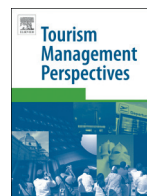




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Yoga tourism: Commodification and western embracement of eastern spiritual practice

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the growth of interrelated tourism phenomena yoga tourism and spiritual tourism - both sit under the wider umbrella of wellness tourism. Tourism has long been linked with spirituality and where this is the case (for example pilgrimage travel), it is considered to pave the way for personal transformation. Linking spiritual tourism to yoga tourism is a *fait accompli*, as is drawing similar associations with wellness and pilgrimage tourism on account of allied and abiding motivations predicated on uniting mind, body and spirit and these ruminations are central to this paper. More recently, there has been a growing chorus calling for the decolonisation of yoga on account of its commodification and industrialisation, and especially concerning what is argued to be a shift away from its spiritual and transformative tenets. The underlying meaning of the Sanskrit word *yuj* from which yoga is derived alludes to the pursuit of achieving a sense of union with something higher than oneself, and this is arguably one of the key drivers for its contemporary acceptance. Linkages between spirituality and yoga tourism through an examination of the motivations of Western yoga devotees in Maharashtra, India provide the canvas for this analysis. The motivations for yoga related travel and the broader implications for yoga and spiritual tourism are discussed. This article draws from two periods of exploratory fieldwork conducted in 2014 and 2015 in Maharashtra, India. A qualitative, case study scaffold underpinned by serious leisure as a conceptual framework (Stebbins, 2001) was constructed.

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1. Introduction

Yoga is also a relationship, not a mass movement. It is a one-to-one relationship between people, not commercialization. (T.V.K Desikachar in *Yoga Beyond Asana: Hindu Thought in Practice* (HAF, 2016)).

At the 2016 International Conference on *Frontiers in Yoga Research and its Applications*, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi opined: “yoga is a symbol of the universal aspiration for health and well-being” (Modi, 2016). Such sentiments are central to the underlying principle of yoga and speak to the universal appeal of it as lifestyle and practice. This also reiterates the increasing trend to connect yoga to health, wellness and fitness. In non-traditional (this acknowledges Indians who have westernised lifestyles) and Western contexts, yoga is a well-established phenomenon, not only as health and well-being practice but also as a conduit for the pursuit of spirituality, meditation

and mindfulness (Aggarwal, Guglani, & Goel, 2008; Laing & Weiler, 2008; Lehto, Brown, Chen, & Morrison, 2006). Yet the growing fondness for yoga globally and its inevitable commercialisation has raised a range of unintended contestations that are emblematic of Desikachar's sentiments above. This implies that the binary about maintaining deep yoga traditions versus enabling its evolution into newer forms and for wider ranging purposes not necessarily aligned to its pedigree is foremost (Figs. 1–4).

India is undeniably the birthplace of yoga and its renown as the global epicentre for holistic healing is underpinned by its capacity to offer unique health and wellness experiences (Aggarwal et al., 2008: 459). Referred to as the “yoga bhumi”, India is the gateway to yoga and arguably one of the main spiritual hubs of the world on the basis that many religions have their genesis in the nation (Aggarwal et al., 2008). In signifying the exalted place of yoga in the country's national psyche, the Indian government appointed Shri Shripad Yesso Naik as its inaugural “Minister for Yoga” in 2014 as part of the Ministry of AYUSH - Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy. Thus, for India, yoga is arguably more than just a populist undertaking, but an intrinsic part of India's national identity, psyche and history.

This article draws from two periods of exploratory fieldwork conducted in 2014 and 2015 in Maharashtra, India. A qualitative, case

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Fig. 1. Yoga practitioners at GEV (Source: Authors).

study scaffold underpinned by serious leisure as a conceptual framework (Stebbins, 2001) was constructed. The study and data collection site was the Govardhan Eco Village (GEV) located 108 km north of Mumbai and in close proximity to the Western Ghats that straddles India's west coast. Respondents to this study comprised of foreign nationals in attendance at GEV's yoga retreat and teacher training program. Key emphasis in this paper is examination of the underlying

motivations of foreign yoga devotees in India following Sharpley and Sundaram's (2005) exposé of Western spiritual tourists in Pondicherry, South-eastern India.

Accordingly, the key research question posed asks: What factors motivate attendance at yoga retreats? Most importantly, the extent to which yoga-related travel is imbued with spirituality is a key underpinning linkage to the research question, as well as considerations of ties to

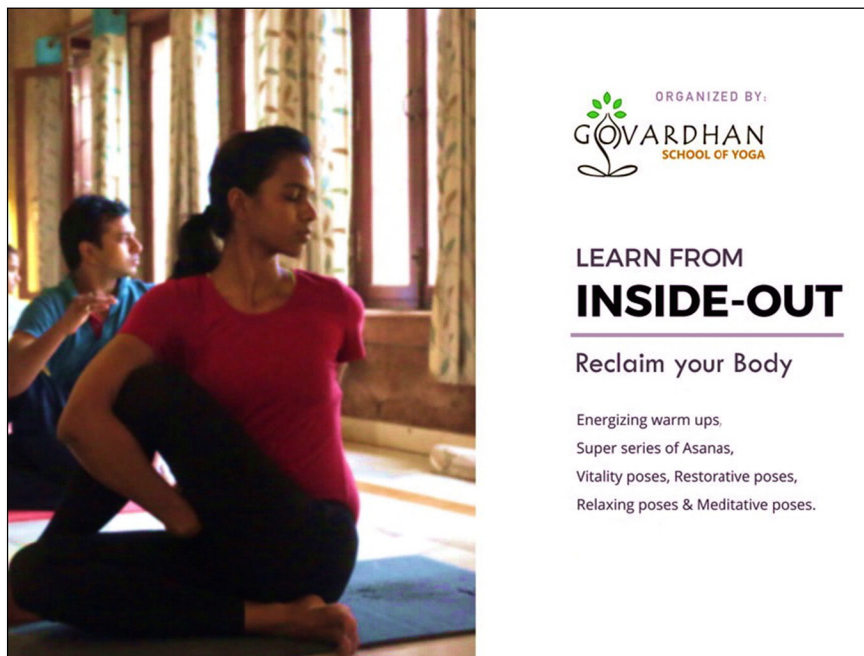


Fig. 2. GEV yoga workshop flyer. (Source: Authors).

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