

# Evaluating Rural Tourism Experience: An Exploratory Study

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**Abstract:** *In the last few decades rural tourism has attained significant importance both in academics and industry. There is a greater demand from tourists visiting rural areas. Although tourism experience has been studied in the literature, however specifically rural tourism has received little attention from the academia. The rural tourism has a potential to shape rural economies together with giving rich and diversified experience to the tourists visiting these areas. The paper attempts to explore the concept of tourism experience in the context of rural tourism at Pahalgam, India. The study is based on interviews conducted at the study site and an in-depth analysis of the interviews regarding tourist experience at the rural site was carried out. It was concluded that rural tourism experience is a complex phenomenon and requires an integrated approach ensuring participation from all the stakeholders and the experience must be co-created in line with the destination resources and the visitor expectations in order to deliver satisfaction and value.*

**Keywords:** Tourism Experience, Rural Tourism Experience, Rural Tourism, Rural Destination, Pahalgam

## 1. Introduction

Rural tourism has become an emerging field of study in the academic field. It has also attracted a considerable interest from tourism planners because of its potential for enhancing rural development and its importance as a sustainable and alternative form of tourism. Current business trends in tourist industry also indicate an increased demand in rural areas that gives open space for outdoor leisure, engagement with nature, and interaction with the local population and culture, so providing visitors with an entirely unique and authentic experience (Ribeiro & Marques, 2002; Cavaco, 2003; Kastenholz, 2010;; Walmsley, 2003; Figueiredo, 2004).

To appeal to the diversified rural tourism market, rural regions endowed with endogenous natural and cultural resources may be structured to offer a variety of experiences (Kastenholz, 2010; Mossberg, 2007). It is, nevertheless, a challenge for practitioners and service providers to co-create such experiences that please visitors, elicit strong emotions, and leave an impression on participants, with the potential to even transform them. Co-creating these experiences results in long-term market success, which benefits all parties involved (Kastenholz & Figueiredo 2010; Pan & Ryan, 2009; Richards & Wilson, 2005, Mossberg, 2007;), ensuring adequate and sustainable economic rewards for local supply agents.

Thus, it is very critical to understand how tourism experiences can be planned, created, supplied, and most importantly how well managed in rural destinations for rural communities so as to successfully design and manage rural tourism goods, which will therefore promote sustainable development of rural tourism. The complexity of understanding the rural tourism experiences, it is integral and most appropriate to analyse and understand the

phenomenon from the perspective of tourists who are the ultimate demand side stakeholders of rural tourism.

This article begins with a brief conceptualization, followed by a brief description of the case study area and, lastly, the findings of an empirical study that aid in understanding the significance and components of the tourist experience in rural areas. The paper ends with putting some valuable suggestions for designing and creating experiences for successful development tourism in rural areas.

## 2. Conceptual Understanding of Rural Tourism Experience

Tourist experience is viewed as the key aspect of the entire tourist phenomenon in academic literature, necessitating in-depth investigation in order to build more appealing, unique and successful tourism product (Li, 2000; Mossberg, 2007; Ellis & Rossman, 2008; Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003). Tourism experience is regarded to be a highly complex topic. There are a few widely recognised dimensions, including the "emotional" (Otto & Ritchie, 1996; Vitterso, Vistad, Vorkinn & Vaagland, 2000), the "social" (Morgan & Xu, 2009; Tucker, 2003), the cognitive dimension, which relates to destination characteristics such as landscape, attractions and infrastructure (Gopalan & Narayan, 2010), and "escapism," which is defined as seeking novel experiences (Dann & Jacobsen, 2003). Therefore tourism experiences are not restricted to tangible aspects, but also include intangible elements experienced by the tourists. In this context the rural tourist experience must be understood as the overall experience of diversified elements including attractions, services, local community and physical environment present at the destination. While not all of these features are necessary intended for tourist use, they all

contribute to the experience and may be sought for and cherished by travellers.

According to Larsen (2007), tourist experience is a "very complex psychological phenomenon that is centred on and originated with the individual visitor." Elands & Lengkeek (2000) while citing Cohen (1979) have suggested that tourists assume that there is some novel experience available "out there" that is distinct from routine life experiences, an experience that provides meaning and significance to the trip and thus assists the tourist in breaking free from routine life and becoming refreshed. This phenomenological perspective views the tourist experience as something more intangible and pleasurable than simply travelling to the place. This vision of the tourist experience enables tourists to relate with an idealized, imagined world (Cohen, 1979; Elands & Lengkeek, 2000). Elands & Lengkeek (2000), suggest that the tourist experience can take on a variety of forms, including "amusement" (something enjoyable and temporary; entertainment in a familiar context), "change" (relaxation and escape from daily life routines, stress or monotony), "interest" (quest for knowledge, experiencing novelty, and variety), "rapture" (enchantment/ecstasy, discovering one's self, taking challenges, experiencing the unexpected). In this direction, the tourist experience at a rural place is always contingent on the traveler's major experiencing modality.

Tourists usually see rural areas in contrast to urban destinations (Lane, 1994). A rural destination must provide the visitor with a sense of freedom and possibilities for relaxation, as well as opportunities to engage in outdoor activities that connect the tourist to nature and correlate to the motives revealed in rural tourism research (Molera & Albaladejo, 2007; Park & Yoon, 2009); Frochot, 2005; Kastenholz, 2004; Kastenholz et al., 1999;; Park & Yoon, 2009). The ultimate goal of the experience must be to satisfy the various visitor sector seeking unique experiences, which presents a significant barrier for rural tourism development planning and management. To create high-quality experiences, it is critical to understand the motivations of different tourists, their expectations, perceptions, and meanings involved with this subjective experience (Uriely, 2005). Numerous stakeholders, including tourists, the local community, and tourism service providers, are involved in developing and co-creating the rural tourism experience. Tourists, on the other hand, are regarded central to shaping their experience, beginning the process well in advance of travel by obtaining information and visualising the range of services available on-site at the destination (Gnoth, 2003). Rural tourism cannot exist without the active participation of rural tourists.

As previously discussed, the experience is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by numerous characteristics. These include the physical and human consideration, social, cultural, and natural contexts, all of which require components that serve as central attractions and thus influence the tourist's satisfaction with the experience (Kastenholz, 2010). Rural tourism experience being multifaceted in character calls for an "integrated rural tourism development" aimed towards coordination of local resources and stakeholders based on sustainable development principles (Saxena, Clark, Oliver, & Ibery,

2007), For the successful and sustainable rural tourism development and management, a multi-stakeholder approach is required to understand the complex rural tourism. However, due to the researchers personal consideration the study is limited to the important stakeholder of the rural tourism i. e. tourist.

### 3. Study Area

The study was conducted in Pahalgam. Known as the "Valley of Shepherds", Pahalgam is an important tourist destination located in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. It is a prominent tourist destination and tourism has played important role in the development of this area. Because of its rich natural and cultural diversity and its pleasant climate. Pahalgam has remained an internationally famous tourist destination, with thousands of visitors each year. The famed hill station is located 45 kilometres from Anantnag District Headquarters on the banks of the Lidder River at an elevation of 7200 feet above sea level. Pahalgam hosts a number of treks and is also associated with the annual Amarnath Yatra. Phalgamvillage has been approved by the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India as Rural Tourism Site. Due to its pine trees, snow-capped mountains, healthy temperature, and extensive meadows and pastures, the Pahalgam Valley has a gorgeous appearance.

### 4. Methodology

The study is qualitative in character using the phenomenological approach proposed by Cohen (1979) and Elands & Lengkeek (2001). The study's exploratory nature necessitates the use of qualitative methods; the study's purpose is to gain a deeper understanding of the rural tourism experience as experienced by the tourists. The study examines different facets of rural tourism as experienced by travellers. To identify and characterise tourism resources, document analysis and on-site observation were used. The semi-structured interview method was deemed as appropriate for analysing the tourist experience as lived and conditioned by visitors, specifically their behavioural alternatives, thoughts, emotions, and attitudes (Quivy & Van Campenhout, 1998). The questions were developed following a review of the literature and revised during group conversations between academics and teachers. The study population is composed of visitors who visit the study area, and a total of 17 in-person interviews were done to acquire a better knowledge of the experience by tourists in Pahalgam.

The interviews were recorded in order to allow for extra, more in-depth investigation of all the responses with minimum loss of information. Following that, content analysis was done by transcribing the interviews. This entailed categorization and systematisation of discourses with the purpose to ascertain the primary concerns addressed by each respondent's discourse as well as to detect patterns. E. Kastenholz, M. J. Carneiro, C. P. Marques, and J. Lima (2012). Additionally, a comparative analysis was conducted to analyse the correlations between the observations and the literature review, resulting in the identification of consistent and contradictory findings.

## 5. Discussion of Results

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with total number of 12 tourists who were on visit to the study area and had experienced their vacation in rural settings. The respondents were in the age group of 25 to 60 years. There were only 3 female respondents and all the respondents were working. All the respondents had at least one night stay at the destination.

The tourists were first asked about their motivation to visit the rural tourism site. Most of the tourists considered the natural environment and local culture as main motivations. Besides, these tourists also refer climate, seeking of newness and the desire for varied experiences as the specific motivations to visit the destination. As a summary we can say that regarding most motivational factors culture, nature, calmness, novelty, hospitality remain dominant. Asked about cheap accommodation as motivation factor, respondents do not consider it as a motivational factor. We can draw the conclusion that the majority of tourists in rural tourism travel to experience the complexity of rural lifestyle, culture, nature and authentic programs, etc. When asked to define rural, respondents mentioned "closeness to nature, "break from routine, " and "calm setting, " all of which is associated to experience nature that is possible in the rural context. These findings complement those of other research on the rural tourist market conducted by Kastenholz, E. (2012), Kastenholz et al. (1999, 2002), Molera & Albaladecho (2007), Frochot (2005), and Park & Yoon (2009), all of which highlight nature as a primary reason for rural visitors. Asked about cheap accommodation as motivation factor, respondents do not consider it as a motivational factor. However, tourists did prefer traditional accommodation with cleanliness standards.

The study also revealed that tourists also expect the local cultural heritage and architecture enhancing their experiences. This confirms the importance of tourist gaze as propounded by Urry (2002). A positive response was received towards conservation and preservation of various natural and cultural resources as tourists consider them important for leaving a positive image in their minds.

Local community involvement was also considered to be an important factor of shaping the tourist experience. Tourists enjoyed socialising and interacting with the local population. These results confirm with the finding of Kastenholz, E. et al., (2012), Kastenholz & Sparrer (2009) that the indigenous people play a significant role in the development of an experience which is more rich and complete. They however show disappointment with the absence of cultural activities at the destination. Also the respondents were willing and interested in purchasing local crafts and goods at the destination, but the price of the same seemed to be bothering them. Asked about the local food, the respondents seem to be overwhelmed by enjoying the local cuisines at the destination. This all corroborates the findings of Kastenholz, E. et al. (2012) and Kastenholz (2010) that rural spaces attract people due to the mix of numerous resources that allows for a rich and varied experience.

Asking about activities undertaken on-site respondents mainly took part in informal and spontaneous activities which were not planned in advance, with most mentioned activities being horse riding, trekking, fishing, rafting, animal watching, experiencing cultural and farm activities. Thus, the findings of this study corroborate those of previous research on the rural tourism market (Frochot, 2005; Kastenholz, 2002, Kastenholz, E. et al (2012). The findings of the study suggested that experiencing novelty and escape from the routine urban are dominating motivations in shaping the tourist experience at rural destinations. Tourists seek not only a peaceful ambience in a natural, rural setting, but also true cultural relationships.

## 6. Conclusions and Implications

To remain competitive and sustainable, a destination's tourism experience may be a critical issue to consider (Mossberg, 2007; Stamboulis & Skayannis 2003). To grow and succeed, the rural tourism sector must take measures that influence the tourist experience. Tourism experience must be understood as a complex phenomenon, co-created and shared by all the stakeholders but tourist being at the central focus. The experiences must be shaped taking the destination-specific resources into consideration they provide the significant ingredients of this experience.

It's never easy to produce and deliver true rural experiences to travellers in quest of authentic and meaningful encounters (Chambers, 2009). At the same time community being an important stakeholder in rural tourism are having expectations from rural tourism to bring development and economic changes Ellis & Rossman, (2008); Mossberg, (2007); Sharpley, 2005); (Lane, 2009). The complexity of this phenomenon requires an integrated approach that create a balance between encouraging the community participation and delivering value to the tourists (Denicolai et al., 2010; Gnoth, 2003; Gibson et al., 2005; Lane, 2009).

For a location like Pahagam that has not yet completely developed as a rural destination, it is advised that an integrated management together with product development approach be specified (Gnoth, 2003; Gibson et al., 2005; Denicolai et al., 2010; Lane, 2009). A collaborative effort is requires to include and encourage the participation of all the supply side stakeholders such as local community, service providers, development authority and the like thereby resulting in meeting the demand side expectations (tourist).

The findings of this study indicate that tourists desire to attend local cultural events at their destination, which may provide the destination with comparative benefits (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999). Organizing cultural events, such as music, folklore, and cuisine festivals, should contribute to the creation of a genuine and unique experience of rural tourism, while also promoting sustainable destination development (Lane, 2009; Saxena et al., 2007; Sims, 2009; Kastenholz & Figueiredo, 2010). In conclusion the complexity of overall rural tourism experience must be understood thoroughly in order to meet the needsof recent market trends of rural tourism. The destination resources (natural and cultural), as well community participation, economic and social dimensions of tourism, must allbe simultaneously

considered to explore every opportunity of creating a quality and distinctive rural tourism experience.

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