

AYURVEDA AND WELLNESS TOURISM IN SRI LANKA: AN EVALUATION

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INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka is well-positioned to capitalize on the global wellness tourism boom, with a growing population embracing a healthy lifestyle. Ayurveda and wellness tourism are emerging as a growing niche market for economic growth. Since mass tourism is a significant source of revenue for Sri Lanka's tourism industry, promoting Ayurveda and indigenous medicine is essential. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a decrease in people's willingness to visit popular, congested locations, prompting the attention of alternative tourism. Kerala, India, Sri Lanka is the second-largest destination for Ayurveda travel, with a comparative advantage due to its deep-rooted Buddhist and Hinduism philosophies (Gamage & Samarathunga, 2020). Ayurveda tourism in Sri Lanka is not well-known among tourists. Alternative tourism plays a significant role in developing Sri Lanka's tourism industry, and understanding the significance of Sri Lankan Ayurveda tourism development is essential. This indicates that one of the crucial niche sectors that require promotion is Ayurveda tourism. However, tourists still do not know Sri Lanka as an Ayurveda vacation spot (Guruge & Suranga Silva, 2020). In light of the current situation, it is essential to have a proper understanding of the significance of Sri Lankan Ayurveda and Wellness development. Accordingly, the present study aimed to identify the potentials and challenges of Ayurveda and Wellness tourism in Sri Lanka with particular reference to the North Central province.

METHODOLOGY

This research follows a deductive approach, which involves starting with observations and generating ideas based on those observations at the end of the research process. The data for this study were collected from stakeholders involved in Wellness and Ayurveda tourism. Specifically, data were collected from Ayurveda hotel managers/owners (registered with SLTDA), academic professionals, and non-executive employees using purposive sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was considered more appropriate as it allowed more data collection. The selection of stakeholders was based on their personal experience or knowledge of the topic being studied, following the recommendations of Collingridge and Gantt (2008) regarding selecting respondents for an inquiry.

Although the sample size may be considered modest from a scientific standpoint, it is suitable for qualitative analysis. In qualitative research, there is no set minimum requirement for the number of participants; instead, the focus is on obtaining sufficient depth of data to fully characterize the phenomena being examined (Fossey et al., 2002). The interviews were conducted over the telephone and face-to-face, lasting between 20 and 30 minutes. Permission was obtained to record the interviews, which allowed for continuous listening and rewinding, aiding in clarifying interview content. The recordings were valuable in assessing speech pace, pitch, and other nuances. The data analysis in this study utilized content analysis.

This involved examining the interview transcripts, analyzing each phrase and sound, and determining how words and word patterns were used within their contexts. The researcher

then classified and coded the data, identifying key phrases that raised doubts or required further attention.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Regarding the promotion of Ayurveda and Wellness tourism, the study identified several potential factors: people's positive attitudes and practices towards health practices, the availability of facilities such as hotels, resorts, and hospitals for Ayurveda and wellness treatments, the presence of qualified Ayurveda and wellness practitioners, the availability of training facilities, ensuring safety and security for guests, the hospitable culture of Sri Lanka, the traditional practices of Sri Lanka, and the natural attractions, locations, and favorable weather. Similarly, the study highlighted specific challenges: illegal activities, inferior Ayurvedic products, fraud and industry malpractices, language barriers, limited availability of Ayurveda medicine, insufficient government involvement, and poor marketing initiatives.

"The main thing is nobody controls us. There are no departments or sectors to control things. As a general, Due to face trouble. That means also a lack of government involvement. It is less than zero." (Respondent 03, interview 2023).

According to Khanal and Shimizu (2019), the lack of governmental support in promoting the health tourism industry is one of the main obstacles to the development of Ayurveda and wellness tourism.

Additionally, practical marketing exercises and the implementation of marketing strategies are necessary for branding the country and expanding the health and wellness tourism market (Khanal, 2017). When it comes to marketing, professionals from the industry are lacking.

"This is a major thing: we have beautiful marketing professionals in the hotel industry. However, when it is talking about wellness and ayurveda, again, lack of knowledge and lack of experience of minutes when it comes to experience for the marketing development in this industry, not the hotel I am talking about totally, but in this ayurveda and wellness property industries" (Respondent 02, interview 2023).

"As my experience with Ayurveda travelers, they are not going through online platforms. That means booking.com or Expedia, Agoda like that" (Respondent 04, interview 2023).

"India is promoting too much about their Ayurveda. Then, they bring it to the whole world. Everybody knows about that. Unless nobody knows about Sri Lanka and Vedamahaththya and Veda Gedara and how we treated them, what is the illness? If nobody knows about that, then it is a problem." (Respondent 02, interview 2023).

A research study on health tourism in Nepal conducted by Khanal and Shimizu (2019) revealed poor cooperation and coordination between the health and tourism ministries, a shortage of specialized human resources in the health tourism sector, and a lack of essential infrastructure and legal frameworks for the development of health tourism, all of which hinder the growth of Nepal's health tourism industry. Consequently, stakeholders in the wellness industry feel frustrated, leading to investor dissatisfaction. Previous research has similarly provided evidence of a lack of medicine for Ayurveda. Krishna et al. (2020) stated that the scarcity of herbal drugs and concerns about product quality harm the Ayurveda sector. Furthermore, Khanal and Shimizu (2019a) have identified that most herbal medicines used in Ayurveda are imported from countries like India.

“Some medicines are produced in Sri Lanka. Most of the ingredients for those medicines are also imported from India. Some natural herbs are found in Sri Lanka, but most of the natural herbs, like Iramusu and Pathpadagam, are imported from India.” (Respondent 05, interview 2023).

Additionally, the study has highlighted two significant challenges for promoting Ayurveda tourism in the Sri Lankan context. Firstly, many respondents mentioned the limited language proficiency among Ayurveda doctors, staff, and other relevant parties. Most respondents concurred that this is a significant impediment to Ayurvedic tourism, and the following are some of their comments.

“The language barrier, in my opinion, is the biggest obstacle. We should be proficient in at least one language as professionals or therapists, for instance, English” (Respondent 04, interview 2023).

“Although English and whatever other languages are vital, we do not have enough knowledge of them here” (Respondent 03, interview 2023).

“Without languages, we cannot be involved with and survive with the tourism industry” (Respondent 05, interview 2023).

“One of the main issues we have is fewer people who have multi-language speaking skills with Ayurveda knowledge” (Respondent 05, interview 2023).

Secondly, respondents expressed concerns about fraud and illegal activities in Sri Lanka. Dilmi (2019) has similarly acknowledged fraud as a significant challenge in promoting Ayurveda tourism. Although previous research does not explicitly mention fraud and illegal activities, the present study has recognized them as a significant obstacle to promoting Ayurveda tourism in the Sri Lankan context.

“The biggest challenge to promoting Ayurveda tourism in Sri Lanka is that many medical centers provide illegal activities. Because of those centers, a negative image of Ayurveda tourism has been created among the people” (Respondent 06, Interview, 2023).

Furthermore, John & Chelat (2013) have stated that the Kerala Ayurveda sector has made progress in the past two decades through the systematic production of medicine, the institutionalization of education, and the professionalization of clinical practice. Khanal and Shimizu (2019) further support this notion in their findings. According to their research, Ayurveda-based traditional healers have been practicing Ayurveda as a family profession for generations. Additionally, academic Ayurveda practitioners who have received training from educational institutions, training centers, colleges, and universities are recognized as potential contributors to health tourism. The local population in Sri Lanka is actively engaged with traditional herbal medicines and believes these medicines are beneficial for boosting the immune system. According to Fonseka and Kottage (2021), Sri Lanka is ideally situated to welcome Ayurveda and wellness travelers thanks to its higher levels of terrestrial biodiversity, adequate ground and port infrastructure, rich cultural heritage, organic foods, and authentic cuisines, as well as its relatively clean environment, good air quality, and abundance of water-based activities locals and a multitude of water-based activities. The country's already existing private Ayurveda and wellness resorts, like Siddalepa, Barbarian, Jetwing, Tree of Life, Santani, and others, benefit the industry. Furthermore, illegal activities disguised as Ayurveda

practices pose a local threat to promoting Ayurveda tourism in Sri Lanka. Frauds have been as a significant obstacle to promoting Ayurveda tourism. Nonetheless, scams and illegal acts were not explicitly included in earlier studies. Researchers have identified scams and other unlawful activities as a significant obstacle to promoting Ayurveda tourism in Sri Lanka.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The demand for Ayurveda tourism remains high, indicating its potential to contribute to the recovery of Sri Lanka's tourism industry. Effective promotion of Ayurveda tourism can revitalize the country's tourism sector by attracting many reputable visitors. This study aims to identify the challenges and opportunities in boosting Ayurveda tourism. The findings highlight significant obstacles to promoting Ayurveda tourism in Sri Lanka, including limited government involvement, fraud, illegal operations, language barriers, and a lack of available medicines. On the other hand, potential opportunities lie in showcasing Sri Lankan culture, natural resources, and well-equipped facilities for Ayurveda treatments. Traditional herbal remedies are popular for strengthening the immune system; nevertheless, challenges such as competition, illegal activities, and competition from India impede their promotion. To attract more Ayurveda tourists, Sri Lanka should increase government support, promote Ayurveda production, train staff, and invest in research and development initiatives.

Keywords: Ayurveda tourism, fraud, government involvement, illegal operations

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