

RELIGIOUS TOURISM: CONCEPT, DEFINITION AND SIGNIFICANCE

Religious tourism is also known as pilgrimage tourism, faith tourism whereby people individually or in group travel to religious centres for religious, missionary or leisure purposes. This is the fastest growing area in the holiday industry. Many places like Bodhgaya, Amritsar, Tirupati and other most popular tourist destinations are related to ancient places of worship or the site of noticeable miracles.

Countries such as Italy, Spain and the Slavic states are experiencing an explosive interest in the old pilgrim routes subsequent to the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Christ. More than 10 million Christians are expected to visit Lourdes in 2008 for the 150th anniversary of the apparition of the Virgin Mary. Muslims performing the annual hajj Religious to Mecca number three million while the Kumbh Mela held every 12 years in Allahabad northern India attracted 75 million Hindus on the occasion in 2001.

India is home to some of the world-renowned temples such as

- Tirupati Balaji, which is visited by 50,000 to 100,000 people every day, making it the most visited and richest holy place in the world, while on special occasions and festivals, like the annual Brahmotsavam, the number of pilgrims shoots up to 500,000.
- Vaishno Devi, place of worship near Jammu, northern part of India, where more than 6.7 million tourists visited last year. For this purpose, only Indian Railways Tourism Corporation runs a special package tour, while India's only helicopter ferry service, Pawan Hans, runs a helicopter service right up to the temple
- Golden Temple the holiest Sikh shrine in the city of Amritsar in Punjab offers online booking for accommodation around the temple complex.
- Religious tourism is an emerging market in India, a study by Delhi based National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER)

shows that of the 230 million tourist trips were undertaken in India, the largest proportion is made up of religious purpose. The research also shows that of all of the package tour organised in India, religious trips account 50 %, much higher than leisure trips ie,28%. The government has realised the potential market, thus investing more than one million euros for development of tourism department under religious circuits to boost spiritual tourism.

- A domestic tourism survey conducted by the Indian Ministry of Tourism in 2002 reported that more than 100 million visitors travelled for 'religious purposes and eight of the top-ten ranking domestic tourist destinations were religious sites. According to the Ministry's Tourism Satellite Accounts, religious tourism segment contributed almost 20% towards the total domestic tourism consumption (approximately INR 2.8 billion) and this contribution is likely to increase annually.

RELIGIOUS TRAVEL INDUSTRY IN INDIA: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

There is a revival of religious attitudes not only in India but the world over. The second and third generations of the Indian Diaspora are actively seeking out their roots in religion. India as religious tourist centre has large prospects to develop the place as a big hub for pilgrims.

Religious tourism has a big future in India. India is richly endowed with ancient temples and religious festivals. Religions originating in India, be it Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism or Buddhism, have a vibrant culture and spiritual philosophy. Together, they present a viable, alternative way of life as compared to the materialism and confrontation prevalent in the West. In the tourism industry of India religious tourism is playing all important roles especially with the high interest of domestic travellers and overseas Indians. Since the ancient times India is considered at the top of world leaders of spirituality. India is the land where world's oldest knowledge books Vedas were written and since that time for Indian's religion is working as the bases and life supportive fluid.

Religious tourism in India. India has sites of religious importance that are revered by the Hindus and these are Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri and Yamunotri. One of the most common pilgrims points the religious tours would cover is Rishikesh which is located in the laps of the Himalayas. The Hindus light the mustard oil lamps near at the banks of the holy rivers and worship the deities with full piousness. Vaishno Devi is one of the most respected of pilgrim spots and is an indispensable point on the religious tours of India. It is located at a height of 5200 ft above the sea level but still the tourists cover this formidable distance with ease by reciting the hymns in a spiritual trance. The religious tours in India are said to be the most rejuvenating ones as it brings a complete refinement of the mind body and soul.

There are also many Sikh shrines in the northernmost parts of the country and Hemkunth Sahib located at an elevation of 4329 meters above the mean sea level and is a huge draw for the pilgrims. A religious tour to Sikh religious sites commences at the base camp of Govind Dham. There is also a Gurudwara located in Manikaran and is known for the hot water springs with curative properties. It is visited by lots of devotees every year.

India has also been a favourable base for the growth of Buddhism. Lumbini is a must visit place on the religious tours of Buddhism since it is the birth place of Buddha. The city of Sarnath is well-known amongst the Buddhists as the spot for His first oration, which disclosed the eight-fold path after His enlightenment. Religious tourism in India has its own significance and is the most well-liked by the tourists not only from India but the world.

India is characterized by various religious sites and there are many religious sites located here that attract a large number of tourists from various parts of India and the world. Many religions have been born in India, among which are Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism. Despite differing religions and cultures, India is united in its diversity.

PROBLEMS IN RELIGIOUS TOURISM IN INDIA

While, in principle, religious tourism in India has huge potential to evolve as a niche segment, there are obstacles to be overcome. The first hurdle is the poor tourism infrastructure in general, and perhaps the even poorer infrastructure of religious centres. Adequate facilities for lodging, boarding and travel will have to be created.

Poor tourism infrastructure:

India's poor domestic tourism infrastructure is leading to a threat of losing foreign tourists to other competing countries. What needs to be done is to create nodes near religious centres, where there is already a basic infrastructure present and plan day trip from there. For example, Chennai in South India can be a node for excursions to Madurai, Thanjavur, Trichnapalli and Pondicherry. Madurai is the home of the exquisite Meenakshi Temple, which is regarded as the holiest temple in India by many people.

Lacking of a wonderful religious experience:

The second aspect that will need to be taken care of will be to provide the tourists with a holistic religious experience. Tourists may not find it worthwhile to come all the way just for a Religious.

Deficiency of good packages for religious tourism:

A packaged trip that offers the different hues of religious tourism will have to be prepared. This would require blending the ritualistic part of the religious tours with informative, cultural and philosophical inputs. Lack of proper Information on the mythological significance of the places of Religious will need to be provided in advance so that tourists are better prepared. Traditional dances, music and theatre related to the religious shrine will have to be built into the itinerary. Discourses on the essence of the religious beliefs, workshops on yoga and Ayurvedic practices can add immense value to religious tourism.

Religious tourism in India can provide an experience that cannot be had anywhere in the world. But for it to fructify, the seeds will have to be sown and the saplings will have to be nurtured.