

Developing Salalah as a Health Tourism Destination in GCC (An Attempt to Explore Communication Strategies)

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Health tourism means travelling for acquiring, regaining, improving or maintaining good health. It is not a new phenomenon. Health has always been a great motivational force behind travelling. Roman spas and sanatoriums are examples of early human health tourism. Popularly known as 'Perfume Capital of Arabia', Salalah has always been the centre of attraction for tourists. With the upcoming 'Medical City Project', Salalah is poised as a health tourism destination. Effective communication is the key to success of any venture, service, industry, or community. This study tries to explore the communication strategies to develop Salalah as a health tourism destination.

Main objective of this study is to explore the communication strategies in developing Salalah as a health tourism destination in GCC. A qualitative research approach with semi-structures interviews was adopted for the purpose of this study. Study shows that integrated communication strategies are required to develop Salalah as health tourism destination.

This study is useful for the policymakers to formulate appropriate communication strategies to develop Salalah as health tourism destination in GCC. Lack of prior research & availability of related data is a limitation for the study.

Key Words: Health Tourism, Medical Tourism, Communication, communication strategies, GCC etc.

INTRODUCTION

Health tourism is a niche form of tourism having unique characteristics of linking health objectives with tourism. It has been growing rapidly over last couple of years. Tourism is commonly explained as travelling for recreation, leisure, business, or change of weather. When these travelling are combined with the objectives of acquiring, regaining, improving or maintaining good health, it may be termed as health tourism. Health tourism is not a new phenomenon to the world. Since times immemorial, health has been a great motivational force behind travelling. Roman spas and sanatoriums are examples of early human health tourism.

Health tourism is not a new concept of modern era. Evidences suggest that health tourism existed even before the beginning of Christ era. Yoga & Ayurveda were being practiced in India as far as 5000BC, while Chinese medicine was used in 1000BC. There are examples of Greek and Roman structures of thermal and medical baths, Ottoman and Arabian Hammams or steam baths, and Egyptian traditions of baths and use of cosmetics. Spas in Belgium has a long history that goes back to Roman times, while European tradition of spas, seaside bath, and oxygen therapy has mention in the colonial history.

Salalah as a Potential Health Tourism Destination

Since ages, Salalah has been the centre of attraction for tourists. It is popularly known as 'Perfume Capital of Arabia'. Every year hundreds of thousands tourists visit Salalah during khareef festival. Salalah is often dubbed as region's summer paradise. It provides a perfect blend of tourism activities in the lap of nature. Blessed with the lush green hills, gorgeous waterfalls, misty mountains, beautiful landscapes, burbling springs, Salalah converts into a mystic destination during monsoon season. Equipped with an international airport and very good infrastructure for tourism, Salalah provides a perfect location to be developed as a health tourism destination in the GCC. According to Dhofar governorate officials, Salalah received a total of 293,043 visitors in 2009, while this figure was 262,203 in 2010. Statistics show that GCC citizen form the second largest chunk of visitors who visit Salalah after the Omani nationals. [1] In the context of this study, Salalah represents the whole Dhofar region, not the Salalah city only.

Ambit of Health Tourism

The ambit of Health tourism covers a wide range of activities. Following are some activities that could be provided at Salalah as a Health Tourism destination are:

- A. Change of weather: It is a very common type of health tourism activity. Across the globe people mostly travel for change of weather. Besides, all over world, physician advice people a change of weather to recover from a mental trauma and physical weakness. Change of weather helps to rejuvenate & regain health, rebuild body & strength after some illness or sickness. A climate change activities during the Khareef season are already very popular in Salalah. Health tourism can be enhanced with addition / combination of following activities.
- B. A Specialised Service: Following specialised services could be provided at a health tourism destination.
 - a. Spa Treatment
 - b. Yoga / Meditation
 - c. Body Massage / Relaxation
 - d. See & Sun Activities
 - e. Nature Walk
 - f. Hot n Cold Spring
 - g. Water Sports / Adventure Sports
 - h. Nutritional / Healthy Diets
- C. Providing a Special Treatment Package Service:

The most recent trend in health tourism is to provide a treatment package service for the prospective travellers. A particular city or tourist destination is promoted for this theme. This treatment package may contain a holistic (healing / recuperating) treatment, or a preventive / Curative (drug-free) treatment etc at a particular place/city.

Health Tourism Vs Medical Tourism

Health tourism is often confused with medical tourism. While both terms are used interchangeably, there is a lot of difference between the two. Following is an attempt to differentiate both the terms.

HEALTH TOURISM

Health tourism is the act of travelling with the purpose of acquiring, regaining, improving, or maintaining good health. Rejuvenating, relaxing, & soothing body & mind are main motivational factors behind health tourism. Health tourism is often dubbed as wellness tourism. Health tourists are generally healthy.

MEDICAL TOURISM

Medical tourism is the act of travelling with a view to obtain medical care or treatment for a sickness / illness, disease or a condition, or to undertake a cosmetic procedure. Medical tourism is facilitated by high quality of medical care, better access to medical services at a cost cheaper than what they get at home. Medical Tourists are generally ill and seek some medical / cosmetic surgery or enhancement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Health tourism is a relatively new discipline and there is not much literature available on the topic. Different scholars have tried to define health tourism in different way. There is no clarity about a globally accepted definition of Health tourism. It is often dubbed as wellness tourism. Many academics use wellness and health tourism interchangeably. Here is an attempt to get an understanding of health tourism.

[2] An attempt was made at a summit of International Unions of Tourist Organisation to define health tourism (IUTO-1973). It says that health tourism is the provision of health facilities utilising the natural resources of the state, especially the water, natural resources and climatic conditions.

[3] Dunn (1959), the first scholar, who was a medical doctor, talked about concept of health & wellness, defines it as... the state of health which comprises an overall sense of wellbeing and sees a person as consisting of body, mind, and spirit. Lifestyle and self responsibilities for health are paramount in the quest for a better quality of life.

[4] Hall (1992:151) while mentioning about Van Spielen explains about health tourism as .. “staying away from home, health as the most important motive, and done in a leisure setting. Van specified five ingredients of health components. These are:

- A. Fun & Sun activities
- B. Engaging in healthy activities, but health is not the central motive (adventure and sports tourism activities such as cycling, hiking, or golf etc.)
- C. Principal motive for travel is health (e.g. sea cruise or travel to different climate)
- D. Travel for sauna, massage, and other health activities (spa resort)⁴
- E. Medical treatment

[5] Muller & Kaufmann (2001) mentions about wellness tourism as “It is the sum total of all the journey and activities of the people whose main objective is to preserve or promote their health. They stay at a designated place and require a comprehensive service package equipped with specialised know-how and individualised care. During the stay they focus on beauty care / physical fitness, nutritional / healthy diet, medication /yoga, mental activity / relaxation etc.”

[6] Deutscher Wellness Verband (2008) combines the idea of wellness and health (cure). He explains it as ... “a form of ‘behavioural medicine’ where clients are directed by experts to make necessary changes in lifestyle to attain wellness/ wellbeing.

COMMUNICATION & HUMAN BEING

Communication is central to all human activities. It regulates and shapes all our behaviour. No society, organisation or enterprise can survive without communication. Being at the core of every human activity, effective communication is the key to success of any venture, service, industry, or community. Communication is vital for human existence, and for the progress of humanity. Effective communication policy is a prerequisite for success of any venture. It is the lifeblood of good governance.

Media contribute to spreading awareness about new issues in the traditional society by helping to change the attitudes of people. For example change in attitudes relating to Environment, work, gender, customs, communities, and beliefs etc can be brought in the society. Media are very effective medium of mass communication. It is a very good source of information and education, and its impact on audiences is personal and substantial.

Media's Role in a Developing Society

According to the Dinning and Backer (1991), all the media in the emerging society act as Purveyor of information, Providers of pleasure and enjoyment, Furnishers of channels of expression and enjoyment, Economic activists and changers of perceptions, influencers of behaviours, builders of institutions, and shapers of the future. [7]

The media play the following four important roles:

1. It circulates the knowledge that will inform people of significant events, events, opportunities, dangers, and changes in their community, country and the world.
2. Media provides a forum where issues affecting the national or community life may be aired, discussed and debated to reach a common understanding.
3. Media educate / teach those ideas, skills and attitudes that people need to achieve for a better life.
4. It creates and maintains a base of consensus that is needed for the sustainability of resources.

NEED FOR RESEARCH

Effective communication is fundamental to the success of any venture, organisation, or enterprise. Yet it is frequently overlooked in developing and creating brand awareness. Use of appropriate communication strategies is instrumental in influencing the behaviour of the people in creating brand awareness / promoting brands.

This research paper will help policy makers, government agencies, development planners, environmentalist, economists, media persons, and the stakeholder in formulating appropriate communication strategies to develop Salalah as a health tourism destination in GCC.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Main objective of this paper are:

- A. To explore the possibilities to develop Salalah as health tourism destination in GCC
- B. To develop communication strategies to promote Salalah as a health tourism destination in GCC

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach is adopted for purpose of this study. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect data. A total of 32 respondents were interviewed to collect the data. Data were collected through a personal / telephonic interview. Respondents chosen were the well experience person related to different walks of life. Respondents include professionals from hospitality industry, healthcare providers, academics, healthcare seekers, health & medical tourists, media personnel, & other stakeholders etc.

The samples were chosen through purposive sampling. The criteria for sample selection included the experience or expertise related to health / tourism / communication / marketing or administration of the relevant field.

Data Collection

Data were collected mainly by primary sources. Secondary sources were also used to collect data.

Research Design

1. Semi-structured Interview conducted with the respondents
2. Based on the interview , SWOT analysis done
3. On the bases of SWOT analysis, communication strategies suggested to develop Salalah as a health tourism destination

Operational Definition

1. Health Tourism: Health tourism means tourism undertaken for the purpose of acquiring, regaining, improving, or maintaining good health.
2. Medical Tourism: Medical tourism means tourism undertaken for the purpose of obtaining medical care or treatment for a sickness/illness, disease or a condition, or to undertake a cosmetic procedure.
3. Communication: Communication means mass communication/ mass media/ media. It means the mechanical device that carry messages simultaneously to millions of audiences across the globe. It includes Radio, TV (DTH, Satellite TV, and Cable TV etc.), Newspapers/ Magazines, Web media (Internet), Folk & Traditional Media & other forms of media. For the purpose of this study communication means all forms of communication.
4. Communication Strategy: In the context of this study a Communication strategy means the formulation of appropriate communication policies to achieve the specific organisational objectives i.e. creating brand awareness.
5. GCC: GCC means the Gulf cooperation council. It is a group of six countries bordering the bordering the Persian Gulf, and situated on the Persian peninsula i.e. Oman, United Arab Emirate, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain & Saudi Arabia

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Based on the interviews with the respondents, a SWOT analysis was done to assess the ambit and scope of health tourism in Salalah. Finding of the SWOT analysis are mentioned here.

SWOT ANALYSIS**Strengths**

- A. Already a popular tourist destination among Omani / GCC nationals
- B. Good Infrastructure related to tourism industry
- C. Beautiful landscape of Dhofar region
- D. Well Connectivity with neighbouring cities / countries
- E. Availability of modern amenities

Weaknesses

- A. Lack of skilled workforce in health tourism sector
- B. Lack of brand awareness in health tourism
- C. Lack of proper expertise in health / medical tourism sector

Opportunities:

- A. Opportunity to develop Salalah as a tourism destination throughout the year
- B. Opportunity for creation of jobs and employment for local community
- C. Opportunity to promote Salalah as a brand for health tourism destination

Threats:

- A. Apparent threat from established players of the industry—Like Jordan, India, Thailand, Malaysia, and United Arab Emirate etc.

Based on SWOT analysis, following important factors were identified to develop Salalah as a Health Tourism destination:

1. Product: Salalah can offer a wide range of products to health tourists that include a variety of activities mentioned earlier.
2. Pricing: Pricing of the services offered should be economic and competitive with established player of the industry.
3. Target Consumers: Obviously target health tourists are from GCC countries including the Sultanate of Oman.
4. Communication Strategy: A proper communication strategy helps in achieving the target objectives in efficient ways.

INTEGRATED COMMUNICATION STRATEGY REQUIRED

An integrated communication strategy, combining all the mediums of Mass Communication, is a must for successfully achieving the objectives of organisation. Following different mediums of mass media can be used as part of integrated communication strategy to develop Salalah as a health tourism destination.

Web Media: Web media has the potential to carry the messages to millions of audiences across the globe at the ease of finger tips. With the availability of internet in the mobile phones, the access to any information has become a child's play. Studies show that the numbers of mobile users in GCC are increasing by leaps and bounds. In that scenario web media could prove very useful in reaching the target audience to create brand awareness about Salalah

Television: TV is among the most powerful channels of mass media, as it has the potential to deliver the messages to a whole family in the cosy ambience of the drawing / bedroom room. It delivers the messages to the gathering of people at a hotel / restaurant, or at a place where a huge number of people can receive the message. The beauty of television is that it delivers messages to two senses of human being i.e. eyes and ears. It means retention of a message in human mind is for longer time than any other channel.

Newspapers/ Magazines: Newspapers/ Magazines are another useful media to deliver the message to those audiences who want detailed and in-depth information on any topic under the sky. The newspapers provide extensive coverage through different kinds of writings than any other media. There are plenty of backgrounder, field based stories, spot enquiries and feedback interviews and

incisive comments. Besides, special reports syndicated reports and articles, there are special sections for sports and business interests too.

Radio: Radio is one of the most convenient medium of mass communication that delivers message at literally anywhere in the world. It has the unique characteristics of being very economic & mobile medium of mass communication. It can deliver messages on the move, in the car, in the garden, in the mountains, in desert, in the sea etc. This ability makes the radio a very special medium to reach maximum number of audiences than any other media.

Folk & Traditional Media: In traditional societies like GCC, folk & traditional media has an advantage to convey the message to the society in a unique way. Since the society keeps the traditional media in high esteem, it can deliver the complex messages in a very simple way. In that way it proves to be very effective.

Hoardings/ Bill Boards: Hoardings/ Bill boards are also a way of conveying the messages to the audiences.

To develop Salalah as a potential health tourism destination, a number of communication strategies could be integrated to get the best results. Integration of the communication strategies depends upon the budget, time frame, allocation of resources, and the target audiences.

CONCLUSION

Salalah has a huge potential to be developed as a health tourism destination, as it is already a popular tourist destination. Blessed with a picturesque landscape, and equipped with huge infrastructure, Salalah can attract health tourists round the year.

- A. An appropriate combination of communication strategies, based on the future requirements, is needed to develop Salalah as a health tourism destination.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The main limitation of this paper is that it emphasises on exploring the Salalah as health tourism destination, while whole of the Sultanate of Oman can be explored so.

SUGGESTION

1. Further studies are suggested to assess the potential of health tourism in Oman.
2. Health tourism should be incorporated in studies as an academic discipline.

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