

Andaman and Nicobar Islands: An Emerging Eco-tourism Hotspot

The Andaman and Nicobar in India are a group of picturesque islands, big and small, inhabited and uninhabited, lying in the Bay of Bengal. They lie along an arc in long and narrow broken chain; approximately North–South over a distance nearly 800 km. Mother Nature has been very generous to these islands in endowing them with rich biodiversity which is displayed in various forms of flora and fauna on land and in water surrounding the islands.



Pristine Nature and Green Forests

Their uniqueness lies in high degree of endemism, particularly, in avifauna. Forests cover more than 84% of the islands' geographical area. A clean and pollution free environment and lush green forests surrounded by blue sea water make A & N islands one of the most favored destinations for eco-tourism.

The total number of islands/islets is more than five hundred, supporting a population of 356,152 (2001 census) and projected population figure for 2011 is around 489,000. The islands offer a lot for eco-tourists.

A glance over the tourist data indicates gradual increase in tourist arrival (both domestic and foreign) during last thirty years except during 2005 when deadly Tsunami waves struck these islands in the last week of Dec, 2004.

The Islands: Scuba Diving, Fishing and Camping

Jolly Buoy & Red Skin islands located in Mahatma Gandhi Marine National Park, about 30 km from capital city of Port Blair, offer a breathtaking underwater view of coral and marine life.

Cinque island is famous for unspoiled beaches especially a sand bar joining two islands. It is a superb place for scuba diving, swimming, fishing and camping. Havelock Island, about 54 km from Port Blair, provides idyllic resort in the lap of virgin white silver sand Radhanagar beach and unpolluted environment. Time Magazine declared this beach as the finest beach of Asia in 2004. A guesthouse of Tourism Department "Dolphin Resort" and a lot of other private camping facilities are available here.



Chatham Island at Port Blair has the privilege of having one of the biggest and oldest saw mills of Asia. Besides mill machinery, there is a museum depicting islands' forest wealth details and collection of forest products especially "burr" and "off cut" pieces from Andaman Padauk (*Pterocarpus delbergiodes*).

The lush green mangroves forest cover with the area of 1190 sq.km offers an eye catching view on tours around the islands by local boats. The tourists can have a glimpse of one of the primitive tribes (Jarwas) of these islands in the forests of South Andaman adjoining Andaman Trunk Road and around Baratang Island. Other categories of such Negrito race tribe like Great Andamanese (at Strait Island), Onges (at Little Andaman) and Sentinalese (at North Sentinal Island) are protected from outsiders by the local administration and special permission is needed to visit them.

Sentinalese are the most violent type of tribes who do not like outsiders and attack such people with bow and arrows upon seeing them. They are totally cut off from main stream society and depend on hunting/fishing in and around North Sentinal Island for their survival. In fact, they need to be protected from outsiders by administration. Efforts of bringing Jarwas to main stream have not been very fruitful as their status has been reduced to beggars before tourists and local settlers of the islands.

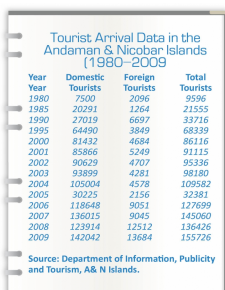
Eco-Tourism Potential and Challenges

These islands have all the necessary ingredients for eco-tourism industry i.e. turquoise blue sea, talc-like beaches and sheer richness of tropical flora and fauna. Principal author carried out a research study to assess tourism value of these islands before and after tsunami disaster of 2004. It has been found that annual tourism value has increased to Rs. 75 million (€1.2) during 2007-08, which is almost three times than the tourism value before tsunami.



At present the creation of eco-friendly infrastructure is required. Water scarcity problem particularly during the months of January to May, every year, needs to be resolved. Village based eco-tourism has tremendous potential in the islands. Raw material for construction of eco-friendly tourist huts in the coconut and areca nut orchards in and around Port Blair is available in plenty.

Local people and settlers having farm and orchard lands can be encouraged by local administration for this venture by providing appropriate subsidy for attracting domestic and foreign tourists for staying palm groves and to have a feel of sincerity and serenity of village life in the islands. Location of such huts adjoining tropical rain forests would provide a wonderful opportunity to nature lovers for studying rare endemic birds, animals, insects, butterflies etc. of the area. Though tourism value of these islands has increased after tsunami of 2004, still administration has to cover a lot for achieving sustainable tourism in the islands.



Tourist Arrival Data in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands (1980-2009)

Year	Domestic Tourists	Foreign Tourists	Total Tourists
1980	7500	2056	9596
1985	20291	1264	21555
1990	27019	6697	33716
1995	64490	3849	68339
2000	81432	4684	86116
2001	85866	5249	91115
2002	90629	4707	95336
2003	93899	4281	98180
2004	105004	4578	109582
2005	30225	2156	32381
2006	118648	9051	127699
2007	136015	9045	145060
2008	123914	12512	136426
2009	142042	13684	155726

Source: Department of Information, Publicity and Tourism, A&N Islands.

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