

# Price, Discounting And Differentials In The Tourism Industry : A Study On Kerala Tourism

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## INTRODUCTION

The travel industry is particularly preoccupied with price because of product characteristics like extensive official regulation and long lead times between price decisions and sales. Operators are obliged to publish prices in brochures or guides months in advance of production (Horner & Swarbrooke, 1996). Price competitiveness is an essential component in the overall tourism management of a destination. There is widely accepted evidence that prices are one of the most important factors in travel planning. However, the importance of price as a marketing tool is often underestimated. Temporary reductions may be used for promotional purposes to attract consumers in low season or to promote a trial visit. Pricing does not only determine profitability, but is also a powerful tool for the marketer to achieve strategic business objectives and a tactical tool to manipulate last minute demand through incentives (Middleton, 1994). The price structure reflects strategic marketing decisions regarding product positioning, corporate objectives, and return on investment requirements. While costs set the lower limits of prices, the market and demand set the upper limit (Kotler and Armstrong, 1995). The quality of the offering must meet the expectation the price has generated in the customer's mind. Premium priced lodges must be promoted in quality magazines and sold through reputable tour operators. Pricing may also be a symbol of status. Ultimately, it is the consumer who decides whether the place is worth the price, and it is critical to set prices according to their ideas of value. If the overall value is considered to be unacceptable, the consumer can choose a substitute or decide to forego the purchase (Cooper et al., 1993). The aims of this paper are: first, to demonstrate the importance of price, discounts and differentials in travel decisions; second, to analyze the '*discounting methods*' of different tourism units in Kerala.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

In the tourism industry, the price elasticity of demand or sensitivity to changes in price need to be considered, because, travel is not an essential activity and many alternatives for leisure time are available. Tourists react differently to the price of different tourism products, and therefore, their price elasticity differs. There are often unpredictable fluctuations in demand, which require a tactical pricing response because there is no possibility of stockholding. Discount for last minute sales have been used extensively by tour operators due to the highly perishable nature of the product. In this context, a study is highly warranted about the '*discounting methods*' adopted in the tourism industry.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Robert R. Nelson (1992) discussed in his article, how an over supply of rooms, a weaker economy, and more widespread use of powerful computers are forcing hoteliers to increasingly use discounting as a marketing tool. Heide et al., (2008) investigated different pricing strategies and assessed their relevance for a segment of the restaurant industry. The reported study examined the potential for using pricing strategies as a strategic tool for revenue enhancement. They suggested that there is potential for increased use of several pricing strategies such as price discrimination and peak-load pricing. Walpole et al. (2001) opined that the extent to which increased revenue generation can be achieved, and the wider implications of price increases have received little attention.

Hughes (1981) examined cases for and against a tourism tax. Ravid and Arbel (1983) created a model of supply and demand conditions for room-nights sold by US hotels and motels using the Cobb-Douglas functions in order to estimate the impact on their sales of rises in energy prices. Sheldon (1986) presented a fascinating industry analysis of the tour operator industry in the United States based on a number of features such as cost of entry and exit from the industry. Crouch (1992) provided a systematic review of literature on the effects of income and prices on international tourism as found in numerous empirical studies. He found that about two-thirds of the 777 usable estimates of income

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elasticity yielded income in excess of unity, indicating that not only does international tourism rise with income, but does so more than proportionately. Guiltinan (1987) explained mixed bundling in terms of consumer perspective that it enables the consumer either to purchase one or more of services individually, or to purchase the bundle. On the other hand, the price in a mixed joint form is set when two products are purchased jointly. Besides, price bundling is also known as commodity bundling that was proclaimed in Lawless's (1991) study. He defined commodity bundling as grouping related products together into a unified marketing offering.

Gronroos (2000) summarized the characteristics of services, which are different from physical goods, namely: intangible, inseparability, heterogeneity and perishability. Many authors illustrated that those characteristics affect pricing in different ways. For example, Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) mentioned that since the tourism product is an intangible service, which cannot be readily displayed and easily communicated to customers, quality maybe difficult for customers to access. Therefore, decisions about what to include in advertising and other promotional materials are challenging, as is pricing. Since tourism is mostly dependent on people in the service producing process, different customers perceive a different level of price and quality for the same product. Finally, service characteristics manipulating pricing is perishability. Horner, S. and Swarbrook, J. (1996) explained perishability in terms of the fact that the tourism product cannot be stored for future use. Budeanu (1999) supported that package holidays mean the supply of a product in fixed supply (e.g. number of beds at a hotel). It can or cannot be covered in demand in a certain season, and an empty place cannot be stored for the next season, so they have to be sold at the last minute discount. Mudambi and Baum (1995) explored the possibilities of oligopolistic hotel pricing in Bermuda. Forrester's research study (2001) found that 66% of all buyers used an online discount in the past 12 months to buy travel online, and a study by the Joint Hospitality Industry Congress (2000) found that there is a real expectation among consumers that the Internet prices will be lower than those in the "bricks and mortar" world. TECS (2005) study revealed that most backwater resorts and houseboats in Kerala are at the high end of the price spectrum and consequently, are out of reach of the average tourist, both domestic and foreign.

## DEMAND FOR TOURISM PRODUCTS

Demand for tourism products is the relationship between the amount of the service that customers will buy and the price fixed for the service. The most important factor that influences the tourism consumer demand behavior is income. While consumers throughout most of the range of income engage in tourism, higher incomes have a strong effect on increasing tourism demand. Reece (2010) observed this effect through time, as nations with growing average incomes see high rate of tourism growth. The major factors affecting the aggregate demand for leisure travel and tourism goods and services are:

**a) General Variables:** Such as income, season of the year, day of the week, price of the travel service, prices of the substitute, prices of complements, quality, security etc.

**b) Demographic Variables:** Such as age, household type, education etc.

## DETERMINANTS OF TOURISM PRICE COMPETITIVENESS

While price is a vital decision in the marketing of all types of goods and services, the characteristics of travel and tourism products explain the industry's particular preoccupation with price (Middleton, 1994). Tourism price competitiveness is essentially a matter of the prices of the goods and services that tourists buy, expressed in some common currency. Several factors impinge in different ways on tourism price competitiveness. Some of them are listed below.

**i) Exchange Rates :** Exchange rates are the first and the most obvious factor influencing tourism competitiveness. Other things being equal, if a country's exchange rate rises, its tourism competitiveness falls. Exchange rates do tend to reflect relative price levels at home and in other countries. When a country's prices rise relative to those of the competitors, its exchange rate tends to fall.

**ii) Inflation And Overall Price Levels :** Higher general price levels in a country tend to be cancelled out by exchange rate depreciations, but only up to a point. General prices—and the prices that tourists are paying—may be rising, but export prices may not be increasing to the same extent. In such a situation, a country's exchange rate may not move much, and it may lose price competitiveness in tourism.

**iii) Labour Prices:** These prices are a key determinant of long-term price competitiveness in tourism. Countries with low wages tend to have low prices for goods and services, even when these are converted into other currency terms using market exchange rates.

**iv) Export Booms:** Structural shifts can impact tourism competitiveness through changes in the exchange rate. That means an export boom in one industry pushes up the exchange rate and makes other export industries less competitive. This effect is very relevant for a country's tourism price competitiveness.

**v) Tax levels And Structures:** Taxes, and especially indirect taxes, can influence the prices of the goods and services that tourists buy, and thus they can impact price competitiveness. If taxes result in price rises of a country's goods and services for export and home markets, they will tend to be counteracted by exchange rate depreciation, and the country's tourism price competitiveness will be relatively unchanged. The way taxes are levied will be a significant determinant of tourism competitiveness.

**vi) Infrastructure Charges:** Infrastructure charges can take many forms, such as road pricing, airport levies, and developer contributions to resort developments. These charges push up the prices charged to tourists.

**vii) Fuel Prices and Taxation:** Fuel is an important input into tourism goods and services, and fuel prices can have a significant impact on tourism price competitiveness.

**viii) Environmental Charges:** Tourism industries are becoming increasingly subject to environmental charges. These may be either specific, such as a noise levy on an airport, or very general, such as higher costs due to the implementation of an emissions trading scheme (ETS). The impact on competitiveness will depend on how general the charge is, and how it affects other trading industries.

**ix) Government Policy:** Government policy can impact tourism competitiveness through both general and specific policies. Some policies, such as an aviation tax, may be quite specific; these policies may have unintended impact on tourism. Tax policies can have a direct impact on tourism prices, and thus on competitiveness.

**x) Impact Of Price Changes:** The cost of tourism to the visitor includes the cost of transport services to and from the destination and the cost of ground content (accommodation, tour services, food and beverage, entertainment etc.). Both types of costs are relevant to the travel decision.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study aims:

1. To make a cross sectoral analysis of the '*discounting methods*' adopted by different categories of tourism units in Kerala.
2. To compare and analyze the '*discounting methods*' of different tourism units in Kerala according to their marketing experience.

## HYPOTHESES

The following hypotheses have been formulated on the basis of the objectives of the study;

1. There are significant differences in the '*discounting methods*' of different categories of tourism units in Kerala.
2. There are no significant differences among different tourism units in Kerala in their '*discounting methods*' when they are compared according to their marketing experiences.

## METHODOLOGY

The present study is an empirical one based on survey method. The methodology undertaken has basically been to do a cross-sectoral study of the various discounting methods within the different sectors of tourism units in Kerala on the basis of their marketing experience. For the purpose of this research study, the various tourism units in Kerala are grouped as suggested by Middleton in his classification of sectors of the travel and tourism industry (Middleton, 1994). According to him, the five main sectors of the travel and tourism industry are:-

- 1) Accommodation Sector ; 2) Attraction Sector ; 3) Travel Organizers' sector ; 4) Destination Organization Sector ; 5) Transportation Sector

The first three sectors, namely, the accommodation sector, the attraction sector and the travel organisers' sector have been included in the survey for the purpose of primary data collection. Data were collected with the help of the structured questionnaire. An effort was also made to broad base the sample in major '*identified tourism centres*'. There are 39 identified tourism centers in Kerala as notified by the Government of Kerala during the year 2004 (Government of Kerala, 2004).

✿ **Period Of The Study** : The aims of this research were achieved by means of a survey that was distributed among 217 tourism marketing managers between November 2009 and May 2010.

✿ **Sample Frame** : Of the total 217 tourism units constituting the sample, 70 (32.26 per cent) respondents were from Hotels and Resorts. Data were collected from 65 (29.95 per cent) Ayurveda Health Centres, and 52 units (23.96 per cent) from House Boat Operators category. From the Approved Tour Operators and Travel Agents category, there were 30 respondents (13.82 per cent). The sample units included 33 units (15.21 per cent) with marketing experience of 1 to 5 years. A large portion of the sample units 102 (47.00 per cent) had 6 to 10 years of marketing experience. There were 60 units (27.65 per cent) with 11 to 15 years of marketing experience, and 22 units (10.14 per cent) had more than 16 years of marketing experience.

## PRICE DISCOUNTS AND DIFFERENTIALS

Discounted prices are commonly applied in the off-season. Although it can be useful in gaining immediate business, discounting does not usually differentiate a product from the competition and is generally quickly matched by competitors. In comparison to discounting, *value-adding* can create a competitive edge and can attract a greater market share. Under *disguised pricing*, discounted package components (eg. accommodation, meals, entry fees, transport) are presented as one upfront cost. This method disguises the exact cost of individual components and also, the extent of discount provided by individual operators. The idea behind package deals is to combine products together and offer them at a lower price than what the customer would pay if the products were purchased individually. Discounting this way increases perceived value along with benefits-it saves money in the long run and provides a good balance of value and benefits in the mind of customers.

Pricing decisions are essential for the profitability of the tourist establishment, as it has a tremendous impact on demand and sales volume. Pizam A. and Mansfeld Y. (1999) stated that the goal for the tour operators is to maintain the quality of the package tours at a constant and high level without price increases, as the market is relatively price sensitive. Although tour operators attract customers by cutting prices as low as possible, they attempt to compete mostly on non-price characteristics such as service, product quality, brand name, etc. Consumers are often less conscious of the price than as to whether the elements within the package are complementary; thus differentiating it from other products (UNCTAD, 2008). For the tourist, purchasing a package also has price advantages. Sellers offer discounted rates to stimulate demand for products or services that would otherwise be unallocated. However, this discounted rate is not extended to those customers who need last-minute accommodation, or who want a particular room at a specific time. Discounted prices are, according to Middleton and Clark (2001), a vital weapon in marketing within the tourism industry, manipulating demand with short-term incentives offered as inducements to purchase. Most companies adjust their basic price to reward customers for certain responses, such as early payment of bills, volume purchase, and off-season buying. These price adjustments are called discounts and allowances (Kotler et.al., 1996). Owing to the highly competitive nature of the tourism industry, discounting has become very prevalent, though it is a controversial practice. The concept of a fixed price has got limited relevance in our today's tourism marketing situation. The following kinds of discounts are most commonly found in the tourism sector :

**1) Trade Discount** : These represent discounts given to people employed in the trade itself by airlines to travel agents, by hotel to airline staff, tour operators, etc.

**2) Cash Discount** : A cash discount is a price reduction to buyers who pay their bills promptly. The discount must be granted to all customers meeting these terms. In the tourism industry, we can find this form of discount in some sectors.

**3) Discount On Group Bookings** : In marketing terminology, this is known as '*quantity discount*'. A quantity discount is a price reduction to buyers who buy large volumes. One of the most common discounts, this offers marketers economies of scale and presents the possibility of passing off some of these economies to the customer also. They are most prevalent in negotiation between the tour operators and the suppliers as well as the travel agents in dealing with



the business clients or groups travellers.

**4) Seasonal Discount:** A seasonal discount is a price reduction to buyers who buy merchandise or services out of a season. Hotels, airlines and other tourism organizations will offer seasonal discounts in their slower selling periods. Perishability of the service product is the reason for the widespread practice of seasonal discount in the tourism sector. Holidays, hotels, and pleasure travels, by their very nature, enjoy seasonal demand. Seasonal discount allows the seller to keep production steady during an entire year.

**5) Promotional Allowances:** Promotional allowances are payments or price reductions to reward dealers for participating in advertising and sales-support programmes. In the tourism industry, these types of allowances are prevalent in trade shows, travel marts, etc. The above-mentioned forms of discounts are analyzed among the four categories of units and is depicted in the Table 1. It is noteworthy that cash discounts are not common in all the four categories. Only 7.4 percent of the whole samples allow '*cash discount*' as a discounting tactic. Except this form of discount, all the other forms show significant differences among the different categories of tourism units. The  $\chi^2$  value of '*discount on group bookings*', '*seasonal discounts*' and '*promotional allowances*' are 28.829, 12.478 and 96.486 respectively, which are statistically significant at 1% level of significance. The  $\chi^2$  value for '*trade discount*' is 10.032, which is significant at the 5% level of significance. Therefore, it is inferred that tourism units in the four categories show significant differences in their discounting tactics.

Table 1 : Comparison Of Forms Of Discounts - According To Category Of Units								
Sl. No.	Forms of discounts	Category of units				Total	Chi	Sig.
		Hotels and Resorts	Ayurveda Centers	House Boat Operators	Approved Tour Operators & Travel Agents			
1	Trade discounts	57 (81.4)	60 (92.3)	50 (96.2)	29 (96.7)	196 (90.3)	10.032*	0.018
2	Cash discounts	6 (8.6)	8 (12.3)	1 (1.9)	1 (3.3)	16 (7.4)	5.443	0.142
3	Discount on group bookings	54 (77.1)	53 (81.5)	22 (42.3)	14 (46.7)	143 (65.9)	28.829**	0.000
4	Seasonal discounts	61 (87.1)	52 (80)	46 (88.5)	18 (60)	177 (81.6)	12.478**	0.006
5	Promotional allowances	9 (12.9)	2 (3.1)	3 (5.8)	24 (80)	38 (17.5)	96.486**	0.000
6	Others	(0)	(0)	1 (1.9)	(0)	1 (0.5)	3.188	0.364

Source: Survey Data. \* Significant at 0.05 level \*\* Significant at 0.01 level  
Note : Figures in brackets indicate percentages to respective category of respondents

While comparing the various forms of discounts according to the marketing experiences of the tourism units, it was found that "*trade discounts*" show significant differences at the 5% level of significance. The results are presented in the Table 2.

Table 2 : Comparison Of Forms Of Discounts - According To Marketing Experiences Of The Units								
Sl. No	Type of discount	Marketing Experience (Years)				Total	Chi	Sig.
		1-5	6-10	11-15	16+			
1	Trade discounts	25 (75.8)	93 (91.2)	58 (96.7)	20 (90.9)	196 (90.3)	10.865*	0.012
2	Cash discounts	(0)	7 (6.9)	7 (11.7)	2 (9.1)	16 (7.4)	4.38	0.223
3	Discount on group booking	24 (72.7)	59 (57.8)	42 (70)	18 (81.8)	143 (65.9)	6.56	0.087
4	Seasonal discounts	30 (90.9)	83 (81.4)	48 (80)	16 (72.7)	177 (81.6)	3.159	0.368
5	Promotion discounts	4 (12.1)	16 (15.7)	16 (26.7)	2 (9.1)	38 (17.5)	5.46	0.141
6	Others	(0)	1 (1)	(0)	(0)	1 (0.5)	1.133	0.769

Source: Survey Data. \*\* Significant at 0.01 level  
Note : Figures in brackets indicate percentages to respective category of respondents

From the Table 2, it can be observed that all other types of "*discounts*" show insignificant  $\chi^2$  values. It is also evident that "*trade discount*" (90.3 per cent) and "*seasonal discount*" (81.6 per cent) are the most prevalent types of discounts

among the different units. This also means that there is no marked difference among different units in allowing these types of discounts.

## DISCOUNT ON ONLINE BOOKING

Maintaining the tourist information base and presenting the tourist products are the prerequisites for online booking. Key to successful selling online is the issue of price and discounting. The hotel product is increasingly being sold electronically, and price has been identified as one of the key motivators for encouraging customers to purchase online. Selling each room each night at an optimum price is critical to a hotel's long-term success. The internet has clearly revolutionized the market for travel packages by giving travel agencies and destinations the possibility to create and distribute them. The increased availability of powerful computers has accelerated the use of discounting (Robert, 1992). This is made possible by providing the management with the information it needs to use discounting more effectively. Online reservations allow users to interact with the organization by inspecting and purchasing products through websites.

Table 3 : Discount On Direct Online Booking- According To Marketing Experiences Of The Units								
Sl. No	Discount on direct online booking	Marketing experience					Chi	Sig.
		1-5	6-10	11-15	16+	Total		
1	No discounts	5 (17.9)	32 (44.4)	5 (13.2)	1 (10)	43 (19.8)	20.209**	0.003
2	Only for group booking	21 (75)	38 (52.8)	28 (73.7)	9 (90)	96 (44.2)		
3	For all bookings	2 (7.1)	2 (2.8)	5 (13.2)	(0)	9 (4.1)		
Source: Survey Data. <span style="float: right;">** Significant at 0.01 level</span>								
Note : Figures in brackets indicate percentages to respective category of respondents								

The Table 3 shows the comparison of tourism units with regard to the allocation of discounts on “*direct online booking*”. Among the surveyed units, only 148 units (68.20 per cent) were having the facility to book their services online. Out of the total 217 respondents, 44.2 per cent units allowed discounts only for group bookings done online. The analysis indicates that there are significant differences among units in allowing discounts to online customers. The  $\chi^2$  value is 20.209, which is significant at 1% level of significance.

## CONCLUSION

It may be concluded from the analysis contained in this study that the hypotheses:-

1. There are significant differences in the '*discounting methods*' of different categories of tourism units in Kerala.
2. There are no significant differences among different tourism units in Kerala in their '*discounting methods*' when they are compared according to their marketing experiences.

Hence, the hypotheses stand accepted.

It was found that pricing and discounting is the most important criteria for purchasing decisions in tourism. In addition, there exists significant differences among various tourism units in discounting. This paper could provide some guidance for one who desires to run a business in tour operating through the potential practice of price discounting.

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