

HOMESTAYS –AN INSTRUMENT FOR
COMMUNITY BASED TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN KERALA

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Abstract:

Various tourism concepts such as eco-tourism, shopping tourism, cultural tourism, festival tourism, ethnic-tourism, art and heritage tourism, sports tourism and nature-tourism have been introduced in Kerala focusing on the development of rural areas with the active involvement of the local people. Homestays, are a stay in a 'home' with a family where the tourists will get the opportunity to mingle with the people, their culture, life style, ideas etc. The homestay program is not merely a rural tourism programme; it is also a strategy for rural development. The implementation of the homestay programme offers opportunity to the tourists to be aware of and understand the cultures and the way of life of the local community as they, themselves will be experiencing the village life. However, the implementation demands high commitment and understanding among the villagers. In order to design a successful homestay program a concerted effort without relying on outsiders' assistance is needed, particularly in terms of promotion.

KEYWORDS:

Homestay, HATS, CBT, community development.

INTRODUCTION

For the last two decades, the government strategy in most developing countries has been focusing on the development policy of rural areas. This is caused by the slower socio-economic development in rural areas compared to that of the urban areas. Therefore, new policy has been introduced to ensure that the rural community will be free from poverty and regression through active involvement in the development of the rural tourism sector. Accordingly various tourism concepts such as eco-tourism, shopping tourism, cultural tourism, festival tourism, ethnic-tourism, art and heritage tourism, sports tourism and nature-tourism have been introduced in Kerala. All these tourism concepts have been integrated and proclaimed as the marketing strategy of tourism products in the international level. The local community involvement in the tourism activities will facilitate the increase in living quality which includes economical and social aspects as well as conducive environment that will ensure productive and healthy living. This is particularly true as the tourism sector has been proven to promptly stimulate the economic growth and developmental progression of an area. In other words, the involvement of the local community in the tourism activities, which is mainly based on the advantages possessed by the area, is expected to be able to overcome the enduring poverty crisis. The government anticipates that the development in the rural tourism sector particularly in homestay tourism will be able to boost the socio-economic development of the community in the areas involved. It is for the reason that, the homestay tourism is able to make the most of nature's beauty as well as the community's idyllic customs and cultures as appealing strategies to attract tourists to come to their village, which in turn will heighten the tourism activities in the area. Ever since it was introduced, the homestay tourism has gained encouraging responses that it is utilized as the strategy to overcome poverty in rural areas. Since then, the homestay tourism has attracted tourists, particularly

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international tourists. Through homestay tourism, participants are given the opportunity to experience the difference in the way of living and customs of the local community as well as given accommodation package throughout their stay in the chosen village. The implementation of the homestay programme offers opportunity to the tourists to be aware of and understand the cultures and the way of life of the local community as they, themselves will be experiencing the village life.

HOMESTAY ACCOMMODATION

As its name indicates, homestays, are a stay in a 'home' with a family where the tourists will get the opportunity to mingle with the people, their culture, life style, ideas etc. Homestays play an integral part of promoting our culture and nature to the external world. Homestay is an accommodation system and economic activity in the tourism industry. It is popular with the tourists who want to interact with local culture, lifestyle, social system and people. The important components of the homestay program are education, entertainment, enrichment, food, accommodation and hospitality. Homestay means to living place and it is one type of tourism product based on accommodation oriented. The improving, enhancing and promoting of homestay depends on local communities. This accommodation is ensuring their economic, social and cultural aspects with sustainable well beings. The main component of homestay is the cultural diversity of the local people which can attract the visitors. Social returns of homestay accommodation are essential for its success. The home stay program should be given emphasize on the emotional feelings of the local communities. It must be respectful of the local heritage, sense of place and social organizations.

Homestay accommodation is helpful for tourism development in a country or an area. Rural tourism, ecotourism and cultural tourism are facing accommodation problems at near the tourism destination. Homestay can solve the accommodation problem for this type's tourism. Rural and cultural tourism destinations have active participation of local people. On the other hand, ecotourism tries to decrease the environmental degradation with ensuring strong community participation in tourism activities. Homestay accommodation can create a scope to the local communities for active participation in tourism activities. The network development between local government and community is necessary to understand and adjust knowledge regarding tourism activities.

REQUIREMENTS FOR HOMESTAY OPERATIONS

1. Locations

The homestay must be situated in a suitable location for easy transportation and accessibilities. The areas of homestay keep free from pollution and promote the lifestyle of local community.

2. Basic facilities

Proper and separate spaces are needed for homestay accommodation. These accommodations have given emphasize to the comfort of tourists, including facilities such as dining space, living rooms and toilets.

3. Hygiene

The homestay accommodations should be clean and free from pollution. Good toilets and drainage systems are needed to be in homestay for avoiding bad smell.

4. Safety and security

The tourists' insurance coverage is required for the homestay operation. Moreover, safety steps like fire protection facilities to be arranged by the homestay operators.

5. Low charge

The accommodation, meal and other charges of homestay must be cheaper than other accommodation facilities.

6.Hospitality

The guests of homestay get warm hospitality. The guests are becoming actually guests of the whole village areas.

7.Motivation for young generation

Home stay program build up confidence, patriotism and leadership among the young generation. The young generation learns about collaboration by working with the visitors' of homestay accommodation.

8.Women entrepreneurship

Homestay program is helpful for the women entrepreneurs in the rural areas. It provides new jobs and business opportunities to the women using their local resources. They can operate a small business, traditional food production and homemade cooking on the basis of the home stay program.

9.Easy access

Homestay accommodations are usually situated near the tourism attractions.

10.Profitable investment

Homestay operators can withdraw their investment of home stay accommodations within a short period.

11.Government support

The homestay operators need proper training facilities and proper support of government for their business. If they have got sufficient support for home stay, it can play vital role in the rural economy.

12.Capacity building

Capacity assessment is very important for the homestay operations.

13.Appropriate Act

An Act should be passed to properly promote and develop the homestay program. Some entrepreneurs operate this business without proper licenses and certifications. They cannot ensure adequate facilities for the visitors.

14.Community involvement

The success of homestay operation depends on community involvement and support towards this program. The homestay owners get opportunities, ability, power and incentives from the communities for their successful operation.

15.Loan facility

The government and non-government organization can allocate sufficient loan for homestay accommodation. They should be allocated this facility to the operators with reasonable terms and condition.

Criteria for Homestay Development

There are several criteria that need to be addressed to ensure the homestay program to be successfully implemented. The criteria can be grouped into three main components: Product, Participant, and Principal.

The Product

This is an important component that needs to be identified and given attention by the parties involved since the motivation of the tourist to visit a destination is based on the product or attractions. In this context, product refers to the supplementary attractions such as nature, habitat and vernacular architecture, historical significance, art & crafts, music and cultural activities, traditional food and beverage, agriculture projects or activities, and special phenomena. These are the appeal factors as to why tourists are interested to stay and experience the uniqueness of the homestay

The Participants

The participant is a very crucial component in the program. In a community that practices democracy or any other ideology, there would be support as well as opposition to a homestay program. Many reasons not to participate would surface, but the common cause for disagreements, among others, would be the uncertainty of the project's success. Most local communities in tourist destinations are enthusiastic to participate in tourism activities. Confidence, support and motivation must come from the participants and authority in ensuring the sustainability of the homestay project. Obviously, not every form of community participation can contribute to the realization of the expected benefits of tourism. Commonly, there are three categories of potential participants in a homestay program;

a. Willing participants: Keen and eager participants that are motivated for many reasons. Continuous motivation and support behind the willingness of every participating member will ensure the success and sustainability of the project.

b. Wait-and-see participants: This is the second category of community participation. They are potential participants who would like to see the results first before joining the project. Once the confidence level is achieved to their acceptance, they will be part of the project willingly.

c. Non-committing participants: They are residents who are uncooperative, intolerant, and have no faith in the project. They could be alienated for many reasons which may include different political and religious belief and racial factors. The best solution is not to prevent information flow to them and avoid pessimism.

The Principal

This is the third component that influences the success of homestay program. This is because the homestay program involves not only the local community but also the principal and village committee. The principal could be an individual or a group that shares the same aspiration to the homestay project. They must possess the initiative to improve the economy of the village. All these qualities must be in the heart and soul of the principal to ensure the sustainability of the project which includes leadership, personality, integrity, knowledge, and networking.

Homestay Tourism in Kerala

Kerala is blessed with immense natural beauty and diverse set of tourism products like pilgrimage, excursion, adventure sports, heritage, culture, cuisines, festivals etc. has started paying attention towards tourism industry in past few years. The successful branding of Kerala as “God's Own Country” has generated multiple benefits to the industry in terms of revenue generation, employment generation etc., and the tourism has always motivated the community to participate and take maximum benefit out of it.

People are invited to experience the unique hospitality of Kerala homestay. Homestay is one such tourism product of Kerala that over the years has significantly added value to the hospitality sector of Kerala. It facilitates visitors to experience the local culture and lifestyle. These are traditional households of Kerala, where people have shaped their lives according to socio-religious and environmental factors. The joint family system, which once prevailed in Kerala, too had a role to play in the functioning of such households. Kerala has in recent times become the most enchanting holding destination for families, tourists and individual travellers. Holiday makers arrive from all over the world to this destination every year. The state offers luxury as well as budget accommodation all over, but a new dimension in Kerala package tourism has emerged in recent times. The concept of homestay accommodation allows the traveller to experience Kerala from a different perspective. Kerala homestay helps the tourists to mingle with the host and the family leading a close cultural interaction and provides a learning process for better

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understanding of the society, local tradition, cuisine and community. Apart from being economical the homestay accommodation is an experience of the hospitality and warmth of people of Kerala. It is far removed from the monotonous dwelling and seclusion of the closed four walls of a hotel room. Thus Kerala homestays are not akin to bed and breakfast accommodation, but on the contrary offer the comfort of Malayali hospitality and warmth. Kerala homestay accommodation is available at many different levels of service. It definitely does not offer upscale amenities of five star hotels but the rich experience the traveller gets is much more than the comfort of the lunching accommodation. Travellers spending their holidays at homestay in Kerala are assured of holiday experiences that are quite different from the usual ones. At homestay, the very informal atmosphere makes visitors feel at home and at the same time can partake in activities carried out by the host family.

Homestay tourism is one of the important products in tourism which facilitate tourism development in Kerala. It ensures social, environmental and economic responsibilities which are the objective of homestay tourism. The main concern of homestay tourism is to encourage the foreign inhabitants and educating them to how to protect and respect the culture of Kerala. The local people also can play a good role in encouraging tourists to see their communities as more than a site for recreation. Homestays play an integral part of promoting our culture and nature to the external world. People are invited to experience the unique hospitality of Kerala homestay. The popularity of homestays increases day by day as it helps tourists experience the real and multifarious cultural traditions of the state. Tourists from all over the world stay in homestays with their family to live in the lifestyle of Keralites. Traditional home cooked Kerala dishes are the main attraction of Kerala Homestays. The guests can also take part in various household activities of the family. Homestay can be described as a safe, secure and caring home away from home, for the guests.

Kerala State Homestay and Tourism Association (Kerala HATS) has been formed basically to serve as a consortium of Homestay providers and tourism promoters for the effective co-ordination of tourism activities in Kerala and also to ensure qualitative and competitive service. Kerala HATS while striving to enhance the working conditions of Homestay providers and tourism providers would also join hands with the government and organizations of it to promote tourism activities in Kerala. It would also among the objectives of Kerala HATS to carry out research programs in the hospitality sector of Kerala and be actively involved in conservation of natural resources and environment, upkeep of heritage structures and monuments. Promotion of rainwater harvesting, organic farming and zero waste management system would also occupy a prominent place in the activities of Kerala HATS.

CLASSIFICATION OF HOMESTAY UNITS

The Classification Scheme will be implemented through the District Tourism Promotion Councils. Based on the facilities and quality of the accommodation provided, Homestay units will be classified into three categories by bringing out clear guidelines on the requirements. The criteria for classification include:

- a) Location of the house.
- b) Quality, surroundings, facilities and hygiene of the house.
- c) Access to the property.
- d) Educational and professional background of the applicant and the family members.
- e) Tourist attraction of the area.

After evaluating all these things they score the house out 100. Based on the score there are three kinds of houses.

- a) Class A - score 75 and above - Diamond House
- b) Class B - score 60-74 - Gold House
- c) Class C - score 50-59 - Silver House



HOME STAY SCHEME AND HOST COMMUNITY

Community participation is one of the most essential tools in tourism for national development. The aims of CBT include communities' ownership and empowerment, natural and cultural resources conservation, enhance socio-economic development, increase tourists' consciousness and awareness about the community and ensure environmental, social, economic and cultural sustainability. Community capacity building is an essential aspect that must be addressed by the stakeholder to ensure that the community based tourism really benefits the communities themselves. Community participation is one of the domains of community capacity building. It is one of the mechanisms used to empower people to take part in community development. Community participation is an essential part of community development and one of the most important factors in the community based tourism development process, which allows involvement of people in the different stages of decision making. Public participation in tourism planning and management is essential because when development and planning do not fit with local aspirations and capacities, resistance and hostility can increase the cost of business or destroy the industry's potential altogether. Therefore, the study of motivational factors and the readiness of the local communities, as well as the program provided to enhance the communities' participation are very important in the development of the Homestay Program. Community capacity building is a prerequisite for community empowerment. Without proper planning in community capacity building, tourism development at the community level has negative outcomes. The lack of tourism knowledge is a critical barrier that not only directly limits locals' participation in the development of tourism, but also contributes to further obstacles - a lack of local tourism leadership and domination by external agents. The capacity building of local communities must be parallel with the community based tourism planning.

Contribution of Homestay Program towards Community Development

Tourism planning has followed a significant evolution in development and planning paradigms that moved from myopic and rigid concerns to more comprehensive, flexible, responsive, systematic and participatory approaches. This evolution seeks to sustain tourism as an agent for socio-cultural and economic development, especially towards rural community development. The effects of the homestay program towards the community can be portrayed through development of the economy, social capital, infrastructure, as well as the environment.

Socio-economic Changes

The development of agro-tourism via the homestay program obviously has generated the desired socio-economic benefits in terms of employment and business opportunities to the underdeveloped local

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areas and communities. The spillover effects from tourism are much appreciated as it provides opportunities for more people to participate not only as operators of small food stalls or groceries but also as the main providers of board and lodging due to low investment cost. In fact, most of the homestay projects in Kerala require participation of not just the host family but the whole community including the school children, the youth club, the women club, etc. The development enjoyed is not just in terms of additional income and infrastructure but also in terms of a change in the mindset and culture. The local community's perception of their heritage has also undergone change as they now realize the importance of preserving the heritage to be shared and developed with the global community. The homestay program can be regarded as an informal cultural institution.

Improving Quality of Life

The successful implementation of the homestay program needs peace and the harmony in the family, the local community and the village leadership. As such, the homestay program can be regard as an informal institution. Other than that, safety and healthy are importance components that need to be addressed. The cleanliness of the houses is among the criteria evaluated during the assessment of the Ministry of Tourism. As a result, the homestay program will improve the quality of live of the host family as well as the community as a whole.

Development of Community Organization and Rural Infrastructure

The main success factors for any homestay program are leadership and the unity and understanding of its community. The active involvement of the villagers fosters understanding and cooperation in implementing activities in the village. The homestay program has indirectly been instrumental in fostering leadership and unity within the community. The villagers enjoy better infrastructure provided by the government in terms of road upgrading, electricity and water supply, and provision of public amenities such as multi purpose hall, service centre, and computer centre.

Social Capital

Social capital refers to the social resources upon which people draw in pursuit of their livelihoods, such as relationships of trust, social norms, networks, and membership of groups. Engagement in tourism can affect social networks and community organization in a number of ways, positively and negatively. Through the homestay program, it would be able to enhance the sense of ownership and pride in the community. Enhancing the social capital resulting from the homestay program can be analyzed through three aspects:

- a)Increased social capital of households within their community.
- b)Organizational strength and management capacity of community organizations.
- c)Increase in communities' recognition from, and links with the external world

CONCLUSION

The Government of Kerala has taken several initiatives for economic enhancement of the region by tourism development. Home stay accommodation can be one of the major activities for tourism development. The local people will be benefited economically, socially and culturally by the accommodation. The development of homestay may be occurring by the joint efforts of the Tourism Ministry, Homestay Association and local investors. Again, Government support must be essential for suitable development of homestay accommodation.

The homestay program is not merely a rural tourism programme; it is also a strategy for rural development. However, the implementation demands high commitment and understanding among the villagers. In order to design a successful homestay program a concerted effort without relying on outsiders' assistance is needed, particularly in terms of promotion. This program is an added support to the rural socioeconomic development, social capital development, as well as contribution to conservation and enhancement of the rural areas by developing public understanding pertaining to life in rural areas and environmental issues generally. Considering the potential of the homestay program towards community development, the government should take appropriate steps. The homestay program has great potential to be an alternative tourism product to attract international and domestic tourists. However, for the program to be successful, full commitment from the operators as well as firm support from the Government agencies

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and other related private agencies such as the tourist operators is very much needed. Although initially the homestay operators knew very little about the tourism industry, their enthusiasm together with the assistance from the Government and the private sector, have contributed to the growth of this new tourism sector.

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