

## COVID-19: TOURISM AT CROSSROADS! WHERE NEXT?

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**Abstract:** An unprecedented catastrophe has struck the world in the form of 'Novel Coronavirus', i.e. 'COVID-19', bringing life across countries to a sudden standstill. The pandemic has overwhelmed the tourism industry, creating a multitude of immediate problems like mass unemployment in the labour-intensive tourism industry, business survival questions for the 'direct' and 'indirect' tourism sectors and issues of customer retention. The paper discusses the impact of COVID-19 on travel and tourism and addresses impending concerns of the industry post COVID-19. Now that the reality of this unprecedented catastrophe is staring in the face of an industry at cross roads, it seems apparent that in view of an indefinite long lasting pandemic and its related safety concerns, it will be inevitable for future tourism to choose an entirely new direction. With the contagious disease that has brought to the fore the necessity of 'distancing', the paper also sheds lights on the evolution and challenges of a new norm in tourism post COVID, viz. 'Physical Distancing Tourism'.

**Keywords:** Tourism, COVID-19, Physical Distancing Tourism

### Introduction

Tourism industry is highly vulnerable to crisis situations. Crises are inevitable, 'episodic events that disrupt the tourism and hospitality industry on a regular basis' (McKercher and Hui, 2004:101). Any crisis comes as a 'shock' for the tourism industry (Prideaux, 2004). History has shown time and again that crisis arising out of natural disasters, terrorism, economic downturns and health threats have had an instant adverse impact on tourism (McKercher and Chon, 2004; Pforr and Hosie, 2008; Sönmez, 1998; Sönmez, Apostolopoulos and Tarlow, 1999; Sönmez, and Graefe, 1998; Ritchie, 2008). Early this year a deadly infectious virus i.e. 'Novel Coronavirus', called as 'COVID-19' originated in China and spread like wildfire, taking one country after the other in its throes. In January, COVID-19 was declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a 'Global Emergency of International Concern'. Within months the spread of the disease has transformed into a 'pandemic' creating a worldwide health crisis. The omnipresent and omnipotent, invisible lethal virus that is showing no signs of abating, has brought the world to a grinding halt. Countries shaken worldwide are trying to deal with this unexpected crisis. However, in the absence of any vaccination yet, there is looming uncertainty of when things would be brought under control and when a resumption of normal life would become possible. The only way to curtail the transmission of virus as advocated by the WHO, is to, 'Stay Home' and 'Stay Safe' so that the individual can prevent getting infected by the virus and can also guard from unknowingly transmitting the virus to others. City 'shutdowns' and 'lockdowns' have been the universal preventive measure adopted across the globe to keep people from venturing outside. 'Tourism' known to be a highly vulnerable industry, has suffered a direct impact of this crisis. As highlighted by the Secretary General of United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), tourism is among the 'hardest hit' of all economic sectors (UNWTO, 2020). 'Tourists' are considered as a major force spreading contagious diseases across borders. Therefore 'international travel' is often held responsible for serious public health consequences (Richter, 2003) raising heightened concern for cross border travel during times of health emergency (Hollingsworth, Ferguson, and Anderson, 2007; McKercher and Chon, 2004). To remain safe from 'importing' the virus through tourists, most countries have closed their borders to all international travel. In wake of such stringent measures all leisure travel for

tourism stands suspended, casting an indefinite dark shadow over the tourism industry. The outbreak of COVID-19 has created an unexpected survival challenge for the global tourism industry. Regardless, the 'never say die', resilient industry, is gearing up to carve out an entirely new path for recovery that will be shaped by the current crisis. The paper discusses the nature of concerns arising for tourism industry on account of the impact of COVID-19 and also sheds light on a possibly changed and new future tourism scenario.

### **Impact of COVID and Concerns for Tourism Industry**

Research documents that the effect of pandemics is critical for tourism (Cayhanto et al., 2016; Grais, Ellis, and Glass, 2003; Kuo, et al., 2008; Pine and McKercher, 2004; Reisinger and Mavondo, 2005). Pandemics can completely paralyse the tourism industry in terms of halting both 'demand' and 'supply', and this is evident in the current crisis. While tourists have stopped travelling, the tourism supply operations have been grounded resulting in a severe adverse impact on the industry. Consequently, several challenges and concerns have arisen for the industry, as discussed below.

#### ***Mass Unemployment***

Tourism industry is a major employment provider, providing jobs to more than 330 million people around the world. Business operations crashing on account of the pandemic have resulted in huge layoffs of workforce both in the 'direct' and 'indirect' tourism sectors. For temporary employees, in an industry already known for its 'seasonality', job cuts due to COVID-19 have rendered millions unemployed. Besides, tourism industry is dominated by the 'private sector enterprises' that do not offer job security and this is a major concern for the employees. In the 'management pyramid hierarchy' of employment in tourism, the larger workforce comprises the 'middle' and 'lower' level management of 'semi-skilled' and 'unskilled' workforce, that has taken the direct brunt of unemployment. All industry sectors like transport, accommodation, travel agency business and food and beverage, along with a wide spectrum of 'supporting industries' have been caught unaware and are finding themselves struggling for survival in the absence of business. The severity of the crisis can be gauged from the fact that a successful airline like British Airways has announced '12000 job cuts' and even Qatar Airways has warned of 'substantial job losses'. Taking note of the rising unemployment concerns, the UNWTO Crisis Committee has strongly appealed to countries to save jobs. However, with no income, tourism businesses are finding it impossible to retain employees. Even once things start returning to normalcy, it will be difficult to get back the old workforce, or else make new recruitments from the scratch, which could prove to be a costly and time consuming process for businesses that cannot afford to lose time and are eagerly waiting to be back on track. With no future timeline in sight of businesses resuming operations, and of tourists returning, the unemployment concern in tourism continues to grow.

#### ***Industry Survival***

Tourism Industry is not a 'Stand Alone' industry. It is a composite of a large number of varied supplementary supporting industries, government and non-government departments and organizations. The 'primary' sector in tourism comprises transport, accommodation, travel facilitation, sightseeing, and shopping and entertainments sector. It is supported by feeding 'secondary' industries like, agriculture, horticulture, manufacturing, floriculture, information, and technology, among many others. The outbreak of COVID-19 has resulted in sudden closure of 'all sectors' (primary and secondary) in wake of lockdowns for safety reasons. Due to travel restrictions, all demand for travel too is at a standstill for an indefinite period of time. Therefore 'all' businesses have gone defunct. For tourism, 'dependent', upon several other industries,

there is the anxiety, that it may not possible to restart and get back to smooth functioning unless and until the 'whole supply chain' (of primary and secondary enterprises) resumes proper operations. The tourism chain cannot hold firm with any weak or broken link.

The role of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) is highly crucial in tourism. The industry is dominated by SMEs. Bourletidis and Triantafyllopoulos (2014) are of the view that SMEs tend to suffer 'disproportionately' in times of crisis. The situation is apparent during the present pandemic. Most of the SME businesses are 'indebted' under heavy burdens of loans, the repayment of which is possible only if business keeps running. Financial concerns have created another 'survival crisis', especially for SMEs. Businesses are crying out to governments and lending institutions to provide some respite in terms of interest waivers on loans, tax break considerations and financial aid packages. The collapse of 'Virgin Australia' is a classic example of financial crisis affecting the industry. There is anxiety amongst service providers 'if and how' businesses will survive and overcome the financial crunch. Even once the industry is ready to welcome tourists, quick business 'recovery' may not be possible, as most tourists may remain apprehensive about travel for some time, perceiving continuing risks (Lepp and Gibson, 2008; Reisinger and Mavondo, 2005; Roehl and Fesenmaier, 1992). Safety concerns will be detrimental to all their future travel decisions. The industry will need to make a concerted effort to allay the fear of tourists. Hence, to reassure the market and regain its confidence to resume travel, remains a significant challenges post COVID-19.

### ***Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) of Businesses***

CSR has been an extremely important issue over the last few decades to ensure accountability of businesses towards society (Font and Lynes, 2018; Garay and Font, 2013). Similarly, the 'Triple Bottom Line' (TBL) approach advocates that businesses need to be responsible for the '3 Ps', i.e. 'People', 'Planet' and 'Profit' (Elkington, 1998, 2004). However, till date the primary focus of both the approaches has been 'Environment' i.e. 'Planet'. The concern for 'People' or society has always been side-lined. The attack of COVID on planet earth and its ripple effect on 'Lives and Livelihoods' is now pointing in the direction of importance of 'people' (Carroll, 1999; Freeman, 2001), in several ways, e.g. responsibility of businesses towards their 'employees', responsibility towards 'consumers', and responsibility to the 'society'. However, some degree of responsibility of businesses towards 'social welfare', has been visible during this crisis. E.g. in the absence of customers, several commercial airlines have switched over to 'cargo operations', transporting medical facilities and equipment around the globe; accommodation units have opened their doors turning into 'quarantine areas'; and the food and beverage sector has been actively supplying 'food packets' to the needy and homeless. Of other voluntary social welfare gestures shown by business houses, a striking example is of ExCel centre in London, which offered its premises for establishing the 'Nightingale Hospital' for treatment of COVID patients. In this catastrophe the tourism industry has taken a direct hit, affecting millions of employees, communities, and consumers in terms of 'people', leaving 'all' in the lurch. Unprepared for a catastrophe of this magnitude, majority of paralyzed businesses have shown 'little' or 'no' social accountability during this crisis. Therefore, strengthening business accountability laws (CSR) for future is a critical issue which will be detrimental for 'credibility' of businesses in future.

### ***Force Majeure***

'*Force Majeure*' is a French term used to describe a situation that is 'unforeseeable', 'unavoidable' and 'impossible' to overcome (Baker McKenzie, 2020). It can be an 'unexpected' human created catastrophe, or an 'Act of God', beyond human control, which 'forces cancellation of contracts' between parties. COVID-19 is an ideal example of how *Force Majeure*

has struck the tourism industry. The sudden suspension of all industry operations has led to huge unavoidable cancellations in tourism and its composite sectors. Businesses are clueless of how to deal with upset customers claiming refunds. The travel insurance companies too have never come across such a global travel halt, whereby they are liable to adjust large scale insurance claims. On one hand is the sudden loss of business and income, a major financial crunch, and on the other hand, is the threat of losing consumer market. Hence, it is a tricky situation that needs to be handled tactfully. To avoid refunds some airlines are now offering vouchers to customers for future rescheduled travel within a year. However, consumers who are not planning to travel in the foreseeable future have created a dilemma for businesses that cannot decide whether to 'refund' the customers or 'lose them' and their trust for good. Besides, a complex *Force Majeure* situation like this is likely to deter cautious tourists from making way ahead advance bookings in future. This may lead to a continuous uncertainty about business security and may necessitate framing specific crisis management strategies (Faulkner, 2001; Laws and Prideaux, 2005; Martens, Feldezs and Merten, 2016; Ritchie, 2004; Santana, 2004; Sausmarez, 2007) that can help survive *Force Majeure*.

Considering the impact of the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis on tourism and its related concerns, now tourism industry seems to be lost at crossroads. It is difficult to gauge 'when' and 'how' things will be back to business and what path the industry should be treading next. Nevertheless, it is certain that this pandemic is showing the tourism industry a direction towards reshaping itself for future, with 'health and safety' concerns at the core.

### ***Rethinking Tourism – Where Next?***

The Novel Coronavirus has proved to be a highly transferrable disease, the spread of which needs close monitoring. Attributing 'human contact' as the reason for its fast spread, countries decided on strict lockdowns and shutting complete cities, requiring people to 'stay put' or 'stay home', as the only solution to contain the spread. To discourage people from travelling, all transport operations were grounded. Such a step, though highly disastrous for tourism, had to be universally accepted in the interest of 'saving lives'. Amidst a global shutdown and continuing uncertainty of when the virus will be completely wiped off the face of the earth, the future of tourism now stands in limbo. No one can predict 'when' tourists will be ready to travel again. Research documents that post disaster the travel decisions of tourists tend to be governed by their risk perceptions (Kozak, Crofts, and Law, 2007; Law, 2006; Rittichainuwat and Chakraborty, 2009; Sharifpour, Walters, and Ritchie, 2014). As there is no guaranteed end of the virus in sight, the WHO and countries are beginning to accept that 'we will have to learn to live with the virus'. This suggests that post COVID the risks of travel will remain indefinitely lasting and it will not be easy for businesses to reassure tourists any time soon and motivate them to start travelling. The assessment of the present situation indicates that all future travel and tourism will require a drastically changed scenario. Introduction of 'stringent travel rules' (e.g. immunity certificates, necessary vaccination, mandatory masking, physical distancing, changed visa rules, etc.) will be on the top of agenda of countries worldwide, in order to minimize health risks and to guard against any future transmission or recurrence of the disease. The framing and enforcement of a new 'code of ethics' (for tourist, residents and businesses) might become indispensable to ensure 'responsible behaviour' and accountability of businesses, local communities and tourists.

### ***Mulling 'Physical Distancing Tourism' - A Challenge Ahead***

Coronavirus spreads through respiratory droplets, invariably when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Hence the best way to keep safe is to 'keep distance' from people. Early in the year, the WHO started using the terminology 'Social Distancing'. Within a few months the term has

gained immense weightage in global vocabulary. However recently, it was pointed out by experts, social psychologists, and sociologists that the usage of the term 'social distancing' is not correct as it implies getting socially and emotionally disconnected with others (loved ones, friends and society). Hence, the term has recently been deliberated upon by experts and the WHO has decided to replace 'social distancing', with a more agreeable term i.e. 'Physical Distancing' (Kaur, 2020). 'Physical Distancing' implies maintaining safe 'geographical distance' from one another. While WHO recommends a safe distance of 'three feet' i.e. one meter, a distance of 'two meters' is suggested by other experts, to avoid transmission of the virus. Thus, physical isolation all the time from others in terms of a 'safe distance' has emerged as a new norm in society and will carry on in the foreseeable future, until the complete end of the invisible COVID enemy is not confirmed. The 'Physical Distancing' norm has already percolated in all aspects of our lives, dealings, and business operations as a 'requirement'. Keeping this in view, the tourism industry too is mulling over the emergence of perhaps a new future concept in travel and tourism viz. 'Physical Distancing Tourism'. However, the idea of this 'new norm' and 'new form' of tourism, has started raising eyebrows, with businesses voicing ample concerns for its possibility, implementation, and viability. In case, 'Physical Distancing Tourism', does evolve, it will come with several challenges, some of which are highlighted in the ensuing discussion.

### ***Physical Distancing - Safety and Stringent Accessibility Rules***

The fear of the virus being omnipresent and lingering on for an indefinite period will necessitate changing of travel rules and regulations, making them 'stricter' for health and safety concerns. To limit mass tourism in the interest of distancing for safety, accessibility rules may become stringent for visas, insurance, and vaccination. It is already under consideration by several countries to introduce a 'COVID-19 immunity certificate' as an essential requirement for travel. Several countries are also planning on mandatory '14 days quarantine' for all incoming traffic. However, tourists may not welcome this move, as they would not want to land at their destination and first be quarantined for 14 days before venturing out. In this view, stricter rules may discourage tourists to travel, or even force them to change their destination choice in favour of countries that allow easy access. This may result in certain countries losing out on tourist markets and thereby suffering economic losses. It has been noted during the pandemic that some of the top ranking popular tourism destination countries (in terms of international tourist arrivals) have taken the top ranks of COVID affected countries as well, i.e. Spain, Italy, France, Germany, U.K and U.S.A. Affected seriously by the virus, if these countries consider re-opening with stringent restrictions post COVID, they might witness a steep decline in arrivals. The statistics may completely alter their rankings and popularity, consequently affecting the economy of nations, particularly threatening the ones that are highly dependent on tourism. Hence stringent rules, though the need of the hour, can become a problem for tourism.

### ***Physical Distancing - Challenging the Ethos of Tourism***

Since ages, tourism has been about 'learning about people and cultures' around the world. The very ethos of tourism is 'socio cultural interaction'. The 'authentic experience' of tourism is only gained through 'one-to-one', 'in person', interaction between tourists and hosts, and interaction amongst tourists from different backgrounds. Ironically, if physical distancing becomes the new norm, it will not allow mingling of people. Rather, it will only encourage the withdrawal of tourists into their cocoons of individual 'environment bubble'. To strictly keep the tourists and local communities physically distanced from one another and to even force tourists travelling together to keep at bay from one another, will pose an immense challenge regarding enforcing distancing. The implementation of physical distancing will be highly questionable, particularly in Socio-cultural Event based tourism, Homestay and Airbnb tourism, all of which thrive upon

providing an 'authentic experience' through interaction. Therefore, practicing a tourism that isolates one from the other, could end up destroying the very 'ethos' of tourism, i.e. socio-cultural interaction.

### ***Physical Distancing- Service Industry Concerns***

Physical Distancing as a necessity will pose significant challenges for service providers in terms of 'limiting customers' to 'mind the gap'. The transport industry has been the first to flag the contentious issue. No transport considers it financially viable to operate its fleet with vacant seats to ensure distancing. Several airlines are finding it 'illogical' and absurd to be forced to distance passenger by leaving seats 'vacant' and selling much lower than capacity. In response, airlines e.g. Ryan Air and Spice Jet have already threatened to ground their operations and many others may follow suit. It is also being speculated that airfares might increase by 50% if middle seats are required to be left vacant. Such an increase in airfares will inevitably result in a heavy burden on the pockets of the tourists who may choose 'not to travel at all'. Same is the case with restaurant operators who are unwilling to leave tables free for the purpose of 'spacing out' and 'limiting' number of customers. The accommodation industry too cannot figure out how it can make any changes to its supply in case physical distancing becomes mandatory. Hence, the whole service industry has been compelled to ponder over working out the tough logistics and financial implications of a future 'Physical Distancing Tourism'.

### ***Physical Distancing - Selective Tourism***

Physical distancing might necessitate businesses to narrow down from mass tourism to 'Selective Tourist Markets'. In case airline operations take a long time to resume, or else, airlines ground their operations, then 'long-haul' tourism might not be possible. However, for land locked countries or those sharing physical borders, 'short-haul' traffic from neighbouring markets accessible by surface transport may become the new focused 'selective market'. Besides, businesses may now be necessitated to cater to selective 'educated and responsible' tourist segments alone, who understand and respect distancing for health safety reasons and obey the mandatory do's and don'ts. For the travel agency businesses, selectivity would imply taking a tough call about deciding on 'tourism destinations' and 'tourist markets' to deal with. Several top destinations like Spain, France, Italy, UK, USA have been severely affected by Coronavirus and it is likely that 'Outbound' businesses may shy away from these countries due to reluctance of tourists to visit the same. On the other hand, 'Inbound' travel companies may now think twice with regard to dealing with the lucrative market of China (the origin of the virus), a market that cannot be ignored as it is the highest revenue generator, but has now become stigmatized, generating global Xenophobia. Therefore, in view of health and safety, what to do, or not to do, in terms of business selectivity will become a major cause of worry for the industry.

### ***Physical Distancing - Shift from 'Group Inclusive Travel' (GIT) to 'Free Independent Travel' (FIT)***

Physical distancing is difficult to achieve when tourism businesses are dealing with group tours, or families travelling together. If physical distancing is to be the new norm, then the industry might need to rethink shifting from organizing large group inclusive tours (GIT) to tours for smaller groups, families, or free independent tourists (FIT). Dealing with smaller groups could facilitate more control and monitoring of tourists and could be the best way to ensure security of 'minimal interaction' with strangers. However, distancing will be difficult to manage for family groups or couples who may not be willing for the same. All though a good measure to

ensure safety, a shift from GIT to FIT, may also not be financially viable for travel companies that deal with large group / *en masse* travel.

### ***Physical Distancing - Decongestion and Visitor Management***

Tourism hubs around the world are largely concentrated in metropolitan ‘urban areas’ that are usually overcrowded and polluted. If physical distancing is to be enforced in future, there will be a need to move away from tourism concentrations and disperse the tourist traffic to the ‘outskirts’ or peripheral areas/attractions. Hence ‘decongestion’ of core destinations (to enable distancing) will have to be planned by tourism planning and destination management organizations (DMOs). Such re-planning could become economically favourable for rural or lesser developed areas where new forms of tourism could be encouraged in the form of Handicraft tourism, Creative tourism, Horticulture tourism and Farm tourism, among others. All such forms can cater to smaller groups of tourists in clean, safe, and pristine environments that can ensure an enriched quality of experience. Besides, decongestion, ‘visitor management’ too will need to be strictly adopted at all tourist attractions to control number of tourists that can be permitted keeping a safe distance from one another. Though highly desirable for safety, both these measures are bound to raise concerns of management planning and revenue loss. On account of COVID it is apparent that the idea and reality of physical distancing has already started gaining increasing importance in our lives and is becoming a crucial requirement. Distancing will become indispensable in travel and tourism phenomenon as well. If ‘Physical Distancing Tourism’ becomes a necessity, it will demand radical changes in the industry and ignite serious debates about implementation issues.

### **Conclusion**

Time and again tourism has faced various kinds of disasters. However, repeatedly the industry has bounced back swiftly and proved its strong resilience. While localized disasters do not have a serious effect on global travel, the spread of any contagious diseases across the globe is bound to have disastrous implications for tourism industry. This is evident from the way the outbreak of COVID-19 has created an unprecedented health safety crisis around the globe. The tourism industry has taken the direct hit of the pandemic, consequently coming to an instant standstill. The industry is now overwhelmed with multiple challenges that stand tall barricading its future. Examining the nature of challenges and the dilemmas created for travel and tourism, the study concludes that this pandemic should be seen as an ‘eye opener’ for businesses to gear up and devise firm response strategies to be better prepared for crisis situations. In addition, catastrophes have often necessitated businesses to drastically change their future course and introduce new operations. This pandemic too, is leading to a path of introduction of drastic changes in travel and tourism revolving around the need of ‘physical distancing’, which has become imperative for safety. Henceforth, the tourism industry would need to adopt a more flexible approach to ‘adapt to’ changing unpredictable scenarios, and even proactively initiate innovate steps ‘to change’ the shape of things to come.

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