

Developing Lonavala for Spiritual Tourism – Opportunities and Challenges

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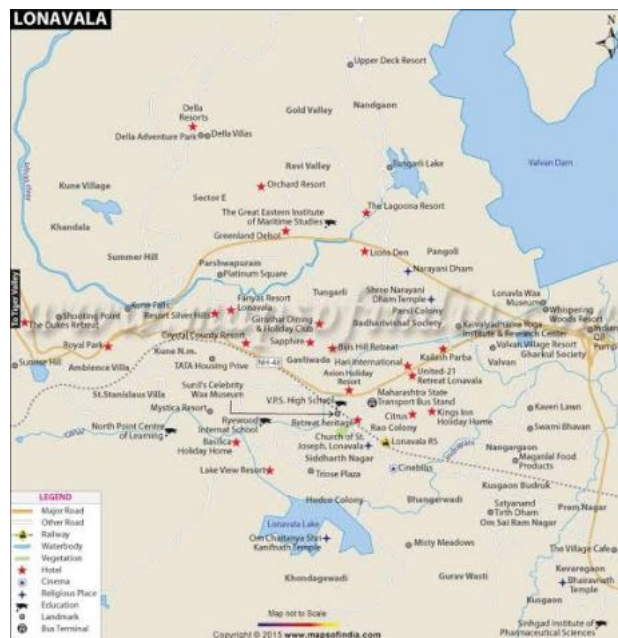
ABSTRACT

In tune with The Butler Model of Tourism Development, the Maharashtra government is soon coming up with a plan to project Lonavala – a hill station in Maharashtra as an international tourist destination in order to lure foreign travellers. The plan includes marketing Lonavala as monsoon destination by developing the parks and lakes and revamping the old tourist spots. A new type of emerging tourism is Spiritual Tourism wherein tourists travel either domestically or to international destinations to visit spiritual places and to have a spiritual experience motivated by faith or religious reasons. As the town already fulfils the 4 As of Tourism, there is a scope to market Lonavala as a destination for Spiritual Tourism by projecting the already existing Buddhist Caves, Temples, Meditation Centres and Kaivalyadham Ashram (Yoga Centre). In addition, as a Startup India initiative, a new Health and Wellness Centre can be created nearby any of the 4 lakes offering state of the art amenities, thus cashing in on the Rs.2.5 lakh crore market of religion and spirituality in India. The paper attempts to weigh the opportunities the idea offers and the challenges that might have to be faced during the process.

Keywords: Lonavala, Spiritual Tourism, Health and Wellness Centre, Monsoon Destination

INTRODUCTION

Lonavala is a hill station in the Sahyadris close to Pune and Mumbai in Maharashtra; sprawling an area of 38 square kilometers. The name means ‘line of caves’ as the Karla, Bhaje and Bedse caves are nearby. Lonavala has lots of waterfalls, lakes like Lonavala, Walwan and Tungarli, rivers like Indrayani, Pawna and Andhra and the Rajmachi, Tikona and Lohagad fort. In addition, the flora and fauna of the Sahyadri hills make Lonavala a popular weekend getaway.



Map of Lonavala

Source: www.mapsofindia.com

Spiritual Tourism means travelling either domestically or internationally for spiritual purposes i.e. to connect with a higher self, to achieve peace, to meditate. People may either visit religious places like temples, shrines or churches or they may visit places with natural beauty which provides a sense of well being and calm which helps them in their search for a meaning to life. Spiritual tourism is judged as the most rapidly growing segment in the tourism industry and in 2013 UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organisation) had an international conference on Spiritual Tourism for Sustainable Development.

Places of Spiritual Interest: Lonavala has many places which are of religious and spiritual interest like:

Caves

- Bhaja Caves: These are Buddhist caves dating back to 160 BC. The caves are divided into 22 rock cut groups and have 14 Stupas with intricate carvings and sculptures.
- Karla Caves: Dated to the 2nd century BC, these are one of the oldest Buddhist cave shrines in India. The caves are divided into several sections as halls and monasteries.

Temples

- Bhairavnath Temple: This is an ancient Shiva Temple displaying unique and architectural design. .
- Narayani Dham Temple: This is a beautiful temple built of white marble and dedicated to Goddess Narayani. The grounds of the temple are beautifully maintained with fountains and people enjoy the calm surroundings.
- Shri Durga Parameshwari Temple: Featuring South Indian style of architecture, this temple is built in white marble with a magnificent Gopuram. There is a green, soothing, peaceful atmosphere around the temple.
- Ekvira Devi Temple: This temple from 2nd Century BC is dedicated to Goddess Ekvira near the Karla Caves.
- Prati Pandharpur: This is a replica of the Vitthal temple at Pandharpur located near Pawna backwater and Lohagad Fort.

Ashrams

- Kaivalyadhama Ashram: There is a Natural Care Center, a Yogic educational institute and naturopathy therapy institute. The Ashram is a unique combination of mysticism and modern science. The library here holds over 25000 books on yoga which is the largest in the world.
- Gagangiri Ashram: Is an ideal place for peaceful meditation. It is a place where Mahayogi Shri Gagangiri lived and meditated.

Parks

- Ryewood Park has a temple within the grounds where people sit, meditate and enjoy some tranquil time.

THE 4 A's OF TOURISM

In Tourism, the 4 A's are Attraction, Accommodation, Amenity and Accessibility. Lonavala has plenty of waterfalls and trails for treks which is a major attraction along with the pleasant climate of the place. There are also man-made attractions like adventure parks and wax museums. Lonavala has many hotels and resorts ranging from budget stays to luxury retreats. There are Airbnbs as well and one can easily find accommodation. The hotels and restaurants provide all kinds of amenities so that one can have a comfortable stay. Lonavala has good road and rail connectivity from Mumbai and Pune. Lohegaon Airport at Pune is the nearest airport and hence is easily accessible. Thus Lonavala already satisfies the 4 A's of tourism and there is a scope to market it as a place for Spiritual Tourism.

REVAMPING LONAVALA

In a bid to attract more foreign tourists, in 2017 the state tourism minister Mr. Jaykumar Rawal formulated a plan to develop the city and make Lonavala an international holiday destination. The plan is to develop the parks and the lakes and revamp the old tourist spots.

India already has an influx of foreign tourists who come for spiritual reasons – either to the Ashrams for peace and tranquility or to pilgrimage centres like Puri, Varanasi, Tirupati and Shirdi or to rejuvenate themselves at Ayurvedic Spas and Yoga Centres. So these tourists can be lured into visiting Lonavala if it is properly projected as a centre for Spiritual Tourism.

HEALTH AND WELLNESS CENTRES

These are in great demand these days which provide a holistic all round development for the mind, body and soul. Providing guidance to a better lifestyle, wellness centres have medical and mental professionals, nutritionists and life coaches. They also have facilities like gymnasium, spa and meditation centres. A Health

and Wellness Centre can be constructed near one of the many lakes in Lonavala under the Startup India initiative. The Centre can provide a tranquil and peaceful atmosphere in which to meditate and a Spa to rejuvenate the mind and body. It can offer Yoga and/or other forms of mind and body alleviating practices like Art of Living or Brahmavidya. Brahmavidya includes spiritual lessons in addition to breathing exercises and meditations thus ensuring sound health and mental peace. Excursions to religious and spiritual places nearby can be arranged in order to provide a complete spiritual experience.

CHALLENGES

Apart from the money to set up the wellness centre, this will of course need suitable infrastructure. The development of roads should be given top priority. The internal roads should be widened and modernized. The accessible approach roads to all the attractions should be properly developed as well. There should be uninterrupted electric supply to cater to the needs of tourists and residents of this region. Similarly independent water supply arrangements for all the areas of Lonavala need to be made for the floating population coming in. The public transport system needs to be strengthened. Sightseeing tours should be introduced both by public and private transport services. The broadband connectivity must be made stable and strong. There should be the facility of foreign currency exchange in every hotel and shop. Accommodation facilities should be expanded to the maximum possible limit taking into account the ecology of the region so that the development is sustainable.

CONCLUSION

Cashing in on spiritual tourism in India, the beautiful and well accessible city of Lonavala in Maharashtra can be developed as a hub by creating a state-of-the-art Health and Wellness Centre. Funds can be procured through start up initiative and it might turn out to be a great opportunity to generate foreign revenue. However some infrastructure developments will have to be made for the Centre to be successful.

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