

# From Thrill to Tranquility: A Comparative Study of Adventure and Wellness Tourism Trends in India Before and After COVID-19

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**Abstract :** The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly reshaped tourism patterns across the globe, with India witnessing a marked transition from adventure-oriented travel to wellness-focused tourism. Prior to the pandemic, adventure tourism in India experienced steady growth, particularly among youth and solo female travelers, driven by expanding infrastructure, enhanced safety mechanisms, and experiential travel preferences. Wellness tourism, rooted in India's ancient traditions of Ayurveda, Yoga, and spirituality, remained a niche segment largely dependent on international tourists. The pandemic disrupted both segments, but recovery trajectories diverged significantly. While adventure tourism faced a sharp decline and a slow revival, wellness tourism experienced unprecedented domestic growth in the post-COVID era. Emerging trends include hybrid travel models combining soft adventure with wellness, increased male participation in wellness retreats, digital detox programs, immune-boosting therapies, and forest bathing experiences. This paper adopts a qualitative comparative approach based on secondary data to analyze pre- and post-COVID trends in adventure and wellness tourism in India. The findings indicate a decisive shift toward conscious, health-oriented, and regenerative travel. Despite persistent challenges related to infrastructure, manpower, and service quality, India is increasingly positioned as a global wellness tourism hub, leveraging its cultural heritage, policy support, and evolving traveler preferences in the post-pandemic world.

**IndexTerms - COVID-19 Impact, Adventure Tourism, Wellness Tourism, Post-COVID Travel Trends, India Tourism Evolution, Ayurveda and Yoga Tourism, Sustainable Tourism Models, Hybrid Travel Experiences**

## INTRODUCTION

Tourism has long been one of the most dynamic sectors of the Indian economy, contributing significantly to employment generation, foreign exchange earnings, and regional development. India's tourism portfolio is uniquely diverse, encompassing cultural heritage, adventure, spirituality, wellness, and nature-based experiences. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 triggered an unprecedented crisis in the global tourism industry, forcing destinations and travelers alike to reassess priorities, risk perceptions, and travel motivations.

In India, the pandemic acted both as a disruptor and a catalyst. Adventure tourism, which had gained momentum during the pre-pandemic years through trekking, rafting, paragliding, mountaineering, and wildlife experiences, suffered severe setbacks due to lockdowns, travel restrictions, and safety concerns. Conversely, wellness tourism, deeply embedded in India's civilizational ethos of Yoga, Ayurveda, meditation, and spiritual healing, gained renewed relevance as individuals sought physical immunity, mental peace, and emotional resilience.

This paper undertakes a comparative study of adventure and wellness tourism trends in India before and after COVID-19. By examining changing traveler behavior, policy interventions, and emerging hybrid models, the study aims to understand how the pandemic reshaped tourism demand and how India can strategically position itself in the evolving global tourism landscape.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing literature on tourism and pandemics highlights that health crises significantly influence travel behavior, risk perception, and destination choice. Niewiadomski (2020) observed that COVID-19 intensified risk aversion among tourists, resulting in reduced participation in high-contact and high-risk activities. Gurunathan and Lakshmi (2023) emphasized that wellness tourism transitioned from a luxury-oriented segment to a necessity-driven form of travel in the post-pandemic context.

Smith and Puczkó (2022) identified a psychographic shift in tourist motivation, where mental well-being, emotional balance, and holistic health gained precedence over thrill-seeking experiences. Studies focusing on India underline the importance of government initiatives such as the Ministry of AYUSH, Swadesh Darshan Scheme, PRASHAD Scheme, and the National Strategy for Adventure Tourism in strengthening sectoral resilience and standardization.

While prior studies examine adventure and wellness tourism independently, limited research offers a comparative analysis of both segments within the Indian context across pre- and post-COVID periods. This study attempts to bridge that gap by synthesizing existing scholarship with recent industry trends.

## METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a qualitative and comparative research design based on secondary data sources. Data were collected from:

- Reports published by the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, and the Ministry of AYUSH
- Publications of the Global Wellness Institute and World Tourism Organization
- Peer-reviewed academic journals and edited volumes on tourism studies

- Market analyses, policy documents, and reputed national and international news sources

The data were thematically analyzed to compare trends in adventure and wellness tourism during the pre-COVID (2015–2019) and post-COVID (2021–2024) periods, focusing on demand patterns, demographic shifts, policy responses, and emerging business models.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Pre-COVID Tourism Scenario (2015–2019)

#### Adventure Tourism:

Before the pandemic, adventure tourism in India witnessed sustained growth. Himalayan states such as Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, and Jammu & Kashmir emerged as major hubs for trekking, river rafting, skiing, and mountaineering. Rajasthan and the Northeast promoted desert safaris, rock climbing, and river-based adventures. A significant trend was the increasing participation of youth and solo female travelers, facilitated by better safety protocols, professional guides, and women-centric travel groups.

#### Wellness Tourism:

Wellness tourism during this phase largely catered to international tourists seeking authentic Ayurvedic treatments, Panchakarma therapies, yoga teacher training programs, and spiritual retreats. Destinations such as Rishikesh, Kerala, Varanasi, and Bodh Gaya attracted foreign visitors, while domestic participation remained limited to specific demographic groups.

### 4.2 Impact of COVID-19 (2020–2021)

The pandemic led to an almost complete shutdown of tourism activities due to lockdowns and travel bans. Adventure tourism was severely affected as group activities, physical proximity, and outdoor mobility posed perceived health risks. Wellness centers and spiritual retreats also closed temporarily; however, interest in immunity-building practices, meditation, and mental health solutions increased substantially during this period.

### 4.3 Post-COVID Trends and Transformation (2021–2024)

#### REVIVAL OF ADVENTURE TOURISM THROUGH HYBRID MODELS:

Post-pandemic recovery of adventure tourism has been cautious and selective. Travelers increasingly prefer nature-based, small-group, and low-risk activities. Hybrid tourism models integrating soft adventure with wellness practices have gained popularity, such as trekking combined with yoga sessions or eco-resorts offering meditation alongside outdoor activities. Government initiatives like the National Strategy for Adventure Tourism have supported this revival through safety standardization and infrastructure development.

#### RAPID EXPANSION OF WELLNESS TOURISM:

Wellness tourism emerged as the fastest-growing segment in post-COVID India, driven largely by domestic travelers. A notable shift is the increased participation of men in wellness retreats focused on stress management, mental health, and lifestyle disorders. New trends include digital detox programs, forest bathing, immune-boosting therapies, and personalized wellness packages.

#### Growth of Spiritual Tourism:

Spiritual tourism expanded beyond traditional pilgrims to include younger age groups seeking meaning, mindfulness, and emotional balance. Pilgrimage circuits such as Char Dham, Buddhist circuits, and Sikh religious destinations witnessed record footfalls, reflecting renewed faith-based and introspective travel motivations.

## CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

Despite positive trends, several challenges persist. Infrastructure deficits in remote areas, inconsistent service quality, shortage of trained manpower, and limited global marketing of niche destinations hinder growth. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-pronged strategy:

- Strengthening infrastructure through continued public investment
- Encouraging public–private partnerships for quality assurance and certification
- Leveraging digital platforms for marketing and seamless service delivery
- Promoting community-based tourism for sustainability and inclusive growth

## CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally altered the trajectory of Indian tourism, accelerating a shift from thrill-centric adventure travel to tranquility-oriented wellness experiences. While adventure tourism is gradually recovering through innovation and hybridization, wellness tourism has firmly established itself as a central pillar of post-pandemic travel demand. India's rich heritage of Yoga, Ayurveda, and spiritual wisdom provides a strong foundation for global leadership in wellness tourism. By addressing infrastructural and operational challenges and promoting sustainable, regenerative tourism models, India can successfully integrate thrill and tranquility to offer transformative travel experiences in the post-COVID era.

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