

Original Research Article

Quality of agritourism services to foreign and domestic tourists in Kerala

ABSTRACT

Aims: Tourism has been an essential component of human civilization since the beginning, evolving through various forms, phases, and practices over the centuries. Agritourism is a type of tourism that uses agricultural life as a tourist attraction. It is either agricultural tourism or agricultural marketing. It has the potential to generate additional income and employment for farmers. Agriculture has been a cornerstone of life in Kerala since ancient times, and even in today's digital era, traditional farming methods remain prevalent among the farming community. It can help to boost local economic development and also helps to preserve biodiversity. Furthermore, rural communities must recognize the value of agricultural biodiversity and the need to protect it. It is important to measure the quality of services offered at the agritourism centre to ensure the operational effectiveness of centres as well as the tourist satisfaction. The study was conducted to explore the quality of agritourism services to foreign and domestic tourists.

Objective: Analyse the level of quality of agri tourism services to foreign and domestic tourists

Methodology: Primary survey was conducted among 150 domestic tourists and 150 foreign tourists who visited agritourism centres in Kerala using pre tested structured questionnaire.

Results: The service quality analysis revealed a lack of efficient signage boards, lack of trained guides and lack of accessibility features for disabled individuals at the agritourism destinations. Aside from these areas, the services demonstrated a higher level of performance. Neglecting these aspects will result in various negative outcomes, affecting tourists' satisfaction and overall efficiency. Signage boards at agritourism destinations offer essential directions, enhance the overall visitor experience, and ensure both safety and accessibility. By focusing in clear, informative, and thoughtfully designed signs, agritourism destinations can boost visitor satisfaction, enhance their operations, and achieve success in a competitive market. The presence of trained guides will also enhance the tourists experience by ensuring safety, delivering valuable educational content, boost operational efficiency, provide personalized customer service, and support cultural and community engagement. Investing in well-trained guides enables agritourism destinations to improve the quality of their services, create memorable and rewarding experiences for visitors. Prioritizing the disability-friendly practices will play a key role in shaping a welcoming, inclusive, and successful industry that serves all individuals equitably.

Conclusion: The study identified the quality gaps that experienced by the tourists at agritourism centres. Upholding high service quality in agritourism destinations is crucial for ensuring visitor satisfaction, gaining a competitive advantage, managing reputation, and maximizing both economic and community benefits. Ultimately, high service quality will become the key driver of growth and prosperity for agritourism destinations.

Keywords: Domestic tourists, foreign tourists, service quality, satisfaction

1. INTRODUCTION

India is one of the world's most popular tourist destinations, providing multicultural experiences and a diverse range of tourism products. Tourism in India has significant potential due to its rich cultural and historical heritage, different ecological environments and large employment generation, in addition to being a major source of foreign exchange for the country. The impact of tourism growth on

the Indian economy in terms of spreading benefits across the country and providing employment and entrepreneurial opportunities to youth, women, and excluded sections of society.

Tourism contributes significantly to the country's foreign exchange earnings. In 2022, foreign exchange earnings (FEE) from tourism were US\$ 16,926 million, a 92.41 percent increase over the US\$ 8,797 million FEE in 2021. Over 6.19 million and 1.52 million foreign tourists visited the country in 2022 and 2021, respectively, up from 10.93 million in 2019. Even though the numbers were lower than pre-pandemic levels, foreign and domestic tourist visits to India increased significantly in 2022, benefiting the country's economy. India received 1731.01 million domestic tourist visits in 2022, up 155.45 percent from 677.63 million in 2021 (India Tourism Statistics 2023, GoI).

Tourism has contributed significantly to Kerala's economy for decades, generating Rs. 35,168.42 crore in revenue in 2022. Total earnings in 2022, including direct and indirect means, were Rs 35,168.42 crore, representing a remarkable increase of 186.25 percent over 2021. Foreign exchange earnings and domestic tourist earnings from tourism in 2022 have also significantly improved. In 2022, they were Rs 2,792.42 crore and Rs 24,588.96 crore, respectively. In 2021, foreign exchange earnings were Rs 461.5 crore, while domestic tourist earnings were Rs 9,103.93 crore (Kerala tourism statistics 2022, GoK).

Agritourism is a type of tourism that uses agricultural life as a tourist attraction. It is either agricultural tourism or agricultural marketing. It has the potential to generate additional income and employment for farmers. To merge agriculture with tourism, the Kerala Agri-Tourism Network project was inaugurated by Kerala's Tourism Minister, Sri. Muhammed Riyaz, in September 2021, as a sub sector of the Responsible Tourism Mission. As part of this initiative, the tourism department launched a website 4 named "Kerala Agri-Tourism Network" to promote the agri-tourism centers of Kerala. This will be beneficial for host agripreneurs, allowing them to register their units on the agri-tourism network, attract more tourists, and achieve greater success.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The tourists who visited at least one agritourism destination during 2022-23 were selected for the study. For the collection of primary data, 150 domestic tourists, 150 foreign tourists were selected randomly from the agritourism destinations in Kerala. So, the total sample size of the study is 300. This study is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected from the selected sample respondents using pre tested structured questionnaire. Secondary data was collected from the published reports of Government organizations such as Ministry of Tourism India, Department of Tourism Kerala, KTDC (Kerala Tourism Development Corporation), DTPC (District Tourism Promotion Council) etc.

The collected data were analysed by using SERVQUAL model, Wilcoxon signed rank test.

- a) **SERVQUAL model:** The SERVQUAL method is a well-known tool for evaluating and improving service quality by measuring the difference between customer expectations and perceptions. SERVQUAL assesses service quality on five key dimensions: tangibles, dependability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. In this study the SERVQUAL method is used to identify the service quality gap between the expectation and perception of domestic and foreign tourists at agritourism destinations.
- b) **Wilcoxon signed rank test:** It is a non-parametric statistical method for determining differences between paired observations.

Wilcoxon signed rank test is calculated as follows:

$$W = \sum_{i=1}^{Nr} [(x_{2,i} - x_{1,i}) R_i]$$

W = Test statistic

Nr = Sample size, excluding pairs where $x_1 = x_2$

x_1, i, x_2, l = Corresponding ranked pairs from two distributions

R_i = Rank i

The hypothesis was given below;

H0: No significant difference among domestic and foreign tourists with respect to the service quality at agritourism destinations.

H1: Significant difference among domestic and foreign tourists with respect to the service quality at agritourism destinations.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

SERVQUAL evaluates the service quality on five key dimensions. It includes, tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. The following session deals with the analysis of domestic and foreign tourists' perceptions and expectations based on five dimensions of SERVQUAL method.

3.1 Tangibility

Tangibility refers to the physical and visible aspects of a service or product, which customers can directly observe and interact with. SERVQUAL's tangibility dimension refers to the physical facilities with which the customers interact during the service delivery process. Table 1 reveals the service gap analysis of tangibility among the selected tourists. The tangibility services include the variables, parking, restroom, souvenir shop and signage board. Domestic tourists rated parking facility the highest in terms of service quality score (0.3) and foreign tourists rated the parking facility, restrooms and souvenir shops with highest service quality score (0.2). This indicates that spacious parking, well-maintained restroom facilities and souvenir shops were the most satisfying tangible services provided by the agritourism destinations. Out of four tangible services, both domestic and foreign tourists marked negative gap score for signage board facilities (-0.2 and -0.3 respectively). Poor maintenance and lack of informative sign boards are the reason behind this negative gap score. But the overall SERVQUAL score of tangibility indicates that domestic tourists and foreign tourists were satisfied with the tangibility services offered at the agritourism destinations (0.4 and 0.2 respectively).

3.2 Reliability

Reliability refers to a service provider's ability to deliver promised services consistently and accurately. Table 2 represents the gap analysis of reliability among the selected tourists. The reliability services include the variables, reliability of online and booking services, problem solving techniques and employee's behavior. All the tourists were marked highest score for perception than the expectation. It means the tourists experienced better reliability services than their expectation level. The domestic tourists rated equal gap score for all variables (0.2). Compared to domestic tourists, foreign tourists rated lowest gap score for problem solving techniques and employee's behavior (0.1). This was due to the variance in expectation and perception score rated by the foreign tourists. The overall reliability gap score ranked domestic tourist in top followed by foreign tourists. It shows that domestic tourists have a higher level of satisfaction with the reliability of services at agritourism centers compared to foreign tourists.

3.3 Responsiveness

Responsiveness refers to service providers' willingness to help customers and provide prompt assistance. Table 3 represents the gap analysis of responsiveness among the selected agritourists. The responsiveness services include the variables, professionalism of staffs, website and social media platforms and trained/certified guides. The domestic and foreign tourists were rated highest SERVQUAL score for professionalism of staffs (0.3 and 0.1 respectively). It means the services of professional and trained staffs makes them satisfied. Foreign tourists gave the website and social media platforms a no gap score because the updated information available through these channels just met with their expectations. But the domestic tourists were satisfied with the website and social media platforms with 0.2 gap score. Both the tourists marked lowest score for the services of trained/certified guides (-0.2). It indicates the shortage of trained/certified guides in the agritourism destinations. The absence of trained and certified guides in agritourism destinations created negative impact on the tourist's experience. The overall responsiveness gap score ranked domestic tourist in top (0.3). However, foreign tourists were dissatisfied with the overall responsiveness score, as their gap score was negative (-0.1).

3.4 Assurance

Assurance refers to expertise, skill, and reliability of service providers, as well as their ability to build trust and confidence in their customers. Table 4 represents the gap analysis of assurance among the selected agritourists. The assurance services include the variables, safety and security of agritourism destinations, credibility of discounts and offers, quality of food and confidentiality in maintaining tourists' data. The domestic tourists rated highest gap score for quality of food and confidentiality in maintaining tourists' data (0.2) and lowest gap score for safety and security of agritourism destinations, credibility of discounts and offers (0.1). It means they were only satisfied with the quality of food and confidentiality in maintaining tourists' data. The foreign tourists rated highest gap score for credibility of discounts and offers and quality of food (0.2) and lowest score for safety and security of agritourism destinations and confidentiality in maintaining tourists' data (0.1). It means they were only satisfied with the offers and food provided at the agritourism centers. The overall assurance gap score is same for domestic and foreign tourists (0.6) and it indicates their satisfaction towards assurance dimension.

3.5 Empathy

Empathy means the caring, individualized attention, and understanding that service providers demonstrate towards customers. Table 5 represents the gap analysis of empathy among the selected agritourists. The empathy services include the variables, disable friendly environment at agritourism centre, acceptance of visitor's suggestion, convenient operating hours and effective communication of staff/guide. Out of four services, both the domestic and foreign tourists marked lower gap score for 'disable friendly environment' (-0.3 and -0.5 respectively). It means the agritourism destinations not providing adequate facilities for disabled tourists. The foreign tourists were also marked lower perception score for "communication of guide" (-0.1). Because the language deficiency of guides makes their communication ineffective. The overall empathy gap score is higher for domestic tourists (0.5) and lower for foreign tourists (-0.4). It indicates the higher satisfaction of domestic tourists and lower satisfaction of foreign tourists towards empathy services.

3.6 Overall gap analysis

Table 6 represents the overall gap analysis score of various services offered by the agritourism destinations. Out of five variables, the domestic tourists marked highest service quality score for reliability and assurance (0.6) and lowest for responsiveness (0.3). Lack of services of trained/certified guides makes the domestic tourists to rate less service quality score for responsiveness. The foreign tourists marked highest service quality score for assurance (0.6) and lowest for empathy (-0.4). Lack of disable friendly environment and lack of effective communication from the part of guides were makes them to mark less service quality score for empathy. The overall SERVQUAL score is higher for domestic tourists (2.3) and lower for foreign tourists (0.7). It shows the highest satisfaction level of domestic tourists and lowest satisfaction level of foreign tourists towards the overall services provided at the agritourism center.

The overall service expectation and perception of domestic and foreign tourists were compared by using Wilcoxon signed rank test. The Asymp Sig (2 - tailed) value for each dimension as well as the overall shows the value < 0.05. It indicates that reject the Ho, means that there was difference in the expectation and perception level of domestic and foreign tourists on service quality.

Table 1 Gap analysis of Tangibility

Statement	Group	Mean score		Service quality
		Expectation score	Perceived score	
Parking area should be spacious, well-organized, and provides easy access.	Domestic	3.6	3.9	0.3
	Foreign	3.5	3.7	0.2
Restroom facilities should be clean, well-stocked, and easily accessible.	Domestic	3.4	3.5	0.1
	Foreign	3.5	3.7	0.2
Souvenir shop should offer variety of locally produced agricultural products with high quality.	Domestic	3.8	4.0	0.2
	Foreign	4.0	4.1	0.1
Signage and information boards at	Domestic	3.9	3.7	-0.2

the agri tourism center should be clear and informative.	Foreign	3.9	3.6	-0.3
TOTAL SCORE	Domestic	14.7	15.1	0.4
	Foreign	14.9	15.1	0.2

Table 2 Gap analysis of Reliability

Statement	Group	Mean score		Service quality
		Expectation score	Perceived score	
Online reservations and bookings should be reliably processed.	Domestic	3.6	3.8	0.2
	Foreign	3.7	3.9	0.2
Agri-tourism center should act quickly to resolve service disruptions or technical issues.	Domestic	3.3	3.5	0.2
	Foreign	3.5	3.6	0.1
The employees should behave appropriately.	Domestic	3.9	4.1	0.2
	Foreign	3.9	4.0	0.1
TOTAL SCORE	Domestic	10.8	11.4	0.6
	Foreign	11.1	11.5	0.4

Table 3 Gap analysis of Responsiveness

Statement	Group	Mean score		Service quality
		Expectation score	Perceived score	
Staff members should be professional, trained and approachable.	Domestic	3.9	4.2	0.3
	Foreign	3.8	3.9	0.1
Agri-tourism center should consistently update its website and social media platforms with current information.	Domestic	3.4	3.6	0.2
	Foreign	3.7	3.7	0.0
Centre should provide the services of trained/certified guides.	Domestic	3.4	3.2	-0.2
	Foreign	3.6	3.4	-0.2
TOTAL SCORE	Domestic	10.7	11.0	0.3
	Foreign	11.1	11.0	-0.1

Table 4 Gap analysis of Assurance

Statement	Group	Mean score		Service quality
		Expectation score	Perceived score	
Agri-tourism center should consistently maintain safe and secure environment for visitors.	Domestic	4.3	4.4	0.1
	Foreign	4.0	4.1	0.1
Advertised discounts or promotions should be trustable to the visitors.	Domestic	3.3	3.4	0.1
	Foreign	3.3	3.5	0.2
Quality of food served at the agri tourism center should be consistently high.	Domestic	3.8	4.0	0.2
	Foreign	4.0	4.2	0.2
Personal information of visitors should be handled with confidentiality and securely.	Domestic	3.9	4.1	0.2
	Foreign	4.2	4.3	0.1
TOTAL SCORE	Domestic	15.3	15.9	0.6
	Foreign	15.5	16.1	0.6

Table 5 Gap analysis of Empathy

Statement	Group	Mean score		Service quality
		Expectation score	Perceived score	
Agri tourism center should be disable friendly.	Domestic	3.6	3.3	-0.3
	Foreign	3.7	3.2	-0.5
Agri-tourism center should be receptive towards the suggestions of visitors.	Domestic	3.3	3.3	0.0
	Foreign	3.5	3.5	0.0
Centre should have convenient operating hours	Domestic	3.3	3.8	0.5
	Foreign	3.8	4.0	0.2
Communication from the part of guides should be effective.	Domestic	3.9	4.2	0.3
	Foreign	4.0	3.9	-0.1
TOTAL SCORE	Domestic	14.1	14.6	0.5
	Foreign	15.0	14.6	-0.4

Table 6 Overall gap analysis

Statement	Group	Mean score		Service quality
		Expectation score	Perceived score	
Tangibility	Domestic	14.7	15.1	0.4
	Foreign	14.9	15.1	0.2
Reliability	Domestic	10.8	11.4	0.6
	Foreign	11.1	11.5	0.4
Responsiveness	Domestic	10.7	11.0	0.3
	Foreign	11.1	11.0	-0.1
Assurance	Domestic	15.3	15.9	0.6
	Foreign	15.5	16.1	0.6
Empathy	Domestic	14.1	14.6	0.5
	Foreign	15.0	14.6	-0.4
Overall service quality	Domestic	65.8	68.1	2.3
	Foreign	67.5	68.2	0.7

4. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The service quality analysis revealed a lack of efficient signage boards, lack of trained guides and lack of accessibility features for disabled individuals at the agritourism destinations. Aside from these areas, the services demonstrated a higher level of performance. Neglecting these aspects will result in various negative outcomes, affecting tourists' satisfaction and overall efficiency. Signage boards at agritourism destinations offer essential directions, enhance the overall visitor experience, and ensure both safety and accessibility. By focusing in clear, informative, and thoughtfully designed signs, agritourism destinations can boost visitor satisfaction, enhance their operations, and achieve success in a competitive market. The presence of trained guides will also enhance the tourists' experience by ensuring safety, delivering valuable educational content, boost operational efficiency, provide personalized customer service, and support cultural and community engagement. Investing in well-trained guides enables agritourism destinations to improve the quality of their services, create memorable and rewarding experiences for visitors. Prioritizing the disability-friendly practices will play a key role in shaping a welcoming, inclusive, and successful industry that serves all individuals equitably. Upholding high service quality in agritourism destinations is crucial for ensuring visitor satisfaction, gaining a competitive advantage, managing reputation, and maximizing both economic and community benefits. Ultimately, high service quality will become the key driver of growth and prosperity for agritourism destinations.

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