

Pre and Post COVID – 19 Tourism Choices of Indian Tourists – A Perspective of Travel Agents and Tour Operator

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Introduction:

Travel agencies are promoting domestic tourism and making special efforts for the same. Almost 90% of the travel agencies are catering more to the domestic tourists as compare to international tourists. Most of them are doing so because there is a high demand in the market for services to domestic tourists throughout the year. Offering domestic tourism services are more profitable for travel agencies than catering to the international touristsⁱ

The research paper titled, “The Effects of Nobel Corona Virus (Covid-19) in the Tourism Industry in India” by Patel P. K. et al, take a look at the degree to which an epidemic of 2020 such as Covid-19 can influence the global tourism industry and make estimates of the damage to world tourism. The data have been composed to understand the effect of the Corona Virus on the world Tourism industry. Due to pandemics, tourists withdraw their travels avoiding distrustful places. Such categories of pandemics disturb directly related industries such as tourism and retail service sector. A comparable case was the outbreak of SARS in 2002. Tourism is at the moment one of the most affected segments.ⁱⁱ

Mr. Amitabh Kant, CEO, NITI Aayog,ⁱⁱⁱ in one of his interview with Hindustan Times said, “COVID – 19 is a temporary crisis in tourism sector”. As per the tourism ministry and Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), there will be a loss of revenue to tourism that can range between Rs 72,000 crores and Rs 1.58 lakh crores in 2020-21. Post COVID there will be enormous opportunity in India and tourists will incline towards experiential and short trips. He predicted tourism sector will bounce back and flourish as the people are wishing to travel around and explore as soon as travelling is allowed more liberally. Mr. Kant further added that, domestic tourism will be the first driver of recovery post COVID and this will provide a chance to the states in India to build a great infrastructure with top class products for tourism sector. Government can help by funding the tourism sector in terms of soft loans, working capital and deferment on loan repayments. We may expect that economic activity would start again with new norms of social distancing. Considering the severe nature of COVID – 19 pandemic India took instant steps and imposed biggest lockdown in the world for almost 1.3 billion people. This was very important for early response to control as well as reduce the number of infected people. It was an attempt to minimise the spread of viral infection among others. Considering all these facts, lockdown was essential. As unlock phases are now allowing many activities to redstart including tourism and hospitality industry, next 8-9 months are crucial. Industry

should not focus for making high profits but utilise this opportunity to survive and revive. Thousands of people are associated with the tourism industry may overcome slowly by serving in the industry. It will take some time for the normalcy to be restored in our social life and economy.

Objectives:

1. To find out pre and post COVID – 19 domestic tourism choices of Indian tourists.
2. To understand the implications of changed domestic tourism scenario due to COVID - 19 in Indian context.

Hypotheses:

1. There are marked differences in tourism choices of Indian domestic tourists post COVID – 19.
2. The changed domestic tourism scenario in India post COVID – 19 is posing challenges for travel agents and tour operators.

Research Methodology:

The researchers have used both primary and secondary data sources to collect information. Structured questionnaire was designed by researchers to obtain the primary data related to the research topic. While preparing the questionnaire two sections are made one covering domestic travel preferences and concerns of Indian tourists' pre COVID – 19 and post COVID – 19. Convenience sampling technique is used to collect the sample size for the research.

Researchers have also collected the secondary data through books, research articles, industry literatures and online reports of various research and government organizations.

Literature Review:

The researchers have screened relevant literature pertaining to pre-COVID tourism choices of tourists and changes if any taken place post- COVID. The role of travel agents in Indian tourism scenario is undoubtedly important. As a major link between tourism suppliers and tourists their opinion about industry trends and perspective should be taken into consideration while gauging the pandemic.

The research paper by Dr. Suvarna Sathe and Mr. Mahesh Randhave titled “Role of Travel Agencies in Promotion of Domestic Tourism” published in *Mahratta – Multi Disciplinary Journal*.^{iv} The researchers have tried to find out the tourism choices of domestic tourists in India and how the travel agents can play a vital role in improving the tourism experience. There are ample of tourism destinations about which the tourists are unaware and hence the lack of knowledge is an obstacle in making a travel decision. Travelling is inherent in human nature and urge to travel always persists. There is variety of domestic tourism destinations available but the tourists are likely to choose the stereo type destinations. The role of travel agents is vital in domestic tourism in India and there is ample scope for promotion of domestic tourism in India.

In the research article by Nangtyngshain Hoojon addressed peculiar problems faced by tourism industry in Meghalaya.^v Being a border state with low connectivity apart from accessibility and availability more sensitive issues grip the tourism of Meghalaya. Demands of locals regarding (ILP) and issue of (CAA) Citizenship Amendment ACT are unique to this state. The benefits derived

from tourism are ripped off due these 2 political and social unrests. In adding to the misery the Pandemic has lowered the tourism activity as never before. The government initiative to open up tourist spots is not gaining any favourable response from the local, domestic or international tourists as all are more concerned with the health. The situation looks grim and no respite unless the vaccination starts.

Afsana Haque discusses various behavioural changes pertaining to taking up a travel and use of various modes of transports to do so in a research paper titled, "COVID 19 and Changes in Travel Behaviour: Is there any 'New Normal'?"^{vi} We are slowly getting used to new normal and it is still uncertain how far the new normal will persist but it has definitely brought change in travel behaviour. This should be the concern for the tourism suppliers. People are finding safety indoors and home being the comfort zone more spending are diverted towards making home stay more comfortable and bearable. But where there is local tourism catchment areas people are seen taking out time to local attractions and enjoy the neighbourhood more than ever before. Local trips are more preferred as they are economical and one need not risk taking up public transport.

The author is mainly discussing the situation in European countries and Indian context is not referred. The study is based on Turkish passengers travelling by air and their travel intentions in COVID-19.^{vii} According to the researchers the travel intentions would play a crucial role in getting the travel industry on track in Pandemic era. The findings show that the perceived risk has a negative effect on travel intention. It is more so with air travel as it is intangible and the perceived risk may alter the travel decision. The risk is more associated with international air travel as Pandemic is globally spread and in some countries it is more than the critical. As taking up air travel has a perceived risk factor the travellers may choose the destinations which do not require travelling long distances and the alternative choice can be domestic or local tourism where perceived risk is less.

The researcher has conducted and empirical studies on Egyptian travellers to find out about the willingness to travel post COVID-19.^{viii} The study reveals that the Egyptian travellers are keen on taking up a travel as soon as the travelling restrictions are lifted. It's a good sign for the tourism industry to rejuvenate at the earliest. The study reveals that they would take up a travel as early as 3 to 6 months from the permission to travel. As travelling is a basic human need travellers would step out. Cleanliness and hygiene would be the major concerns of travellers upon choosing to travel post COVID-19. Hence travel agents and tourism suppliers must recognize the needs of the travellers and cater accordingly.

The researcher^{ix} is discussing about changing trends that would set in amongst youth travellers due to COVID-19. As many youths choose the option of hostels for accommodation while travelling, it's going to pose a problem now to follow social distancing and safety norms as per COVID-19 guidelines. As the youths could not avail such dormitories or common sharing accommodations for a while chances are such establishments would close down. The pandemic could last for a year and such businesses could hardly sustain such long dry run. The youths would be forced to find more expensive accommodations leaving the budget travel aside.

The author discusses the nature of current Pandemic and how it is affecting the travelling. As deadly the virus may be the hope is persistent with good recovery rate and vaccine in progress. The recovered travellers according to the author would be the key element in recovering travel industry. Identifying such travellers and encouraging them to travel is a difficult task but some countries have already taken steps in that direction. Unlike pandemics in history we are dealing in a much better way with CORONA. Lock downs for longer period and sealing the borders are no longer proving viable solution for pandemic. We must use advance technology to recover from the disaster.^x

A study conducted in Poland in famous tourist destination Krakow^{xi} shows that Covid -19 has drastically affected the supply chain of tourism and to revive it, systematic marketing approach is required. From tourists point of view the tourism products which are fulfilling basic requirements and are safe would recover first travellers are not sure about when can they resume their travelling plans and some fear to lose the current employment and hence cannot think of leisure activities as of now. The tourism entrepreneurs must pick the market clues to stay in business.

There would be drastic change in tourism trend post COVID-19 in tourism industry.^{xii} It would be more inclined towards safe and sustainable tourism. But the travel agents in Spain according to the research are not taking cognizance of the changes and hence may not be able to cope up with the changing tourism scenario.

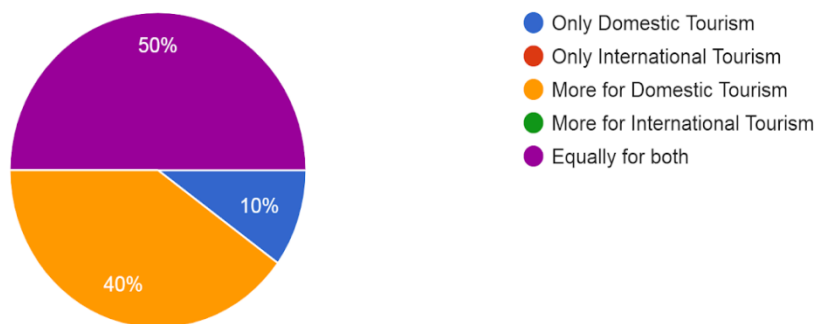
According to the author the lockdown is an opportunity^{xiii} in itself for tourism industry and more tourist activity would be seen in this field in coming days as people are tired of sitting at home and are seeking an opportunity to get a break. The author has also enumerated certain positive impacts of this global calamity. To list a few are emergence of new tourism destinations, more preference to tourism sites which are nearer, more awareness about health, hygiene and safety precautions in travelling, rise in domestic tourism. The author is of the opinion that the tourism stakeholders should not lose this golden opportunity to grab the tourists waiting to escape the lockdown fatigue. Also the prediction is made about receiving more domestic tourists than the international tourists in coming 2 years. The research underlines the importance of domestic tourism in the difficult times of Pandemic and how it can sustain the tourism industry for the time being.

Data Analysis and Interpretation:

Researchers have circulated the designed questionnaire to various travel agents and tour operators all over India to get the insight of the research undertaken.

Section I: Pre COVID – 19 Travel Preferences

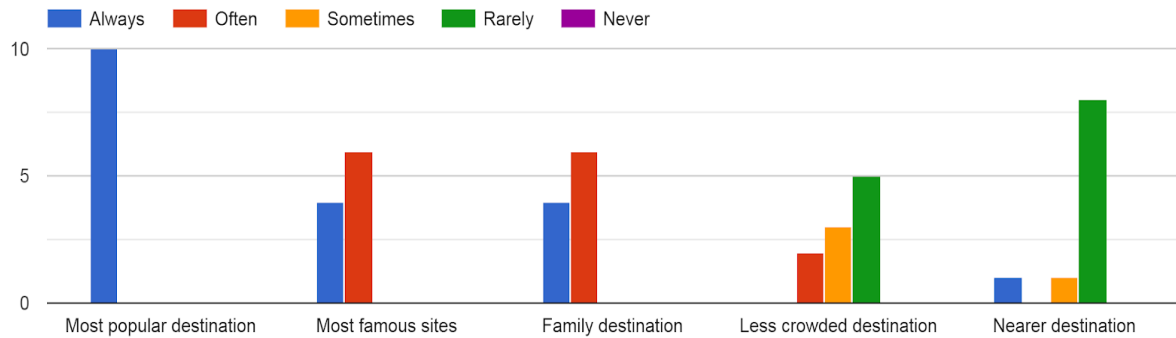
Pre COVID - 19 the booking you were getting were mainly for,
10 responses



To identify the pre COVID – 19 travel preferences of Indian tourists, researchers have asked question to travel agents and tour operators. Data collected reveals that pre COVID – 19. Indian tourists preferred to take both domestic as well as international tourism and it accounts for 50% of the responses. Only 10% travel agents and tour operators experienced that the Indian tourists prefer only domestic tourism pre COVID - 19, whereas, 40% of them experienced that there were more bookings for domestic tourism as compare to international tourism pre COVID – 19.

Domestic Tourism Preference

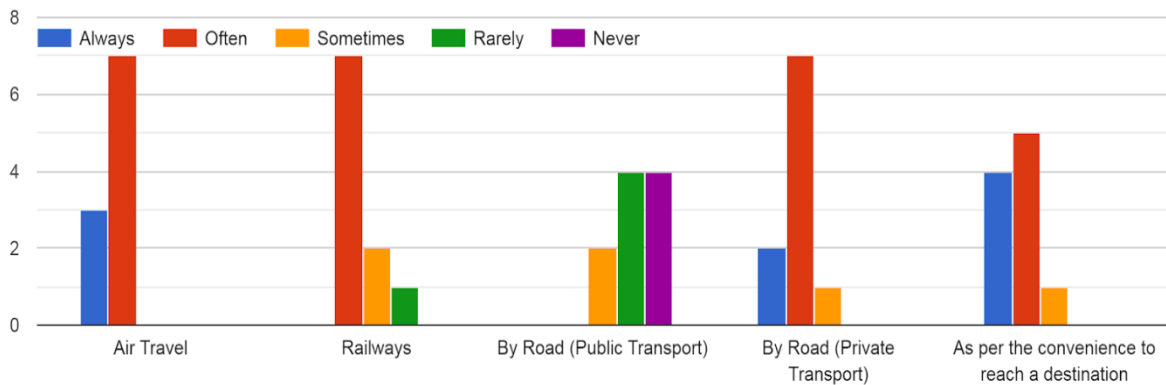
Domestic tourism bookings pre COVID - 19 the preference was given to



Pre COVID – 19 Indian tourists always preferred to travel to the most popular destination in India. Rarely did they use to look for the nearer destination and less crowded destination. Moderately the preference was towards family destinations and most famous sites in domestic tourism.

Preferred Mode of Transport

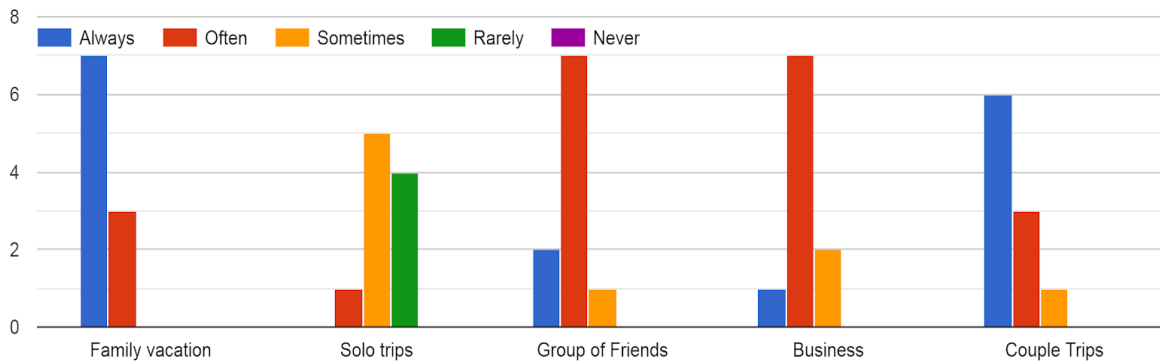
Pre COVID - 19 preferred mode of transport to reach a domestic tourist destination was,



Air travel, railways and by road (private vehicles) were at par as a preferred mode of transportation by Indian tourists’ pre COVID – 19. By road (Public transport) was the least preferred mode of transport. Occasionally Indian tourists have to opt for the transport which is available and convenient depending on the type of destination.

Preferred Form of Availing Vacation

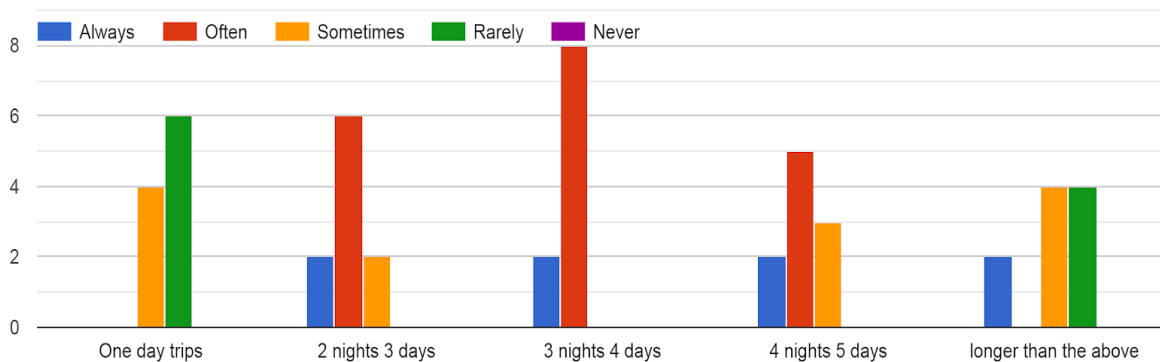
Pre - COVID - 19 the most preferred form of availing vacation was,



Family vacation was the first choice of Indian tourists for availing vacation pre COVID – 19. Second preference for vacation for Indian tourists was vacationing with friends and mixing leisure with business. (More commonly termed as “Bleisure” which is a practice of combining of both business and leisure).

Duration of Domestic Trips

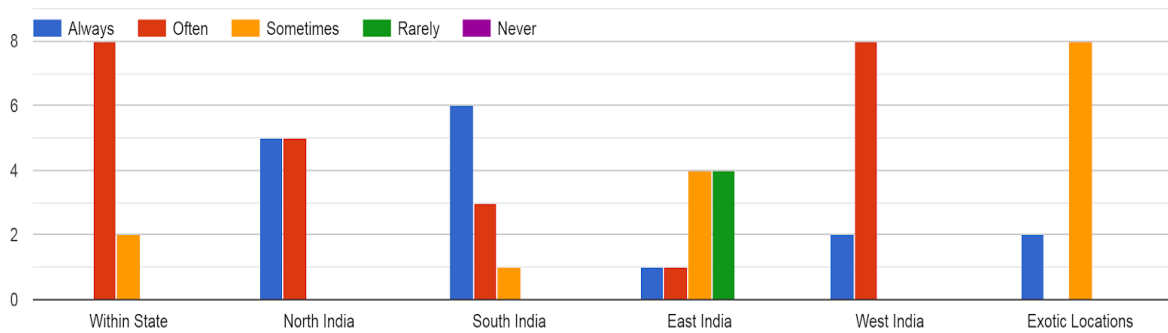
Pre COVID - 19 bookings for more frequent Duration of Domestic Trips was,



Pre COVID – 19, frequency of bookings for Domestic Trips was 3 nights 4 days followed by 2 nights 3 days and 4 nights 5 days. One day trips and longer duration trips was the rarely preferred option by Indian tourist for domestic trips.

Regional Domestic Preference

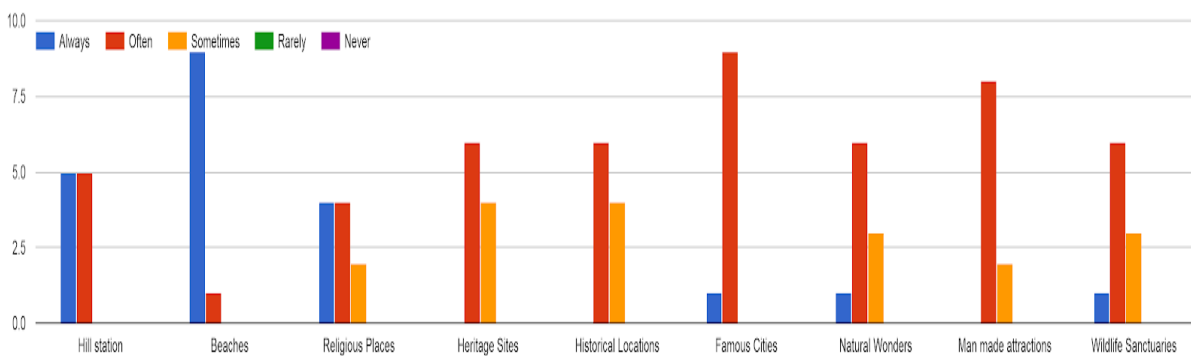
Pre COVID - 19 the regional domestic preference was,



Travelling within one’s own region and West India are the 2 often preferred choices by Indian tourists followed by South Indian region. Exotic locations are also tried sometimes. East India is rarely preferred region.

Preferred Location

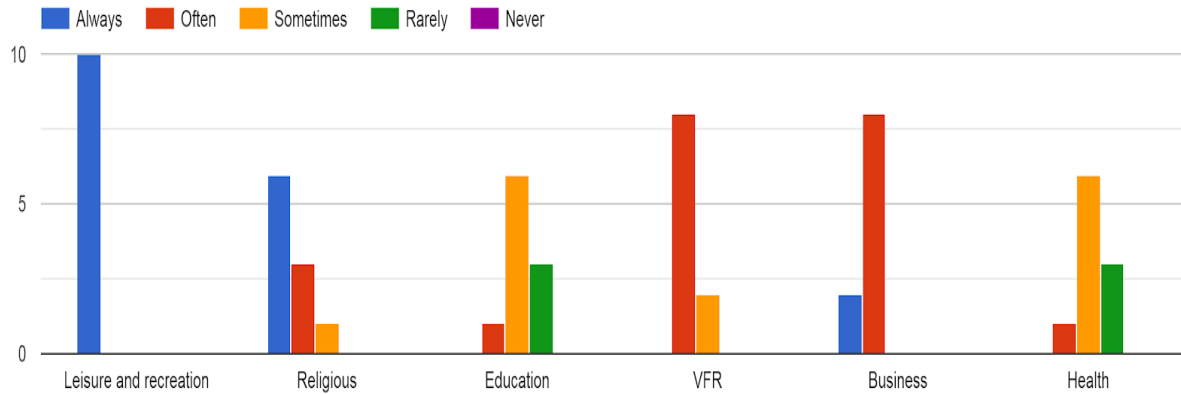
Pre COVID - 19 the preferred location for domestic tourists was,



Beaches ranked first as a preferred location for domestic tourists followed by famous cities and manmade attractions respectively. Religious places are the least preferred locations by Indian tourists’ pre COVID – 19.

Domestic Travel Motive

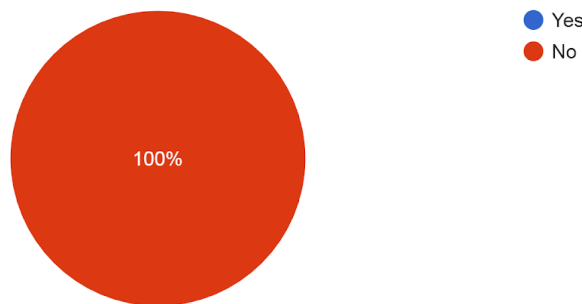
The most common domestic travel motives pre COVID - 19 were,



The most common motive for domestic travel pre COVID – 19 was leisure followed by business and VFR at equal position. Health is the least common domestic travel motive for Indian tourists.

Section II: Post COVID – 19 Domestic Tourism Plans – Current Scenario

Do you feel domestic tourism plans are on hold in the current scenario,
10 responses



Data received from travel agents and tour operators shows that, domestic tourism plans are not affected due to COVID -19. In all regions of India, Indian tourists have already taken domestic trips and will continue the trend in future as well.

Domestic Tourism – Time required to come back to Normal Level

By your estimate the domestic tourism business should come back to normal level within _____ months from the vaccination begins,

10 responses

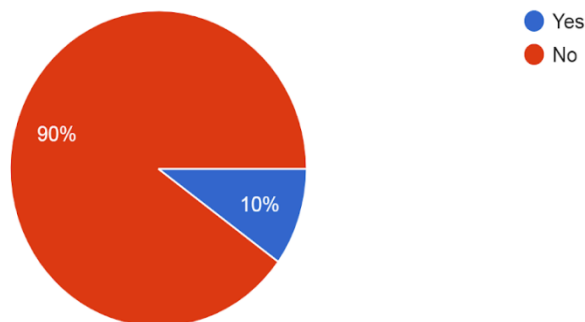


In India, vaccination drive for COVID – 19 has already begun from 16 January 2021. It will boost up the tourism sector in India. According to travel agents and tour operators within next 3 months the domestic tourism business will be back to normal level.

Budget for Domestic Tourism

The budget for domestic tourism is cut down by tourists due to COVID - 19 effect,

10 responses

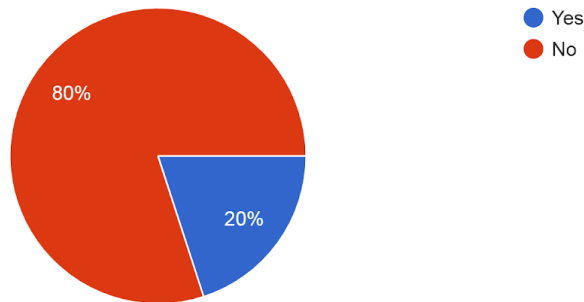


Almost 90% of travel agents and tour operators said there is no effect on the budget for domestic tourism due to COVID – 19. Merely 10% of travel agents and tour operators feel that there is cut down in the budget for domestic tourism by Indian tourists due to COVID – 19.

Current Domestic Tourism Demand

According to your opinion current domestic tourism demand is limited

10 responses

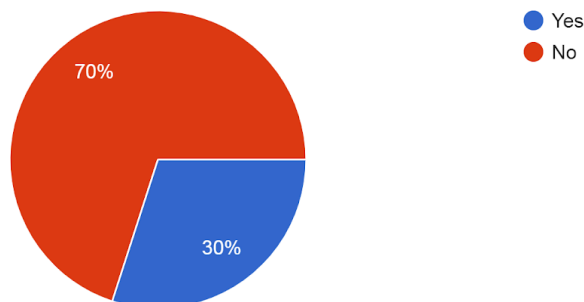


Merely 20% of the travel agents and tour operators feel that current domestic tourism demand is limited. Maximum travel agents and tour operators counting 80% disagreed with the statement and are happy with the current domestic tourism demand in India.

Sustenance in Tourism Business

Do you feel that the sustenance in Tourism business will pose a challenge in near future due to limited tourism demand

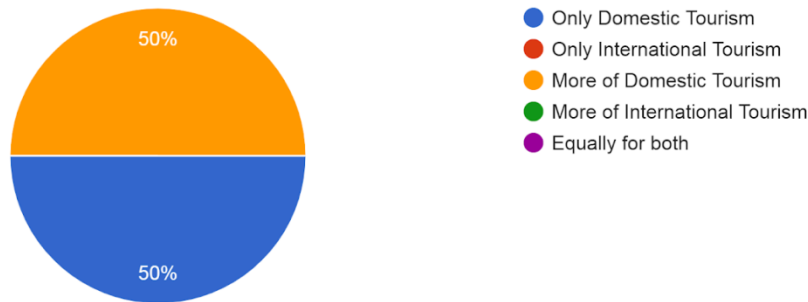
10 responses



Not more than 30% of the travel agents and tour operators experiencing some challenges at present and in near future for the sustenance in tourism business. Majority of travel agents and tour operators don't think there is any challenge in the sustenance in tourism business in near future.

Travel Preferences

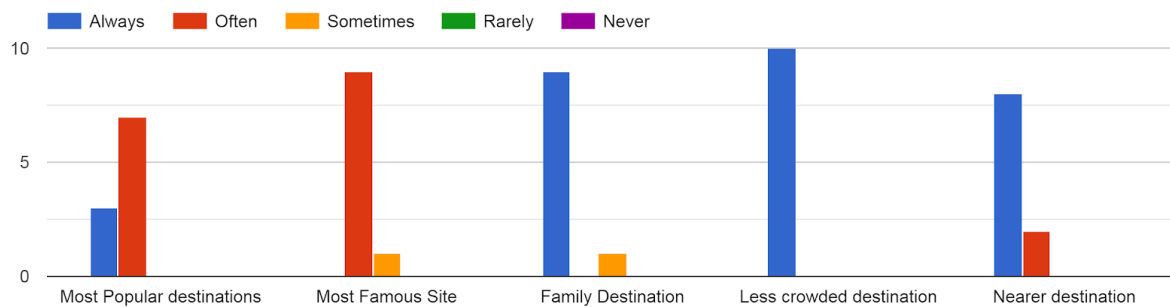
Post COVID - 19 the booking you are getting are mainly for,
10 responses



Post COVID - 19 all travel agents and tour operators are experiencing a 100% shift towards domestic tourism by Indian tourists. At present 50% of Indian tourists are more inclined towards domestic tourism as compare to international tourism and other 50% are opting only for domestic tourism.

Domestic Tourism Preference

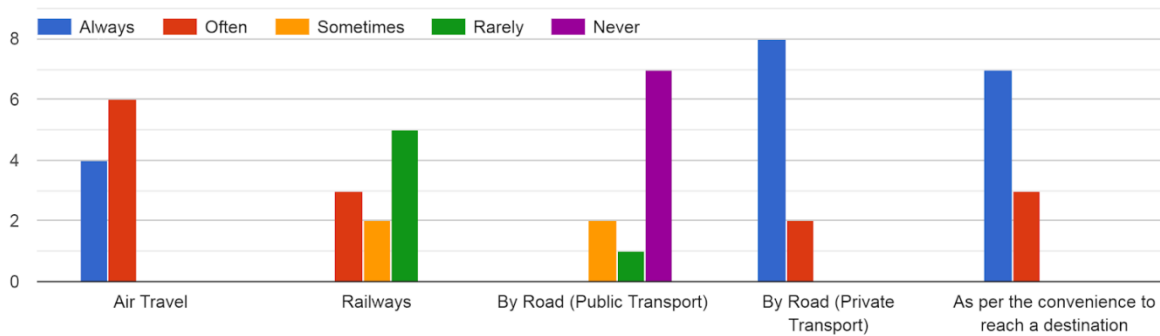
Domestic tourism bookings post COVID - 19 the preference is given to



Post COVID – 19 the domestic tourism bookings preference is changed and Indian tourists now preferring mostly to visit less crowded destination followed by family destination and nearer destinations respectively. Most famous site and most popular destinations are still often preferred by Indian tourist.

Preferred Mode of Transport

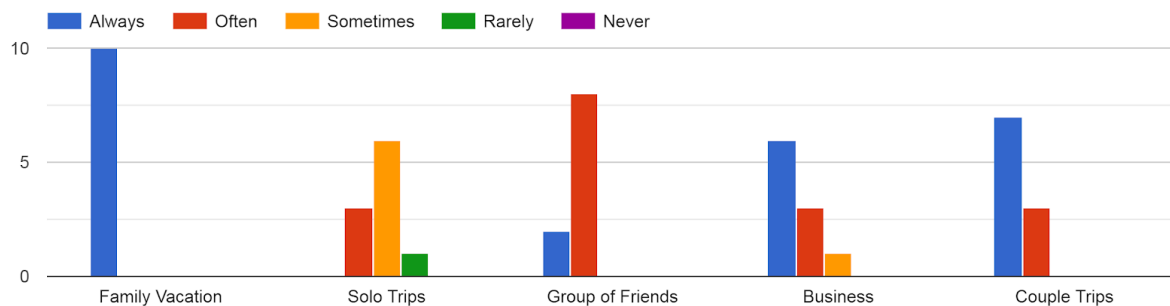
Post COVID - 19 preferred mode of transport to reach a domestic tourist destination is,



Post COVID – 19 there is shift in the preferred mode of transport to reach a domestic tourist destination and now all Indian tourists are opting for private transport by road followed by convenient means to reach a destination.

Preferred Form of Availing Vacation

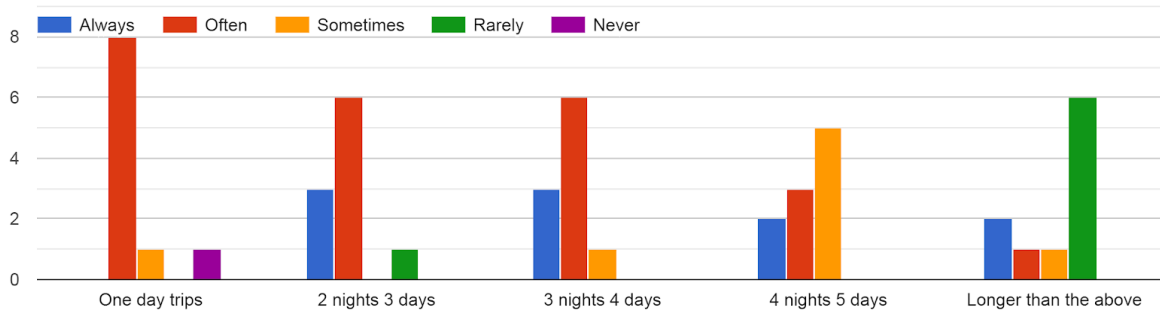
Post - COVID - 19 the most preferred form of availing vacation is,



Post COVID – 19 the Indian tourists are mostly opting for family trips to spend their vacation time followed by couple trips and business travel respectively. Travelling with friends is often selected for availing vacations and some of the tourists even opting for solo trips.

Duration of Domestic Trips

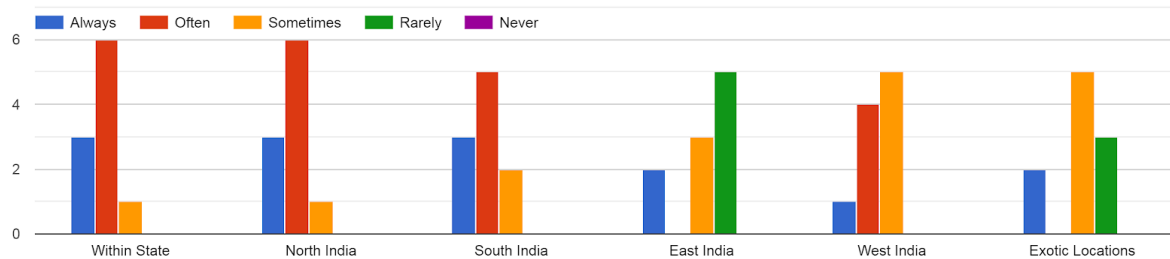
Post COVID – 19 bookings for more frequent Duration of Domestic Trips is,



One day trips is the most preferred duration for domestic trips post COVID – 19. 2 nights 3 days and 3 nights 4 days are equally ranked at second position, followed by 4 nights 5 days at third rank. Longer duration domestic trips are rarely opted by Indian tourists post COVID – 19.

Regional Domestic Preference

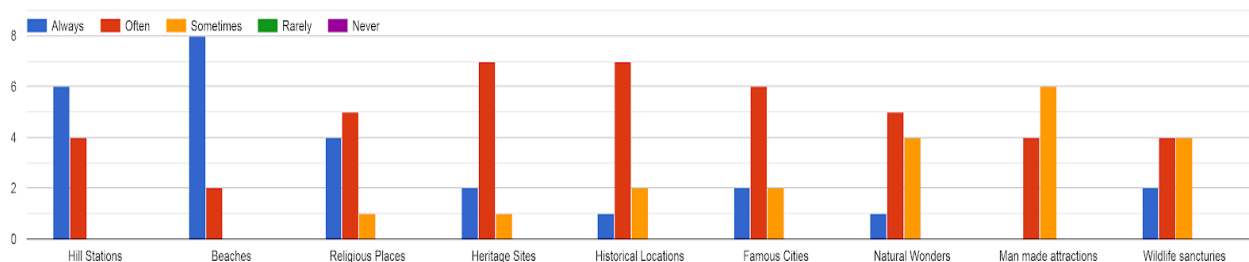
Post COVID - 19 the regional domestic preference is,



Post COVID – 19 one’s own state and North India are the 2 regions often preferred by Indian tourists followed by South India. West India and exotic locations are also sometimes preferred by Indian tourists whereas; East India region is rarely opted.

Preferred Location

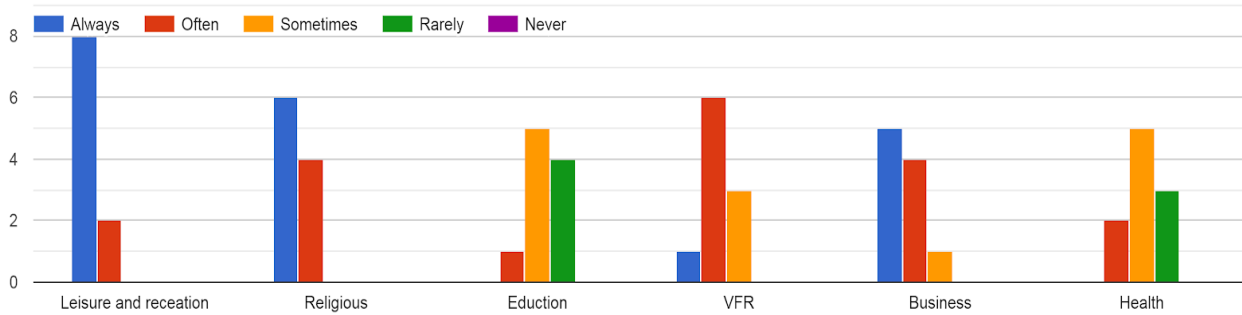
Post COVID - 19 the preferred location for domestic tourists is,



Beaches are most preferred location for domestic tourism followed by hill stations. Heritage sites and historical locations are equally preferred at third rank followed by famous cities in India. Man made attractions followed by natural wonders and wildlife sanctuaries are also sometimes preferred by Indian tourists.

Domestic Travel Motive

The most common domestic travel motives post COVID - 19 are,



The most common domestic travel motive post COVID – 19 is leisure and recreation followed by religious trips. Visiting friend and relatives followed by business trips are the next 2 motives for domestic travel in India. Occasionally education and health is considered as a travel motive for Indian tourists as per the data collected from travel agents and tour operator.

Conclusions:

The researchers have developed questionnaire with 2 sections pertaining to domestic tourism preferences or travel patterns pre and post COVID-19. The researchers have tried to collect the data from various travel agents and tour operators from various regions in India.

There are many shifts observed in preferences of Indian tourists pertaining to travel duration, mode of transport used, tourist place selection pattern and so on.

There were two assumptions of the research,

H₁: There are marked differences in tourism choices of Indian domestic tourists post COVID – 19.

As per this research study it is proven that there are marked differences observed in tourism choices of Indian domestic tourists post COVID – 19 based on the data collected from travel agents and tour operators.

H₂: The changed domestic tourism scenario in India post COVID – 19 is posing challenges for travel agents and tour operators.

Domestic tourism scenario has changed post COVID – 19 but, rather than a challenge it’s a great opportunity for all stake holders in domestic tourism business in India. The same can be understood much better with the help of following conclusions,

1. Pre COVID – 19 travel agents and tour operators used to get bookings almost equally for both the international and domestic travels.

Post COVID – 19, almost 50% of Indian tourists are inclined more towards domestic tourism as compare to international tourism and other 50% are opting only for domestic tourism. It clearly suggests that there is great opportunity for all stake holders dealing in domestic tourism in India post COVID – 19.

2. Indian tourists always preferred to travel to the most popular destination in India pre COVID – 19.
The preferences shifted towards visiting less crowded destination and nearer destinations post COVID – 19.
3. Pre COVID – 19, air travel, railways and by road (private vehicles) were equally preferred mode of transportation by Indian tourists.
Post COVID – 19, all Indian tourists are opting for private transport by road followed by convenient means to reach a destination.
Due to risk of COVID – 19 spread all Indian tourists are avoiding public transport or rarely opting for the same. Air travel is still often selected by tourists for domestic trips as strict protocols are followed in air travel. Railways are not yet fully opened for general public and is rarely or sometimes preferred by Indian tourists at present. Travel agents are playing a key role in providing information on the best mode of transport available to reach out any domestic destination based on their expertise and type of destination.
4. Family vacation was the first choice of Indian tourists for availing vacation pre COVID – 19 and it remain unchanged even post COVID – 19.
5. Pre COVID – 19, frequent duration of bookings for Domestic Trips was 3 nights 4 days.
Post COVID – 19, one day trips and short duration trips are most preferred for domestic trips post COVID – 19.
6. Indian tourists preferred to travel within one's own state pre COVID -19 and the same trend continued post COVID – 19. West India, North India and South India are the other preferred regions by Indian tourists for domestic tourism.
7. Beaches maintained as a first ranked preferred location for domestic tourism pre and post COVID – 19. Manmade attractions and wildlife sanctuaries were the often preferred pre COVID – 19 whereas, both of these locations have shifted in the category of sometimes preferred locations.
8. There is no major shift in the motive for domestic travel pre and post COVID – 19 and leisure is the most common motive.
The second preferred motive was shifted from business and VFR to religious trips post COVID - 19.
9. Domestic tourism plans are not on hold in current scenario due to COVID – 19. Indian tourists are enjoying domestic travel and there will be increasing demand for the same in future as well.
10. Travel agents and tour operators are confident and it is estimated that within next three months the domestic tourism business will come back to normal level as the vaccination has already began in India.
11. There is no impact observed by travel agents and tour operators on the budget or spending for domestic tourism by Indian tourists.
12. Majority of travel agents and tour operators feels there is no any kind of negative impacts on domestic tourism demand at present due to COVID – 19 and there will not be any sustenance issue in tourism business in near future.

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