

Tourism Trends in India

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Once upon a time, not so long ago, one of the pleasures of going to Shimla was the picturesque three-hour drive from Kalka in the plains of north India, up to the Deodar-scented hills and bracing air of Himachal Pradesh. Last year, making that same journey, I found it had become a nightmare. The drive now took six hours, and it was one long traffic jam all the way. Honking horns of irate drivers created a hideous cacophony; people jumped out of their cars and got into ugly fights over right-of-way on the narrow winding mountain roads; packets of chips and empty mineral water bottles littered the roadside.

Finally reaching Shimla, one discovered what else the unregulated influx of tourists had done to the city. The famous Mall in Shimla, a stretch for pedestrians, was now so crowded you could no longer stroll there; you had to inch and elbow your way through the pressing hordes.

The town was also in the grip of a severe water shortage that has now become chronic. Tall apartment buildings and a rash of new hotels are perched so precariously on the edge of the Shimla ridge, and even on steep slopes, that it looks as though a strong wind or the slightest earth tremor would send them tumbling down.

Local shopkeepers told us that peak season in Shimla is now throughout the year. Every weekend from April to October, visitors from Punjab and Haryana drive up to escape the searing heat of the plains. June and July school holidays are another peak season, when whole families arrive for their annual hill-station holiday. Every October and November, the Dussehra-Diwali holidays is yet another peak season. Every winter, thousands of tourists drive up to marvel at the sight of snow, or to escape the pollution and smog that is at its worst during the cold weather in the plains.

Thanks to unregulated tourism, or “overtourism” as it is now called, Shimla has become an ugly, overbuilt, overcrowded town with its civic services severely strained. And it is pretty much the same story in so many other Indian hill stations, such as Nainital and Mussoorie. It is not just the

tourists who are the cause of Indian hill stations becoming overcrowded, with their civic infrastructure close to collapse, but also the increasing and unceasing flow of rural-urban migration, as young people from villages in the surrounding areas migrate to hill-station towns in search of jobs in hotels, as taxi drivers, guides porters, and other tourism-related jobs.

Is this to be the fate of Bhutan too, with the ever-growing number of tourists from India visiting the country? How long can regional tourism to Bhutan (as distinct from the high-end tourism which for years kept tourist numbers to Bhutan limited) continue as it is now, with no regulation of visitors and vehicles? Several other prime travel destinations are facing some of the same problems of “overtourism” that Bhutan faces today -- Venice, Amsterdam and Barcelona, for example.

Everywhere, unregulated tourism is putting a severe strain on civic services, leading to a host of problems, such as water shortages, traffic jams, and an increase in petty crime. What is worse, it has led to a growing hostility from locals towards these visitors, because they feel that the visitors are pushing up prices, making their towns and cities unlivable and unaffordable, causing impossibly long queues at places of pilgrimage or historic interest that locals also visit, degrading the natural environment with litter and noise pollution, and in various other ways having a negative impact on the culture and identity of the host country. For the visitors too, in such circumstances, the experience of tourism becomes so much less enjoyable.

What is the solution? It is probably better to put regulations in place before the situation reaches a tipping point, when solutions become more difficult to implement. The burgeoning of regional tourists, especially from India, is a problem that Bhutan will have to confront, and the sooner the better. The growing affluence of the urban middle class in India has led to more Indians buying cars, and more and more of them travelling in those cars to neighbouring destinations in search of what they do not find at home -- in the case of Bhutan, a pristine environment, crystal clear air, beautiful climate, magnificent temples and monasteries, and distinctive and beautiful architecture and crafts and festivals. The Bhutanese also have a reputation in India of being the most courteous, warm and honest people in our subcontinent, who go out of their way to be kind to visitors. But who can blame the people of Bhutan if they, like their counterparts in Venice or Barcelona, soon start to harbour feelings of hostility towards Indian visitors?

Before things come to such a pass, something must be done. There could be a cap on the number of tourists' cars and group tour buses coming into Bhutan by road. These regulations must be communicated clearly and widely to travel agents and in the Indian media, lest Indian tourists face the sad disappointment of being turned back at the Bhutan border. Hefty fines should be imposed on anyone found throwing litter, honking horns, playing loud music, plucking flowers or in other ways despoiling the environment. Similarly, a cap could be put on the number of foreign visitors allowed on any one day at major tourist sites like Taktsang, and applications for visits to such sites should be made in advance. Again, this rule should be communicated widely to Indian media and travel agents. A number of major tourist attractions in Europe, such as museums and castles, have such a system, in order to avoid congestion, where tourists have to make advance bookings to visit such sites.

Greater efforts could be made to develop other tourist activities in Bhutan, such as birdwatching and botanical tours, because Bhutan is so amazingly rich in both fauna and flora. More opportunities for activities such as mountain biking, which is increasingly popular in India, could also be offered. So also for tours specialising in nature cures; I can vouch for the incredible therapeutic effects of Bhutanese stone baths and traditional medicine!

Village homestays too -- with some training programmes for host families in the basic facilities that must be provided to tourists -- could help avoid "overtourism", by offering tourists a wider range of destinations when they visit Bhutan. All these would also, of course, greatly enrich the visitors' experience of Bhutan and Bhutanese culture.

Responsible Tourism and Village Homestay schemes, launched with the help of state governments and the UN, have been very successful in India. At Kumarakom in Kerala, where many resorts and luxury hotels have come up around Lake Vembanad, the Responsible Tourism scheme has ensured that local residents, too, benefit from tourism. For example, a cooperative of local women has set up a restaurant at the lakeside serving a delicious local Kerala *thali* meal prepared by the women themselves, with ingredients from local farms and fresh fish from the lake, and business is booming. Customers from luxury hotels nearby are among the restaurant's most enthusiastic patrons.

At Chanderi in Madhya Pradesh, under the Rural Tourism scheme launched with help from the UN, a weavers' village on the outskirts of the town -- way off the tourist track -- offers charming, comfortable rooms for visitors, and an opportunity to participate in the daily life of the villagers, whether accompanying them on bullock cart rides, learning to cook local specialities or watching the weavers and potters at work. I was fortunate to experience both the Kumarakom and Chanderi schemes, and they remain among the most memorable and enjoyable experiences I have had in all my travels in India.

Bhutan's rich culture and unique identity, its verdant and pure environment, its guiding philosophy of Gross National Happiness, have been an inspiration and an example to the whole world. These attributes are too rare and precious to remain unprotected from the depredations of unregulated mass tourism.