector. Furthermore, researchers have expressed that most herbal medicines are exported to countries like India. Medicinal Plants are mainly exported to India & China and produced medicines imports from India (Khanal & Shimizu, 2019).

The researcher also gathered the hotel managers' views on the potential for promoting Ayurveda tourism in post-COVID Sri Lanka. Accordingly, the following potentials for promoting Ayurveda tourism in Sri Lanka were identified. Having qualified medical practitioners.

1. Having policies to ensure the safety and security of the guests.
2. Having the tendency to consider natural health practices due to Pandemic.
3. Having facilities (hotels/ resorts/ hospitals) for Ayurveda tourism.

Furthermore, the researcher identified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to Ayurveda tourism. Having qualified Ayurveda doctors and traditional Ayurveda practitioners, state universities offering degrees for Ayurveda education, Sri Lankan culture and tradition, natural resources, locations, and weather suitable for Ayurveda, Sri Lankan cuisines, and the hospitality of Sri Lankan Ayurveda staff were identified as the strengths for Ayurveda tourism in Sri Lanka. Moreover, less government involvement in promoting Ayurveda tourism, fewer promotional activities for Ayurveda tourism, importing medicines from India, and language barriers of the Ayurveda doctors, were among the identified weakness of Ayurveda tourism in Sri Lanka. Due to the current COVID-19 pandemic situation, most people are engaging with traditional herbal medicines and believing herbal medicines are the best for boosting the immunity system, which is identified as an opportunity by the researcher. Finally, with competition from other countries, India has international production for Ayurveda medicines. Illegal activities were identified as threats to promote Sri Lanka as an Ayurveda destination during the post-COVID-19 pandemic.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Collaborating closely with the Ministry of Tourism should recognize the need to promote Ayurveda tourism. It is also critical that the government develop a clear strategy for promoting

the Ayurveda tourism industry. The Ayurvedic tourism business can also be fostered by enacting specific rules and regulations and certification processes to preserve the quality of services supplied and the Ayurvedic Centers. Furthermore, it is critical to market the Ayurvedic tourist business in Sri Lanka to other countries. While promoting Sri Lankan Ayurvedic tourism in new nations should also be taken to promote Ayurvedic tourism among domestic tourists. It has the potential to earn a prosperous living. Awareness campaigns, for example, can be developed to attract potential customers. Furthermore, researchers suggest that, in addition to stimulating the cultivation and manufacture of Ayurvedic medicines locally and the export of medicines, professionals be provided with facilities to perform Ayurvedic-related research and development.

Keywords: Ayurveda tourism, COVID-19 pandemic, challenges, potentials, tourism industry

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