

## REGIONAL AND LOCAL TOURISM IN COVID-19 TIMES: A STUDY OF ALAPPUZHA IN KERALA

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### Abstract

*It is obvious that the tourism sector world over has been badly hit by the outbreak of the Covid-19 Virus. The lockdown, travel restrictions and social distancing have apparently led to the decline in tourist operations in many parts of the world. The income, employment and livelihood of those engaged in tourism have been badly affected. The visitors have been deprived of opportunities to visit the places of their interests. The reopening of the tourism sector to local and regional tourists has become succor for the tourism sector which would at least help the sector to cover its running costs. However, the satisfaction of the visitors with regard to the Covid-protocol measures matter a lot in sustaining tourism at these difficult times. The present study conducted in Alappuzha in the Kerala State of India reveals that more concrete steps need to be taken by the stakeholders of the tourism sector to make it more attractive and comfortable to the visitors. The study found that only 44 per cent of the respondents expressed a good opinion about the overall Covid Protocol measures adopted by the tour operators. The dissatisfaction with social distancing was quite high among the respondents.*

**Key Words:** Local Tourism, Social Distancing, Covid Protocol, Sanitization, Social Media

**JEL Classification:** Z30

### I. INTRODUCTION

One of the sectors that have been badly hit by the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus is the tourism sector (Uğur & Akbıyık, 2020). The lockdown, travel restrictions and social distancing that have been introduced to fight back the spread of the Covid-19 have apparently led to the decline in tourist operations in many parts of the world (Roman, Niedziółka, & Krasnodebski, 2020). Tourism being an important source of income and employment in many countries especially in developing and emerging economies, the economic loss that Covid-19 has made to the tourism sector is something that goes beyond quick estimates. For instance, in 2019 the travel and tourism industry accounted for 10.4 per cent of Global GDP which plummeted to 5.5 per cent in 2020 (WTTC, 2021). On the employment front, in 2019 one in ten jobs was created by the travel and tourism industry whereas in 2020 it became one in eleven (WTTC, 2021). To tide over the backlash effect of the virus on the tourism sector, many governments have announced revival packages, but in vain (Mishra, 2020). Recently, as the tide of the crisis calms down, there have been signs of certain resurgence in tourism activities on a sporadic basis (Radhakrishnan, 2021). Although these developments have sent positive messages as to the return of the tourism sector to near normalcy, still the picture looks very gloomy. Since tourist activities struggle to reoccupy their earlier positions, tourists have been deprived of avenues to productively utilize their leisure time (Borko, Geerts, & Wang, 2020). Against this backdrop the travel industry in Kerala has ushered in new concepts like Local and Regional Tourism, mainly aiming at local tourists (Sharma,

2020). In these circumstances, the present study attempts to present the profile and reactions of travellers at local tourist places in Alappuzha and Kuttanad in pandemic time.

### II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objective of the study is to understand the profile of visitors that venture into visiting places amid all concerns of the Covid-19 pandemic. Further, the study also looks into the Covid-19 protocols being observed by the tour operators and the response of visitors to such protocols.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The study makes use of primary data collected from the visitors at different selected tourism spots and hotels in Alappuzha. Although we attempted to meet more visitors using the mall intercept method, we could get data from 75 respondents. Others kept away citing different issues mainly pertaining to Covid-19 fears. The data were analyzed using appropriate statistical software.

### IV. A BRIEF REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A study by Roman, Niedziółka, & Krasnodebski in 2020 presents the respondents' involvement in tourism activities in times of Covid-19 pandemic. The study found that Covid-19 has made changes in the organization of tours by the visitors. Relaxation from the work has been cited to be the main the reason behind travelling in Covid-19 times. The study also

found that people preferred to travel with their partners and family and in their own vehicles. Analyzing the social cost of tourism in Covid-19 times, Qiu, Park, Li, & Song in 2020 described the residents' perceptions of risks posed by the tourism industry and estimated the willingness to pay to reduce the health risks associated with the tourism activities.

Emphasizing the need to incorporating more localized indigenous content in the organization of tourism in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, Carr (2020) in a study presented the case of an indigenous group in New Zealand and argues that indigenous-informed approaches would contribute to the transformation of the tourism sector so as to accommodate the threats posed by the pandemic. Wen, Kozak, Yang, & Liu in their study on tourism in China predicts that Covid-19 would impact the consumption pattern of Chinese travellers. They also

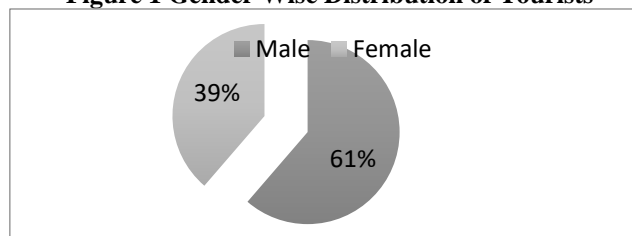
argue that new forms of tourism like 'slow tourism' and 'smart tourism will drive future tourism in China.

In another study, Sánchez-Cañizares, Cabeza-Ram, Munoz-Fernandez, & Fuentes-García analysed the impact of perceived risks on intention to travel in the pandemic condition. It also analysed the willingness to pay for additional safety measures for the tourism spots and hotels.

**V. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATIONS**

Looking into the gender wise distribution of tourists that visit places under the present study, it has been found that females have absented themselves from venturing into visiting places perhaps owing to the existing Covid related restrictions and fear. In the present study, 39 percent of visitors who have responded are females while the rest 61 percent are males (Figure No.1).

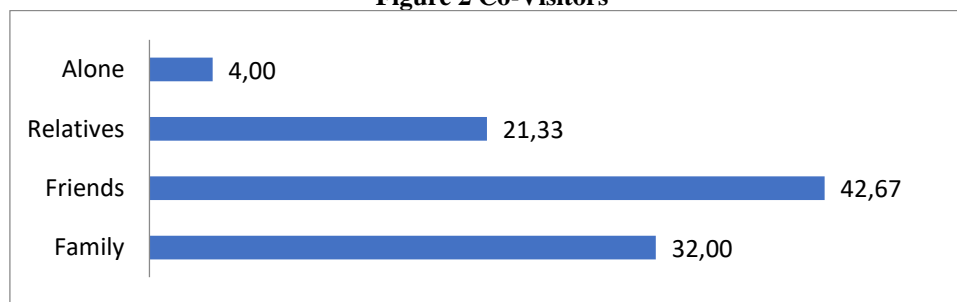
**Figure 1 Gender Wise Distribution of Tourists**



Usually people prefer to visit places in the company of their family, friends or relatives. In Covid days more visitors have chosen to travel with their

friends (42.67 percent) while only 32 percent make it together with their family (Figure No.2). Travelling alone has become almost rarity (only 4 percent)

**Figure 2 Co-Visitors**



It is further interesting to know the age of the visitors as age of the visitors' matters a lot in preparing themselves both mentally and physically to foray into a tour activity amidst all hectic schedules and Covid-restrictions. Most of the visitors in this study are aged 34 years with 22 years being the

minimum and 56 the maximum. Among the visitors, it has been revealed that most of them are highly educated. 42.7 percent of them have post-graduation while only 18.7 percent have got education up to higher secondary level (Table No.1).

**Table 1 Education Level of Visitors**

Education Level	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Higher Secondary Education	18.7	18.7
Degree	37.3	56.0
Post-Graduation	42.7	98.7
Another	1.3	100.0
Total	100.0	

Next, we probe into the occupation status of the visitors under the present study. Many studies have pointed out that IT professionals have become a group who regularly make it to the tourist places in many parts of Kerala. In the present study as well, it has

been revealed that the highest percent of visitors belong to the IT field and 21.3 per cent are self-employed (Table No.2).

**Table 2 Occupation of Tourists**

Occupation	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Business Executives	14.7	14.7
IT Professionals	25.3	40.0
Doctors	13.3	53.3
Professor and Teachers	10.7	64.0
Self Employed	21.3	85.3
Others	14.7	100.0
Total	100.0	

Since mobility has become a restrained thing in the Covid-19 pandemic period, rarely people plan for a trip to faraway places (Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020). Perhaps, because of this, the local and regional tourism have received much attention in recent times, and unsurprisingly the same thing has become evident from the study that nearly half of the tourists are from

outside the district of Alappuzha and 20 percent each has come from within the district and from neighboring states viz. Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Only a meager percent of visitors have arrived from both foreign nations and other states within India (Table No.3)

**Table 3 Place of Origin of Visitors**

Place of Origin	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Within the Districts	20.0	20.0
Outside of the District	52.0	72.0
From Neighboring States	20.0	92.0
From other States	6.7	98.7
Foreigners	1.3	100.0
Total	100.0	

Nowadays, social media and internet have become an important source of information about the tourist places ( Leung, Law, Hoof , & Buhalis, 2013). Social media like Facebook and YouTube have been extensively used by the travel and tourism industry to advertise their products with much attraction. It is

evident from this study that 36 percent of the visitors came to know about the local tourist activities of Alappuzha district from the social media. However, it is interesting to note that the role of relatives and friends in giving information about the tourist places still appears important (Table No.4)

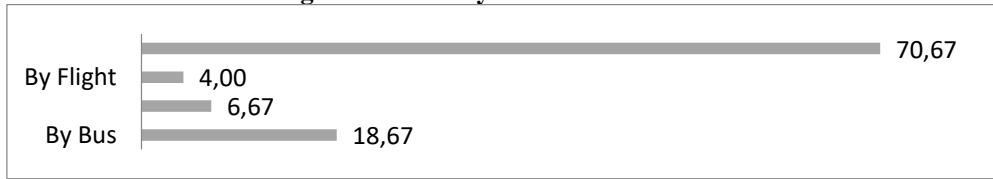
**Table 4 Source of Information about the Tourists Spots**

Source of Information about the Tourist spots	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Social Media	36.0	36.0
From Relatives and Friends	26.7	62.7
Google Search	18.7	81.3
From the Concern itself	14.7	96.0
Part of any other promotions	4.0	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

As people have become more conscious of the sources of the spreading of Covid-19 virus, it has become evident that public utilities have not been a preferable mode of transport for the tourists. The

present study has revealed that an overwhelming percent of tourists, that is around 70 percent, reached tourist spots by their own private vehicle (Figure No.3).

Figure 3 how did you reach the location?



Although tourism provides avenues for the productively use of leisure time, people choose to visit place either by choices or by chance. By chance, people visit places as part of their official visit or a private visit. On other, some people visit places solely to enjoy the destination or to get a refreshable relief from their routine work schedules. Since due to lockdown, people were forced to restrict themselves from moving out other than for necessary matters

including job related necessities, the ‘unlock’ phases announced by the Government of India have given an opportunity to move out slowly and carefully to enjoy the places. This is quite evident from this study that close to 42 percent of visitors have arrived at different tourist locations in Alappuzha solely to enjoy the beauty of location and 32 percent have admitted that it is quite a relief from their routinized work at workplace and work at home (Table No.5).

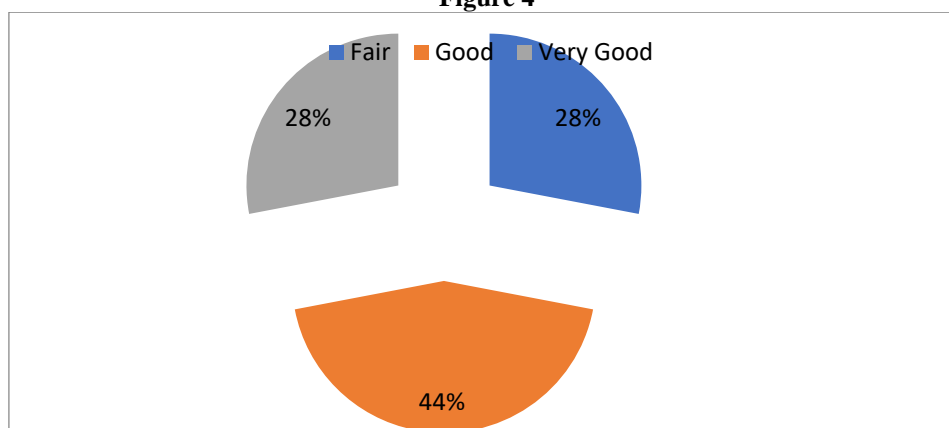
Table 5 Purpose of Visit

Purpose of Visit	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Part of a Private Visit	21.3	21.3
Part of an Official Visit	4.0	25.3
Enjoying the Destination	42.7	68.0
Relief from the Routine Work	32.0	100.0
Total	100.0	

As tourism and travel industry has started coming back from the deep ridden crisis of not having even an enquiry for months since the onset of Virus, it is imperative that there should be strict adherence to the Covid Protocol in tourist places. Hence, this study has made an attempt to understand the opinion of the tourist with regard to the Covid protocol measures in tourist places including in hotels. It is worthwhile to

note that almost half, that is 44 percent of respondents, opined that Covid protocol appears good whereas 28 percent have felt that it appears ‘very good’. Nevertheless, only 28 percent are of the view that measures are just fair, which points towards the fact that Covid-protocol measures needs to be improved further to attract more tourists (Figure No.4).

Figure 4



Further, the study found that the opinion regarding the practice of Covid-19 protocol by the tour operators and their staff differ based on the occupation wise

distribution of the travellers. It means that there the occupation of the travellers influences the opinion regarding the Covid-19 protocol at tourist places in the study area (Table No.6)

**Table 6 Occupation Wise Classification of Opinion about the Covid-19 Protocol**

Occupation	Opinion About Protocol Practiced by the Tour Operators		
	Fair	Good	Very Good
Business Executives	4.76	9.09	33.33
IT Professionals	19.05	18.18	42.86
Doctors	23.81	12.12	4.76
Professor and Teachers	9.52	15.15	4.76
Self Employed	19.05	30.30	9.52
Others	23.81	15.15	4.76
Total	100	100	100

P value .028

Going deep into each aspect of Covid-19 protocol being adopted by the tour operators and their staff, it is disheartening to note that in social distancing, 44 percent of respondents appear to be dissatisfied whereas 26.7 percent satisfied (Table No.7). Social distancing, of course, is an important Covid prevention measure which is something usually

forgotten by people when they actively engage in their economic and social activities (Lingam & Sapka, 2020). It calls for urgent attention from the part of tourist operators that they must be more vigilant about keeping social distancing as an indispensable part of the Covid-protocol

**Table 7 Opinion about Social Distancing**

Opinion about Social Distancing	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Very Dissatisfied	4.0	4.0
Dissatisfied	44.0	48.0
Unsure	17.3	65.3
Satisfied	26.7	92.0
Very Satisfied	8.0	100.0
Total	100.0	

The abbreviation 'SMS'-Sanitization, Masks and Social Distancing, has become a buzzword in Covid times, showing the significance of these measures in preventing the spread of Covid-19 virus. Visitors are

of the view that staff and operators appear to be wearing Masks only often (60 percent) not always. Only 13.3 percent appear to be wearing masks always (Table No.8)

**Table 8 Opinion about the wearing of Masks by the Staff, Operators and Visitors**

Opinion about the wearing of Masks by the Staff, Operators and Visitors	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Rarely	6.7	6.7
Sometimes	20.0	26.7
Often	60.0	86.7
Always	13.3	100.0
Total	100.0	

To lure the visitors and at least to cover the costs of operations, many tourist operators have resorted to cut down the costs of services to affordable levels. In the

present study, 48 percent of the visitors opined that reduction in costs to the affordable levels is acceptable (Table No.9).

**Table 9 Opinion about the Cost cut by the tourist Operators**

Opinion about the Cost cut by the tourist Operators	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Unacceptable	8.0	8.0
Neutral	25.3	33.3
Acceptable	48.0	81.3
Perfectly Acceptable	18.7	100.0
Total	100.0	

The most important variable that captures the satisfaction of the visitors is nothing but their readiness to visit the place again ( Osman & Sentosa, 2013). As far as this is concerned, it is quite evident that 41 percent of the visitors are likely to visit the

spot again whereas 36 percent are neutral about the opinion. However, it is worthwhile to note that 21.3 percent are extremely likely to visits again whereas only 1.3 percent is unlikely to visit the place again (Table No.10)

**Table 10 Are you likely to visit these spots again?**

Likelihood of next visits	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Unlikely	1.3	1.3
Neutral	36.0	37.3
Likely	41.3	78.7
Extremely likely	21.3	100.0
Total	100.0	

## VI. CONCLUSION

Obviously, the tourism sector has been heavily hit by the spread of the Covid-19 Virus. The income, employment and livelihood of those engaged in tourism have been badly affected. The visitors have been deprived of opportunities to visit the places of their interests. The reopening of the tourism sector to local and regional tourists has become succor for the tourism sector which would at least help the sector to cover its running costs. However, the satisfaction of

the visitors with regard to the Covid-protocol measure like sanitization, social distancing and wearing masks by both the staff, operators and visitors at the tourist places matter a lot in sustaining tourism at these difficult times. The findings of this study show that more concrete steps need to be taken by the stakeholders of the tourism sector to make it more attractive and comfortable to the visitors.

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