

The Contributions of Resorts to the Development of Wayanad Tourism

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Abstract

Resorts in the Wayanad district of Kerala (India) have played a central role in transforming the region from a largely agrarian and nature-based destination to one of the fastest-growing tourism zones in the state. This article investigates how resorts contribute to economic development, livelihood diversification, infrastructure and service enhancements, product diversification (eco- and experiential tourism), and local community empowerment — while also unpacking the environmental and governance challenges. The research draws on empirical studies, statistical data from government sources, and academic literature to highlight the multi-dimensional contributions of resorts to Wayanad's tourism growth. The study concludes with policy recommendations and a proposed agenda for future research to optimise sustainable resort-led tourism growth in Wayanad.

1. INTRODUCTION

Wayanad, located in the northern part of Kerala, is characterised by highland forests of the Western Ghats, spice plantations, tribal populations, and scenic landscapes. Over the past two decades the growth of tourism — in particular the development of resorts and resort-style accommodations — has altered the region's economy, ecology and social fabric.

Resorts serve not only as lodging facilities but as catalysts: they attract visitors, create demand for services, raise standards of hospitality, and stimulate supply chains (local agriculture, transport, guiding). In Wayanad, which has for long struggled with agrarian distress (George & Anjaneya Swamy, 2021), the rise of resorts offers alternative livelihoods and new economic streams.

Recent tourism statistics show noteworthy growth: Wayanad welcomed more than **1.3 million visitors** in a recent year, underscoring its transformation into a major tourism hotspot. Kerala Tourism During the Christmas–New Year period

(Dec 20 to Jan 2) alone, about **2.93 lakh (293,000) tourists** visited. @mathrubhumi These numbers point to the scale of tourism demand that resorts help to absorb and direct.

This article explores the ways resorts contribute to Wayanad's tourism development, while also acknowledging the risks (ecological fragility, unregulated growth). The aim is to provide a nuanced analysis useful for policy makers, researchers and tourism planners in hill-destination contexts. The next section provides a review of literature relevant to resorts, tourism development, and Wayanad in particular.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Resort-led tourism and destination development

The literature on resort-led tourism emphasises how lodging infrastructure influences destination attractiveness, length of tourist stay, spend per visitor, and the nature of tourism value chains. Resorts often act as anchors: they provide high-quality accommodation, attract niche segments (eco-tourists, wellness travellers), and foster backward linkages (local sourcing) and forward linkages (tour transport, adventure activities). For example, research in the Maldives on luxury resorts finds that sustainable tourism practices and the “triple-bottom-line” (economic, environmental, social) approach are critical for long-term viability (Naqvi, Ahmed & Pervez, 2023). arXiv

2.2 Tourism in Wayanad: special-interest, agrarian transition, sustainability

Wayanad has attracted academic attention for multiple reasons: its transition from agriculture to tourism, unique ecological and tribal context, and the challenge of balancing growth with preservation. George & Anjaneya Swamy (2021) document how tourism participation offered an offset to agrarian crisis in Wayanad. Christ University Journals Another study on special interest tourism shows Wayanad's potential for nature-based, adventure and niche tourism market segments. Christ University Journals In the resorts context, Kumar (2022) examines “green behaviour” of tourists staying in selected resorts in Wayanad. The study found only about 24% of tourists were “fully green,” indicating sustainability challenges in resort-tourism settings. revistadeturism.ro

2.3 Empirical data on tourist satisfaction and destination performance

Studies also explore domestic tourist satisfaction in Wayanad: Sujith & Sumathy (2022) found that factors like cost of services, food facility, accommodation quality, transport and information availability significantly influence satisfaction levels. Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham The destination's growth trajectory is further captured in state data: e.g., Wayanad recorded 364,826 domestic travellers in a first quarter (2023) as part of Kerala's domestic travel surge. Invest Kerala

2.4 Challenges: environmental risk, carrying capacity, governance

While tourism growth offers benefits, the literature warns of mounting risks. For instance, news and academic work indicate Wayanad's landslide vulnerability is exacerbated by unregulated resort construction in ecologically fragile zones (India Today, 2024). India Today A Reddit thread (though non-academic) echoes similar concerns of deforestation and

risk due to resort building. Reddit Overcrowding and exceeding carrying capacity is also a growing concern in Wayanad, similar to other high-growth destinations in Kerala. Reddit

2.5 Gaps in the literature

Despite a growing literature on Wayanad tourism, specific focus on the **role of resorts** (as distinct from general tourism infrastructure) remains limited. Empirical studies rarely isolate resort growth, supply-chain linkages, and socio-economic outcomes for local communities tied to resorts. This gap provides the basis for the present study: to examine how resort-led tourism in Wayanad contributes to development, as well as its trade-offs.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Based on the foregoing, this study sets out the following objectives:

1. To analyse how resorts in Wayanad contribute to economic development: employment generation, backward and forward linkages, income diversification.
2. To assess the role of resorts in product diversification and quality upgrading of tourism in Wayanad (eco-resorts, experiential stays, adventure tourism).
3. To examine the social and cultural contributions of resorts – community participation, cultural preservation, skills development.
4. To identify environmental, governance and sustainability challenges associated with resort growth in Wayanad.
5. To formulate policy recommendations and a research agenda for sustainable resort-driven tourism development in Wayanad.

4. PROBLEM STATEMENT

While tourism in Wayanad has expanded significantly, the **specific role** and **impact** of resorts remain under-explored. Resorts are by definition a major component of tourism infrastructure but can mediate both positive outcomes (jobs, infrastructure) and negative externalities (environmental pressure, cultural disruption). In Wayanad's ecologically sensitive landscape, with existing agrarian distress and tribal populations, understanding this duality is essential. Without such understanding, policy interventions may remain generic and may fail to harness the full potential of resort-led tourism or mitigate its risks.

Therefore, this study responds to this gap by focusing on **resorts** as active agents in Wayanad's tourism ecosystem—rather than treating them as passive infrastructure—to uncover how they shape economic, social, cultural and environmental outcomes.

5. METHODOLOGY

Given the constraints of desk-based research, the methodology adopted is primarily **secondary research** with synthesis and critical analysis. The sources used include:

- Official tourism statistics from the Government of Kerala / Kerala Tourism newsletters (e.g., Wayanad welcoming 1.3 million visitors). Kerala Tourism+1
- Peer-reviewed journal articles focusing on Wayanad and tourism (e.g., Kumar, 2022; Sibi, 2017; George & Anjaneya Swamy, 2021). revistadeturism.ro+2Christ University Journals+2
- Media and news reporting on resort growth, environmental risk in Wayanad. India Today+1
- Comparative literature on resort tourism in other contexts (e.g., Maldives) to draw lessons. arXiv

The study uses qualitative content analysis and descriptive statistics to interpret patterns and themes. While primary fieldwork (surveys or interviews) is beyond scope in this draft, the paper identifies future research opportunities for primary investigation. Limitations include reliance on existing published data and the absence of resort-specific primary data for Wayanad (such as number of resort rooms, occupancy rates, direct linkages to local suppliers) — highlighting an area for empirical research.

6. FINDINGS

6.1 Growth of tourism and resort potential in Wayanad

The tourism growth trajectory in Wayanad is striking. For example, in the first quarter of 2023, Wayanad recorded 364,826 domestic travellers. Invest Kerala The district welcomed more than 1.3 million tourists in a recent year, according to Kerala Tourism's newsletter. Kerala Tourism Peaks in visitor numbers are evident in festive periods — 293,000 tourists visited Wayanad during the Christmas–New Year rush alone. @mathrubhumi Given this demand, resorts become vital for absorbing visitor flows, enabling longer stays, higher spend and increased comfort, which in turn justifies investment.

6.2 Economic contributions

Employment and income diversification: With resorts proliferating, there are new employment opportunities — front office, housekeeping, food & beverage, adventure guides, transport. While specific resort-level employment figures are unavailable, regional studies show tourism helping offset agrarian distress (George & Anjaneya Swamy, 2021). Christ University Journals For example, tourism services emerged as an alternative livelihood when agriculture faced crisis.

Backward linkages and local supply chains: Resorts often need local produce (spices, vegetables, tea, coffee), local handicrafts, tour-guides, transport. While specific data for Wayanad resorts is scarce, the general concept is supported: for example, enterprise opportunities exist for local villagers when tourism demand rises. This supports the observation that resorts act not just as final demand points but as nodes in a local value chain.

Revenue generation and entrepreneur development: As resorts encourage new service providers (adventure tours, heritage village visits, transport), micro-enterprises are formed. For instance, the study on indigenous tourism in the tribal

heritage village (En Ooru) in Wayanad highlights how tourism initiatives create revenue streams for tribal communities (KP & V, 2024). Granthaalayah Publication

6.3 Product diversification and quality upgrading

Resorts in Wayanad have shifted beyond mere accommodation to experience-oriented stays: eco-resorts, forest lodges, adventure-activity linked stays, farm-stays and so on. The study by Sibi P S (2017) indicates Wayanad's niche in special-interest tourism (nature-based, adventure, culture) and how resorts can align to these trends. Christ University Journals By offering higher standards of service, resorts raise the overall quality of tourism infrastructure, set benchmarks for non-resort accommodations and encourage longer stays and higher spend.

6.4 Social and cultural contributions

Community participation and cultural value: Resorts that incorporate tribal culture (performances, village visits) or local crafts provide platforms for cultural preservation and promotion. For instance, the En Ooru tribal heritage village case shows indigenous tourism supporting tribal identity and income. ResearchBib+1 When resorts partner with local communities, the social benefits multiply.

Skill development and capacity building: Resort operations necessitate hospitality training, guiding, foreign-language skills and customer-service culture. This builds local human capital, which can spill over into other tourism segments.

6.5 Infrastructure, branding and institutional support

Resorts tend to drive improvements in infrastructure: better roads, sanitation, electricity reliability, water supply. For example, the growth of tourism in Wayanad is associated with connectivity improvements noted in Kerala Tourism's newsletter. Kerala Tourism Moreover, resorts often carry the destination brand and help spread awareness through online travel platforms, thus elevating Wayanad's visibility beyond local or regional markets.

Institutionally, the state's Responsible Tourism initiative and district tourism promotion councils (DTPCs) are engaging resorts in skill and community programmes. Although direct resort-participation data is limited, the broader framework exists (Kerala Tourism, n.d.). Invest Kerala

6.6 Environmental and governance challenges specific to resort growth

Ecological fragility and risk of over-development: Wayanad lies in a sensitive ecosystem (Western Ghats). Reports suggest resort construction in fragile zones, deforestation for access and soil instability — culminating in tragic landslides. One report indicates that rapid tourist development aggravated landslides in Wayanad (India Today, 2024). India Today Another article details how tourism, accounting for 22 % of Wayanad's revenue, was severely impacted by landslide shocks and cancellations. @mathrubhumi

Sustainability behaviour of tourists in resorts: Kumar (2022) studied green behaviour among tourists staying at resorts in Wayanad and found only 24 % were fully green, 29 % moderately green and 47 % marginally green. revistadeturism.ro This suggests that while resorts can adopt green practices, tourist behaviour remains a constraint.

Carrying capacity and overcrowding: Some informal sources suggest that Wayanad (like other Kerala destinations) faces issues of overcrowding and the need to study carrying capacity. Reddit Overcrowding can degrade visitor experience, strain infrastructure and cause environmental stress.

Governance and informal/unregulated resort growth: Media reporting has pointed to concerns about illegal resorts operating without proper permits or environmental clearances. Although precise figures for Wayanad resort zone are not systematically documented, the risk is acknowledged. The Times of India

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to maximise the positive contributions of resorts in Wayanad while mitigating risks:

1. **Regulatory & zoning frameworks:** Strengthen land-use zoning and enforce building standards that respect ecological fragility (slope limits, forest buffers). Resort approval must integrate environmental impact assessment for sensitive areas.
2. **Green operations and certification:** Establish a resort-level certification scheme (eco-resort or sustainable lodge) that promotes waste-management, water-conservation, energy-efficiency and local procurement. Incentives (tax or subsidy) should be offered for certified resorts.
3. **Community benefit-sharing models:** Resorts should adopt formal community benefit agreements: hiring quotas for local tribal or agrarian populations, minimum procurement shares from local farmers/spice growers, community training programmes.
4. **Capacity building & linkages:** Invest in hospitality training centres in Wayanad (language, guiding, adventure safety) so that local youth benefit and service quality improves. Also facilitate backward linkages: local farms, spice gardens and artisans can be tied to resort supply chains.
5. **Carrying capacity monitoring & destination management:** The district tourism authority should establish monitoring of visitor numbers, infrastructure load (water, waste, traffic) and set thresholds to avoid overcrowding. Resorts must cooperate by sharing data on occupancy and visitor profiles.
6. **Disaster-sensitive planning:** Given Wayanad's vulnerability to landslides and heavy rains, resort planning must integrate disaster-risk assessment, restrict development in high-risk zones, and ensure guest and staff safety protocols.
7. **Marketing of sustainable niche product:** Resorts should market not just "luxury stay" but "responsible nature stay" linked to local culture, agro-tourism, wellness and forest-therapy. This can help lengthen stays, reduce peak crowding and spread benefits across seasons.

8. **Research and data collection:** Resorts, local government and academia should collaborate to collect data on resort-level employment, local procurement, guest spend, environmental performance and community outcomes. Such evidence will support smarter policy.

8. SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study provides a broad overview, several avenues for future empirical research are evident:

- **Resort-level micro-data studies:** Conduct primary fieldwork (surveys, interviews) with a sample of resorts in Wayanad to gather data on number of rooms, occupancy rates, guest spend, employment numbers, local procurement levels, wages and linkages with local agriculture and artisans.
- **Visitor segmentation and spend analysis:** Study guest profiles of resorts (origin, purpose of visit, length of stay) and compare with non-resort accommodations to understand differential contributions and value.
- **Community impact case studies:** Qualitative research on local communities (tribal, agrarian) adjacent to resorts to examine how resort presence alters livelihoods, land use, culture, power dynamics and perceptions of tourism.
- **Environmental impact quantification:** Empirical research measuring water use, energy consumption, waste generation of resorts in Wayanad; linking these to ecological carrying capacity of the area (soil stability, forest cover, slope erosion).
- **Governance & compliance mapping:** Study the extent of formal resort registration, environmental clearances, adherence to building codes and the scale of informal/unregulated resorts in Wayanad. Investigate governance gaps and reform pathways.
- **Longitudinal studies of change:** Track changes over time in communities, resort operations and environment to assess sustainability and resilience of resort-led tourism in Wayanad.
- **Comparative studies:** Compare Wayanad with other hill-resort regions in India (e.g., Himachal, Uttarakhand) to derive transferable lessons on resorts, sustainable tourism and local development.

9. CONCLUSION

Resorts in Wayanad occupy a pivotal position in the district's tourism ecosystem. They contribute significantly to economic opportunities (employment, local supply chains), product upgrading (nature-based stays, experiential tourism), social and cultural revitalisation (community participation, skill development) and infrastructure improvements (connectivity, service delivery). However, these benefits are accompanied by potential ecological and governance risks: environmental degradation, landslide vulnerability, unregulated growth, and limited green behaviour among tourists.

To harness the full potential of resort-led tourism in Wayanad, a balanced approach is required: one that embeds sustainable practices, community linkages, monitoring systems and regulatory oversight. Moreover, detailed empirical research (resort-level, community-level, environmental) is needed to fill current knowledge gaps.

For post-doctoral research, focusing on resort-led tourism in Wayanad offers rich inter-disciplinary opportunities — connecting hospitality management, rural development, environmental sustainability and regional planning.

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