

Exploring the Potentials and Challenges of Ayurveda Tourism in Kerala – An Overview

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Abstract

Ayurveda is one of the oldest traditional medical systems practiced in the most authentic manner in India. Ayurveda has natural healing capability and many people are coming to India, especially to Kerala to reap its benefits. Ayurveda has added value to health tourism as a whole and the demand for Ayurveda and wellness travel has increased especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, this article tries to identify the potentials, strengths, challenges, and barriers of Ayurveda tourism in Kerala and to recommend corrective measures for the effective promotion of this sector. This study uses secondary data from a thorough analysis of the existing research articles on Ayurveda tourism. As this study is based on secondary data, a detailed survey is conducted on the qualitative and quantitative research methods adopted previously among tourists and stakeholders to get a broader picture of this sector. This study may help stakeholders in the Ayurveda tourism sector to give greater attention to its improvement, marketing, promotion and creation of collaborative associations. This study also recommends remedial measures for the effective growth of the Ayurveda tourism sector in Kerala.

Keywords: Ayurveda Tourism, Ayurveda tourism marketing, Kerala Ayurveda tourism

1. Introduction

People travel across the world for leisure, work and medical purposes. This habit of people has led to the growth of tourism as an industry worldwide. Health tourism is one of the prominent tourism avenues in the world where people travel from one country to another for medical and wellness purposes. Health tourism can be classified broadly into two segments – medical and wellness, where medical tourism is involved with diagnosis, treatment and cure, and wellness tourism is mainly involved with enhancing well-being, relaxation, and healing treatment. Health tourism is the mix of two of the world's largest sectors i.e., medicine and tourism (Venkata, 2007). Health and wellness are becoming key

areas in the tourism sector which require special attention from authorities and stakeholders (Anisree & Dharmarajan, 2023). The indigenous and traditional medical systems had been practiced all over the world even before the emergence of modern medicine. Traditional medical systems like Indian Ayurveda, Traditional Chinese medicine, Ancient Roman and Greek medicine, etc., are believed to have laid the foundation for modern medicine. These traditional medical systems are now becoming part of the mainstream healthcare systems which has opened up new avenues in the healthcare and tourism sectors. These healthcare systems are attracting people to travel across the globe to reap its benefits and are adding value to health tourism as a whole. These traditional medical systems are useful for curing illness and maintaining the wellness of both body and mind (Perera et al., 2023).

From ancient times, India has been practicing traditional medical systems like Ayurveda, Yoga, Siddha, Unani, and Naturopathy which have initiated an impactful growth of tourism in India. Ayurveda opens up many tourism avenues in health, wellness, and rejuvenation that help in the holistic development of mankind. Utilizing these opportunities, Ayurveda medical and wellness centres are mushrooming in the country to serve people traveling for these purposes (Anoop & Lakshmi, 2024). In addition, the recent shift of focus from mere physical health to comprehensive and holistic health has led to a continual growth of Ayurveda and related tourism sectors. In today's fast and ever-changing world, the incidence of lifestyle diseases and the need for well-being has increased. This has led to inclusive healthcare and restorative journeys becoming a universal concept. Ayurveda and other related traditional medical systems have a good chance of seizing this opportunity. Ayurveda tourism as a whole would connect the two different processes - Ayurveda medicine and tourism, which would benefit both sectors (Asha & Singh, 2023).

Ayurveda tourism is one of the niche markets in India, especially in Kerala. In this increasingly competitive international tourism market, this tourism avenue can become a unique selling point for tourism stakeholders in Kerala to attract tourists. Many Ayurveda medical and wellness facilities are being established nationwide, especially in Kerala that cater to these tourists. Post-COVID-19, people have realized the importance of their physical and mental health (Liji, 2022). Hence, this study is intended to deep dive into the potentials, strengths, challenges, and barriers of Ayurveda tourism in Kerala and to recommend remedial measures that can help authorities, stakeholders and marketers to prepare effective strategies to boost the growth of this sector.

2. Research Methodology

This study involves the analysis of previous studies available in the literature in the field of Ayurveda tourism and marketing.

2.1 Research Type

The study is descriptive in nature and based on secondary data obtained from an analysis of the existing research articles in the area of Ayurveda tourism.

2.2 Research problem

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the mindset of people towards health and wellness. There is a growing shift in focus from physical health to holistic health. This has increased the urge of people to pursue more health and wellness-related travel. Ayurveda and related tourism have a good chance of seizing this opportunity, as more people have realized the importance and benefits offered by Ayurveda and related traditional medical systems.

2.3 Research Question

What are the potential opportunities and challenges faced by the Ayurveda tourism sector in Kerala?

2.4 Objectives

1. To examine the present state of the Ayurveda tourism sector in Kerala.
2. To identify the opportunities for Ayurveda tourism in Kerala.
3. To identify the barriers and challenges faced by Ayurveda tourism in Kerala.
4. To propose certain suggestions to authorities, stakeholders and marketers to boost the growth of Ayurveda tourism in Kerala.

3. Analysis of Previous Articles

The analysis of the literature has been conducted to get an in-depth knowledge about the previous studies performed in the Ayurveda tourism sector. A survey of the previous studies on Ayurveda tourism was performed by selecting the articles, from 4 databases namely, EBSCO, Google Scholar, Research Gate and ProQuest. Articles were systematically selected, excluded, and shortlisted for the study as shown below (Figure 1).

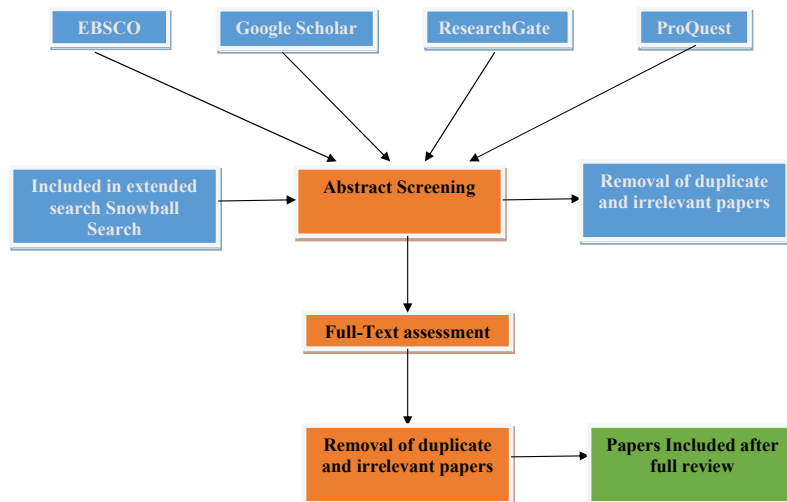


FIGURE 1: Systematic Selection of Articles for Review (Source: Researcher).

A total of 23 Articles were included in the final study.

The Literature analysis is divided into 4 major headings: Ayurveda, AYUSH, Ayurveda Tourism and Ayurveda Tourism Marketing.

3.1 Ayurveda

Ayurveda is regarded as an alternative system of therapy that helps achieve “arogya” (health) through the use of natural herbs as medicines. It helps the body to reboot and detox without adversely affecting the human body system. Ayurveda is the “Science of Life” that originated in India concentrating on treatment, illness prevention and holistic well-being. It focuses on mental health, customization, and a personalized approach to each patient and sets itself apart from modern medicine (Arunangshu, 2017).

Ayurveda is a theological and philosophical system that has an integrated view of the physical, mental, psychological, and spiritual well-being of humans. Ayurveda also has a preventive aspect to it along with the healing of diseases. Ayurveda medicine treats the body as a whole instead of looking for quick relief, but people are rarely utilizing it. In critical situations, the role of modern medicine is considered to be far ahead of Ayurveda, but, for chronic diseases, allergies, lifestyle diseases, infertility issues, neurological and orthopaedic issues Ayurveda is considered to be the best healthcare system. Ayurveda is conceived to be an integrative medicine, which promotes healthy living, eating and well-being (Prachi, 2023).

Ayurveda is a science of rejuvenation and relief that has gained a lot of importance among people over the years, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, WHO has started to promote traditional medical healthcare systems like Ayurveda more than before. Ayurveda when combined with other traditional practices, such as yoga, meditation, naturopathy, nature-themed tourism activities, and other alternative medicines provides a holistic healing system, which has led to the recognition of this healthcare system and the rise of the Ayurveda tourism industry (Aytaş et al., 2024).

3.2 AYUSH

Since the last few decades due to the healing power, holistic wellbeing, and the positive impact of alternative medical systems, authorities have started to pay more attention to this sector in India. Keeping this in mind a new ministry of Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy (AYUSH) was established by the Government of India, for the protection and promotion of these traditional medical systems (Jaiswal & Williams, 2017).

The main vision of the AYUSH Ministry is to “Accomplish a Well India” and to spot AYUSH systems as the ideal health system of living and practice. To accomplish this vision different regulatory authorities and development agencies were established. AYUSH is a unique feature of the Indian healthcare sector which is becoming popular among foreigners as well as Indians. Understanding the prospect of Ayurveda for both healthcare and tourism segments in India, the AYUSH ministry is setting guidelines and steps to brand Ayurveda both in India and abroad. It also allocates funds for the promotion,

development of infrastructure, quality assurance, standardization and training of human resources in the sector (Katoch et al., 2017).

The government of India has recently introduced the “AYUSH VISA” which would ease the visa procedures and encourage people to visit India for traditional medical care. The ministry has signed a Memorandum of Undertaking (MOU) with many countries, is attending international fairs and events, and is also engaged in international cooperation to widen the reach of AYUSH systems worldwide. Ayurveda is an integrative traditional system that provides robust healthcare to people and has the potential to transform multi-dimensional sectors like health, tourism and hospitality (Bhargavi & Shivani, 2020).

3.3 Ayurveda Tourism

Ayurveda assures a complete natural and holistic approach to healing with the absence of side effects that have been attracting people from all over the world. This steered the birth of a new tourism avenue called Ayurveda tourism. Ayurveda tourism includes two terms i.e. ayurveda and tourism, thus integrating tourism with Ayurveda health care, treatment, wellness, along with relaxation, and leisure (Mahisha & Samarathunga, 2023).

Ayurveda tourism is the practice of visiting a destination away from home to try Ayurveda to improve health and well-being. Ayurveda tourism retreats offer comprehensive programs that address physical, mental and emotional well-being. Ayurveda centres offer personalized and customized routines with curated wellness menus, treatments and therapies that cater to achieving unique health and well-being goals. Ayurveda also has a treatment angle to it, and people visit Ayurveda facilities for the treatment of chronic diseases, lifestyle diseases, neurological and orthopaedic problems, back pains, arthritis, etc (Manpreet & Roshan, 2022).

3.4 Components of Ayurveda Tourism

Ayurveda tourism is regarded as “healing tourism” and nature-based tourism, as it is considered to be a pathway to wellness and well-being. The central theme of Ayurveda tourism is more of prevention and well-being rather than cure. The main components of Ayurveda tourism are mentioned in Figure 2.

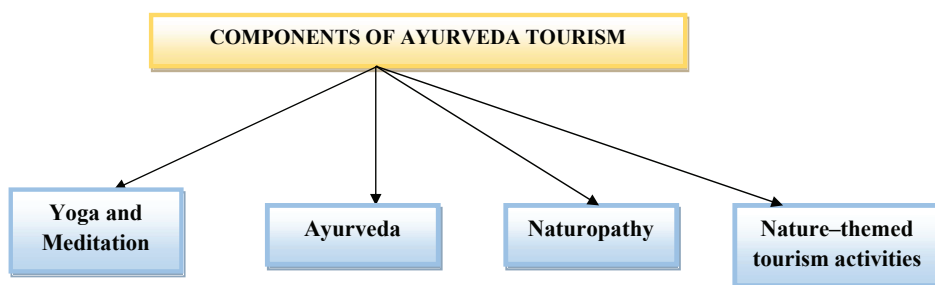


FIGURE 2: Components of Ayurveda Tourism (Source: Researcher).

South Asian countries like India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bali, Thailand and Malaysia are the major countries that practice Ayurveda. Ayurveda and related facilities are present all over the world, but in Asia, it is practiced most traditionally and authentically. India has an edge over other Asian countries, as the birth of Ayurveda medicine is believed to have taken place here (Pradeep & Wickramasinghe, 2021).

India is known for its diversity, hospitality and uniqueness which have been attracting travellers from all over the world. India has a lot to offer to tourists with distinctive tourism avenues and related activities. Ayurveda is one such category that has been attracting tourists to India due to its holistic identity. India is becoming a favourite destination for traditional healthcare systems, as India is considered to be the pioneer in traditional medical practices like Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani, Naturopathy, Yoga and meditation. India has rapidly emerged as a health tourism destination, thanks to its ancient healing practices and indigenous healthcare systems. Almost all states in India have well-renowned Ayurveda centres and resorts. States like Kerala, Tamilnadu, Karnataka, Gujarat, Goa, Uttarakhand, and Rajasthan have top-class Ayurveda facilities that attract a lot of foreign and domestic tourists (Subin, 2022). Kerala stands out from all other states, as Ayurveda has been practiced with genuineness for centuries in Kerala which has marked the formation of the brand “Kerala Ayurveda”. Kerala is acclaimed as the “Land of Ayurveda” for its authenticity. Kerala being the cradle of Ayurveda is setting the standards in Ayurveda tourism and is attracting a huge number of foreigners for Ayurveda treatment and wellness. The pleasant climate, unspoiled destinations, culture, backwaters, presence of other tourism avenues, and educated society provide a competitive advantage for “Kerala Ayurveda” over other states in India (Aswathy & Kumar, 2025)

3.5 Ayurveda Tourism – Kerala

Kerala has a combination of traditional Ayurveda practitioners called “Vaidyas” who have been practicing Ayurveda as a family tradition that was passed down from generation to generation and a pool of qualified Ayurveda doctors and medical staff who have academic degrees from colleges, ensuring that Ayurveda treatment and therapies are administered in its pure, genuine and traditional style. This makes the state stand out from other countries and states in India by offering excellent treatment modalities (Preji & Sarat, 2021). Hari Krishnan (2020) also observed similar findings that Kerala has Ayurveda traditional healers who have been practicing Ayurveda as a family profession for generations, and also academically qualified Ayurveda practitioners who have received training from educational institutions. Private hospitals and resorts are also providing Ayurveda treatment and therapies to their tourists. Besides, the tourists visiting Kerala for Ayurveda, also explore other tourism avenues like backwaters, eco-tourism spots, cultural and heritage tourism avenues. The stakeholders and authorities in this sector need to tap this opportunity effectively, which will pave the way for the overall development of tourism, healthcare and Ayurveda sectors. The nature-based healing legacy of Ayurveda and the healthy cultural environment of Kerala fascinate and attract tourists (Lata & Santoshi, 2023).

People have become more health conscious and are seeking authentic and holistic experiences in recent times, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Travellers have

started to pursue individual medical and relaxation goals while going on outdoor tours. Ayurveda tourism avenues align with these priorities as they promote well-being and enhanced tourism experiences (Manpreet & Roshan, 2023). Many Western tourists want to return to their roots and are looking to add natural elements to their tours and travels. India, especially Kerala has a lot to offer such as Ayurveda, yoga, and other related tourism activities to satisfy tourists of diverse interests. Kerala is the most-sought after location for Ayurveda and other traditional medical healthcare as it has an extensive legacy in this segment (Sarwal et al., 2021).

Kerala is poised to become a global tourist hotspot of health and wellness tourism avenues as it offers quality, authenticity, originality, and genuine services of both modern medicine and Ayurveda. Though there are a lot of opportunities and potentials for Kerala Ayurveda, there are also many challenges such as., i) the promotion of Ayurveda tourism avenues and brand building of Kerala Ayurveda, ii) the need for standardization of Ayurvedic treatments, iii) the presence of fake Ayurveda centres, iv) unethical practices in the name of Ayurveda, v) improving international accreditation standards, vi) integration of Ayurvedic facilities with modern medical facilities, vii) competition from other countries, and, viii) lack of proper policy framework and proper infrastructure development (Devi & Singh, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced people to review their way of life. Hence, in this new era of the post-COVID-19 world, alternative tourism avenues like Ayurveda, wellness, and healing focusing on the well-being of travellers are gaining momentum. To tap this opportunity there is a need for a proper marketing and promotion plan in place (Anoop & Lakshmi, 2023).

3.6 Ayurveda Tourism Marketing

No sector can survive in the long run without a proper marketing and promotion strategy and similar is the case with the Ayurveda tourism sector too. The marketing frameworks for the sector are set by stakeholders in the domain. The major stakeholders of the Ayurveda tourism sector are mentioned in Figure 3.

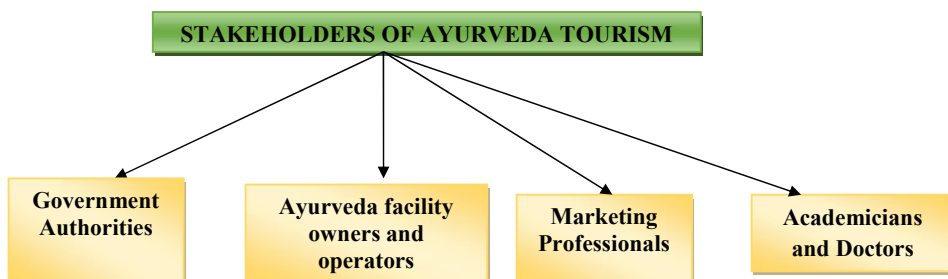


FIGURE 3: Stakeholders of Ayurveda Tourism (Source: Researcher).

Khanal & Shimizu (2019) observed the lack of effective governmental support in promoting Ayurveda and wellness tourism avenues as one of the main obstacles to the development of this sector. They further noted the importance of developing a marketing plan and proper implementation of these strategies for branding the country as an Ayurveda tourism destination. Kerala possesses all the essential components for the growth of Ayurveda tourism, like qualified Ayurveda doctors and professionals, authenticity in treatment, other tourism attractions, amenities and the presence of private players but, when it comes to marketing, the sector is far behind. To expand the market of Ayurveda and related tourism activities well-drafted Ayurveda tourism promotion strategy needs to be in place (Telej & Gamble, 2019).

The needs of tourists who come to explore Ayurveda vary. Some come for Ayurveda treatment, some come for wellness therapies, whereas another group comes to explore other tourism avenues along with the possibilities of Ayurveda in Kerala. Hence, there is a need to develop Ayurveda tourism packages that satisfy the needs, aspirations and requirements of all sections of people. Additionally, Ayurveda facilities can offer various add-on services in addition to Ayurveda such as yoga, meditation, garden tours, beauty tips, acupuncture, naturopathy, and clubbing other tourism activities that tourists can enjoy while being at the destination. These activities will motivate tourists to visit the Ayurveda destination more often. Additional services along with Ayurveda tourism will make tourists' experience more comfortable, enjoyable and memorable (Ranjan et al., 2022). Ayurveda tourism is a crucial niche sector that can attract a lot of tourists to India and so it requires proper promotion and marketing. Kerala and India as a whole can take a leaf from Sri Lanka which is aggressively marketing and promoting Ayurveda. Hence, there is a need to focus on promoting the uniqueness of Kerala Ayurveda and to publicize the potential and importance of Ayurveda and related activities that can provide good health, wellness and well-being (Mavela & Athula, 2024).

The importance of ayurveda-related tourism activities has gained prominence in recent times and promoting it along with other tourism avenues like religious tourism and providing quality ayurveda, yoga, wellness, and well-being offerings in religious tourism spots and marketing it accordingly can be effective and need to be explored (Prasad & Rani, 2015., Prasad, 2023). Conducting marketing and awareness programs focusing on the uniqueness that Ayurveda offers can be looked into. People of Germany, Switzerland, England, and other European countries are aware of Ayurveda but do not know where the authentic and genuine centres are located. Hence, there is a need to publish the benefits and details of Ayurveda and tourism avenues through international magazines, journals, and websites. Participation in international health expos, seminars, workshops and trade shows will also help in the long run. India is also the hub for modern spiritual tourism and, blending spiritual tourism with Ayurveda therapies can also benefit the growth of this sector at a fast pace (Uma et al., 2023).

With the emergence of online and social media platforms, the decision-making process and tourist destination selection have become easier. Reviews, ratings, and recommendations given on online and social media platforms can influence the destination selection. Positive electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) and online reviews from other tourists on platforms like Trip Advisor can influence the customer's final destination

selection (Hamzah & Waqas, 2023). Hence, there is a need for an active online and social media presence of Ayurveda facilities and stakeholders have to explore the opportunities of running ads on Google and social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. A proper marketing plan with good quality service can increase tourists' visits and revisits to the facility. Satisfied tourists will turn into loyal customers and will suggest it to their peer group and revisit the facility (Radwan, 2022).

Currently, there is a lack of proper media campaigns for Ayurveda tourism. Moreover, the reach of campaigns run for Ayurveda is alarmingly low. Proper information about Ayurveda and related tourism avenues needs to be delivered through both online and offline platforms. Most of the Ayurveda facilities in Kerala are amidst the lap of nature that would attract more tourists if promoted properly and effectively. Proper segmentation of tourists needs to be considered while planning and managing marketing activities for Ayurveda tourism services (Liji, 2023).

4. Findings

Regarding the Ayurveda and related tourism activities in Kerala, this study identified several key factors:

4.1 Potentials

1. People have started to understand the importance of wellness and well-being especially after the COVID-19 pandemic which has directly benefitted Kerala Ayurveda tourism.
2. Presence of qualified and traditional Ayurveda practitioners and staff.
3. Presence of world-class Ayurveda resorts and hospitals in both private and public sectors.
4. Presence of other tourism avenues, attractions, and good hospitality services.
5. Possibility of blending modern medicine with Ayurveda.
6. Personalized and customized consultations, and accommodation facilities.

4.2 Challenges

1. Scarcity of rare herbs required for the formulation of Ayurvedic medicines.
2. Fraudulent centres and illegal activities in the name of Ayurveda.
3. Competition for Ayurveda services from other South-East Asian countries.
4. No proper marketing and promotional activities specifically for Ayurveda tourism.
5. Lack of proper infrastructure facilities.
6. Government support and assistance is not adequate.
7. No proper facilities for Ayurveda medical research.
8. No proper framework for the standardization of Ayurveda medicines.

5. Suggestions

5.1 For Government and Authorities

1. Increase government support to promote Ayurveda drug production, train staff, and invest in research and development initiatives.
2. Institutionalization and professionalization of Ayurveda clinical practice.
3. AYUSH department needs to conduct more workshops inviting the key players of the sector and provide training and support.
4. The government can start a regulatory body to control the whole mechanism which will curb fraudulent and unethical practices.
5. Genuine Ayurveda centres and stakeholders can be supported by providing interest-free loans and funds.
6. Ayurveda stakeholders need to be sensitized about the standards that need to be followed by their centres.
7. Upgrading the Ayurveda tourism sector by focusing on developing Ayurveda hospitals and providing advanced training facilities for Ayurveda doctors.
8. The tourism department has to prioritize the Ayurveda tourism sector and come up with short-term training courses for Ayurveda staff.
9. Proper promotional and marketing activities for Ayurveda-related tourism activities in national and international arenas.
10. Conducting regular seminars in various parts of the world and distributing publications related to Ayurveda thus popularising the Ayurveda field globally.

5.2 For Stakeholders

1. Create integrated packages that cater to the tastes of both domestic and foreign travelers who are interested in Ayurveda.
2. Provide quality services with all other facilities that can be experienced in star hotels and avoid any illegal activities in the name of Ayurveda.
3. Participate and organize exhibitions, conferences, presentations, and workshops in India as well as abroad to promote and publicise Ayurveda.
4. Attend online meetings and discussions related to Ayurveda.
5. Can blend both modern medicine and Ayurveda treatments in the same hospital. Combining the two methods will benefit the people and the growth of this sector.
6. Strategic business alliances and impactful engagement with the government and vital players of the Ayurveda tourism industry
7. Allocation of more funds for marketing and promotional activities.

5.3 For Marketing Professionals

1. A proper marketing strategy has to be developed for Ayurveda tourism to get maximum benefits.
2. Separate marketing plan for national and international markets.

3. The large domestic market for Ayurveda tourism needs to be tapped properly by offering Ayurveda-related tourism services at a reasonable cost.
4. Ayurveda practices are often considered as just a massage system that needs to be solved by formulating a clear awareness and branding strategy.
5. The packages need to be carefully designed which will draw the attention of all groups of tourists to the Ayurveda destination.
6. Cross-country promotion and overseas promotion need to be looked upon.
7. Taking advantage of online and social media platforms in marketing.
8. Having a strong and active presence in online and social media platforms.

6. Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings and suggestions of this study would add to the literature on Ayurveda tourism by giving information regarding the prevailing state of the Ayurveda tourism sector, particularly in Kerala. The insights obtained from the current study would help the government authorities, stakeholders and marketing professionals in the Ayurveda tourism sector to develop policies and improve existing services and marketing strategies. This study would also act as a wake-up call for the government authorities and stakeholders of Ayurveda tourism to devote greater attention to Ayurveda tourism, its improvement, marketing, promotion and establishment of collaborative associations.

7. Limitations and Future Scope of Study

There is a need to conduct both qualitative and quantitative research surveys among tourists and stakeholders to collect primary data to get a broader overview of this sector. Also in India, there are other traditional healthcare systems, and their potential as tourism avenues need to be explored. For this study, research articles and papers from Google Scholar, Research Gate, EBSCO and ProQuest databases were only referred. Other databases are also to be referred to get a wider range of insights regarding this area.

8. Conclusion

The prospects of Ayurveda tourism in India, especially Kerala are promising. There is a need for additional efforts to channel this opportunity by addressing the identified barriers and challenges to ensure the smooth growth of Ayurveda tourism in Kerala. Addressing the findings and recommendations identified can help in creating a conducive environment for the development of Ayurveda tourism in Kerala. The insights obtained from the current study would help in contributing to a broader discourse on Ayurveda tourism development and will pave the way for the bright future of Kerala tourism.

Conflict of interest statement: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest involved.

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