

# **Sustainable Wealth Maximisation Through Tourism Branding: A Dual-Sector Comparison of Kerala Backwater Tourism and Heritage Tourism**

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**Abstract:**

Tourism plays an integral role in Kerala's socio-economic development, with two of its major subsectors—backwater tourism and heritage tourism—contributing to economic growth and community empowerment. However, their branding strategies, market positioning, and contributions to sustainable wealth maximisation remain insufficiently explored. This study aims to fill that gap by comparing the tourism branding strategies and wealth-generation mechanisms of Kerala's backwater and heritage tourism subsectors. Using a mixed-methods research approach, including field surveys (N=210), expert interviews (n=12), and secondary data analysis, this study evaluates the effectiveness of marketing strategies, tourist perceptions, spending behavior, and overall economic outcomes in these two subsectors. Results reveal that while backwater tourism benefits from superior global brand recognition and higher tourist spending, heritage tourism offers greater long-term benefits through community engagement, cultural preservation, and emotional brand loyalty. The study proposes a sustainable wealth maximisation model that incorporates the unique strengths of both sectors. This paper discusses the implications for tourism policy, brand strategy, and sustainable development within Kerala's tourism industry.

**Keywords:** Tourism branding, Kerala backwaters, heritage tourism, wealth maximisation, marketing strategies, destination image, sustainable tourism.

## 1. Introduction

Kerala is internationally recognised as one of India's most distinctive tourism destinations, celebrated for its scenic backwaters, Ayurveda traditions, cultural landscapes, and historic monuments. Tourism contributes substantially to the state's GDP, employment generation, and rural development. Yet the competitive landscape of global tourism requires continuous strengthening of branding and marketing strategies to ensure long-term sustainability and wealth maximisation.

Backwater tourism—centred around Alappuzha, Kumarakom, Kollam, and Kochi—emphasises serene water systems, houseboat experiences, and nature-driven encounters. Heritage tourism—linked to Fort Kochi, Thalassery, Muziris, Bekal, and other historical regions—focuses on cultural identity, architecture, and intangible traditions. This research compares both sectors using a branding and economic perspective. It evaluates:

1. How branding strategies differ between backwater and heritage tourism.
2. How these strategies influence tourist behaviour, satisfaction, and spending.
3. The degree to which each sector contributes to wealth maximisation for the local economy.
4. Policy and marketing implications for sustainable tourism development.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Tourism Branding and Destination Identity

Tourism branding is the process of creating a distinct and appealing identity for a destination, differentiating it from its competitors. Effective branding enhances a destination's visibility, attracts tourists, and increases overall economic impact. For Kerala, the tourism brand "God's Own Country" has become synonymous with natural beauty, wellness, and cultural heritage. However, more specific subsector branding efforts—such as Kerala's backwaters and heritage sites—have proven essential in drawing different types of tourists. Backwater tourism is primarily marketed through its serene landscapes, houseboat cruises, and eco-tourism experiences, while heritage tourism focuses on the region's rich cultural history, monuments, and festivals.

Tourism branding involves creating a distinct, memorable identity that differentiates a destination from competitors. Scholars emphasise that strong destination branding improves visitor perception, increases tourist inflow, and enhances economic gains.

## 2.2 Backwater Tourism: Brand Attributes

Backwater tourism branding highlights tranquillity, natural beauty, houseboats, and ecosystem-based experiences. Research indicates that experiential environments with high sensory appeal often lead to higher tourist satisfaction and willingness to pay.

## 2.3 Heritage Tourism: Brand Attributes

Heritage tourism branding appeals to cultural authenticity, architectural heritage, cuisine, art forms, and local narratives. Authenticity-driven experiences often contribute to stronger emotional attachment and destination loyalty.

## 2.4 Wealth Maximisation in Tourism

Wealth maximisation refers not only to revenue generation but also to distribution of economic benefits among communities, long-term sustainability, repeat visitation, and reduced seasonality. Branding plays a central role in shaping tourist spending and economic resilience.

Scholars like Ritchie and Crouch (2003) have argued that destination branding requires a balance between both tangible and intangible assets. Kerala's backwater tourism leverages its natural resources to create an experiential brand that emphasizes sensory appeal and environmental harmony. On the other hand, heritage tourism taps into the narrative value of Kerala's cultural identity, which is built on centuries of trade, art, and architectural heritage.

Previous studies, such as those by Sharma (2019) and Nair & George (2021), highlight that branding plays a central role in shaping tourist experiences and influencing perceptions of a destination's authenticity. Tourists often view backwater experiences as highly commercialised, but the experiential quality (e.g., houseboat cruises, wildlife sanctuaries) drives higher willingness to pay. In contrast, heritage tourism's focus on local traditions, historical monuments, and authentic culinary experiences fosters emotional connections and loyalty, leading to a stronger sense of destination attachment.

## 3. Research Objectives

1. To compare branding strategies employed in Kerala backwater tourism and heritage tourism.
2. To assess tourist perceptions of brand identity in both sectors.
3. To analyse the relationship between branding effectiveness and tourist spending.
4. To evaluate each sector's contribution to sustainable wealth maximisation.
5. To propose a sustainable tourism branding model for Kerala.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Research Design

A mixed-method research design was chosen to provide both quantitative and qualitative insights into the comparative analysis of backwater and heritage tourism. This approach allows for a comprehensive evaluation of the branding strategies and their effectiveness from both tourist and stakeholder perspectives. The quantitative component consisted of a field survey conducted among 210 tourists (110 from backwater destinations and 100 from heritage destinations). Respondents were selected using stratified random sampling to ensure representation across different demographic groups (age, nationality, and type of tourist). Additionally, 12 in-depth interviews were conducted with tourism experts, including local tourism marketers, government officials, and community leaders. These semi-structured interviews aimed to gain insights into branding strategies, the challenges of marketing, and local perceptions of tourism's economic impact. The study also utilized secondary data from Kerala Tourism Development Corporation (KTDC) reports, which provided historical trends and data on tourism revenue, tourist arrivals, and economic impacts across the backwater and heritage tourism subsectors.

### 4.3 Data Analysis

Tools used:

- Descriptive statistics
- Comparative mean analysis
- Content analysis for qualitative inputs
- Wealth maximisation index (constructed using tourist spending, local employment impact, and perceived value)

## 5. Results and Data Analysis

### 5.1 Tourist Demographics

Table 1: Tourist Profile (Field Data, 2024)

Variable	Backwater (n=110)	Tourism	Heritage Tourism (n=100)
Average Age	37.8 years		39.2 years
Domestic Tourists	58%		63%
International Tourists	42%		37%
First-time Visitors	61%		53%
Repeat Visitors	39%		47%

Heritage tourism shows higher repeat visitation, indicating stronger loyalty.

## 5.2 Branding Perception Scores

Perception measured on a 1–5 Likert scale.

Table 2: Branding Perception

Branding Attribute	Backwater Mean Score	Heritage Mean Score
Destination Image	4.52	4.21
Authenticity	4.18	4.63
Marketing Visibility	4.44	3.79
Visitor Experience Quality	4.39	4.07
Emotional Connection	4.09	4.55

Backwaters outperform in marketing visibility, while heritage sites lead in authenticity and emotional engagement.

## 5.3 Tourist Spending Pattern

Table 3: Average Tourist Spending per Trip (INR)

Spending Category	Backwater Tourism	Heritage Tourism
Accommodation	7,850	5,920
Food & Cuisine	3,100	3,450
Activities/Experiences	6,950	4,200
Shopping	2,300	2,780
Total Spending	<b>20,200</b>	<b>16,350</b>

Backwater tourism shows significantly higher spending due to premium experiences such as houseboats.

## 5.4 Wealth Maximisation Index (WMI)

Calculated using economic, environmental, and social value scores.

Table 4: Wealth Maximisation Comparison

Indicator	Backwater Tourism	Heritage Tourism
Direct Revenue Contribution	High	Moderate
Local Employment	High	High
Community Income	Medium	High
Sustainability of Resources	Moderate	High
Overall WMI Score	<b>4.12/5</b>	<b>4.05/5</b>

Both sectors contribute significantly, but through different channels:

- Backwaters: commercial revenue and tourism inflows
- Heritage: community livelihoods and sustainable cultural preservation

## 6. Discussion

The comparative analysis reveals that backwater tourism enjoys superior global branding, structured marketing campaigns, and higher per-tourist spending. The premium nature of houseboats and experiential water-based activities increase commercial returns, enabling stronger direct revenue-based wealth maximisation.

Conversely, heritage tourism, though less commercially intense, contributes positively to local economies through community participation, craft industries, and preservation-led employment. Heritage tourism also demonstrates stronger emotional value and loyalty, which are vital for long-term sustainability.

Branding effectiveness plays a pivotal role in shaping these outcomes. Backwater branding is experience-centric and visually iconic, making it easier to market internationally. Heritage tourism relies more on narrative depth, historical significance, and authenticity, requiring storytelling-based marketing techniques.

The study highlights the need for integrated branding strategies combining visual appeal with cultural authenticity. Such an approach can optimise wealth generation while ensuring sustainability.

## 7. Conclusion

The dual-sector comparison demonstrates that both backwater and heritage tourism significantly contribute to Kerala's socio-economic wealth, albeit through different mechanisms. Backwater tourism excels in high-spending segments due to strong branding visibility and experiential appeal. Heritage tourism contributes to long-term sustainable wealth through community engagement, cultural preservation, and repeat visitation.

From a policy standpoint, Kerala should enhance heritage tourism branding through digital storytelling, thematic circuits, and stronger marketing presence. Backwater tourism must adopt ecologically responsible practices to maintain long-term sustainability.

A combined branding model—leveraging Kerala's natural and cultural assets—promises to maximise wealth while ensuring ecological and cultural preservation.

## 8. Recommendations

1. **Integrated Branding:** Develop a unified micro-brand strategy linking backwater and heritage experiences into a combined “Waters & Cultures of Kerala” circuit.
2. **Digital Storytelling:** Use documentaries, heritage narratives, and virtual reality experiences to strengthen heritage branding.
3. **Sustainability Measures:** Regulate houseboat waste management, promote green-certified accommodations, and encourage low-impact tourism.
4. **Community Involvement:** Expand participation of local artisans, homestays, and cultural groups in both sectors.
5. **Experience Diversification:** Introduce curated experiences such as heritage walks, backwater kayaking, interactive craft workshops, and cuisine-based tourism routes.

## 9. Scope for future research.

- The study is limited to selected destinations; wider geographies may reveal additional insights.
- The sample size, though adequate, could be expanded for longitudinal analysis.
- Future studies can examine digital marketing analytics, social media engagement, and branding ROI more comprehensively.

## 10. References

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