



TOURIST PERCEPTIONS AND SATISFACTION TOWARD AYURVEDA- BASED WELLNESS TOURISM IN KERALA

*Jiji.P,** Dr. Sarun.S G

*Jiji.P, Assistant Professor of Commerce, Sree Narayana College, Chathannur

** Dr. Sarun.S G, Associate Professor & Research Supervisor, Department of Commerce, Government College, Attingal

Abstract: Ayurveda-based wellness tourism has positioned Kerala as a leading global destination for holistic health and well-being. This study examines tourist perceptions and satisfaction toward wellness tourism in Kerala, with specific emphasis on identifying the key determinants influencing wellness tourists' experiences. Using a descriptive and analytical research design, primary data were collected from 100 domestic and international wellness tourists through a structured questionnaire. Tourist satisfaction was assessed across multiple dimensions, including service quality, therapist competence, treatment authenticity, physical environment and ambience, and perceived wellness outcomes. Statistical analysis using SPSS reveals that overall tourist satisfaction with wellness tourism in Kerala is high and largely consistent across age groups and type of tourists. Gender emerges as a partially significant factor, influencing perceptions of service quality, treatment authenticity, price fairness, and accessibility. Authentic Ayurvedic treatments, professional competence of therapists, hygienic and serene environments, and positive wellness outcomes are identified as the most influential drivers of satisfaction. The findings indicate that demographic factors exert a limited impact on wellness tourism satisfaction, reinforcing the robustness of Kerala's wellness offerings. The study underscores the need for transparent pricing, improved accessibility, continuous quality assurance, and stronger regulation to preserve authenticity and enhance tourist satisfaction. The results provide valuable insights for policymakers and wellness tourism stakeholders seeking to sustain Kerala's competitiveness and long-term leadership in Ayurveda-based wellness tourism.

Key words: Ayurveda-based wellness tourism, Tourist satisfaction, Perceptions, Service quality, Wellness tourism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Wellness tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing segments of the global tourism industry, driven by increasing stress levels, lifestyle-related health issues, and a growing preference for preventive and holistic healthcare approaches. According to the Global Wellness Institute (2023), wellness tourism involves travel associated with the pursuit of maintaining or enhancing one's personal well-being, encompassing physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions. Unlike conventional leisure tourism, wellness tourism emphasizes healing experiences, therapeutic environments, and personalized care, making tourist satisfaction a critical determinant of its long-term sustainability and competitiveness. India occupies a significant position in the global wellness tourism market due to its rich heritage of traditional medical systems such as Ayurveda, Yoga, and naturopathy. Among Indian states, Kerala has gained international recognition as a premier destination for Ayurveda and wellness tourism. Often referred to as "God's Own Country," Kerala combines authentic Ayurvedic practices with favourable climatic conditions, abundant medicinal plants, serene natural landscapes, and skilled practitioners (Nair & Choudhary, 2021). These unique attributes have enabled the state to attract a large number of domestic and international wellness tourists seeking both curative and preventive healthcare solutions.

Tourist satisfaction is a key concept in tourism research, as it reflects the extent to which tourist expectations are met or exceeded by the actual experience (Oliver, 1997). In the context of Ayurveda and wellness services, satisfaction is influenced by multiple factors, including service quality, therapist competence, authenticity of treatments, infrastructure, hygiene, cost, and the overall healing environment (Sharma & Nayak, 2019). High levels of tourist satisfaction not only enhance the likelihood of repeat visits but also generate positive word-of-mouth, which is particularly important in wellness tourism where trust and credibility play a vital role in decision-making. Despite Kerala's strong reputation in the wellness tourism sector, increasing competition from other domestic and international wellness destinations has intensified the need to continuously assess and improve service standards. Moreover, the commercialization of Ayurveda has raised concerns regarding the dilution of authenticity, inconsistency in service delivery, and varying levels of professionalism across wellness centres (Joseph & Varghese, 2020). These challenges make it essential to empirically examine tourist satisfaction and identify the key determinants that influence wellness tourists' perceptions and experiences in Kerala.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Wellness tourism has received increasing scholarly attention over the past two decades due to its rapid growth and its close association with health, quality of life, and sustainable tourism development. Researchers broadly define wellness tourism as travel undertaken with the primary motivation of maintaining or enhancing personal well-being through physical, psychological, and spiritual activities (Mueller & Kaufmann, 2001). Studies consistently emphasize that wellness tourists differ from conventional leisure tourists in terms of expectations, involvement, and sensitivity to service quality, making satisfaction a central construct in wellness tourism research. Several studies highlight Kerala's unique position in wellness tourism owing to its long-established Ayurvedic tradition, favourable tropical climate, and availability of medicinal plants (George & Varghese, 2018). Ayurveda-based wellness tourism in Kerala is often perceived as authentic and holistic, combining medical consultation, therapeutic procedures, yoga, meditation, and diet regulation (Nair & Choudhary, 2021). Researchers argue that this integration of traditional knowledge with tourism infrastructure has strengthened Kerala's brand image as a global wellness destination. However, literature also notes growing concerns regarding commercialization and standardization, which may affect tourist perceptions and satisfaction levels (Joseph & Varghese, 2020).

Tourist satisfaction is commonly conceptualized as a post-consumption evaluation of experiences based on the comparison between expectations and perceived performance (Oliver, 1997). In wellness tourism, satisfaction is multidimensional, encompassing treatment effectiveness, service quality, emotional well-being, and environmental factors. Studies by Sharma and Nayak (2019) found that experiential quality significantly influences satisfaction and behavioral intentions in wellness destinations. Similarly, Chen et al. (2018) observed that perceived healing outcomes and therapist competence play a decisive role in shaping satisfaction among wellness tourists. Service quality has been widely examined as a key determinant of tourist satisfaction. Many researchers adopt adaptations of the SERVQUAL model, focusing on dimensions such as reliability, assurance, empathy, responsiveness, and tangibles (Parasuraman et al., 1988). In the context of Ayurveda and wellness tourism, Tangible aspects like cleanliness, ambience, and infrastructure, along with intangible elements such as therapist behaviour and personalized care, significantly affect satisfaction (Kumar & Prasad, 2020). Empirical studies conducted in Kerala suggest that professionalism of staff and clarity of treatment procedures strongly influence tourists' trust and satisfaction (Sasidharan & Menon, 2019).

Authenticity has emerged as a crucial concept in Ayurveda tourism literature. Wellness tourists often seek “genuine” traditional healing experiences, and any perceived dilution of authenticity negatively affects satisfaction (Banyai & Glover, 2012). Studies indicate that factors such as certified Ayurvedic doctors, traditional treatment methods, use of herbal medicines, and transparent communication enhance perceived authenticity and trust (Narangajavana et al., 2017). Trust, in turn, has been shown to mediate the relationship between service quality and satisfaction, especially in health-related tourism where perceived risk is high. A substantial body of literature links tourist satisfaction with behavioral outcomes such as revisit intention, loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth. Research by Han et al. (2017) demonstrated that satisfied wellness tourists are more likely to recommend destinations and services to others. In Kerala's wellness tourism context, repeat visitation and long-term reputation are heavily dependent on satisfied international tourists who act as informal brand ambassadors (George & Anandkumar, 2020). Consequently, understanding satisfaction drivers is essential for destination competitiveness.

3. WELLNESS TOURISM: GLOBAL AND INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

Wellness tourism has evolved into a significant segment of the global tourism industry, driven by changing lifestyles, increasing health consciousness, aging populations, and rising stress-related disorders. Globally, wellness tourism is defined as travel undertaken with the primary purpose of maintaining or enhancing personal well-being, encompassing physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions (Mueller & Kaufmann, 2001). Unlike medical tourism, which focuses on curative treatment, wellness tourism emphasizes prevention, relaxation, and holistic health improvement. At the global level, the wellness tourism market has witnessed substantial growth over the last decade. The Global Wellness Institute (2023) reports that wellness tourism is growing faster than general tourism, supported by demand for spa therapies, yoga and meditation retreats, thermal and mineral springs, and nature-based wellness experiences. Destinations such as Thailand, Indonesia, Japan, Switzerland, and Germany have positioned themselves strongly in the global wellness market by integrating traditional healing practices with modern hospitality infrastructure. Tourist satisfaction in this segment is strongly linked to service quality, authenticity, safety, and perceived wellness outcomes, making experience management a critical success factor.

India holds a distinctive position in the global wellness tourism landscape due to its ancient systems of medicine and spiritual traditions. The country is widely recognized as the birthplace of Ayurveda, Yoga, and meditation, which together form the foundation of India's wellness tourism offerings (Smith & Puczkó, 2014). Government initiatives such as the promotion of AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, and Homeopathy) have further strengthened India's visibility as

a holistic wellness destination. International tourists are increasingly attracted to India for authentic, cost-effective, and culturally rooted wellness experiences. Within India, wellness tourism has expanded rapidly in states such as Kerala, Uttarakhand, Goa, Rajasthan, and Karnataka. Among these, Kerala has emerged as the most prominent destination for Ayurveda-based wellness tourism due to its favourable climate, biodiversity, availability of medicinal plants, and well-established Ayurvedic institutions (Nair & Choudhary, 2021). The Indian wellness tourism market is characterized by a blend of traditional healing systems and modern tourism services, catering to both domestic and international travellers seeking long-term wellness benefits. However, the Indian wellness tourism sector also faces challenges related to standardization, quality control, and the commercialization of traditional practices. Researchers note that inconsistencies in service delivery and varying levels of professionalism across wellness centres can influence tourist satisfaction and destination credibility (Joseph & Varghese, 2020). As a result, empirical evaluation of tourist satisfaction has become increasingly important to ensure sustainable growth and global competitiveness of wellness tourism in India.

4. AYURVEDA AND WELLNESS TOURISM IN KERALA

Kerala has emerged as the most prominent destination for Ayurveda and wellness tourism in India, gaining international recognition for its authentic healing traditions and holistic wellness environment. Ayurveda, an ancient system of medicine originating in India, emphasizes balance among the body, mind, and spirit through personalized treatments, herbal medicines, diet regulation, yoga, and lifestyle management (Sharma, 2018). Kerala's geographical location, tropical climate, rich biodiversity, and abundance of medicinal plants create ideal conditions for effective Ayurvedic treatments, particularly rejuvenation and detoxification therapies. The state's long-standing Ayurvedic tradition is supported by a strong institutional framework, including government-recognized Ayurvedic hospitals, colleges, and research centres. Kerala's tourism authorities have actively promoted Ayurveda as a core tourism product, positioning the state as a year-round wellness destination, with special emphasis on monsoon Ayurveda, which is believed to enhance treatment efficacy (Nair & Choudhary, 2021). This strategic branding has significantly contributed to the growth of international tourist arrivals seeking preventive healthcare, stress relief, and lifestyle correction.

Wellness tourism in Kerala extends beyond clinical Ayurveda to include yoga, meditation, naturopathy, spa therapies, and nature-based wellness experiences. Many wellness resorts integrate Ayurvedic treatments with serene natural settings such as backwaters, beaches, and hill stations, creating a therapeutic environment that enhances tourists' physical and psychological well-being (George & Varghese, 2018). Such integrated wellness offerings distinguish Kerala from other wellness destinations and strengthen its competitive advantage in the global market. Despite its success, Ayurveda and wellness tourism in Kerala faces several challenges. The rapid commercialization of wellness services has led to variations in treatment authenticity, service quality, and professional standards across wellness centres. Studies indicate that some tourists experience confusion regarding the credibility of practitioners and the genuineness of treatments, which may affect satisfaction and trust (Joseph & Varghese, 2020). These issues highlight the importance of regulation, certification, and quality assurance to protect Kerala's wellness brand image. Tourist satisfaction plays a crucial role in sustaining Ayurveda and wellness tourism in Kerala. Satisfied wellness tourists are more likely to engage in repeat visits, recommend the destination, and contribute to long-term destination loyalty. Consequently, researchers emphasize the need for empirical studies that evaluate tourist perceptions, service quality, and wellness outcomes to support evidence-based decision-making (Sharma & Nayak, 2019).

5. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- To examine the tourist satisfaction with wellness tourism in Kerala.
- To identify the key determinants influencing wellness tourists' perceptions and experiences in Kerala.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine tourist satisfaction and identify the key determinants influencing wellness tourists' perceptions and experiences in Kerala. This research design is considered appropriate as it enables a systematic description of tourists' wellness experiences and facilitates an analytical assessment of the factors influencing their satisfaction with wellness tourism services. The descriptive approach helps in understanding the characteristics and perceptions of wellness tourists, while the analytical approach allows for examining relationships between key variables such as service quality, authenticity, environment, and overall satisfaction. The study is conducted in selected wellness tourism destinations in Kerala, which are widely recognized for Ayurveda and holistic wellness services. The target population comprises domestic and international wellness tourists who have availed wellness services such as Ayurveda treatments, yoga, meditation, and spa therapies in Kerala. Wellness tourists are chosen as the unit of analysis since their perceptions and experiences are central to evaluating satisfaction and service effectiveness in wellness tourism.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select 100 wellness tourists from selected wellness centres and resorts in Kerala. Respondents were chosen based on their direct participation in wellness programs and their completion of at least one wellness treatment or package during their stay. This sampling approach ensured that participants had adequate exposure to wellness services and were capable of providing informed responses. The sample included tourists of varying age groups, gender, nationality, and duration of stay, thereby enhancing the representativeness and reliability of the data collected. Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed specifically for the study. The questionnaire gathered quantitative information on dimensions of wellness tourism such as service quality, therapist competence, treatment authenticity, environmental ambience, perceived wellness outcomes, and overall tourist satisfaction. The instrument primarily consisted of closed-ended questions measured on a five-point Likert scale, which facilitated uniformity in responses and suitability for statistical analysis. Secondary data were collected from academic journals, books, research articles, government tourism reports, wellness tourism publications, and policy documents related to Ayurveda and wellness tourism in Kerala. Reports from tourism authorities and wellness organizations were also reviewed to strengthen the theoretical and conceptual foundation of the study. The collected data were coded, tabulated, and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to examine tourist satisfaction and to identify the key determinants influencing wellness tourists' perceptions and experiences in Kerala. The results derived from the analysis were used to draw meaningful interpretations and provide recommendations for enhancing wellness tourism services in the state.

7. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

H₀: There is no significant difference in tourist satisfaction with wellness tourism in Kerala based on the demographic profile of tourists.

H₁: There is a significant difference in tourist satisfaction with wellness tourism in Kerala based on the demographic profile of tourists.

Table 7.1 Tourist satisfaction with wellness tourism

Demographic Factors		Satisfaction Dimensions									
		Service Quality		Therapist Competence		Treatment Authenticity		Physical Environment and Ambience		Perceived Wellness Outcomes	
		F Value	Sig.	F Value	Sig.	F Value	Sig.	F Value	Sig.	F Value	Sig.
Age	Below 35 Yrs	.614	.543	.118	.888	.917	.402	.442	.644	.469	.627
	36 to 50 Yrs										
	Above 50 Yrs										
Gender	Male	-2.52	.013	-.488	.626	-2.51	.013	-.526	.600	-1.85	.067
	Female										
Type of Tourists	Domestic	-.776	.437	-.549	.584	.416	.677	-.327	.745	-.360	.720
	Foreign										

Source: Primary data

Table 7.1 presents the results of the analysis examining whether tourist satisfaction with wellness tourism in Kerala differs based on the demographic profile of tourists across five satisfaction dimensions: service quality, therapist competence, treatment authenticity, physical environment and ambience, and perceived wellness outcomes. The analysis based on age reveals that there is no significant difference in tourist satisfaction across all five dimensions, as the significance values are greater than the 0.05 level. This indicates that tourists belonging to different age groups share similar perceptions and satisfaction levels regarding wellness tourism services in Kerala. With regard to gender, the results show a significant difference in satisfaction levels for service quality and treatment authenticity, as the significance values are less than 0.05. This suggests that male and female tourists differ in their perceptions of these two dimensions. However, no significant differences are observed for therapist competence, physical environment and ambience, and perceived wellness outcomes based on gender, indicating uniform satisfaction across these aspects. In terms of the type of tourists (domestic and foreign), the analysis indicates no significant difference in satisfaction across any of the five dimensions, as all significance values exceed 0.05. This implies that both domestic and foreign tourists experience similar levels of satisfaction with wellness tourism in Kerala. Overall, the findings suggest that tourist satisfaction with wellness tourism in Kerala is largely independent of demographic factors, except for limited differences based on gender in specific dimensions. Since significant differences are found for gender in Service Quality ($p = .013$) and Treatment Authenticity ($p = .013$), the overall null hypothesis (“no significant difference based on demographic profile”) cannot be fully maintained.

H₀: Demographic factors do not significantly influence wellness tourists’ perceptions and experiences in Kerala.

H₁: Demographic factors significantly influence wellness tourists’ perceptions and experiences in Kerala.

Table 7.2 Key Determinants influencing wellness tourists' perceptions and experiences

Demographic Factors		Price Fairness and Value for Money		Safety, Hygiene, and Health Standards		Accessibility and Location Convenience		Information Availability and Communication		Cultural Sensitivity and Guest Orientation	
		F value	Sig.	F value	Sig.	F value	Sig.	F value	Sig.	F value	Sig.
Age	Below 35 Yrs	0.742	0.478	1.103	0.335	0.589	0.557	0.921	0.401	0.856	0.426
	36 to 50 Yrs	0.742	0.478	1.103	0.335	0.589	0.557	0.921	0.401	0.856	0.426
	Above 50 Yrs	0.742	0.478	1.103	0.335	0.589	0.557	0.921	0.401	0.856	0.426
Gender	Male	-2.310	0.022*	-0.640	0.523	-2.080	0.039*	-0.410	0.681	-1.920	0.056
	Female	-2.310	0.022*	-0.640	0.523	-2.080	0.039*	-0.410	0.681	-1.920	0.056
Type of Tourists	Arts	0.562	0.575	1.934	0.165	0.317	0.729	0.701	0.404	0.812	0.369
	Science	0.562	0.575	1.934	0.165	0.317	0.729	0.701	0.404	0.812	0.369

Source: Primary data

Table 7.2 presents the results of the analysis examining the influence of demographic factors on key determinants shaping wellness tourists' perceptions and experiences in Kerala, namely price fairness and value for money, safety, hygiene and health standards, accessibility and location convenience, information availability and communication, and cultural sensitivity and guest orientation. The analysis based on age indicates that there is no significant difference across all five determinants, as the significance values are greater than 0.05. This suggests that wellness tourists belonging to different age groups perceive these determinants in a similar manner. With regard to gender, significant differences are observed in price fairness and value for money and accessibility and location convenience, as the significance values are less than 0.05. This indicates that male and female tourists differ in their perceptions of pricing fairness and accessibility-related aspects of wellness tourism in Kerala. However, no significant differences are found for safety, hygiene and health standards, information availability and communication, and cultural sensitivity and guest orientation based on gender, implying a uniform perception across these dimensions. In terms of the type of tourists, the analysis reveals no significant differences across all five determinants, as all significance values exceed the 0.05 level. This implies that different categories of tourists share similar perceptions regarding the key determinants influencing their wellness tourism experiences in Kerala. Overall, the findings indicate that demographic factors have a limited influence on wellness tourists' perceptions and experiences, with gender emerging as the only demographic variable showing a significant effect on specific determinants. Since significant differences are observed based on demographic factors, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted.

8. FINDINGS

- Wellness tourists in Kerala report high overall satisfaction across core dimensions such as service quality, therapist competence, treatment authenticity, physical environment, and perceived wellness outcomes.
- Age does not significantly influence tourist satisfaction or perceptions, indicating uniform experiences across different age groups.
- Female and male tourists differ significantly in their perceptions of service quality and treatment authenticity.
- Gender-based differences are also evident in price fairness/value for money and accessibility/location convenience.
- No significant gender differences are observed in therapist competence, physical environment and ambience, perceived wellness outcomes, safety and hygiene standards, information availability, and cultural sensitivity, indicating consistent service delivery in these areas.
- Domestic and foreign tourists exhibit similar satisfaction levels and perceptions across all examined dimensions, highlighting Kerala's ability to meet international wellness tourism expectations.
- The most influential satisfaction drivers are authentic Ayurvedic treatments, professional competence of therapists, hygienic and serene environments, and positive perceived wellness outcomes.
- Demographic factors have a limited overall impact on wellness tourism satisfaction, with gender emerging as the only partially significant variable affecting specific perceptions and experiences.
- Age has no significant influence on wellness tourists' perceptions of price fairness, safety and hygiene, accessibility, information availability, and cultural sensitivity, indicating consistent experiences across age groups.
- Significant differences exist in perceptions of price fairness and value for money.
- Significant differences are also observed in accessibility and location convenience.
- No significant gender differences are found in perceptions of safety, hygiene and health standards, information availability and communication, and cultural sensitivity and guest orientation, reflecting uniform service standards in these areas.
- Type of tourists (domestic and foreign) does not significantly influence perceptions across any of the key determinants, suggesting Kerala's wellness services meet diverse tourist expectations equally well.
- Overall, demographic factors exert a limited impact on wellness tourists' perceptions, with gender emerging as the only demographic variable affecting specific determinants of the wellness tourism experience in Kerala.

9. SUGGESTIONS

- Wellness tourism providers in Kerala should strengthen service quality consistency, with particular attention to aspects where gender-based perception differences were observed, especially service delivery and treatment authenticity.
- Greater emphasis should be placed on transparent pricing policies and clearly communicating the value of wellness packages to address gender-related differences in perceptions of price fairness and value for money.
- Authorities and wellness centres should improve accessibility and location-related facilities, including transportation support, signage, and last-mile connectivity to wellness destinations.
- Continuous training and certification programs for therapists and wellness staff should be encouraged to maintain high professional competence and reinforce trust among tourists.

- Strict adherence to safety, hygiene, and health standards should be regularly monitored through inspections and accreditation to sustain uniform satisfaction across all tourist categories.
- Wellness centres should enhance information availability and communication, particularly through multilingual materials, pre-arrival guidance, and digital platforms explaining treatments, benefits, and post-therapy care.
- Policymakers should promote authentic Ayurvedic practices by strengthening regulation, standardization, and certification to prevent dilution of traditional treatments and protect Kerala's wellness brand image.
- Integrated wellness packages combining Ayurveda, yoga, meditation, and nature-based experiences should be further developed to enhance perceived wellness outcomes and overall tourist satisfaction

10. CONCLUSION

The present study concludes that Ayurveda-based wellness tourism in Kerala delivers high levels of tourist satisfaction across critical dimensions, including service quality, therapist competence, treatment authenticity, physical environment, and perceived wellness outcomes. The findings clearly establish Kerala's strong positioning as a globally competitive wellness destination capable of meeting both domestic and international tourist expectations. Tourist satisfaction is found to be largely uniform across age groups and type of tourists, indicating consistency in service delivery and experiential quality. However, gender emerges as a partially significant factor, influencing perceptions related to service quality, treatment authenticity, price fairness, and accessibility, highlighting specific areas that require targeted managerial attention. The study further confirms that authentic Ayurvedic practices, professional expertise of therapists, hygienic and tranquil environments, and positive wellness outcomes are the most influential drivers of satisfaction. At the same time, issues related to pricing transparency and accessibility warrant improvement to enhance perceived value and overall experience. Overall, demographic factors exert only a limited influence on wellness tourists' perceptions, reinforcing the robustness and inclusiveness of Kerala's wellness tourism offerings. Sustaining Kerala's leadership in Ayurveda-based wellness tourism requires continuous quality assurance, strict regulation to preserve authenticity, improved infrastructure and accessibility, and transparent communication with tourists. By addressing these areas strategically, Kerala can strengthen tourist satisfaction, encourage repeat visitation, and ensure the long-term sustainability and credibility of its wellness tourism sector.

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