



The Experiential Facets of Special Interest Tourism Offerings of Wayanad, Kerala

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Abstract

Wayanad, an exquisite hill station of Kerala, is emerging as one of the most preferred destinations for nature lovers as well as special interest tourists. Keeping in mind the demand for Special Interest Tourism (SIT) promotion and with the objective of sustaining the natural and unique cultural heritage of Wayanad, an attempt is made in this paper to explore the special interest tourism avenues of Wayanad. All the popular tourist sites of the destination have been personally visited to get firsthand information about the potential for Special interest tourism. An effort is also made to know the perception of service providers about the current trends in special interest tourism in Wayanad. For this, a qualitative study has been conducted based on interaction with various travel and accommodation service providers of Wayanad. Few of the specialised tour providers were also interviewed for this study. Content analysis was done to interpret the data collected through interviews. The result of the study brings to light the tremendous potential for SIT in Wayanad and its significance for sustainable tourism development.

Keywords: Special Interest Tourism, Niche Tourism Concept, Sustainable Development

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Introduction

Earlier people used to travel to places on tour during which they took photographs, enjoyed local ethnic food, interacted with people whom they met on the way, stayed in resorts or home-stays at the destination, enjoyed nature and appreciated the culture. But now people travel only to take photographs, to relax in resorts, to know about certain community's culture and tradition and only to enjoy the native tastes. Touring has come a long way from a conventional itinerary. Special Interest Tourism (SIT) is emerging as one of the most popular forms of international and domestic travel. New age tourists are very selective and choose places and attractions based on their interests and passion. They are more confident of their plans and enthusiastic about having unique experiences in each place. They give priority for what the mind says. Tourists have different expectations about their experiences at the destinations. Novelty, authenticity, excitement or adventure motivate them to visit a place. Nowadays, more and more tour operators are specializing themselves into niche tourism based on special interest.

The Special Interest Tourism (SIT), a fast growing concept and approach to tourism demonstrates a strong people centred, sustainable model which seeks more authentic experiences enabling closer interaction with host communities. Hall & Weiler (1992) suggests that rewarding; enriching, adventuresome and learning are the four major elements of Special Interest Tourism. SIT products offer customized packages of experiences developed for niche markets (Derrett, 2001). These products provide unique insights into particular destinations, communities or bodies of knowledge.

The main objective of special interest tourism is to satisfy specific needs or tastes of individuals or groups. Douglas et al (2001) suggest that SIT has emerged from concerns for sustainability. They define SIT as 'the provision of customized leisure and recreational experience driven by the specific expressed interest of individuals and groups'. The term comprises of two major indicators-Special Interest and Tourism. Initially SIT was perceived on homogenously considered forms of tourism such as adventure

tourism, eco-tourism, sports tourism, cultural tourism, pilgrim tourism, health and wellness tourism, educational tourism, recreational tourism, alternative tourism, rural tourism, ethnic tourism etc. But now it is more specific and specialised.

Wayanad, a district of Kerala endowed with glorious natural attractions started showing rapid growth in the tourist arrival since 2004. Wayanad is one of the prime locations selected by foreign as well as domestic tourists today. Tourist arrival to Wayanad increased many fold in the last five years which is a major concern for sustainable tourism promotion. Hence this paper tries to identify potential for special interest tourism in Wayanad which can control overcrowding in popular tourist sites in one end and to offer an unforgettable experience for tourists in the other end.

Objectives of the study

The primary objective of the study is to explore the areas for special interest tourism in Wayanad. The other objectives include, to unveil the Special Interest Tourism market for Wayanad and to analyse the present scenario of SIT in Wayanad.

Need of the study

Wayanad with its enchanting nature and inimitable culture has always been in the purview of historians, environmentalists and even destination promoters. The growing tourist arrival to Wayanad in the last few years is a major concern for sustainable development. Wayanad is not a place for mass tourists, but for special interest tourists. This paper helps to identify the present scenario of special interest tourism in Wayanad and it may provide guidelines for tourism service providers who want to include more special interest tourism activities in their packages.

Research Methodology

This is a study of exploratory nature using qualitative variable. The popular tourist sites and special interest areas were visited and closely observed. Selected tourists were interviewed and primary data was collected. Five tour operators and five other service providers including organisers of special interest tours were also interviewed to know their perception on the topic and to know the

present scenario of SIT in Wayanad. A purposive non-random sampling method is used to select the samples. Content analysis was used to analyse the data and interpreted based on the result of analysis.

Literature Review

Tourism development over the years has its share of controversies in spite of several benefits. Prompted by disillusionment with mass tourism, many researchers became critical of 'mass tourism' development and offered 'alternative tourism' by formulating better ways of integrating a broader range of values and social concerns (Smith & Eadington, 1992). This transformation slowly changed the perception of tourists also. People who are reluctant to conventional mass tourism are now searching for alternative and new experiences. This change in the tourist perception has initiated the development of a few niche markets (Butcher, 2000). In the words of Krippendorf (1987), the guiding principle is 'to put as much distance as possible between themselves and mass tourism'. The concept of alternative tourism is described by many authors in different terms such as "Alternative Tourism" (Smith & Eadington, 1992), Rural Tourism (Lane 1994), "New Tourism" (Krippendorf, 1987; Mowforth & Munt, 2003), "Soft Tourism" (Krippendorf, 1987), "Low-impact tourism" (Wearing & Neil, 1999, p. 5), "Special Interest Tourism" (Douglas et al., 2001) and "Indigenous Tourism" (Butler and Hinch 1996)

Special Interest Tourism has emerged from the concern for sustainable development and is not a new phenomenon. The term SIT may be of recent origin, but travelling for specific purposes were there since the beginning of organised tour. SIT may be defined as the provision of customized leisure and recreational experiences driven by the specific expressed interests of individuals and groups (Douglas et al., 2001). SIT may be defined as a form of tourism which involves consumers whose holiday choice is inspired by specific motivations and whose level of satisfaction is determined by the experience they pursue (Marina Novelli, 2005). United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines special interest tourism as 'the specialized tourism that involved individual or group tours by those people who wish to

develop their given interests or visit sites and places that has a relation or connection with their specific interest or subject'.

According to Kruja & Hasaj (2010) Special interest tourism is a form of tourism which encompasses different special interest travel activities which have become known as niche markets over the years like Adventure tourism, Rural Tourism, Cultural tourism, Religious tourism, Wildlife tourism, Heritage tourism, Ecotourism, Culinary tourism and Medical tourism and so on.

Special Interest tourists express a deep desire for authenticity and real time experiences which make the tour most memorable. According to Douglas et al., (2001), the Curiosity, the physical challenges of some environments and ethical considerations all contribute to SIT. According to Stebbins (1982) involvement provides way of finding personal fulfillment.

The profile of SIT participants is associated with many factors. Behavioural as well as psychographic factors contribute to it. However, there have been changes in the consumer behaviour of the tourists and their value system. The present day tourists are well educated, better informed, more independent, flexible, spontaneous and unpredictable. Such tourists demonstrate a 'see and enjoy, but do not destroy' attitude. With more and more trip, they look for high quality experiences, variety of activities and unique experiences.

The tourism scenario of Wayanad

The state of Kerala witnessed 5.71% increase in the total tourist arrival in 2016 and welcomed 14.2 million visitors despite the challenges of demonetization and change in bar policy. Wayanad, the beautiful hill station of Kerala, is located 76 kilometers away from the Calicut town also shows almost similar trend in tourist arrival. Tourism is a fast growing sector in Wayanad. Accordingly, the Government of Kerala has declared Wayanad as a Tourism District. The scenic beauty, exotic landscape and rich heritage of Wayanad offer several opportunities for tourism promotion. Wayanad's wildlife, plantations, and cuisine further enrich the tourism potential. The district is best known among nature lovers who search for adventure and novel experiences.

Wayanad is a destination with immense potential for rural tourism, Heritage tourism, Leisure tourism, Island tourism, Adventure tourism, Hydel tourism, Pilgrim tourism, Wildlife tourism, Tribal tourism, Plantation tourism, Spice tourism, Health tourism, Festival tourism, Shopping tourism, and Ecotourism. Wayanad has attractions for special interest tourists seeking nature, jungle walk, indigenous culture, photography, monsoon climate and many more.

Special Interest tourism experiences in Wayanad

The natural picturesque beauty of Wayanad and its gorgeous natural and cultural resources offer several opportunities for the visitors who travel with a special intention or primary motivation of practicing or enjoying a special activity or unusual hobbies. Based on the field study and interaction with selected special interest tourists, the important special interest tourism activities possible in Wayand are listed as follows.

Adventure tourism –Chembra peak, Pakshipatalam, Meenmutty

Wayanad with its rich natural resources, rocks, valleys and climate provide ample scope for adventure tourism. Chembra peak, Pakshipathalam and Meenmutty are favourite trekking areas for adventure lovers. Chembra peak is located fourteen kilometers away from Kalpetta town is the highest mountain in Wayanad at 2100 meters above mean sea level. The most relaxing point for tourists is the heart shaped lake. In about three hours one could reach the top of the peak which is a paradise for nature lovers and photographers. The view of neighboring districts like Kozhikode, Malappuram in Kerala and Nilgiris in Tamil Nadu is an amazing experience. Also the raft experience along the small islands of Kuruva makes the tourist feel excited and elated.

Bird watching at Pakshipathalam

Pakshipathalam is located at an altitude of 1700 meters in the Brahmagiri hills near Tirunelly temple. Pakshipathalam, the name itself refers to the presence of large number of birds (Pakshi means bird in Malayalam) in the area. The deep forests, rivulets and hills on the way offer adventurous experience. Trekking is the only mode to reach the top. The deep and dark caves with hundreds of

cave chambers are a wonder in Pakhipathalam. These caves are home to a variety of birds and animals. The caves are believed to have been used by saints in the past for meditation. Hence these places are named as Muniyara, Patasala, Rishipathalam, Teerthobhava, etc. A visit to these caves is considered divine.

Cycling in Wayanad

According to Mr Sarath, Managing Partner of Wild Tusker Resort there is a wide scope for cycling activities in Wayanad. Though, trekking is definitely one of the most exhilarating things to do in Wayanad, cycling through the rock-strewn and less frequented paths of Wayanad is thrilling too. Riding through the dew-covered tea estates, picturesque coffee plantations, rocky terrains and the lush green paddocks is itself a refreshing experience. Many of the resorts in Wayanad offer cycling as their major recreational activity.

Heritage expedition at Edakkal

The remains excavated from different places of the district prove the presence of Neolithic settlements in Wayanad. Edakkal is an important heritage site with prehistoric petroglyphs. It is a cleft or rift caused by a piece of rock splitting away from the main body. Historians believe that the cave was a site of human civilization in the past. Fred-Fawcett, the then Superintendent of Police of the Malabar district in 1894 happened to see this Neolithic Celt (Stone axe or chisel) near a coffee estate. He identified the site as a habitat of Neolithic people during late Stone Age 4000BC to 1700 BC, (Johny, O.K., 2008). The study conducted by historian M.R. Raghava Warier in 2009 established the presence of materials connected to the Harappan civilization also in the region.

Plantation experience

The journey to the major tourist sites in Wayanad through breathtaking tea and coffee plantations has ample opportunities for photo stops. Apart from this, there are also enough options for exclusive plantation tours. All the major tourist resorts arrange plantation tours for their guests on request. Many home stays offer guests a walk through their own plantations and opportunity to indulge in tapping rubber, pollinating vanilla, plucking the tea leaves, etc.

Ethno medicines

The ethnic medicines of Wayanad are very popular. Native wisdom and practices of tribes have evolved over a period of time from their cultural and ecological background. The forests of Wayanad are rich with a variety of medicinal plants. The tribal healers collect these plants to make medicines. They treat snake bite, bone fracture, jaundice, Asthma, skin problems etc. They consider the medicinal knowledge as sacred. There is huge potential for promotion of health tourism by leveraging the local community knowledge of traditional systems of medicine with herbs and medicinal plants which do not have any side effects on the patients.

Shopping of native forest products and crafts

Good quality coffee and tea grown in the plantations of Wayanad are sold in the outlets spread along all the important roads of the region and shopping centres at the tourist destinations. Pepper of Wayanad is known for its' quality worldwide. Pure honey collected from the forest is available in Pookot, Gandhigramam and also at the various tribal societies. Handicrafts and handlooms of Wayanad are also unique. 'Uravu' in Trikkapatta is known for the handicrafts made with bamboo. Pickles, Jams and squashes made of fruits and vegetables produced in the villages also persuade tourists to shop around. Gooseberry in honey, Pineapple and mango kept in salt, buttermilk, etc. sold in small shops, refresh and energize tourists at all the tourist sites in Wayanad. Native crafts made of coconut shells, canes, wood and metals are best souvenir items for visitors to Wayanad. Natural cosmetic items and herbal medicines available in many ethnic shops in the region also find a prominent place in the shopping list of the tourists.

Wildlife Tourism

Wayanad Wild Life Sanctuary established in 1973 is the second largest wildlife sanctuary in Kerala and a separate Wayanad Wildlife division was constituted in 1985. Wayanad Wildlife sanctuary includes 13 reserved forests which are classified under moist deciduous forests, dry deciduous forests, semi evergreen forests and plantations. The sanctuary is also part of Project Elephant Reserve No.7. The rich flora and fauna include many

endangered rare species. For administrative purpose, Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary is zoned into Core zone, Buffer zone, Tourism zone and Restoration zone. Tourism activities, of course, are restricted to the tourism zones in Muthanga and Tholpetty ranges of the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary. These wildlife ecotourism centers offer unique experience of watching free roaming elephants, deers, monkeys, bears, gaurs and tigers. Information on wildlife from the interpretation centre, knowledge on medicinal plants, elephant camp and opportunity to interact with tribes are other attractions for tourists visiting Wayanad wildlife sanctuary.

Ramayana yathra

Sita Lava Kusha temple is located in Pulpally, 25 Kilometers from Sulthan Bathery. It is believed that the land of Pulpally is blessed with the feet of Sitadevi, her sons Lava and Kusha and sage Valmiki of Ramayana. Few other temples around Pulpally located at Chedayatankavu, Ashramakolly, Sasimala and, Eriyappally are connected with the myths of Ramayana. Given the number of important temples of Wayanad in close proximity to each other, there is ample scope to promote 'Ramayana circuit' by connecting all these temples linking them with the highly revered Indian epic Ramayana.

Indigenous tourism/tribal tourism

Native people, their culture and lifestyle are always a curiosity for the outside world. Wayanad is known for its rich indigenous heritage, with the largest tribal population of Kerala. The different tribal communities like, Paniyas, Kurumans, Kattunaykas, Uralis and Adiyans are different from each other with respect to culture and tradition. It would give a great experience to Special Interest Tourists visiting Wayanad. The rich legacy of arts and crafts, music, dance, ornaments, cuisine, and medicines of tribes are of good academic interest for students and researchers. There are tribal villages like Nellarachal, where special interest tourists are taken for a visit by District Tourism Promotion Council on request.

Village tourism

The whole of Wayanad gives the feeling of visiting a village. For the first time in Wayanad, a village tourism concept was

conceptualized by 'Uravu'. Uravu is a non-profit trust established in 1996, registered under the Indian Trusts Act in Trikkaiipatta village of Wayanad district in Kerala. Uravu is the realization of the dream of a few socially responsible minds searching for alternative ways of living. Uravu runs with the theme 'Bamboo'. It highlights the sustainable way of producing bamboo and designing bamboo products which in turn protects the indigenous handicraft industry. Ten years of dedicated service to nature and society led Uravu develop a unique model called Bamboo Village in Thrikkaipatta Village in the year 2006 for the sustainable development of nature, local community and the preservation of indigenous culture. Bamboo Village is a self-sufficient and sustainable model village in Wayanad. Around 2000 families live in this Bamboo Village. Uravu supports the families with a steady source of income along with agriculture. Agriculture, Cattle farms, Bamboo Bag units, Food Production units, Honey Processing units, Dry Flower units, Flower nurseries, Training and Educational centers, and Community based tourism activities are promoted and nurtured in Trikkaiipatta under the leadership of Uravu and with the support of local Panchayat and SHGs. For tourists who look for a different experience and are interested in interacting with local community, Bamboo Village is an ideal place. Special Interest Tourists are guided by the local people for a 'Village Walk' and 'Trekking'. Village families also offer home stay facilities for tourists. Tourists are very curious about the ethnic cookery classes given by the families. Jack Fruit Festival is another popular festival organized by Uravu Bamboo Village from 2006 onwards which has found a mention in the Limca Book of World Records in 2008 for showcasing more than hundred value added products of Jackfruit.

Excerpts of Experts' views

The views of tourism service providers and destination promoters of Wayanad give a positive response to the scope of promoting SIT in Wayand. 'Country walk, plantation visit and trekking through forest are the main special interest tourism activities preferred by the guests. According to Mrs Prabha Narayanaswami, who runs Sundaramahal home stay in Wayanad Elephant ride and rock climbing has become popular and most demanded activities in Wayanad. She also cited the example of an eighty six year old guest

who was so excited with the experience of the country walk that he was not back to room even when it was dark. Mrs Narayanaswami said that, irrespective of gender and age, tourists participated in special interest activities. Monsoon is no more an off season now. Wayanad promotes monsoon tourism too. Splash-Wayanad monsoon carnival, an annual event organized jointly by Kerala Tourism, Government of Kerala and Wayanad Tourism organization is a mega event in the month of June which is the monsoon season in Kerala. Ayurveda and other native medicine are another reason for choosing Wayand in monsoon time. Families settled abroad visit Wayanad along with their children to have a wonderful experience of monsoon.

According to Mr Sarath, Managing Partner of Wild Tusker Resort, there are two categories of tourists visiting Wayanad. The first group wants to spend maximum time in their accommodation itself. They select luxurious resorts, have good food and relax. They entertain themselves in indoor facilities. Second category is budget tourists, who prefer to spend their time in enjoying and experiencing nature and interacting with the people. He also said that, majority of the special interest tourism activities in Wayanad are associated to wildlife tourism. The tourism scenario has changed in Wayanad in the last few years, mainly due to the potential of the place to attract all categories of people, irrespective of age, income and gender. From a weekend destination it is slowly becoming a holistic destination.

The responses from agents who operate tours to Wayanad reveal that there are many tourism companies that specialize on various adventures, wildlife and other special interest activities in Wayanad. Chembra, Kuruva Island, Soochipara falls, Muthanga wild life sanctuary and Pookot Lake are ideal sites for special interest tourists. Yoga, Ayurveda and Spas are other special interest areas named as traditional medicines and wellness tourism. Wildlife, mountains, tea and coffee plantations, rivers, waterfalls and lakes make Wayanad an environmentally rich destination and also provide the platform for various special interest tourism activities.

Mr Vancheeswaran, the President of Wayanad Tourism Organization is a special experience holiday planner (The nomad)

who runs Wynberg Resort in Wayand. He is a specialist of wildlife and adventure tours. Wynberg offers wildlife experiences, tribal interactions, plantation walks, birding, photography trails and so on. According to him, the objectives of his tours are to make the clients experience what Wayanad is. The challenge for him is to present the uniqueness of the place in such a way that it appeals to the clients. Authenticity of the attraction and the originality of information make the experience different. Involvement of native people who are very close to the nature and nature related attractions are ideal to provide information which may be interpreted by the tour escort.

Findings and Suggestions

The majority of the tourism service providers in Wayanad are well conscious about the scope of special interest tourism in Wayanad. They appreciate the actual motive behind the visit and offer sightseeing and activities of their choice. Fishing, Cycling, trekking, spa, wildlife safari, mountaineering, agricultural field visit and heritage walk etc. have become part of a Wayanad tour itinerary.

Initiatives like Gandigramam and Uravu have become a hub for shoppers who want to buy forest products and crafts. These kinds of ventures also ensure a steady source of income for local community.

Itinerary planners are highly focused on special interest tourism activities since it has become prime motive for the tourists to visit Wayanad.

The prevailing SIT leads the development of sustainable tourism practices in Wayanad since the Special interest tourism activities are highly concerned about the well-being of nature as well as local community.

Special interest tourists spend more, stay longer, travel more frequently, and participate in more activities than other tourists. It helps the local economy to generate more income from tourism. Local people will get sufficient time to interact with tourists since they are staying for a longer period at a destination.

Since special interest tourism is in its developing stage, it is difficult to make a final conclusion on socio-cultural and economic impact of special interest tourism activities in Wayanad.

Trekking, cycling, heritage walk, visit to pilgrim centres, witnessing the ethnic lifestyle, farm visit, enjoying the rustic life style, boating, fishing, wildlife safari, mountaineering, relishing the local fairs and festival, observing the tribal settlements, local shopping and bird watching are the important special interest tourism activities that prevail in Wayanad.

The government and other authorities have to take more initiatives to promote Wayanad as a major hub for special interest tourists.

The local people of Wayanad are not much aware about the concept of special interest tourism and its benefits. An awareness campaign needs to be organized by the tourism promotion wing of the government to educate people.

Conclusion

With enormous potential in various fronts, Wayanad still is perceived as a backward district of Kerala albeit with enormous potential in various fronts. Till a few years back, Wayanad was known for agrarian prosperity. However, the agrarian crisis in the last decade pushed back Wayanad economically too. Improvements in the infrastructure facility coupled with exploration of tourism potential will certainly open up new vistas of development in Wayanad. The novelty, variety and diversity of tourism attractions are the strengths of Wayanad. Same factors open up the scope for special interest tourism promotion in Wayanad. Also, Wayanad comes within the category of ecologically sensitive areas of Western ghats as per the Kasturirangan report. With this sensitive natural and cultural feature, promoting mass tourism should not be encouraged any more. Limiting mass tourism activities to popular tourist sites like Pookot Lake, Banasurasagar dam, and the waterfalls and encouraging SIT would help crowd management and hence sustainable development of tourism in Wayanad. It may be noted that SIT is a niche tourist market which includes cost conscious, responsible and highly motivated tourists. A planned and

sustainable development of tourism in a responsible manner would certainly bring Wayanad to the mainstream of tourism in Kerala.

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