

Experiential Tourism and Homestays in Kerala

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ABSTRACT

When we undertake leisure travel, in most cases, we want to enjoy the history and civilization of a distant location, relax in an eco-friendly destination, or experience the beauty of local culture like dance, drama, theatre, handicrafts, or any other fine arts. These experiences become memorable and remain in our minds for longer duration. The interests for experiential tourism have gained more importance among young generations and scholars and tourism practitioners of late. This process or trend in leisure travel is also known as “Immersion travel”. Uniqueness of the destination and authentic experiences are the hall marks of experiential tourism. Tourism is a principal contributor to the State’s economy in Kerala. Kerala has topped the list of the ‘Most Welcoming Region’ in India, according to a survey conducted by leading digital travel platform Booking.com. Because of its uniqueness, National Geographic Traveler selected Kerala as one of the best 50 destinations of a life time and also as one of the thirteen paradises in the world. Of late, the Responsible tourism destinations in the state and the new STREET (acronym for Sustainable, Tangible, Responsible, Experiential, Ethnic, Tourism hubs) projects have attracted many enthusiastic experiential travelers. Homestays in Kerala are an alternate accommodation option and they are part of the sharing economy. They also provide opportunities for Village tourism and authentic socio-cultural experiences. The homestays in Kerala are concentrated in those districts where there are a lot of destination attractions. The study concludes by saying that Experiential tourism is a special kind of tourism where the traveler and his/her direct experiences, are an opportunity for enrichment of cultural, social and emotional enrichment. Because homestays are comparatively

economical and they provide security and warmth of a home and also provide to learn a new culture, they attract many experiential travelers.

Key words: Experiential tourism, Memorable Tourism Experience, Homestays, Socio-cultural Experiences

INTRODUCTION

According to Scott. A. Cohen (2017)¹, Tourism is about creating experiences, which are the core of travel. Tourism experiences have been defined as enjoyable, memorable and engaging encounters (Oh et al, 2007)². We understand that the issue of memorable tourism experience (MTE) has garnered increasing attention from scholars and tourism practitioners. The Experience process has been clearly elaborated by Luca Meacci and Giovanni Liberatore³ in their research article “A senses-based model for experiential tourism”. According to them, in the case of experiential tourism, although the experience is usually treated as a product or object, it is crucial to recognise that the experience is a process of consumption where an event, the real object, became an experience. Travel trends the world over have dramatically shifted after the Covid 19 Pandemic and multiple studies have proved it. For example, TripAdvisor’s Travel in 2022 Report discovered that about three-quarters of travelers are willing to see new places with priorities such as having new experiences and learning about history and culture not far behind. According to their survey, in addition to spending time in nature and relaxing and dining out, one of the main areas where travelers seem to have

an interest in 2022 is in self-guided cultural activities. Research by TripAdvisor has found that travellers seek out for a mixture of new experiences and unique visits to iconic places. According to the Northern Ontario Tourist Outfitters Association (NOTO), Experiential tourism is a form of tourism in which people focus on experiencing a country, city or particular place by actively and meaningfully engaging with its history, people, culture, food and environment. Experiential tourism, also known as “Immersion travel” is a form of travel in which the focus is on the experience. Immersion travel provides diverse experiences that match the visitor’s interests and provides a sense of personal accomplishment, thereby creating their own unique memories. It is understood that Uniqueness is one of the biggest assets that a place can have when it comes to experiential tourism. Many travelers, who choose immersive travel, do it because they want to live a truly authentic experience and get to know the local culture. Experiential travel entails immersing yourself in the essence of a travel destination instead of experiencing it superficially. Another most popular form of experiential travel is volunteer tourism. Many youth travelers (also so-called “gap-year” tourists) seek experiences with an educational angle. Some of these involve volunteering on development projects in the chosen destination. Fear of Missing out (FOMO) is another new concept that is becoming more popular to a large section of travel and adventure enthusiasts. Young travelers’ lookout for fresh and unique experiences on trips to a common holiday destination, keen on discovering hidden gems of unexplored lands and broadening their horizons and definitions of what ‘travel’ really means, experiential travel has gradually increased in recent years.

The main attraction of homestays in Kerala is that homestays provide many unique experiences for the guests. One such experiences is homely food because providing sleeping space (Bed) and

Breakfast is a compulsory obligation of the host. Guests more often than not, do engage themselves in learning culinary tips. Another aspect of homestays in Kerala is that almost all of them have some sort of specialty. It could be the agricultural activities they are normally engaged in. For example, homestays in Idukki and Wayanad districts are mostly familiar with coffee or tea plantations or the cultivation of other hill produces like Ginger, Cardomen, Cinnamon, Cloves, Pepper, Turmeric and Nutmeg. Incidentally, Kerala produces approximately 97 % of India’s national output of Pepper. Kerala accounts for 91 % of the natural rubber production in the country. Similarly, 92 % of Cardamom produced in India are from Kerala. Kerala accounts for 70 % of India’s coconut production.

Some of the other specialties of Homestays in Kerala for experiential tourism are the holistic Ayurveda treatment, Eco-tourism, Beach tourism, Pilgrimage tourism, Cultural tourism etc. Kerala has recently started its Caravan Tours providing travel services for travelers to trip around Kerala on their own accord in fully furnished vans, including beds, kitchens, and amenities that are commonly found in hotels.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A study was made to understand the origin of the concept of Experiential tourism. In the process the following research articles were reviewed.

1. Gallang Perdhana Dalimunthe and Henry Meytra Taufik (2021)⁴

According to the authors, Experiential Tourism is a tourism concept that prioritizes the subjectivity aspect in its consumption patterns. This aspect of subjectivity affects tourists’ interpretation of each destination visited. This study discusses four concepts of postmodern tourism as well as the patterns of sun-lust and wanderlust tourist visits. In mass tourism, where managers offer tourism concepts such as good quality accommodation or tour packages at low

prices, the new concept of experiential tourism in which tourists are willing to pay more to get an optimal experience that offers an emotional stimulus. Tourists are not only willing to pay for a product, but more than that, they are paying for the feeling they get when they visit a tourist destination. In conclusion, the authors stated that Experiential tourism is a branch of tourism that should be considered to get a more research portion in the future. This is related to the close relationship between experiences and the concept of special interest tourism which is starting to be sought after by tourists

2. Luca Meacci and Giovanni Liberatore (2019)⁵

The author has quoted Aristotle (2001), and said that the role of the senses in human life, experience and knowledge has been a reason of reflection since the early days of philosophy. In tourist studies, in particular in the field of experiential tourism, senses have played always a pivotal role. Often, these studies have been systematically centered on the visual component of the tourist experience. According to the authors, in the case of experiential tourism, although the experience is usually treated as product or object, it is crucial to recognize that the experience is a process of consumption where an event, the real object, became an experience. Experience is that only when the objective characteristics of the event interact with subjective responses of the protagonist (consumer) of experience. They concluded by adding the following points namely,

- A) Consumption is an interaction between a subject and an object;
- B) The experience is a process of consumption where an event became an experience;
- C) Senses are the first and corporeal gate in the experience process;
- D) Each experiential point is sensual in nature and has a specific sensory dimension;

3. Oystein Jensen (2014)⁶

The author states that the basis for differentiating experiential tourism from mass tourism can be linked to elements such as specific themes, extreme contexts, novel and innovative arrangements offering exclusiveness, perceived experience value, specialized competence, and multiple-sense involvement. These elements increase the perceived value for the customer. From a management/industry angle, experiential tourism gives emphasis on especially to the production- and management-specific aspects. But, from a consumer/market angle, it is concerned with nature of experiences and experience value as perceived by the customers. Tourist experiences have been defined as personal travel event that have entered long-term memory (Larsen, Citation2007), and the type of travel events that has been subject to major attention are those with particularly strong emotional impacts. Firms involved in creating experiences for tourists, can only plan and facilitate for the customer to partake in value-creation processes. The perceived experienced value, however, can only be realized when the customer is partaking in the creating valuable experiences. For successful co-creation of value, then the firm needs to identify, trace and empower tourists with the right skills and characteristics, and as such turn them into co-creators of value.

4. Nina.K. Prebensen, Joseph.S. Chen, Muzaffer Uysal (2014)⁷

The authors have discussed the concept of “Co-creation of Tourist Experience” in detail. When tourists choose to spend money, time and effort to engage in activities of interest, they do so to produce an enjoyable moment of time, whatever their primary aims, motivation, interest, involvement, experiences and skills. This makes the hedonic side of tourist consumption of great importance, and so the focus on understanding tourist presence and participation in enjoying, playing and partaking relevant to the production of

psychological well-being is essential. The authors go on to add that Experiences and their meanings usually appeal to tourists' high-order needs, such as novelty, excitement and enjoyment, prestige, socialization and learning, and contribute to the enhancement of a sense of well-being. Creating value in tourism experiences is greatly focused on the role of tourist as consumer and the destination setting and the service company as the producer or provider in the co-creation process. According to the authors, Whatever name we use – the experience environment, servicescape, experiencescape, spheres or setting – on-site value creation processes are core foundations that the tourism industry must acknowledge in order to plan, develop, involve and accommodate tourists so that they are able to actively partake in such practices. In conclusion, it is said that the study aims to serve as a reference from the unique perspective of co-creation of experience value and vacation experience in the field of tourism and allied fields such as leisure, recreation and service management.

5. Tony Joy and Jose K Antony (2019)⁸

The authors have studied the increased interest in Off-roading trips in Kerala especially in the Hill Areas of Kottayam, Idukki, Pathanamthitta and Wayanad districts. According to them, The Adventure Tourism sector is actually an industry that has a very high potential to generate income, although this sector is comparatively less popular in India when compared to other countries. They explained the Off-Road Adventurism by giving a simple definition of “Four-Wheel Drive (4WD) Tourism, which is the tourism experiences that the consumer and the supplier perceive as heightened in value through the use of 4WD Vehicles.” They opined that Off-Road Tourism is the complex and the changing relationship between the 4WD Vehicles and the Drivers, who perceive their aspirations for leisure trips, with the search for new sites and locations that offer freedom to both mind

and body. They have also quoted Kwortnik & Ross (2007)⁹ by saying that the Objectives and goals of travel motivations for Off-Road are the memorable experience, escape and change of scenery to mention few. They concluded by saying that “The study mainly focused on Off-Road from the perspective of the participants; had the study been focused on the perspective of the Local Community residing in the identified regions, an altogether different image of Off-Road as a Recreational Activity would have been obtained”.

6. P.S. Sibi (2017)¹⁰

The primary objective of the study was 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. According to the author, Special Interest Tourism (SIT) is emerging as one of the most popular forms of international and domestic travel. The Special Interest Tourism (SIT), a fast-growing concept and approach to tourism demonstrates a strong people centered, sustainable model which seeks more authentic experiences enabling closer interaction with host communities. The main purpose of special interest tourism is to satisfy specific needs or tastes of individuals or groups. The study has concluded that Special interest tourists spend more, stay longer, travel more frequently, and participate in more activities than other tourists. Unlike the mass tourism destinations, 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 author has concluded by saying 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.

7. William L. Smith (2006)¹¹

According to the author, “experiential tourism” began to appear in tourism practitioner literature around the world in the late 1990’s and into the new millennium. His study reviews available academic and practitioner literature to develop a working definition of the “experiential tourism” concept, examines examples of “experiential tourism” activities around the world, and suggests a set of standards for an analytical framework. He is of the view that whereas goods are tangible and services are intangible, experiences are memorable. The author has described a Set of Standards (20 numbers) for Experiential Tourism. He goes on to add that quality, memorable visitor experiences are a shared outcome between the visitor and the experience provider. The desired outcome of experiential tourism is to achieve a complete participatory experience that provides new knowledge and authentic experiences. He concludes and says that Experiential tourism engages all five senses.

Definitions of “experiential tourism”

The idea of Experimental travel was led by a French journalist, Joel Henry in 1990 who transformed travel into a game. He suggests experiencing the chosen destination in a unique way that would remain etched in the memory forever. There are many definitions for Experiential tourism available in the literature. It would be worthwhile if we go through the following:

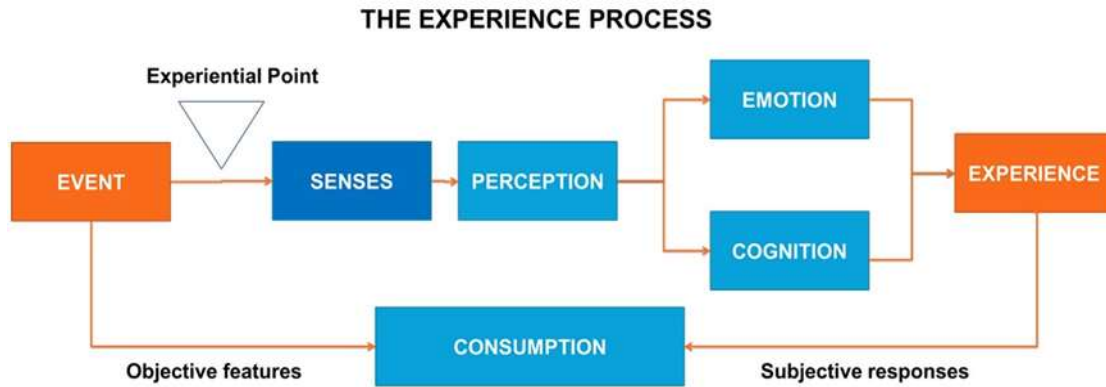
1. Speaking at the 2004 Wisconsin Governor’s Conference on Tourism, Ted Eubanks defined “experiential tourism” as something that attracts people to

places and markets to merchandise. He said that experiential tourism is everything visitors touch, feel, see and do, and, people are craving experiential tourism now more than ever.

2. Canada’s Minister’s Roundtable on Parks Canada provides a set of insights into accepted definitions of “experiential tourism” in the literature. According to them, Experiential tourism shows rather than describes. It encourages visitors to actively participate in the experience and promotes activities that draw people outdoors, and into cultures and communities. In this sense it is very personal and individual.
3. According to Stamboulis & Skayannis¹², Experience-based tourism is a type of tourism that is different from more conventional tourism and is characterized with offerings with a relatively high degree of differentiation and intangible value perceived by the customers at a certain place and in a certain time. The basis for differentiating can be linked to elements such as specific themes, extreme contexts, novel and innovative arrangements offering exclusiveness, perceived experience value, specialized competence, multiple-sense involvement and other elements that increase the perceived value for the customer.

The process of Experiential tourism

The experienced utility allows eliminating the majority of self-report biases, capturing the affective components of visitor experience, analysing relationships between anticipation, experienced, and remembered utilities, and applying emerging moment-based research techniques.



Adapted from “Towards a Senses-Based Model for Experiential Tourism”: The Youtooscan.Com Case by Luca Meacci¹, Giovanni Liberatore
 The four main components (emotional, cognitive, sensorial, and conative) of holistic definition of experience, in graphical representation is as under:



Adapted from Maksim Godovykh, Asli D.A. Tasci.

Source: Their article on Customer experience in tourism: A review of definitions, components, and measurements.

Objectives of the study

The most important objectives of the study are as under:

1. To study the purpose of visits of tourists who preferred to stay in homestays in significant tourist destinations
2. To understand the experiential tourism potentials of 6 districts in Kerala
3. To suggest various marketing tools to encourage experiential tourism in Kerala

METHODOLOGY

Although Kerala has 14 districts with distinctive tourist attractions, the 6 districts of Alappuzha, Ernakulam, Idukki, Kottayam, Thiruvananthapuram and Wayanad have the presence of 78 % of homestays in Kerala during 2017. These districts also receive 62.14 % of the total tourist arrival in the state. Primary data was collected from 127 Homestays spread across

the above 06 districts of Kerala and 269 tourists who used homestays in different tourist destinations/locations in the selected districts. Two sets of questionnaires were used to collect the information from both homestay owners (stakeholder) and tourists. Among many feedbacks received, the purpose of the visits of tourists were analysed in particular. Further, the type of homestays and the respective tourist attractions of the locality were also assessed.

Experiential Tourism around the World

Experiential tourism has become the current term that encompasses a variety of tourism and traveler categories, including the following: cultural tourism, ecotourism, educational travel, experimental tourism, adventure tourism, heritage tourism, nature tourism, caravan tourism, house boat

tourism and cruise tourism ... - where activities are environmentally sensitive, displaying respect for the culture of the host area and looking to experience and learn rather than merely stand back and gaze.

Bali is known as one of the tourist destinations that has various types of arts in its culture. One of the elements of Balinese culture that is used as a tourist attraction is the performing arts. Barong and Keris is one such dance form used for attracting visitors interested in experiential tourism. The dance essentially represents the eternal struggle between good (the Barong) and the evil (the Witch). The Barong is a mythical masked beast believed to date back to Bali's pre-Hindu era. According to Tanuja Barker¹³, evidence of International tourism in Bali is seen as early as in 1920s when Dutch operated 5-days tour to the Island as a result of favourable responses stemming from a Balinese Orchestra performance in Paris. According to a survey conducted by the Bali tourism office, more than half (56%) of the foreign tourists were interested in the Balinese people and their culture. Villages in Sothern Bali tend to have at least one barong, as barong has been traditionally used to protect villagers from evil forces.

Thousands of tourists travel to Spain every year particularly to the southern region of Andalusia to attend and experience the world-renowned Flamenco festival. The tourism income generated out of the festival goes to local Flamenco artists and their heritage-related stakeholders such as Flamenco specialized shops, clothes and accessories designers, musical instrument makers, regional record companies and Flamenco venues. The unique, authentic and place-specific cultural experiences such as Flamenco festival is an art form originating from Andalusia and also a well-marketed tourism product. Flamenco experience invokes states of transcendence and it is proved to be spiritually enriching and transformational.

New Zealand's tourism development in recent decades suggests that experiential tourism can indeed help off-the-radar places

develop into mainstream destinations. Admittedly, New Zealand in the southern hemisphere was able to take advantage of the buzz from the "Lord of the Rings" movies to help its tourism efforts. However, New Zealand introduced advertising campaigns that focus on adventure and culture rather than on attractions related to the popular films. Adventure sports, culinary and wine tourism, and cultural excursions have led to a boom for New Zealand in both the U.S. and Asia Pacific markets. This has happened at a grassroots level, with more than nine out every 10 tour companies in the country having fewer than five employees. This means that even if people are there for the skiing or wine and nothing else, they will often be interacting directly with local people in a way that is more personal than in destinations with more traditional tourism infrastructure.

In Luang Prabang, an historic city and UNESCO World Heritage Site in Laos, one tradition has become quite popular with tourists. The practice of donating food to feed the city's monks occurs every morning. Local people congregate at the roadside and put food into the monks' bowls as they walk past. Tourists began coming early in the morning to photograph the procession-like practice. Some even take part, raising concerns that this once quiet, solemn religious affair has descended into a noisy spectacle. The Luang Prabang Airport reportedly has signs that offer advice on how to participate in the almsgiving in a respectful way.

Experience Travel Group, which offers experiential travel throughout destinations across Asia, describe it as 'boutique holidays for curious travelers. They are a UK based travel group having their office in Sri Lanka. The Exodus Travels Foundation was established in 2019 who offer adventure holidays, which boils down to experiential travel. They say "there's something about the feeling of visiting a new country, culture or environment – whether that's a mountain range, desert or jungle – that just can't be beaten". A tourist might achieve an

immersive experience by staying in a homestay and getting to know the local people and culture or they might choose to donate their time by taking a volunteer tourism trip. Travelling to places that are off the beaten path, such as Inner Mongolia or the Chinese Silk Road can be a great way to ensure that you have an immersive experience too.

In June 2019, Airbnb introduced 'Airbnb Adventures,' where travelers get to 'ditch the tourist trails and go deeper with wildly unique adventures around the world'. Airbnb's 'Experiences' arm, where travelers can engage in activities ranging from exploring the ancient ruins of Jordan, to uncovering the secrets of the Amazon rainforest, extensively involves local hosts, who handle all the nitty-gritty of the trip.

Tourism in Kerala

Tourism is an important hallmark of Kerala's economic development and a principal contributor to the State's economy. Kerala is now recognized internationally as a much sought-after tourist destination because of its pristine beaches, backwaters, mountain ranges, wild-life sanctuaries, superior facilities for Ayurveda treatment and the ancient culture of dance, drama and music. Kerala is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world. Several international agencies ranging from UNESCO to National Geographic have recognised the state's tourism potential. The most powerful positioning statement for an Indian destination is Kerala's USP "God's own country". It was in 1995, Kerala announced its first Tourism policy. The relevance of public- private partnership has sufficiently been highlighted in the policy. The policy also recommended popularizing Monsoon tourism and Experiential tourism and formation of Kerala Tourism Entrepreneurship Fund (KTEF). Kerala has topped the list as the 'Most Welcoming Region' in India, according to a survey conducted by leading digital travel platform Booking.com. (DOT Press release dated 31/1/2022). According to the press release

three cities of Kerala – Mararikulam, Thekkady and Varkala – also feature among the top five 'Most Welcoming Cities' in India. The State is the recipient of Das Golden Stadttor award for human by nature print Campaign in 2020. Kerala also received UNWTO accessible tourism destination award 2019, Asia spa India awards 2019 – best wellness destination, PATA gold awards for travel advertisement broadcast media –come out and play TV campaign, 2019, PATA gold awards for women empowerment initiative – ethnic restaurant at Kumarakom, 2019. Because of its uniqueness, National Geographic Traveller selected Kerala as one of the best 50 destinations of a life time and also as one of the thirteen paradises in the world. Caravan tourism by name 'Keravan Kerala' is the latest addition in the portfolio which was introduced in September 2021. The first such Caravan park has been inaugurated in Vagamon. 'Keravan Kerala' project rolled out by the State Tourism Department has been presented with the prestigious India Today Editor's Choice Award. Kerala Tourism launched the 'STREET' project to promote and take tourism deep into the interiors and rural hinterland of Kerala. The project would help visitors experience the diversity of offerings in these locales. The STREET is an acronym for Sustainable, Tangible, Responsible, Experiential, Ethnic, Tourism hubs. The project, conceived by the Responsible Tourism Mission, is inspired by the 'Tourism for Inclusive Growth' slogan of The United Nations World Tourism Organization. The purpose of the project is to give the state tourism a makeover, and introduce various new experiences under experiential tourism. There are 10 STREET projects in line, and Maravanthuruthu Water Street is the first of the 10 to be developed by Kerala Tourism through its Responsible Tourism Mission Kerala programme. Just like the Water Street theme in Maravanthuruthu, the STREET project has many themes including Green Street, Cultural Street, Ethnic Cuisine Street,

Village Experiential Tourism and Art Street to name a few.

Homestays in Kerala

Perhaps it was in Kerala that the Homestay Scheme was first implemented in the country. At one point of time, largest number of Homestays were there in Kerala and was popularly known as the Homestay capital of the country. Kerala has large numbers of well-constructed and excellent homestays that include estate bungalows, heritage homes, farm houses, vacant houses owned by NRIs and local residents. They provide economic and comfortable

accommodation within a traditional ambience providing fresh local food and a feel of the indigenous way of life. Homestays are an alternate accommodation and they are part of the sharing economy. The idea of ‘homestays’ was first approved by the Government in January 1998 and revised many times. However, the classified homestays came into existence some time in 2007. We can find Homestays in all the 14 districts of the state, because of various tourist attractions and the state government has proactively taken necessary steps to promote the homestay scheme.

Table -1: Number of Homestays in Kerala (2017 and 2020)

Name of the District	Diamond		Gold		Silver		Total	
	2017	2020	2017	2020	2017	2020	2017	2020
Alappuzha	24	22	33	35	74	95	131	152
Ernakulam	42	52	48	55	71	27	161	134
Idukki	22	11	49	42	141	21	212	74
Kannur	5	1	6	6	25	14	36	21
Kasaragod	1	1	6	10	1	4	8	15
Kottayam	30	11	34	15	49	7	113	33
Kozhikode	1	1	7	6	6	9	14	16
Malappuram	7	2	10	4	11	1	28	7
Palakkad	9	5	6	5	15	3	30	13
Pathanamthitta	8	8	14	4	6	5	28	17
Quilon	17	8	13	16	9	9	39	33
Thrissur	18	7	15	9	14	9	47	25
Thiruvananthapuram	17	22	33	35	28	10	78	67
Wayanad	8	3	20	7	89	7	117	17
TOTAL	209	154	294	249	539	221	1042	524

Source: Department of Tourism, Government of Kerala

Concentration of Homestays

While compiling district-wise and category-wise information on homestays in the state, it was observed that almost 78 % of the homestays are concentrated in the six districts of Idukki (212), Ernakulam (159), Alleppey (131) Wayanad (117), Kottayam (111) and Thiruvananthapuram (76). These districts have more attractive tourist destinations and the socio-cultural background existing in these districts are more conducive for growth of experiential tourism. In case we take the district of Idukki, it is the largest district in terms of geographical area and has also the largest number of Homestays. Almost 97 % of the area are covered by mountains and forests. The hilly terrain is full of plantations like Tea, Coffee, Cardamom, Pepper etc. and plenty of wild-life, and the climate is very

pleasant as it is approximately 6200 feet above sea level. Anamudi and Meesappulimala in Idukki district are the two highest peaks in India south of Himalayas. Similarly, Ernakulam District has the Modern International Airport, Centre for world class healthcare system, remains of Portuguese, Dutch and British colonial rule, Chinese fishing nets, Integrated Tourism Village at Kumbazhanji, and the presence of Jewish synagogue. Wayanad is famous for Eco-tourism, Adventure tourism, and the Award-winning RT initiative. Backwaters and village life are the main attractions in Kumarakom. Very famous temples and Churches, large plantations of Rubber, Tapioca, Cardamom, and Educational activities are the main attractions in the Literacy capital of the state

Kottayam and the so-called Venice of the east, Alappuzha district.

District-wise major tourist spots for Experiential tourism in the sample districts.

Sl No	Name of the District indicating No: of Homestays	Important Locations	Experiential tourism Activities
1	Alleppy	Kuttanad	Kuttanad Wetland Agriculture System is unique, as it is the only system in India that favours rice cultivation below sea level in the land created by draining delta swamps in brackish waters. This system also allows fisheries systems, livestock and home garden to be grown.
		Pathiramanal	The scenic beauty of both sides of the lake as well as that of the island is mind blowing. It is home to many rare varieties of migratory birds from different parts of the world.
		Mararikulam beach	The Marari beach is one of the most sought-after beaches by the visitors because of mesmerizing picturesque views, clear blue water, silver sand, and the serene place to peacefully relax and chill out.
		House boat in backwaters	Living in a houseboat in Alleppey is a captivating experience. Floating on serene backwaters, passing through bent mangroves and beautiful sceneries and sumptuous food of visitor's choice
		Thannirmukkam	The Thannirmukkam bund across Vembanad Lake, is meant to keep the water balance and prevent intrusion of salt water into Kuttanad
		Krishnapuram Palace	It is a historically important palace where the kings of Kayamkulam dynasty last stayed.
2	Ernakulam	Fort Kochi	Fort Kochi houses many historical monuments such as the St. Francis Church, the first church of Vasco da Gama, the Dutch Seminary, the China Fishing nets and many others.
		Chinese Fishing nets	Chinese fishing nets - Cheenavala in Malayalam - is believed to have been introduced in Kochi by Chinese explorer Zheng He, from the court of the Kubla Khan. The fishing net established itself on the Kochi shores between 1350 and 1450 AD.
		Thattekkad Bird Sanctuary	Thattekkad Bird Sanctuary with barely 25 square kilometers, is the first bird sanctuary of Kerala, is also one of the most popular ones in the country. Today the sanctuary is known after Dr. Salim Ali, the legendary 'Bird man of India'.
		Kumbalangi	It is the first eco-tourism village in India, surrounded by backwaters. The occurrence of the natural phenomenon known as sea sparkle or bioluminescence in the backwaters at Kumbalangi is a tourist attraction. Famous for Kudumbashree for their RT activities
		Mattancherry	The Mattancherry palace was built by the Portuguese Empire as a gift to the Kingdom of Cochin. It was included in the "tentative list" of UNESCO World Heritage Site
		Kerala Folklore Museum	It is a cultural hub, with an aim to preserve and promote the culture and heritage of South India.
3	Idukki	Vagamon	Vagamon, due to its elevation and climate, has a unique ecosystem, leading to the emergence of rich natural vegetation, plant species, shola forests etc. From the early 20th century plantation crops like tea, coffee started. Vagamon hills are home to less explored flora and fauna.
		Marayoor	it is the only place in God's Own Country that has a natural growth of Sandalwood Trees. Its legendary product is famous across the country and has competed on equal terms with other areas with larger pockets of Sandalwood Forests, especially in Southern India. The New Stone Age Civilisation depicting ancient Dolmenoid Cists (Dolmenoids were burial chambers made of four stones placed on edges and covered by a fifth one called the cap stone) in Muniyara.
		Eravikulam	Eravikulam National Park is the home and sanctuary of the Nilgiri Tahr. The park also boasts of hosting South India's highest peak, Anamudi. The rare flora and fauna present in the park also attract visitors. One can view rare terrestrial and epiphytic orchids and beautiful wild balsams along with the Nilgiri Langur, leopards and the Indian Bison as well.
		Munnar	Known for its evergreen tea plantations, the hills of Munnar with their rolling beauty and charm can cast a magical spell on the visitors! While most of the hills are adorned with tea plantations, some are enchanted by mesmerising waterfalls.
		Mattupetty	Mattupetty is among the most visited destinations in the tourist hotbed of Munnar. The lush green tea plantations and forests in and around Mattupetty are ideal for trekking and host a large number of unique bird species.
		Thekkady wildlife Sanctuary	The Periyar Tiger Reserve, named after the Periyar river, is one of Kerala's prestigious possessions on the High Ranges of the Western Ghats. It was declared a Tiger Reserve in 1978 under the Project Tiger scheme. In 1982 the core area of the reserve (350 sq. km.) was notified as National Park.
4	Kottayam	Kumarakom Backwaters	Kumarakom is known as the land of lakes, lagoons and backwaters. The scenic beauty of the Vembanad lake, the largest backwater in Kerala, makes it the luscious glory of Kumarakom. Kumarakom has a wide variety of houseboats and is well known throughout the world for houseboat experience. The Prince of Wales brought in his 65th birthday at the beautiful Kumarakom Lake Resort in Kerala. Charles and wife Camilla, the duchess of Cornwall, and their entourage booked 30 rooms at the stunning lakeside retreat. Kumarakom, as an international tourist destination, came into the limelight after the visit of the then Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee in the year 2000 for Ayurvedic treatment at Taj, Kumarakom.

		Aymanam	Village Life Experience packages of RT will mesmerize the guests to the virtually untouched terrains of villages that are rich enough to grant fresh experiences on every visit. This village is famous for Raja of Chembakasserri, the classical dance-drama Kathakali and a village popularised by Arundhati Roy in her Booker Prize Winning Novel 'God of small things.
		Bharananganam Church	The mortal remains of the St. Alphonso is entombed at the St. Mary's church which is now a famous pilgrim centre. The Bharananganam church which is 1000 years old is also known as Anakkallu church. Bharananganam is relevant to Nasrani history. Bharananganam is well known for Sree Krishna Temple on the banks of river Meenachil,
		Poonjar Palace	Poonjar dynasty was one of the royal dynasties in medieval Kerala and their descendants are said to be the Pandya kings of Madurai. History records Pandya King, Manavikrama Kulasekara as the sole founder of the dynasty. The palace is about 600 years old, entirely built of wood. Poonjar palace preserves a unique exquisite collection of various materials which remain in good condition.
5	Trivandrum	Padmanabhaswamy Temple	Padmanabha Swamy Temple dedicated to Lord Vishnu. The history of the Temple dates back to 8th century. It is one of the 108 sacred Vishnu temples or Divya Desams in India. It was Marthanda Varma who introduced the Murajapam and Bhadra Deepam festivals in the temple. In 1750, Marthanda Varma dedicated the kingdom of Travancore to Lord Padmanabha. Marthanda Varma vowed that the royal family will rule the State on behalf of the Lord and he and his descendants would serve the kingdom as Padmanabha Dasa or the Servant of Lord Padmanabha. It is the richest temple in the world.
		Varkala-Sivagiri beach	The Papanasam Beach (also called as Varkala Beach), is renowned for a natural spring. Which is considered to have medicinal and curative properties. A two thousand-year-old shrine the Janardhanaswamy Temple stands on the cliffs overlooking the beach, a short distance away. The Sivagiri Mutt, founded by the great religious reformer and philosopher Sree Narayana Guru (1856 - 1928) is also close by. The Samadhi (the final resting place) of the Guru here attracts thousands of devotees every year during the Sivagiri Pilgrimage days
		Agasthyakoodam	One of the highest peaks in Kerala, it has long been known as a bird watcher's paradise and many gather here to catch sight of exotic avian species. Agasthyakoodam is also known for its remarkable flora and fauna, especially certain rare medicinal herbs which have been discovered here.
		Anchuthengu Fort	The island is very small in area, sandwiched between the sea and backwaters, but it has high relevance in the history of India, with various colonial powers – The Portuguese, Dutch and the English – tried to occupy the place. Anchuthengu was the first trade settlement of the East India Company. The Queen of Attingal gave permission to the British under the East India Company to make a factory in Anchuthengu in 1684 and the Anjengo Fort was built in 1695. This small island soon became one of the major trading platforms of the British in India, after Mumbai. The Attingal rebellion of 1721 has some historical significance because it was the first collective move against the British rule in Kerala.
		Kovalam	Kovalam is an internationally renowned beach with three adjacent crescent beaches. It has been a favourite haunt of tourists since the 1930s. Kovalam is extremely popular among westerners due to shallow waters and low tidal waves. It is also the most pristine beach in India. The staggering blue waters of the Arabian Sea and the rocky headlands, makes this beautiful beach paradise. Honeymoon couples and beach lovers extremely love this beach as it offers romantic moments all along with plenty of activities for adventure and fun.
		Thenmala	Thenmala is home to India's first planned Eco tourism destination. Lying on either side of the Shendurany river this sanctuary draws thousands of visitors. The major attraction of this place is the boating in the reservoir of Shendurany Sanctuary. The vegetation in the Sanctuary is mainly wet evergreen forests. About eight divergent types of forests have been identified here including the Myristic Swamps and Reed Breaks. A large cave with paintings similar to the Mesolithic paintings and containing relics of the Stone Age culture is of great tourist attraction.
6	Wayanad	Muthanga Wildlife sanctuary	Established in 1973, the Muthanga Wildlife Sanctuary is contiguous to the protected area network of Nagarhole and Bandipur of Karnataka on the north east and Mudumalai of Tamil Nadu on the southeast. Rich in bio-diversity, the sanctuary is an integral part of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. It is part of the Deccan Plateau and the vegetation is predominantly of the south Indian moist deciduous teak forests. Also, the sanctuary has pastures of the west-coast semi-evergreen trees.
		Edakkal Caves	Edakkal is India's only site where Stone Age carvings have been found. It is believed that it is among the oldest human settlements ever discovered. The rock engravings of Edakkal cave is 3000 to 6000 years old. It is the only known place for stone age carvings in South India. The discovery of the caves dates back to 1895 and it is associated with the then Superintendent of Police of Malabar District, Fred Fawcett. He was on a hunting trip to Wayanad and happened to notice in the coffee estate a stone axe which had been used by a Neolithic Celt. The recent outcomes of the researches and excavations at the Edakkal Caves indicate its probable links with Indus valley civilization.
		Pazhassi Raja Museum	Pazhassi Raja resisted the East India Company from 1793 onwards till his death in 1805. Pazhassi tomb is profound memorial made in the memory of Veera Pazhassi Raja, the Lion of Kerala and a freedom fighter who revolted against the British for the

		independence of India. In 1996 March this tomb has been converted to museum and today the museum is one of the centres in the State which attracts historians, researchers and students from far and wide.
	Jain Temples	Jainism had been the oldest, widely spread and popular religion of Kerala. It arrived here during the time of 3rd century BC. Chandra Gupta Maurya sent out missionaries to various parts of the country, and some people arrived in Kerala following their musings. This temple was built in the 13th century and is situated at the Sultan Battery in Wayanad. This happens to be one of the most important temples of Kerala. The temple shows a great example of the architecture and magnificent style of the Dynasty of Vijayanagara. The temple has a varied history. It first served as a temple; then it served as a place for business trade and last worked as an ammunition store during Tipu Sultan's reign. It is actually because of Tipu Sultan that Sultan Bathery got its name. Since the 8th century, Wayanad has been one of the most important Jain centre in Kerala. One of the oldest religions in the world, Jainism saw a decline from the 18 th century onwards.
	Uravu Bamboo Factory	Uravu is a non-profit organisation at Thrikkaipetta village, about 10 km from Kalpetta in Wayanad. It is a wing of the State Bamboo mission formed under the Department of Industries. Uravu makes use of the indigenous sciences and technology for the upliftment of the tribes in the area and it runs a successful bamboo crafts design and production centre along with a bamboo nursery. Started in 1996, as a bamboo processing training and design centre, it has so far contributed much to the economic and cultural enhancement of the tribal community. Uravu strives for sustainable economic development by making use of the commonly available resource in the region – bamboo.
	'En Ooru,' a tribal heritage village	'En Ooru' offers the quintessential tribal way of life with indigenous dishes, a tribal market and handicrafts. Apart from huts, the village also has an art museum, art centres, handicraft stalls, and an amphitheatre. Tourists can also get to try tribal medicines, forest produce, tribal weapons, musical instruments, children's toys and more. The small village has been established on 25 acres at the Mananthavady Tea Plantation Corporation. the main aim of the village is to offer tourists a glimpse of the life and culture of tribal communities. The village is managed by tribal communities from the district.

Responsible Tourism Initiatives in Kerala

Kerala introduced the Responsible Tourism initiative in 2008. It was implemented on a pilot basis in four destinations across the State, covering diverse geographical regions namely; Kovalam (Beach), Kumarakom (Backwaters), Thekkady (Wildlife) and Wayanad (Hill station). The action plan for practising RT was developed in a participatory framework and implemented through a consultative process, keeping in consideration the basic tenets of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council Criteria. Kerala Tourism has been awarded the 'Highly Commended' Award by World Travel Market (WTM), London in 2020 in recognition of its tireless efforts in promoting Responsible Tourism during the times of COVID-19 pandemic. This is the 5th International Award for the Kerala Responsible Tourism (RT) Mission since its formation in 2017. The Mission which won three other National Awards,

also runs 140 experiential tour packages, has so far imparted training to 7,000 people. Also, 48 new tourism destinations have sprung up through the Mission's flagship projects "Pepper" and "Model RT Village". This initiative has started attracting travellers interested in experiential tourism.

Significant findings of the Research Study

a) Purpose of travel of the tourists

The homestay owners were asked to rank the purpose of travel of tourists as stated in the registration form. The following graphical representation indicate that Eco-tourism, Village tourism, Adventure tourism, Heritage tourism, Pilgrimage tourism, Cultural tourism, medical tourism and Festival tourism were the main purposes in that order. This indicates that major share of tourists who stayed in Homestays were interested in Experiential tourism.

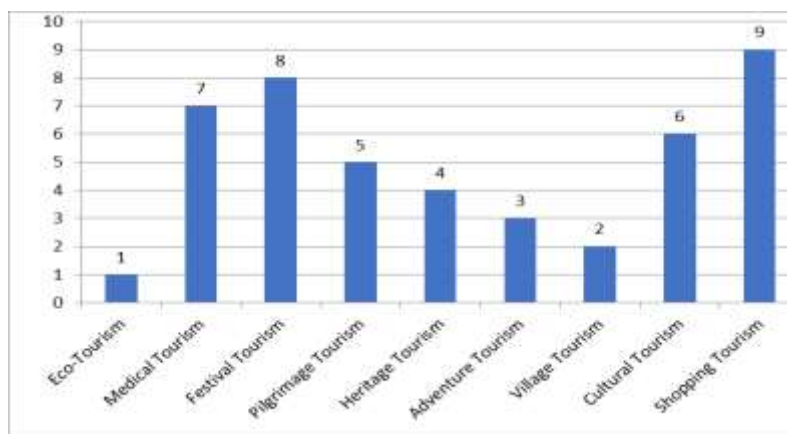


Fig-1: Purpose of Travel of Tourists, Source: Survey data

b) Motivation for Choosing a Homestay

Tourists chose homestays for their vacation for the following reasons according to the rank given

1. Homestays are more economical
2. Homestays give Authentic Socio-cultural experience
3. Homestays provide Security and warmth of home
4. Homestays provide an opportunity for Educational/knowledge acquisition

5. Homestays help Environmental preservation
6. Homestays ensure Social commitment

c) Purpose of stay in Homestay Accommodation

Most of the domestic and foreign tourists stayed in homestays for enjoying nature, recreation, village life experience and Ayurveda treatment in that order as per details below.

Table 2: Purpose of stay in Homestay Accommodation

Purpose	Indian		Foreign		Total	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Business	1	0.65	1	1.75	2	0.95
Recreation	126	82.35	29	50.88	155	73.81
Village Life Experience	45	29.41	22	38.60	67	31.90
Enjoying Nature	146	95.42	46	80.70	192	91.43
Ayurvedic Treatment	30	19.61	25	43.86	55	26.19
Others	3	1.96	5	8.77	8	3.81

Source: Primary Data

Benefits of Experiential Tourism

Experiential travel is more of a commitment than conventional travel, but is also considered to be more fulfilling, leaving a lasting impact on the traveler. Experiential travel revolves around cultural exploration and activity-based travel experiences.

Authenticity has become a core principle for a lot of travelers today. Tourists want to go beyond gazing out of a tourist bus and actually spend time interacting with locals.

Seeking one-of-a-kind culinary experiences in particular locations has also been a significant component of experiential traveling as the food is so inextricably knotted to a place's culture, tying together the social and emotional connection

In tourism, experience is defined as the psychological state that a tourist develops as a result of interactions with a service encounter (Otto & Ritchie, 1996)¹⁴. Service quality is a critical component of consumer behaviour and service marketing which shapes the tourist experience.

Although experience is the single most important construct influencing visitor behaviour, experience as a sub-dimensional construct is recognised (Pine & Gilmore, 1999)¹⁵ and emphasizes the distinct roles of the four experience dimensions in forming satisfaction and revisiting intention.

“Experiential tourism” has become a popular term for travel marketers, but it can mean different things to different people.

For some, experiential travel means doing anything that falls outside of a standard sightseeing, museum-going itinerary. For others, it is defined by interactions with locals or by going to places that might not be considered tourist attractions at all. Popular culture has also played a role in pushing individuals to seek out unusual experiences and locales.

Experiential tourism, on the other hand, can make sustainability more practical when it comes to both culture and the environment. For some, simply getting beyond the tourist trail and seeing the real culture of a destination is the ultimate example of experiential tourism. This has always been a popular option for youth travelers or so-called “gap-year” tourists. Tour packages offering such experiences often have an educational angle (studying abroad or participating in a language immersion program). Some involve homestays or volunteering on development projects while living abroad.

Experiential tourism is a kind of tourism where the traveler and direct experiences, meant as an opportunity for cultural, social and emotional enrichment, are at the centre. The following are examples of Experiential tourism

- Eno-gastronomic tourism.
- Naturalistic tourism.
- Sport tourism
- Healthy tourism

The benefits of experiential tourism

Experiential travel is also beneficial for local communities. Visiting a small, family-run restaurant rather than a chain, for example, ensures that your tourism dollars are benefiting real, local people and prevents economic leakage in tourism. This in turn helps to protect the culture of the locality during our travels. And visiting local communities, especially small tribes as in the case of Community-based tourism such as the Long Neck Tribe in Thailand, helps prevent globalization. By spending the time travelling to places to (respectfully) see and interact with these groups, tourists can

help communities to achieve positive economic and social outcomes. Further, the following are some of the uniqueness of Experiential tourism.

- a) The experience includes the people met, the places visited, the activities participated in and the memories created.
- b) Experiential tourism draws people into local nature, culture and history.
- c) Experiential tourism is low impact, low volume, and high yield.
- d) Quality, memorable visitor experiences are a shared outcome between the visitor and the experience provider.
- e) Experiential tourism opportunities allow for personal growth and reflect the values and interests of the individual visitor.
- f) Experiential tourism provides diverse experiences that match the visitor’s interests and provide a sense of personal accomplishment, thereby creating their own unique memories.
- g) The desired outcome of experiential tourism is to achieve a complete participatory experience that provides new knowledge and authentic experiences.
- h) Experiential tourism opportunities expand personal horizons. Opportunities should provide personal enrichment, enlightenment, stimulation, and engagement as motivators.
- i) Experiential tourism engages all five senses. And it attracts people to places.
- j) Experiential tourism Experiential tourism opportunities include learning a new skill or engaging in a new activity.
- k) The experience includes pre-departure trip planning and post-trip follow-up because People create meaning through direct experience.

Planning for Experiential travel and Unique Experience:

We need to focus on our strengths – base our product on what natural and cultural resources we have that others don’t. We have to be very clear about what we want to

achieve – profit, local employment, community pride and involvement, and conservation of the resource.

It is advisable to take the time to plan the project well. Interpretation should be fun, encourage involvement, stimulate the senses, and pose a challenge. Plan all activities to reflect a strong theme. Choose methods that involve and engage the senses. Face to face interpretation is one of the most effective method. Experiential tourism opportunities encourage the meeting and coming together of different cultures, their problems and potential.

Government support for Experiential tourism through Rural Homestays

National Strategy for Promotion of Rural Homestays is an Initiative Towards Aatmanirbhar Bharat. Rural homestays are experiential tourism product which plays a vital role in rural tourism and also in rural development. These rural homestays along with providing not just the accommodation, but also authentic local experience, opportunities to interact with locals, experience the rural lifestyle, rural communities, get to know the art, craft, food, culture and tradition of the rural India. The homestays are the integral part of community, as it supports the rural population with the economic and social strength. Village and Community support will be crucial for the success of Rural Homestays. The Rural Homestays in a village should be organized and have the support of the Village Panchayat. There should be common facilities in the village for welcoming the guests, performing art and cultural events, and other such activities for guests to experience. The local community should support in various activities including the provision of guides, souvenirs etc. Dedicated schemes to provide support to Rural Homestays have been planned. Accordingly, Subsidy of 30% of the fixed capital invested subject to a ceiling of INR 1 lac per lettable room with a maximum of six rooms in convergence with other schemes such as PMEGP. Further, the

State Governments may provide that Rural Homestays shall not be treated as commercial entities and shall be entitled to power and water tariff as applicable to domestic or residential use. No entertainment or other commercial tax will be imposed on Rural Homestays in connection with food, lodging or cultural activities. Ministry of Tourism has developed a National System of Registration of Homestays through the National Integrated Database of Hospitality Units (NIDHI), which will provide a unique identity to each homestay. This will help other digital marketing platforms for Homestays to discover the Rural Homestays and also access the data from the National registration system. One of the objectives in developing Rural homestays is to cater to the increasing needs of visitors for experiential tourism.

CONCLUSIONS

Experiential tourism is a special kind of tourism where the traveler and his/her direct experiences, are an opportunity for enrichment of cultural, social and emotional enrichment.

Immersion travel provides diverse experiences that match the visitor's interests and provides a sense of personal accomplishment, thereby creating their own unique memories. Memorable tourism experience (MTE) is a by-product of Experiential tourism.

Kerala is a highly potential region for encouraging Experiential tourism because it is blessed with natural assets like pristine beaches, backwaters, mountain ranges, wild-life sanctuaries, superior facilities for Ayurveda treatment and the ancient culture of dance, drama and music.

Kerala is the first state in the country to announce Tourism as an Industry. Perhaps it is the first state in India to introduce its own homestay scheme. Homestays in Kerala have diversified specialties to meet the interests of Experiential tourists.

Eco-tourism, Village tourism and Adventure tourism are the most significant purpose of

travel of tourists coming to Kerala. All of these three falls under Experiential tourism. Further, the top motivation why tourists chose homestay accommodation are 1) They are economical 2) They provide authentic Socio-cultural experience and 3) They give Security and warmth of home.

The Purpose of stay in Homestay Accommodation are for enjoying nature, recreation, village life experience and Ayurveda treatment. All of these are part of experiential tourism.

Rural homestays are experiential tourism product which plays a vital role in rural tourism and also in rural development. That is the reason why Government of India has announced special schemes for rural homestays in May 2022 a National Strategy for Promotion of Rural Homestays - An Initiative towards Atmanirbhar Bharat.

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