

Problems and Prospects of Island Tourism Industry in Andaman and Nicobar Islands



Tourism

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Introduction

The global tourism industry has grown about 50% in the past decade, despite setbacks caused by terrorism, pandemics and times of political and economic unrest (UNWTO, 2011). Global tourism was affected by several worldwide disasters in starting in 2008 and reaching full impact in 2009. The economic recession hit first-world countries hard, which had global implications. North America in particular suffered economic instability which compounded with the outbreak of Swine Flu. Most economies echoed the recessionary state but some countries, like China, flourished in the global economic downturn (Newsweek, 2009). As a result countries like the USA and other areas of economic instability generated fewer travellers, whereas China's outbound tourism increased; this could explain the growth of people travelling to countries neighboring on China like the Russian Federation (UNWTO, 2011).

Although global tourism suffered in 2009, statistics from 2010 show that the industry has bounced back to an all time high. Countries recovered at different paces, with economically developing countries like India, China and Brazil leading in growth. Economically developed areas like Western Europe and North America had the smallest growth but still show signs recovery (UNWTO, 2011). Europe's comeback was stunted by weather conditions in the winter that disrupted flights and other transportation. Also, the eruption of the Icelandic volcano, Eyjafjallajökull, interfered with air travel across the region. Although the world is coming out of the recession, many people are still unemployed and the economic outlook remains uncertain. This may especially impact on international travel to countries that are economically advanced; people may still be choosing to travel in their own country or to destinations where there money is worth more which would have a positive impact on tourism in India.

Political upheaval in a range of counties in the Middle East and North Africa starting in Egypt will have numerous implications towards industries, including tourism. Two main effects on tourism are the deterrent nature of political unrest for travellers and petrol prices effecting global economies and transportation costs. People who initially planned holidays in the Middle East have shifted their business to neighbouring countries like Turkey (Hotel & Resort Insider, 2011). Alan Trotter of Conferences and Incentives New Zealand (CINZ) has said that there is currently a global trend towards "safe" travel which even outweighs the previous trends of social responsibility and environmental concern (A. Trotter, Personal Communication, 2011). Ensuring the security of tourists must thus be a paramount consideration for India and the Andaman Islands in the future.

Snapshot of India and the Andaman Islands

India's travel and tourism industry is growing and was one of the developing nations at the forefront of the global tourism recovery of 2010 (UNWTO, 2011). India received 5.108 million international tourists in 2009; 15.72% of which travelled from the USA. The other top sources of international travelers were from the UK at 14.66% and Bangladesh at 8.97% of foreign tourist arrivals. The 2009 statistics show negative growth of -2.2% from 2008 displaying the global impact of the recession and pandemics on international travel to India. However, foreign travel growth bounced back 8.1% to 5.584 million in 2010 according

to the Ministry of Tourism (2010). Domestic tourism is about 130 times the amount of international tourism accounting for 650.04 million travellers. Domestic travel has been steadily increasing at an average of about 13% per year since 2000, when 220.11 million travellers were recorded. Domestic tourism was positively impacted by global issues in 2009 showing that Indian travellers were taking their holidays within the country rather than travelling abroad (Ministry of Tourism, 2010).

India's travel and tourism industry is not its biggest money maker, but still brings in a massive sum of money every year. In 2010 the direct contribution of the industry to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was USD \$31.28 billion and the amount is expected to grow to over USD \$34 billion dollars in 2011. The total contribution to GDP was more than double at USD \$73.312 billion in 2010, expected to increase by over USD \$6 billion in 2011 (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2011). In a land of over a billion people, these large sums become crucial to the survival and growth of the nation.

The Andaman Islands are a chain of 572 islands in the Bay of Bengal stretching 700 kilometres in length and 52 kilometres at the maximum width (refer to Figure 1). The largest islands in the archipelago are North Andaman, Middle Andaman, Lower Andaman, the deceptively named Little Andaman, and Great Nicobar. International tourism is not permitted in the Nicobar Islands and domestic tourism is only allowed if a special permit is obtained. Middle Andaman is the largest island in the archipelago covering 1536 square kilometres (Barefoot India, n.d. & Andaman Nicobar Tourism, n.d.). Most tourists will stay in Port Blair or travel to the paradisiacal Havelock Island for the bulk of their stay with day-trips to the other islands. Wandoor and Niel islands also have accommodation for overnight stay. Surfers will travel to Little Andaman for its reef and exposure to the waves.

The tourism industry on the Andaman Islands is young as they have only been liberated in the past seventy years. The island chain was occupied by the British and used as a penal colony from the mid 1800s. In 1942 it became a Naval Base for the Japanese Military, and finally gained independence in 1945 (Vashishtha, 2010).

Many would argue that the greatest commodity that the Andaman Islands have is their natural one. The beaches and forests as well as the flora and fauna that inhabit them are significant attractions for tourists. However, the Andaman Islands also have a dark historical element stemming from British rule, which attract both international visitors and domestic who want to learn about their history (Soin, n.d.). Accommodation and activities are available for a variety of types of tourism and costs but infrastructure on the islands such as roads, proper waste disposal etc. have not advanced proportionately. The lack of basic facilities and the disregard for the environment that seems to be the norm might put off or in some cases shock visitors.

Domestic tourism is the largest section of the Andaman Islands tourism industry at 142 042 visitors in 2009. Foreign arrivals for the same year was less than a tenth of domestic visitors and accounted for 13 684 visitors. Although the growth was small, there has still been positive growth in tourist arrivals from 2008 which saw 123 914 domestic travellers and 12 512 international

al. The industry has proved resilient to natural disaster and has more than doubled since 1980 (Chaudhry & Bairagi, 2011).

The inhabitants of the Andamans are a mix of nationalities. Some natives of the Andamans have a likeness to the Australian Aborigines and others are of a Mongoloid origin. There are six ethnic tribes still living in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands: Jarawas, Great Andamanese (of which there are reportedly only 40 remaining), Onges, Sentinelese, Nicobarese and Shompens. Hindi, the mother tongue of 15% of locals, is the most commonly spoken language in the Andamans with the other 85% divided between around 24 different languages including Tamil, Malayalam and Urdu. However, English is the official language (Karthikeyan, n.d.). The population of the Andamans is estimated as 489,000 for 2011 (Chaudhry & Bairagi, 2011).

Activities in the Andaman Islands are a mixture of commercial activities which include Scuba diving and helicopter rides, and non-commercial activities like trekking, snorkelling, kayaking and surfing. This variety might encourage a tourist to stay longer, but the restriction on period of stay cuts short many tourists' holidays. Natural site attractions are the beaches (See Figure 2), the undisturbed rainforests and the volcanoes. Constructed attractions are those of historical importance such as the Cellular Jail, a prison built by the British in 1968 when they used the Andaman Islands as a penal colony (Andaman Cellular Jail Organisation, n.d.).

They frequently hold tribute shows at this prison in honour of the freedom fighters who fought for independence from British rule; these could be viewed as an event attractions (Soin, n.d.). Ross Island, previously the centre for British Administration and now owned by the Indian Navy, is a spectacle in itself with natural and historic components. The small island features churches and buildings from times of British rule, Japanese military bunkers, and a museum. The fifty year old British buildings, which are a symbol of tyranny and segregation, have been pulled apart and overgrown in an unusual way by webs of tree roots (Dutta, 2009) (See Figure 3 below). A famous constructed attraction is Mahatma Ghandi Marine National Park, located on Wandoor Island. This park was so important to early Andaman tourism that the visitor numbers to the park were often the same as the inbound tourism statistics (Chaudhry, 2008).

The Andaman Islands is renowned for its natural beauty and culture. These qualities are much sought after traits in tourism industries but need to be protected as the industry develops. Supporting the culture and environment, there are a diverse range of products available to people travelling, from adventure tour options to relaxing honeymoon packages and these products are well dispersed. People are motivated to travel to the Andaman Islands for relaxation on the tropical beaches, diving, snorkelling and surfing. Other draws are the volcanoes, limestone caves, mangroves and lush, unspoilt rainforests (Chaudhry, 2008 & Soin, n.d.). Many people who visit the Andamans go to the Cellular Jail in Port Blair and the destroyed British colonial buildings on Ross Island to witness a sort of dark tourism (Soin, n.d.). Post 2004 tsunami 'voluntourism' was seen in neighbouring regions like Thailand and Indonesia, but was not given structure or recognition in the Andaman Islands (Andaman Discoveries, 2007). Importantly, the local population are said to be tolerant towards the opportunity of welcoming more tourists to the Andaman Islands (Ministry of Tourism, 2003).

The potential for tourism development in the Andaman Islands is significant. Already, there is a large range of accommodation on the islands with vast differences in prices and facilities available. In Port Blair there are 27 government run accommodation units; 42 private lodges that also offer board; 37 private lodges that do not offer board; and 16 home stays, where one or several rooms are let out from a residential home. These are a mix of premium and budget hotels and resorts which range from low-cost accommodation like Central Lodge for Rs.80 - Rs.120 per night (about \$2 to \$3 USD) to high end resorts like the Welcome Group Fortune Resort Bay Island at approximately Rs.3 100 to Rs.7 500 (about \$70 to \$170 USD). Most tourists will stay at

medium priced accommodation for around Rs.300 to Rs.1000 per night. There are said to be several 'star' hotels which are meant to be a step above premium hotels, but there is little information on India's standards rating system (Andaman Nicobar Tourism, n.d.). Welcome Group Bay Island Hotel is said to be 'five star' and offers facilities including a restaurant, tennis courts, meeting facilities, swimming pools, beauty services and a travel desk. It has 45 rooms and is located near the airport and city but still overlooks the ocean. Welcome Group Bay Islands is a chain, which has other hotels around India (India Hotels Directory, n.d.).

Budget accommodation offers choices of single or double rooms, or dormitory options. They have shared bathrooms and showers, and ceiling fans in the rooms. They can accommodate 20 to 30 people with around 20 rooms (dormitory accommodation can just have two rooms with rows of beds). Havelock has 14 different hotels and lodges (Andaman Nicobar Tourism, n.d.). Barefoot India, the highest quality on the island, is a privately owned business which has strong ecological and socially responsible ideals. The accommodation is built from locally sourced material and built in high quality imitation of the local native structures (i.e. Nicobari huts) which minimises visual pollution. They offer organic meals, local activities (which include scuba diving and kayaking), yoga and massage and the rooms are air-conditioned or fan-cooled. The tariffs range from Rs.4 500 to Rs.15 000, which is around \$100 to \$334 USD (Barefoot India, 2011).

Potentially, the Andaman Islands could tap into the growing medical tourism trend which is becoming increasingly important to India. Medical tourism is expected to reach a value of USD \$2 billion by 2012 (John, 2011); The Indian medical tourism industry attracts over 100,000 international visitors a year and has a monetary worth of USD \$310 million. Medical tourism travellers have chosen India for several reasons: the low cost of medical procedures, India's ancient span of medical care (including alternative treatments, ayurveda etc.), English speaking among most educated Indians and highly accomplished and respected physicians (Maitra, 2010).

There are also opportunities to leverage of the success of mega events. India was the host of the 2010 Commonwealth Games and is the host of the 2011 World Environmental Day. Major and mega events like these can do a lot for a nation, shining a light on what it has to offer as a destination, and creating a tourism inflow that would otherwise be directed at another country (Hotel & Resort Insider, n.d.).

Challenges for Tourism Development in the Andaman Islands.

India is still referred to as an economically developing country with a high percentage of its society living in poverty and the Andaman Islands are no exception. According to statistics from the World Tourism & Travel Council (2011) India ranked 159 out of 181 countries (projected for 2011) for its tourism industry's relative contribution to GDP. This would indicate that India does not rely too heavily this industry. However, on a regional scale, the Andamans tourism administration have stated that, due to multiple pressures on the land (with most of it reserved as national parks and tribal reserves) and the difficulty of constructing any manufacturing industry, there are few other opportunities for the region to receive income (Ministry of Tourism India, 2003). Therefore the local tourism industry may be too heavily relied upon for economic generation.

Additionally, a challenge for tourism development in India is the potential for corruption, usually because existing organisational cultures have accepted corruption as part of the process for many generations. Corruption in India might have come about from hierarchical divisions in society like the 'cast system' in which higher cast members were not held accountable for their actions, and lower cast members hid their mistakes for fear of punishment. Although there are pressure groups and stakeholders that will keep ethical codes intact to some extent, there is always the fear that a decision will be made that is not in the

best interest of the people or environment but rather for the financial gain of private operators and the government members they are in league with. The current prime minister of India, Manmohan Singh, has been actively fighting against the existing corruption (Times of India, 2011) and those involved in making decisions concerning tourism development in the Andaman Islands must also seek to stamp out corruption.

An additional challenge for the Andaman Islands is encouraging tourism while staying true to the cultural values of the locals. Because of the negative impact that contact and assimilation has had on some of the tribes such as the Great Andamanese, there has been activity from pressure groups such as Survival International to try and protect the remaining tribes from being wiped out. The Sentinelese in particular are completely isolated on their island and still live as hunter gatherers. Survival International has also protested against the development of Barefoot India, a resort on Havelock Island (Survival International, 2011). Currently, some international tourists do not have a point of reference for the Indian culture that they are coming into when visiting the Andamans. An example of this is a Norwegian tourist going topless on the beach. Because of the relaxing and relatively unpopulated beaches some tourists forget they are in India and behave in a way that can be offensive to locals or create wrong impressions of international visitors. Although tourists are tolerated and in general, locals are extremely happy for the income brought to the islands and interaction across ethnic boundaries, there are people in the host population that do not fully accept the behaviour of tourists. There are strict religious codes in place and some locals will forego the financial gain of an international visitor if they feel that they will violate those codes. Further, the fact that liquor is not easy to come by on the main visitors' island of Havelock means that rowdy behaviour and the noise pollution that goes along with it is uncommon but can also mean that when people get to the more city-like area of Port Blair visitors sometimes make up for their abstinence.

Infrastructural issues present significant challenges in the development of tourism within the Andaman Islands. Many of the Islands don't have proper communication facilities like internet, cell-phone coverage, or even landlines. Often communication systems will be affected by storms or other issues and can remain out of order for days. As a result, efficiency of business and administration between islands is affected, and the Andaman Islands cannot yet market themselves to the business tourism sector.

CONCLUSION

Furthermore, access to the Andaman Islands is limited because of development issues and the security issues relating to its position as an Indian Naval base. The Andamans can only be reached by air domestically with flights available from Calcutta in the north-east and Chennai in the south-east of India arriving at Veer Savarkar Airport in Port Blair. The cost of flights to the Andamans has not fluctuated much since 2001 (Chaudhrey, 2008) and are substantially cheaper for local residents than international visitors. The three airlines in operation are Indian Airlines, Jet Airways and Kingfisher Red all offering return flights for approximately Rs.14 000 (about \$312 USD) which is quite expensive for a one hour flight. The airport is used by the Indian Air Force at night, shutting it down for public use (123 Yatra, n.d.). Tourists can travel by ship at minimal financial cost (from Rs.1500 or \$33 USD for 'bunk' class) but at extreme emotional and physical expense as the journey is said to be a three day torture with people falling sick, the entire ship infested with insects like cockroaches and a terrible stench from food rotting (Cotton, 2010). Further, Port Blair is the only place with developed road infrastructure, proper signage and regular running services. The other islands like Havelock have few roads which are in extremely poor condition.

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