

UNLOCKING THE IMMENSE POTENTIAL OF BUDDHIST TOURISM IN ASIA AND THE WORLD

Ravi Bankar

Genesis Leisure Consulting Mumbai
4, Surana Layout, Rajnagar,
Nagpur - 440013 (Maharashtra)

ABSTRACT

Religious tourism sector has an enormous potential in India. India is richly endowed with ancient temples, monuments and religious festivals. Religions originating in India, be it Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism or Buddhism, have a vibrant culture and spiritual philosophy. Together, they present a viable, alternative way of life as compared to the materialism and confrontation prevalent in the West. In India, the religious tourism is the largest tourism segment growing at an unprecedented scale as every year millions of devotees travel great distances to visit pilgrimage centers. The "Incredible India" campaign has led to immense interest and awareness and is likely to result in significantly large number of tourists travelling to and within the country.

Key Words : Unlocking, Immense, Potential, Buddhist-Tourism, World.

Introduction

The Buddhist Circuit of India (Inner Buddhist Circuit) which lies in the Northern States of Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar has an immense historical and cultural significance for the millions of Buddhist pilgrims and non-Buddhist travelers as well. Important destinations/sites which are associated with the life of Lord Buddha viz. Sarnath, Kapilvastu, Kushinagar, Sravasti, Sankisa and Kaushambhi in UP and Bodhgaya, Nalanda, Rajgir, Kesaria and Vaishali in Bihar forms an integral part of the Buddhist Circuit.

Lumbini, the World Heritage Site, situated in Nepal is the birthplace of the Lord Buddha, testified by the inscription on the Ashoka pillar, the sacred area in Lumbini is one of the most holy and significant places for the Buddhist World. The site at Lumbini, located in proximity to Kapilvastu, is generally considered an integral part of India's Buddhist Circuit. Bhutan and Bangladesh offer a number of Buddhist sites such as monasteries, stupas, shrines and significant archaeological excavations.



Google Map showing key sites on the Buddhist Circuit of India and Nepal

Buddhism is regarded as one of the three most widespread major world religions. Buddhism was founded by the historical Buddha Shakyamuni or Gautama, in the 5th or the 6th centuries B.C.E. Starting about the 3rd century, Buddhism began to grow and spread outside India, integrating with local cultures and the varying conditions of different countries. Buddhism began to take root in countries in Asia such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Korea, Japan, Thailand and Tibet as they came in contact with Buddhism from early 2nd century B.C.E.

The Buddhist Circuit is one of a series of tourism projects being undertaken by the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, as part of the 'Swadesh Darshan' initiative, which aims to create tourism circuits by combining different sites by region or sector. In a recently concluded 6th International Buddhist Conclave held in Rajgir (2017), the GOI has reiterated its commitment and priority in providing substantial investments for Buddhist Circuit especially in the areas of infrastructure and facility development along the various sites/ destinations.

There are numerous sites in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in India that are associated with Lord Buddha and Buddhism. In fact, Uttar Pradesh along with modern Bihar formed the hub of early Buddhism. It was from this region that Buddhism spread to other parts of the World. The following section depicts some of the prominent Buddhist sites in Bihar, Nepal and Uttar Pradesh constituting the **Buddhist Circuit of India :**

Bodhgaya, Lumbini, Sarnath, Kushinagar, Rajgir and Nalanda

Other Destinations on the Buddhist Circuit

- The Buddhist Circuit also comprises of other important destinations such as **Kapilvastu, Sravasti, Sankisa and Kausambhi in Uttar Pradesh and Kesaria, Vikramashila and Vaishali in Bihar.** Each location is at a different stage of development, since

their evolution started at different times. Therefore, they are focusing on different criteria.

- Situated at a distance of 46 km from Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh, **Sanchi** is designated as a “**World Heritage Site**” exemplified by its well preserved intricately designed stupas and unique Buddhist architecture and art.

High-Value Niche Markets

Source Country	High-Value Niche Markets
Japan	(i) FIT Market: Growing Free Independent Traveller (FIT) market, as Japanese and South Korean outbound travelers become more confident to travel independently and are less reliant on packaged tours. (ii) Special Interest Travellers (SIT): In Japan, South Korea and China, the number of SIT Travellers has gradually increased in the past few years. These travelers have high preference for visiting World Heritage Sites and undertaking cultural tours. (iii) Affluent Senior Market: With the size of the Japanese population continues to decrease, the number of people aged 60 and over has increased. Similarly, Taiwan's rapidly ageing population will lead to a significant rise of the elderly age segment in the top income band. (iv) These older travelers are able to afford longer trips, pay higher prices for greater comfort, and also drive the medical/wellness tourism sector. (v) Wellness Market: These source countries offer a growing market for health and wellness tourism. It is observed that the high value visitors from Japan and China are the most potential segments for wellness/tourism. (vi) Higher per Capita Spend: Visitors from China, Japan, South Korea and Singapore tend to spend more on accommodation, food and transport while travelling in India. These niche segments prefer to stay in luxury accommodation and demanding integrated travel experiences and services. (vii) Increasing Demand for Creative Packages: These niche segments have a latent demand for creative or experiential packages including desire for more authentic experiences and activities during the travel.
South Korea	
China	
Taiwan	
Thailand	
Malaysia	
Singapore	
Indonesia	

Source: Genesis Consulting Market Research (2017-18)

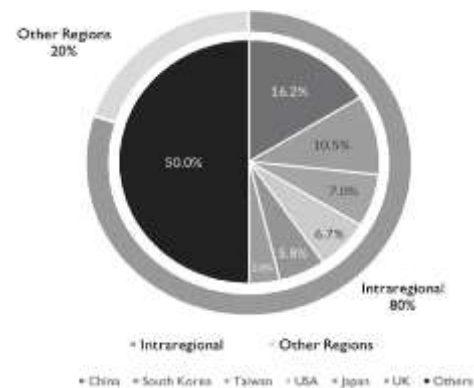
International Tourist arrivals in Asia Pacific Region : Top Destination Countries in Asia Pacific Region 2019 (in millions)

Country	2018	2019	Change %(-19/18)
China	61.99	65.70	7.5
Thailand	38.18	39.60	4.0
Japan	32.19	32.14	-0.2
Hong Kong (China)	29.25	23.75	-18.8
Malaysia	28.88	26.70	-1.3
Macau (China)	18.49	18.68	0.8
India	17.72	17.91	2.0
Vietnam	15.50	18.00	16.2

South Korea	13.35	17.50	14.0
Singapore	14.57	15.12	3.0
Indonesia	13.43	15.45	15.40
Taiwan	11.07	11.85	7.2
Australia	9.25	9.47	2.4
Philippines	7.17	8.26	15.2

- Asia and the Pacific is the second most visited region in the world after Europe, having overtaken the Americas in 2002. It has also been the fastest growing in the recent years.
- China, Thailand, Japan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Macau and India are top destinations in terms of international tourist arrivals.
- Vietnam, South Korea, Indonesia and Philippines are the fastest growing destinations in the Asia-Pacific.
- The region earned USD 443 billion in tourism receipts in 2019, or about 30% of the world total, a share that has increased steadily from 17% in 2000.
- Asian receipts per arrival exceed the world average.
- Asia earns an average USD 1200 from every tourist (arrival), above the world average of USD 1010.

Top Origin Markets for Destinations in Asia Pacific Region



Source: UNWTO

- Intra-regional tourism (originating in the same region) accounts for 80% of arrivals in the Asia-Pacific region.
- China is the largest contributor to Asia Pacific tourist arrivals since 2012.
- China currently generates over 16 percent of total international overnight arrivals in the region and is the largest source market for most destinations in the region.
- The other top source markets for the region are South Korea, Taiwan and Japan.
- Europe is the largest source of inter-regional tourism for Asia and the Pacific accounting for about 11-12% of all arrivals from outside the region.

- USA is also a key potential market for Asia-Pacific region.

Strategic Approach :

- There is an urgent need to enhance the supply-side capability of the tourism industry as many destinations on the Buddhist circuit are constrained with limited supply of quality accommodation, transport and travel related services.
- The strategy seeks to identify the areas of investment that we need to focus on over the next three to five years particularly in facilities and services for both budget and high-end tourists; which presents an opportunity for greater private sector engagement.
- The strategy seeks to focus on mobilizing private investments in key sub sectors such as high quality hotels, restaurants and transport operations that are vital to stimulating tourism demand, promoting longer stays and revitalizing destinations.
- The strategy seeks to provide encouragement to private investors in terms of facilitating availability of attractive land parcels, forward-looking Public-Private Partnership (PPP) policy and suitable build-operate-transfer (BOT) models.
- This in turn will create a favourable environment for market growth that will provide opportunities for local capital investments, employment and income generation and developing a strong sense of entrepreneurship in the area.

Myanmar, Vietnam, India, Sri Lanka and others.

- **Strengthening of Local Value Chains :** As the market grows, new opportunities will emerge for local travel agencies, transport operators, ground handlers and local SME enterprises.
- **Increasing Focus on FIT Market :** Opportunity to attract high-spending FITs from key source markets such as Japan, South Korea, USA and Europe.
- **Introduce Upscale Brands :** Opportunity to attract leading hotel brands to develop premium hotels, wellness resorts and high quality boutique hotels.
- **Cross-border Tourism :** Opportunity for current tour and hotel operators to forge viable partnerships and promotion of cross border tourism between neighbouring countries in Asia Pacific.

Potentials Opportunities : Transformative Experiences

- Sustainable Tourism Development
- Master Planning of Sites and their Surroundings
- Conservation of Living Heritage
- Up-gradation and Comprehensive Site Interpretation
- Buddha Walks – 'Chetiya Carika' (Walking Pilgrimage)
- Heritage Walks (Walking Pilgrimage)
- Cultural Exchanges
- Temple Stay Programmes
- Monastic Stay Programmes
- Integrated Experiences: Cultural and Experiential Tourism
- Buddhist Festivals and Events

Conclusion

There is an urgent need to enhance the supply-side capability of the tourism industry as many destinations on the Buddhist circuit are constrained with limited supply of quality accommodation, transport and travel related services. The strategy seeks to identify the areas of investment that we need to focus on over the next three to five years particularly in facilities and services for both budget and high-end tourists; which presents an opportunity for greater private sector engagement. The strategy seeks to focus on mobilizing private investments in key sub sectors such as high quality hotels, restaurants and transport operations that are vital to stimulating tourism demand, promoting longer stays and revitalizing destinations. The strategy seeks to provide encouragement to private investors in terms of facilitating availability of attractive land parcels, forward-looking Public-Private Partnership (PPP) policy and suitable build-operate-transfer (BOT) models. This in turn will create a favourable environment for market growth that will provide opportunities for local capital investments, employment and income generation and developing a strong sense of entrepreneurship in the area.

Potentials Opportunities for the Promotion of Buddhist tourism



The tourism industry on the Buddhist Circuit is poised for robust market expansion and capacity development.

- **Collaborative Partnerships :** Opportunity of collaborative partnerships between government agencies, monastic institutions and private organizations.
- **Promote aviation access to key markets :** Promotion of Low Cost Carriers (LCC) & charter services to boost tourist arrivals from China, Thailand,

Reference :

- PEW Research Centre, USA (2012-13).
- Robert Wuthnow and Wendy Cage, "Buddhists and Buddhism in the United States: The Scope of Influence," *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, no. 3 (September 2004): 371.
- Todd M Johnson & Brian J Grim, *World Religion Database* (2016).
- 2007: a survey conducted by the [East China Normal University](#) taking into account people from different regions of China, concluded that there were approximately 300 million religious believers (≈31% of the total population), of whom the vast majority ascribable to Buddhism, Taoism and folk religions. (Wikipedia)
- Hoyez A (2007) 'The world of yoga' : The production and reproduction of therapeutic landscapes. *Social Science & Medicine* 2: 1-19.
- Newcombe SH (2005) "[Spirituality and mystical religion in contemporary society: A case study of British practitioners of the Iyengar method of yoga.](#) *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 20: 305-321.
- Sports Marketing Surveys USA on behalf of Yoga Journal.
- Scott A. Mitchell: *Buddhism in the West* (North America & Europe).