

## Journeying With Purpose: Ecotourism in Kerala

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**Abstract:** Kerala, famously christened "God's Own Country," has long been a beacon for travellers drawn to its intricate network of palm-fringed backwaters, the lush, wildlife-rich mountains of the Western Ghats and a vibrant cultural ornamentation. However, a new paradigm of travel is emerging, shifting the focus from mere sightseeing to transformative and responsible engagement with the environment and local communities - ecotourism - a conscious journeying with purpose. This travel philosophy prioritizes conservation, empowers local populations and fosters a deeper, more meaningful connection with the natural world. The essence of Kerala ecotourism model is its symbiotic relationship between the traveller, the environment and the host community. Ultimately, ecotourism in Kerala is not a niche product but a necessary evolution of the state's travel industry. It represents a collective commitment to safeguarding its immense biological and cultural wealth for future generations. For the discerning traveller, it offers an unparalleled opportunity to journey with purpose - to become a temporary custodian of the environment rather than just a consumer of landscapes. It is an invitation to travel deeper, to listen to the stories of the forest and the backwaters and to leave behind only footprints that will gently fade, ensuring that the serene beauty of "God's Own Country" continues to thrive. Thus, the paper is an attempt to explore the potential of Kerala ecotourism as a sustainable blueprint for protecting fragile ecosystems while ensuring equitable socio-economic benefits for local communities along with fostering global environmental stewardship.

**Keywords:** Ecotourism, Kerala, Sustainable Travel, Community-Based Tourism

### INTRODUCTION

Kerala stands as a luminous example of how tourism can harmoniously blend with environmental conservation and community empowerment. Nestled along India's southwestern Malabar Coast, Kerala has transformed the paradigm of travel by pioneering ecotourism initiatives that protect its rich biodiversity while creating sustainable livelihoods for local communities. The concept of ecotourism in Kerala transcends conventional tourism by embedding environmental education, cultural preservation and community welfare into every experience. With nearly 56 places identified with ecotourism potential along with a robust Responsible Tourism Mission launched in 2007, Kerala has established itself as India's most progressive state in sustainable tourism practices (Kokkranikal and Chettiparamb, 2015; Haseena, 2015). Kerala's ecotourism journey has deep historical roots that date back to 1997, when the groundbreaking Periyar Tiger Trail was launched in Thekkady. This

pioneering initiative marked a watershed moment in conservation history, as it transformed former poachers and forest encroachers into tourist guides and conservation ambassadors. The Periyar Tiger Trail provides immersive wilderness experiences for visitors while creating alternative livelihoods for communities that had traditionally depended on forest resources. Thus, the paper is an attempt to explore the potential of Kerala ecotourism as a sustainable blueprint for protecting fragile ecosystems while ensuring equitable socio-economic benefits for local communities along with fostering global environmental stewardship.

Kerala's ascendance as a premier tourism destination in India is not a matter of chance but the result of visionary destination management and strategic promotion. Its leadership is built on a multi-faceted approach that has successfully balanced high tourist volumes with a reputation for quality and sustainability which is evident from Table 1.

**Table 1: Kerala tourist statistics 2013 (GoK, 2013)**

Type	Revenue
<b>Foreign tourists</b>	2013 - 858143 2012 - 7, 93,696 % Variation over Previous year - 8.12 %
Per day expenditure	2013 - Rs.4496/- 2012 - Rs.3600/ % Variation over Previous year - 24.89 %
Average duration of stay	2013 - 18days 2012 - 16 days % Variation over Previous year - 12.5%
Foreign exchange earnings	2013 - Rs. 5560. 2012 - Rs. 4571.69crores % Variation over Previous year - 21.63%
<b>Domestic tourists</b>	2013 - 108,57,811 2012 - 100,76,854 % Variation over Previous year - 6.53 %
Per day expenditure	2013 - Rs.2015/- 2012 - Rs.1800/- % Variation over Previous year - 11.94 %
Average duration of stay	2013 - 8 days 2012 - 6 days % Variation over Previous year - 33.3%
Earnings from domestic tourists	2013 - Rs. 11,726.44 crores 2012 - Rs. 10,883crores % Variation over Previous year - 7.75 %
Total earnings (direct)	2013 - Rs. 17,287.21 crores 2012 - Rs. 15,404.69 crores % Variation over Previous year - 12.22 %
Total revenue generated (direct and indirect)	2013 - Rs. 22926.55 Crores 2013 - Rs. 20430.00 Crores % Variation over Previous year - 12.22%

### Ecotourism and livelihood

Ecotourism in Kerala emerged as a critical lifeline for forest-dependent communities, bridging conservation imperatives with livelihood security in a state celebrated for its natural wealth and biodiversity. Kerala's "Responsible Tourism" project in Kumarakom, a sustainable tourism effort that links the local community with the tourism industry, earned the UNWTO Ulysses Award for Innovation in Public Policy and Governance in 2014, recognizing its pioneering ecotourism initiatives that successfully integrated environmental stewardship with economic empowerment of marginalized populations. This recognition underscored how ecotourism had transformed from a conservation strategy into a comprehensive development model addressing the subsistence challenges of rural and tribal communities inhabiting the state's forested landscapes. The foreign tourist visitors in Kerala in 2014 was 9,23,336 which shows 7.60 percent increase from the last year and the domestic tourist visitors were 1,16,95,411 which again shows 7.71 percent increase, is clear evidence of its potential. In 2014 the industry contributed revenue of 24885.44 crores from direct and indirect sources giving

rise to an increase of 12.11 percent from the last year. A dichotomy of tourists and ecotourists shows that tourists in the ecotourism destinations come to 42.6 percent of the total, shows the scope, significance and its potential (Abraham and Rajasenana, 2015). This significant flow of tourists created direct employment and income opportunities for communities residing in proximity to these sites, many of whom belonged to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other economically vulnerable groups who had historically depended on forests for survival.

Income generation through ecotourism fundamentally altered livelihood patterns for participating communities. Employment opportunities created by ecotourism encompassed diverse roles catering to different skill levels and community segments. Local residents found work as tour guides, trekking guides, protection watchers, boat operators and ecotourism staff at destinations. Ecotourism specifically created opportunities in areas where other economic activities were limited, providing casual employment at destinations and supporting self-employment in ancillary services such as homestays, souvenir

production, food provision, and transportation around ecotourism sites. Prominent ecotourism destinations exemplified how conservation and community welfare could coexist productively. The socioeconomic impacts extended beyond direct income to encompass infrastructural and social transformations in participating communities.

### Responsible tourism

The idea of Responsible Tourism (RT) was first proposed in 1996 with the goal of achieving a "triple bottom-line" - economic, social and environmental responsibility. Following the 2002 Cape Town Declaration, a thorough overview of responsible tourism that emphasized its goals and contributing elements emerged (Responsible Tourism Partnership, 2002). Kerala initiated Responsible Tourism in 2007 with commendable outcomes. The strength and harmony of responsible tourism depend on key pillars working in unison, supporting a shared vision.

- **Environmental sustainability:** This is the foundational pillar, ensuring the physical world the people explore remains pristine. Its principles include, minimizing footprints, reducing waste, conserving water and energy and limiting pollution. In addition, supporting conservation efforts, respecting wildlife from a distance and staying on designated trails along with choosing eco-friendly accommodations, tour operators with green certifications and low-impact transportation are involved.
- **Social & cultural pillar:** This pillar ensures that tourism enriches, rather than erodes, the social fabric of a destination. It is built on community engagement, respecting local customs, dress codes and traditions and valuing and supporting the protection of historical sites, indigenous knowledge and traditional art forms.
- **Economic Pillar:** This pillar ensures that the financial benefits of tourism are widely and fairly distributed across every strata of the society. Ensuring that tourism creates jobs and opportunities that allow residents to thrive in their home communities.
- **The foundation - The responsible traveller & host:** The entire structure rests on a shared foundation: the mindset and actions of both the traveller and the host which is the pivotal element in responsible tourism. This involves traveller's responsibility (to be mindful, prepared and respectful; to make conscious choices that align with the pillars above) and host's responsibility (to operate ethically, share their culture with pride and integrity and prioritize the long-term health of their environment and community).

When all these pillars are strong and balanced, the temple of responsible tourism stands firm, creating a positive and enduring legacy for both the places we visit and the people who call them home. Furthermore, responsible tourism actively works to preserve Kerala's rich cultural ornamentation which encourages visitors to engage with and appreciate authentic art forms like Theyyam, Kathakali or traditional music in their original settings, often organised by local cultural societies. This provides a platform for artists and ensures these traditions are valued and sustained. It also fosters a sense of respect and cross-cultural exchange, moving beyond the superficial to a deeper understanding of the local way of life.

Journeying with purpose in Kerala is to trade the well-worn path of the tourist for the more intimate, meandering trail of the guest (Mathew and Kumar, 2014). It is a conscious decision to see beyond the picturesque houseboats and hill station vistas, and to connect with the living, breathing heart of "God's Own Country." This kind of travel is not about ticking off a list of attractions; it is about the quality of the experience, the depth of the connection, and the intention to leave a positive imprint in return for the memories gathered.

### Journeying with purpose in Kerala

This journey often begins not in a luxury resort, but in a family-run homestay tucked away in a village near the backwaters of Alappuzha or Kuttanad. Here, the purpose is immersion. The morning starts not with a generic hotel buffet, but with the scent of freshly cooked appam and coconut stew from the kitchen, prepared by the host. The backwaters are not just a vista to be photographed from a distant boat, but a way of life to be understood. The traveller join with the host family in learning how coir is spun from coconut husks, or help pole a small, traditional canoe through narrow, silent canals where the large tourist boats cannot go. This intimate access is a privilege, and the purpose is to listen to the stories of the people whose lives are intertwined with these waters, understanding their challenges and their deep respect for this fragile ecosystem. Here, the financial benefit goes directly into the hands of the family, empowering the community and ensuring the survival of these local traditions.

The purpose of the journey also finds expression in engaging with Kerala's vibrant cultural soul in an authentic and respectful manner which means seeking out a small, local Kathakali performance where the traveller can witness the meticulous, hours-long process of the actors applying their own makeup, understanding the symbolism behind each vibrant colour and gesture, before the performance even begins. It means visiting a village where they practice the ancient, ritualistic art of Theyyam, not as a spectacle

staged for tourists, but as a living, spiritual tradition for the community. Here also, the support from the tourist helps to provide a livelihood for the artists and preserves these art forms for future generations.

Ultimately, journeying with purpose in Kerala transforms the traveller. It replaces passive observation with active participation. It swaps the isolation of a resort for the warmth of a shared meal and conversation. It fosters a sense of gratitude and responsibility, knowing that the travel choices have a direct impact. While the traveller return home not just with photographs, but with the taste of a home-cooked meal, the sound of a folk song, the knowledge of a farmer who taught about cardamom and the profound satisfaction that the tourists presence contributed to the preservation of a way of life. This is the essence of purposeful travel in Kerala, a deep, reciprocal exchange where the journey changes both the destination and the traveller for the better, creating a legacy of sustainability and shared humanity.

### Cultural immersion and authentic experiences

Kerala, often celebrated for its breathtaking natural beauty, offers a far richer treasure to those who venture beyond the postcard scenes. Ecotourism in Kerala has evolved into a profound gateway for cultural immersion, offering authentic experiences that weave the traveller directly into the vibrant fabric of local life (Shibi chandradas, 2014). Ecotourism in Kerala is a journey where the destination is not a place, but a connection. The journey begins with a fundamental shift in accommodation in home stays or jungle stays. This immersion deepens through hands-on participation in daily life and traditional crafts. In the tranquil backwater villages of Alappuzha and Kuttanad, life is intrinsically linked to the water. Authentic ecotourism here means stepping into a canoe and gliding through narrow, palm-fringed canals that are inaccessible to large tourist boats. Cultural immersion also means engaging with Kerala's living artistic and wellness traditions in their most authentic settings. Similarly, a visit to a 'Kalari' (martial arts) offers a glimpse into the ancient martial art of Kalaripayattu. The experience is more than a demonstration of acrobatic prowess; it is a lesson in discipline, history, and the holistic healing practices that accompany the training.

The culinary journey is perhaps the most delightful form of immersion which goes beyond restaurant dining to participating in a traditional cooking class in a village home. Ultimately, ecotourism in Kerala, when approached with a desire for authenticity, becomes a reciprocal relationship. It is a slow, mindful travel that respects the environment by supporting practices that protect it and honours the culture by engaging with it on its own terms.

### CONCLUSION

Kerala's ecotourism journey represents a transformative approach to travel that places sustainability, community empowerment and environmental conservation at its core. By a various tourism models, the state has demonstrated that tourism can be a powerful tool for positive change when implemented thoughtfully and inclusively. The integration of tribal communities and women entrepreneurs into the tourism value chain, the preservation of biodiversity through protected areas and sustainable practices and the celebration of cultural heritage through homestays, ethnic cuisine and Ayurveda wellness all contribute to Kerala's unique tourism ecosystem. Journeying with purpose in Kerala means more than visiting breathtaking landscapes, it means becoming part of a larger story of conservation, empowerment and sustainable development. Every traveller who chooses Kerala's ecotourism experiences contributes to preserving the Western Ghats' biodiversity, supporting local livelihoods and ensuring that God's Own Country remains a paradise for generations to come. In an era when responsible travel has become imperative rather than optional, Kerala stands as a beacon, illuminating the path toward a more sustainable and equitable tourism future.

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