

# Pilgrimage to Wellness: Ayurveda's Integral Role and Potential in Nepalese Tourism

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## Abstract

Wellness tourism has emerged as one of the most rapidly growing travel industry recently. For tourism dependent countries and destinations worldwide, this has created both a challenge and an opportunity to reposition and diversify their offerings. This study aims to investigate the potential for integrating Ayurveda into Nepal's tourism framework. This study utilizes a qualitative thematic analysis, to comprehensively investigate the potential for integrating Ayurveda wellness into Nepal's tourism. The analysis reveals the deep historical roots of healing journeys in Nepal, from pilgrimage to herb trading; and current fragmented landscape of wellness provision. The findings indicate that Nepal possesses a authentic heritage, realizing its potential as a premier "Himalayan Wellness" destination. Wellness needs are personalized according to individual characteristics and personality traits. Programs that combine Ayurveda lifestyle (Dinacharya/ daily activities) - waking up at Brahma Muhurta (auspicious pre-dawn time), guided meditation, self-massage (Abhyanga), sessions on Sadvritta (truthfulness, contentment), mindful eating of Ayurveda meals, and Yoga Nidra experiences can add value to tourism. Establishing trust and authenticity to the tourists who are the clients is an immediate requirement to establish Ayurveda wellness tourism. To compete with established destinations, private and public sector must work together to establish a national system for Ayurveda tourism services that guarantees quality control.

**Keywords:** Ayurveda tourism, holistic health, Nepal, panchakarma wellness

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## Introduction

Tourism is a multitrillion-dollar global industry, fundamentally rooted in human behavior (Buckley, 2011). In today's scenario, the major tourism types include; urban, seaside, rural, wine, culinary, health, medical, religious, cultural (or heritage), sports, adventurous, educational, business, ecotourism and others (Camilleri, 2017). The global tourism industry sector is changing from the traditional concepts of sightseeing to broader areas of tourism. For tourism dependent countries and destinations worldwide, this has created both a challenge and an opportunity to reposition and diversify their offerings (Koncul, 2012). Nepal has observed a shift from traditionally pilgrimage type tourism to heritage and mountain tourism. This trend reflects its historical background and the global tourism demand. Before modern tourism, people traveled to parts of Nepal for healing, spirituality, and the exchange of vital goods especially medicinal herbs. Currently Nepal's economy also depends on tourism, driven mainly by the country's natural, cultural, and adventure-based sights and activities (Khadka, 2025).

Apart from the domestic movement of people as tourism purpose in 2024, Nepal had a total of 1,147,548 international tourists, marking a 13.07% increase from the previous year. The majority of tourists (89.23%) arrived by air, with India remaining the largest source market as traditionally from very past (27.69%), followed by the USA, China, the UK, and Bangladesh. The average length of stay slightly increased to 13.3 days reflecting the sector's robust recovery and growing economic contribution (Government of Nepal, 2025). Health tourism (HT) is a type of tourism where tourists aim to receive specific healing treatments or enhancing mental, physical, or spiritual well-being which is comprised of medical, wellness, and spa tourism. Medical tourism is associated with curing a form of illness while wellness tourism (WT) is devoted to maintaining or enhance health and well-being (Pessot et al., 2021). Wellness tourism has emerged as one of the most rapidly growing tourism segments recently (Talukder, et al., 2025). In 2020, the wellness tourism market was valued at USD 436 billion, projected to rise to USD 816 billion by 2022 with more than 1.2 billion trips being realized and anticipated growth estimated at USD 1.0 trillion by 2025 (Clerici et al., 2023). This study aims to analyses the background of Nepal's wellness tourism and conceptualize potential area of Ayurveda wellness tourism. The Objectives of study are to trace the historical continuum of healing and travel, analyze the landscape of wellness provision, identify Nepal's unique "Himalayan Advantage" as a differentiator in wellness market and find the systemic barriers and policy-practice gaps.

## Literature Review

Tourism in Nepal has deep historical roots, stretching far beyond its modern identity as an adventure, mountain, heritage and pilgrimage destination. Historical facts reveal that the travel of people in the region has been a consistent feature since ancient times which aligns with core aspects of modern tourism (Nyaupane & Timothy, 2022) Even in the Neolithic era, evidence suggests the movement of people and pastoralists from the Sino-Tibetan and the Gangetic plains into Nepal, arguably representing the earliest forms of travel in the region (Kafle, 2023). Sanskrit words used for travel purposes like *Paryant* (for pleasure and

knowledge), *Desant* (for economy), and *Tirthatan* (for pilgrimage) validate the foundational patterns of tourism back in vedic times. The historical facts of visit of Manjushree, Emperor Ashoka and Chinese travelers Huien-Tsang are the important historical evidence of vibrant Himalayan route. Pashupatinath, Muktinath, Janakpur, Lumbini and many other parts of Nepal are religious pilgrimage from the past till date. The quest for spiritual religious benefits (Punya) and liberation (Moksha) was interwoven with the pursuit of healing, with temples having resident Vaidyas (traditional healers), and associated herb gardens. The ancient trade routes facilitated a vibrant exchange of herbs, salt and wool. Tatopani (hot springs) were both valued for their healing capabilities. This historical fact demonstrates that Nepal has always been a point of spirituality, economic opportunity, cultural exchange, and new experiences which has provided a rich heritage upon which the foundation of tourism industry is built (Kafle, 2023). The modern tourism industry in Nepal began to formalize after 1950. Landmark infrastructure developments, like the opening of Tribhuvan Airport (1951) helped in the growth. While tourist numbers surged over the decades, the industry has faced significant challenges, including political instability natural disasters like the 2015 earthquake, and most recently, the severe impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which drastically reduced arrivals and highlighted the sector's vulnerability (Paudel, 2021).

Ayurveda, the science of life (Ayur = life, Veda = knowledge or science), is a holistic health system that views the individual as a microcosm of the universe. In Ayurveda health is a state of dynamic equilibrium between the body, mind, consciousness, and environment reflected by state by the three biological humors or Doshas (Vata, Pitta and Kapha). Healthy state is achieved by personalised regimen involving diet (Ahara), sleep (Nindra), lifestyle (Vihara), herbal preparations (Aushadha), detoxification therapies (Panchakarma) and spiritual practices (Sharma & Clark, 2011). Tourists desiring wellness are attracted by Ayurveda as it advocates the preventive and promotive health through Swasthavritta (discipline of maintaining health) which prescribes daily (Dinacharya) and seasonal (Ritucharya), Yoga, meditation routines for well-being (Sharma & Chaudhary, 2025). Sadvritta (codes of right conduct) which encompasses truthfulness, non-violence, and mental discipline are important in rejuvenating mental well beings that creates a natural bridge to spiritual and mental well-being tourism, differentiating it from cosmetic wellness offerings. Nepal has additional authenticity of Buddhist philosophy. The synergy with Ayurveda and Buddhism is profound. While Ayurveda provides the physiological and lifestyle framework for balance, and Buddhism offers the mental and contemplative tools. The integration of Ayurveda with Tourism industry provides an opportunity to offer programs that address growing Ayurveda wellness demand distinct from Kerala's and Sri Lanka's with more Himalayan centric approaches.

## Research Methods

This study utilizes a qualitative thematic analysis to comprehensively investigate the potential for integrating Ayurveda and wellness systems into Nepal's tourism. Review of literature, government documents, secondary data, comparative case analyses to recognize gaps on Nepal's wellness tourism potential. Searches in Google Scholar, and specialized journals using keywords Ayurveda tourism, wellness tourism Nepal, medical

tourism Himalayas, heritage healing and Panchakarma was done. Information from official websites, brochures, and social media pages was collected. Quantitative data on tourist arrivals, purpose of visit, length of stay, and foreign exchange earnings were collated from the Nepal Tourism Statistics 2024 report and analyzed to identify trends and correlations relevant to wellness tourism potential. Tourism industry practices and case studies, through websites, brochures, and promotional materials of existing Ayurveda and wellness resorts in Nepal were analyzed. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted by grouping into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data and addressed the research objectives.

## Results

In the government official websites and current databases, there is no single, centralized, real time statistic that enumerates the wellness resorts, Ayurveda centres, clinics, yoga retreats, and wellness centers in Nepal. In Nepal Tourism Board's official website wellness tourism potential areas are reflected with generalized information of benefits is presented. The data of such centres is fragmented and often estimated. While an exact number is lacking, the wellness tourism infrastructure in Nepal is significant and growing rapidly, concentrated in the Kathmandu, Pokhara, Chitwan and Lumbini. In 2024 there is a significant growth in adventure and pilgrimage tourism, with trekking and mountaineering visitors rising to 14.5% of arrivals, and pilgrimage visits increasing to 15.3%. (Government of Nepal, 2025). These tourists with pilgrimage have cultural demands which can be fulfilled by Ayurveda with roots in tradition and culture. The findings of the thematic analysis, structured around four key themes:

### *Theme 1: The Historical Continuum of Healing Journeys*

Nepal stands as a pilgrimage destination since ancient times. Muktinath, Pashupatinath, Janakpur, Lumbini and other temples provide the living traditions embedded in culture as authentic pilgrimage heritage. The journey to Muktinath in Mustang district involved arduous travel through varying altitudes, which in itself induced physical change and resilience. More explicitly, major temple towns like Kathmandu's Pashupatinath or Janakpur in the Terai were hubs of healing. The pilgrimage circuit itself can thus be reinterpreted as Nepal's original wellness trail, where the destination was not just a site but a state of improved well-being. Ayurveda medical practices was also a dynamic force shaping human mobility in the Himalayan region. The high Himalayas of Nepal, are a biodiversity hotspot for rare and potent medicinal plants adapted to extreme conditions. Local communities carried traders along routes like the salt trade route to Tibetan markets. The contemporary concept of Himalayan Herbal Tourism can be a direct, formalised descendant of this centuries-old practice of herb trade. Modern wellness tourism is a contemporary manifestation of these ancient practices. Contrast this with the purely commercial origins of wellness tourism in other parts of the world Nepal can offer "Pilgrimage to Wellness" concept.

### *Theme 2: A Fragmented Landscape of Wellness Provision*

In a survey of Ayurveda and alternative medicine Centre is Kathmandu valley many 52% centres with clinic setup claimed to have wellness based healthcare with services

like Abhyanga, Shirodhara, Yoga (Bhusal et al., 2025), Government health centres like Ayurveda hospital Bhaktapur, Ayurveda Teaching hospital at kirtipur have recorded frequent visits of tourist seeking Ayurveda consultation and Panchakarma services. Private owned centres like Dwarkas, Ayurveda Health home, Jungle Mahal resort, Aarogya Nepal claim to provide typical Ayurveda based wellness services with residential facilities. Nepa Ayurveda, Kaya Ayurveda, Kundalini Ayurveda provide day care based wellness services in Kathmandu. The Begnas Lake resort in Pokhara offers dedicated Ayurveda wellness programs, featuring personalized treatments. Yoga based tourism is also interconnected with Ayurveda as both are sister sciences and follow same ideology. Many Yoga schools including Nepal Yoga Home, Himalayan Yoga, Mandala yoga offer retreat packages for tourist seeking wellness services. Spa like zen spa, Tranquility provide wellness services where Ayurveda concepts are also followed. The components of Ayurveda, sound healing and healing techniques are incorporated with the principles of Ayurveda. The data of available centres demonstrate the sector's heterogeneity. The spectrum from high-end resorts to clinical settings and unregulated spas. This heterogeneity presents challenge and opportunity for branding and quality control. Investment in high-quality infrastructure and cross-sector training is required to present Nepal as a premium destination for holistic well-being. The potential for advancing Ayurveda and wellness tourism in Nepal is vast and multifaceted, transcending traditional spa offerings to incorporate the nation's distinct cultural, spiritual, and ecological resources. Steps like establishing specific clinical Ayurveda retreats, trails for exploring Himalayan herbs, wellness programs, and retreats focused on mental well-being that merge Ayurveda Sadvritta with Buddhist mindfulness practices can add more value to tourism

### ***Theme 3: The "Himalayan Advantage" as a Key Differentiator***

The availability of high-altitude herbs, the synergy of Ayurveda with Buddhism, Sowa Rigpa, the mountain geography and seasonal biodiversity make Nepal unique from others. Wellness tourism in areas like Pokhara, Mustang, Dolpa, Langtang valley and the mid-hills, connect healers, hospitality services, and marketers under a cohesive "Himalayan Wellness" brand. As Himalaya is considered as sacred location for potent herbs since the ancient times as supported by the visit of Hanuman for Sanjivani mentioned in Ramanayan. The rich biodiversity of Nepal provides medicinal resources for herbal practitioners. Kerala, India, is leading in promoting Ayurveda wellness experiences through proactive state government activities accreditation systems and integrated offerings with natural attractions like backwaters. This has attracted high-spending international tourists and significantly boosted revenue. Sri Lanka, has also developed wellness tourism by combining Ayurveda with beach retreats, meditation, and yoga. Both neighboring nations with shared heritage of Ayurveda emphasize Ayurveda based wellness. The uniqueness of rich biodiversity and Himalayas build the case that Nepal's offering is unique in wellness "Himalayan Ayurveda" as a distinct brand, differentiating it from the Kerala and Srilanka.

### ***Theme 4: Systemic Barriers and Policy-Practice Gaps***

There is a lack of a centralized database, national accreditation system, trained practitioners, Limited wellness purpose-built, high-standard wellness resorts with clinical facilities.

Shortage of practitioners with wellness hospitality training and guides with interpretive skills creates a barrier for wellness destination branding in key international markets. There is a gap between NTB's policy and the on-the-ground reality. This allows for a critical discussion of the challenges that must be tackled. There is a risk of diluting sacred traditions into commercialized, inauthentic experiences and competition from well-established wellness destinations. Direct economic benefits to rural communities and strategic transition from historic pilgrimage/healing sites to contemporary wellness experiences could be achieved by supportive policies. There is a need to build a regulated accrediting and ethical framework to develop sustainable wellness tourism by branding authentic Himalayan Ayurveda wellness services. There should not be inter-ministerial coordination gaps and policy implementation delays. Nepal should implement a national strategy to get the benefit of wellness potential while reducing its threats.

### *Discussion*

Wellness needs are personalized according to individual characteristics and personality traits. Wellness tourism is a travel associated with the pursuit of maintaining or enhancing one's personal well-being and it is emerging field moving beyond short-term satisfaction to longer-term, transformative experiences (Smith & Diekmann, 2017). It is a multidimensional sector with primary travel to secondary activities where wellness is a significant part (e.g., spa visits, yoga classes). Increasing health consciousness, stress from lifestyles, ageing population, and a growing desire for meaningful travel experiences are the few reasons for increasing Wellness tourism. The tourist in Nepal are also seeking Ayurveda Yoga based wellness packages. The act of pilgrimage, which included ritual washing, fasting, and prayer, served as a type of cleansing and rejuvenation, similar to Ayurveda concepts. The trekking and mountain tourism post trekking burnout Ayurveda relaxation techniques can add value and relaxation (Manhas et al.,2025). Nepal can adapt lesson and brand wellness based tourism on mountain trekking routes differentiating from rest of the globes through its Himalayan context. Establishment of national accreditation standards, professional training pathways, and integrated value chains that connect healers, hospitality services, and marketers under a cohesive "Himalayan Wellness" brand in needed. Herb exploration trails involve multi-days' hikes or drive to designated bioclimatic areas, such as the Langtang valley for alpine herbs and the mid-hills for a variety of flora. Tourists would have the opportunity to engage in basic herb knowledge, kitchen-based herbs use, create traditional formulations, and gain insights into the oral history of plant medicine, thereby fostering community-based tourism and facilitating direct knowledge transfer. Nepal has potential to become a premier destination for health tourism as highlighted by earlier study (Sharma & Pant, 2022). Wellness tourism contributes in sustainable tourism- economic earning from service providing, environmental conservation, heritage preservation and social harmony (Oli & Bhattarai, 2021).

Short term training on "Mountain Ayurveda', sound healing, Basic Ayurveda, Panchakarma, Yoga, meditation, Himalayan healing, Spirituality, Vedic food science, Himalayan herbs can be started in collaboration between Nepali university like Vidushi Yogmaya Himlayan Ayurveda University or institutions like *Nepal Academy of Tourism*

and *Hotel Management (NATHM)* focused to tourists and international partners to offer certified short courses. These would help in exploring the unique Rasayana (rejuvenative) and adaptogenic properties of high-altitude plants, differentiating “Himalayan Integrative Medicine” from plains counterparts in Kerala and Sri Lanka.

The wellness traveler looking for detoxification, profound healing, and a change in lifestyle can visit wellness Panchakarma resorts. The resorts should have a certified Ayurveda Panchakarma physicians (MD Ayurveda) and provide authentic detox 7, 14, or 21-day programs as Nepal has more favorable climate and the seasonal variation as mentioned in Ayurveda than southern India. Prakriti analysis (individual approach) in diagnosis and wellness management packages can be more beneficial. Dosha-specific yoga and pranayama, meditation sessions, Satvik cooking workshops utilizing organic local produce can provide Himalayan flavor. Shirodhara (oil stream on the forehead) would be recommended for stress and relaxation. Stress management, weight management, musculoskeletal rehabilitation, digestive health with Ayurveda can be branded as the foundational modality. Programs that combine Ayurveda Dinacharya – waking up at Brahma Muhurta (auspicious pre-dawn time), guided meditation, Ayurveda daily self-massage (Abhyanga), sessions on Sadvritta (truthfulness, contentment), mindful eating of Ayurvedic meals, and yoga nidra experiences can add value to tourism desiring wellness. Collaboration with monasteries (e.g., at Lumbini, Boudha, or Himalayan regions) can be done to provide quiet retreats or structured programs. This could be marketed as “Finding Peace in the Buddha’s Birthplace,” or “Himalayan Ayurveda for modern stress” which can connect the tourist’s inner journey with Nepal’s spiritual legacy.

The budget and programs document of the Nepal Tourism Board for the fiscal year 2082/83 also has a specific focus on health tourism, with initiatives aimed at promoting Nepal as a wellness and spiritual destination. Under the theme of “Lifetime Experiences,” the board plans to market and develop yoga, meditation, Ayurveda, wellness tourism, and spiritual tourism to international audiences. This strategic emphasis aims to establish Nepal as a holistic wellness and spiritual hub while contributing to sustainable tourism development and employment generation within the sector. (Nepal Tourism Board Budget Fiscal year 2082/83). Promotion and branding, introducing the quality standards is required as suggested by earlier study also (Khanal & Shimizu, 2019). To compete with established destinations, Nepal’s industry and government must work together to develop a national accreditation system for Ayurveda tourism services that guarantees quality control.

## **Conclusion and Implications**

Nepal’s wellness tourism is not new but a modern restructuring of its ancient identity as a healing destination. The journey from the healing ancient pilgrimage sites and the bustling herb trade routes of the Himalayas to modern, wellness experiences represent a continuum. The integration of Ayurveda with tourism, viewed through the lens of its own historical legacy and informed by the wellness models, offers Nepal a robust pathway towards a more resilient, sustainable, and high-value tourism economy. The proposed plans like Himalayan Ayurveda insights and integrative mental well-being retreats can open new areas of wellness tourism in Nepal.

To translate Nepal's wellness tourism potential into a sustainable, high-value industry, a coordinated multi-stakeholder strategy is essential. The government must lead by creating a dedicated Himalayan wellness brand, establishing a rigorous national accreditation system for services, formulating an integrated cross-sectoral policy, and funding specialized training programs. Furthermore, educational institutions must innovate curricula with specialized degrees and cross-disciplinary workshops while establishing research units to document practices, study program efficacy, and monitor the sector's socio-economic impact, ensuring the industry's growth is authentic, high-quality, and beneficial to local communities.

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