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# Yoga travellers' experiences in guided tours: a multiple case study approach

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**ABSTRACT**
This study investigates yoga travellers' experiences in guided tours organized by the renowned online travel platform, Tripaneer. Travellers' online narratives *(N = 880)* regarding three main yoga destinations were collected and examined through content analysis. Six main components were revealed: yoga facilities and services, a sense of awe, the overall benefits of yoga, a memorable experience, social interaction and learning about the local culture.

## 1. Introduction

Studies over the past two decades have provided important knowledge on yoga tourism (Bowers & Cheer, 2017; Oznalbant & Alvarez, 2020). Despite the growing recognition of yoga tourism in recent years, little attention has been paid to date on its experiential aspect. In particular, to the best of our knowledge, there is no research that examines travellers' guided yoga experiences by utilizing user-generated content, although there continues to be a surge of interest in such tours. Thus, this inherent gap motivated us to focus on this issue.

Contributing to this research stream, the current study sets out to ascertain what constitutes a yoga tourism experience in tours organized by a yoga practitioner through an online platform, Tripaneer. This study answers the following research question: which components represent travellers' yoga tourism experience in guided tours offered through online platforms? Importantly, this study contributes to the burgeoning literature on yoga tourism by capturing the main components of yoga travellers' experiences in guided tours. Furthermore, our study can assist destination planners and practitioners in creating proper strategies for this activity. Several scholars argue that guided tours can create different and new experiences for travellers. Hence, it can serve as an important planning tool for destination practitioners (Zillinger et al., 2012).

## 2. Conceptual background

Oznalbant and Alvarez (2020) outlined three main types of yoga tourism experiences which are namely: yoga-, cultural- and wellness-focused. The first type, yoga-focused, concentrates on learning and self-improvement; the second generally focuses on the cultural aspects of yoga rather than concentrating on the practice itself; and the third emphasizes on wellness, which comprises of detoxing and relaxing.

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A yoga traveller is a 'special interest person, whose motivation and decision-making are primarily determined by their interest in yoga' (Ali-Knight, 2009, p. 89). The primary purpose of their travel is to improve their physical, mental or spiritual well-being (Ali-Knight & Ensor, 2017). Previous studies are mainly based on yoga travellers' or participants' motivations. A considerable body of research also calls for research to focus on the yoga tourism experience itself (Ali-Knight & Ensor, 2017). However, a focus on the components of yoga tourism or guided yoga tour experiences is required to bridge this gap in the literature.

A guided tour is a popular activity for international travellers (Zillinger et al., 2012) since it can be extremely useful for those who desire to save costs, experience destinations' attributes in a short time and focus on enjoying a specific service (Albayrak & Caber, 2018). Considering these features, travellers' experiences can differ and be guided or non-guided. Maharani et al. (2020) described yoga tourism as 'a tour to visit a special place to do yoga guided by a yoga teacher' (p. 22). Thus, it can be concluded that such experiences requiring a trainer are evaluated within the scope of a guided tour.

## 3. Methodology

A qualitative research approach was adopted to ascertain yoga travellers' experiences in guided tours since no information was readily available. Online narratives posted by yoga travellers were used since these reviews enable researchers to understand tourists' experiences (Atsız et al., 2021). Online communities, which travellers use to gain information and share their experiences, are popular day-by-day (Miguéns et al., 2008). Thus, as an online community, Tripaneer was selected as an online research area since it is considered the most-used yoga platform by travellers.

We adopt a multiple case study to capture the main picture of yoga experiences. We have included three top yoga destinations in the current study –These destinations were selected as research settings because they have received a wide range of reviews on Tripaneer that may help us to reveal the details of yoga travellers' experiences. We first determined the tours offered on this platform, and on 1–5 March 2021, we began gathering every online comment on yoga experiences. Online yoga reviews from 11 service providers (three in Sri Lanka, three in Thailand and five in India) were included in this research.

The distribution of reviews by year is illustrated in Figure 1. A total of 880 online yoga reviews written in English (see Appendix A for details) were retained for the analysis. Most of the online yoga reviews were from 2018 and 2019, and there was a striking decrease in the number of comments in 2020 and 2021. The reason for this decline is due to the considerable impact on the tourism and travel industries of the Asia-Pacific Region by COVID-19 (Jaipuria et al., 2021; Ranasinghe et al., 2021). In addition, interestingly, in the years 2020-2021, the comments of the participants about COVID-19 were not found in sufficient numbers.

The raw data were examined through content analysis using NVivo, which enables researchers to organize data in a clear way. As a data reduction strategy, a coding procedure was applied, and two independent coders performed the analysis. Each coder read the data several times and then began
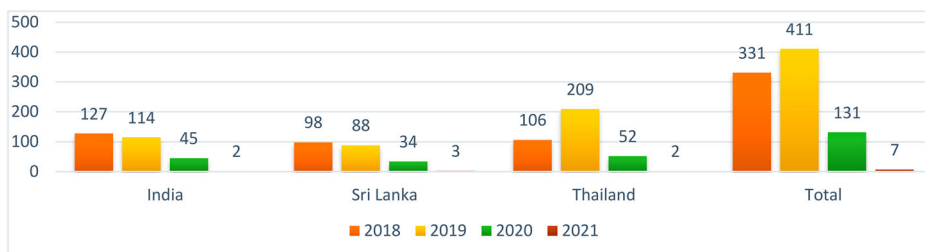


**Figure 1.** Distribution of views.

to code the reviews one by one; this initial coding aimed at breaking the raw data down. Then, axial coding was applied to understand the subthemes of yoga travellers' experiences. Finally, selective coding helped the researchers to identify the main themes of the yoga experience. As a result of this inspection, the coders banded together with the themes, subthemes, and indicators. The coders discussed the main components of yoga travellers' experiences until a consensus was provided. After reaching a common point, the coders consulted an exterior expert, who has conducted research on tourists' experiences; thereby, the main components forming the travellers' guided yoga experience were determined (Atsız et al., 2021).

## 4. Results

The key components of yoga travellers' experiences drawn from content analysis are as follows: (1) yoga facilities and services, (2) a sense of awe, (3) the overall benefits of yoga, (4) a memorable experience, (5) social interaction and (6) learning about local culture (See Figure 2). The share (in %) of each major theme is illustrated in Figure 3. Direct quotations from yoga travellers were used to better comprehend and synthesize our findings (Sutton & Austin, 2015). For this, original quotations were coded as P (Participant) to ensure the anonymity of reviewers (Gholamhosseinzadeh et al., 2021).

### 4.1. Yoga facilities and services

The most dominant component we established as a result of the analysis is the category of yoga facilities and services, which includes subthemes, such as food and staff. One traveller commented that: '*The facilities far exceeded our expectations, and the food was delicious (and accommodating to a*
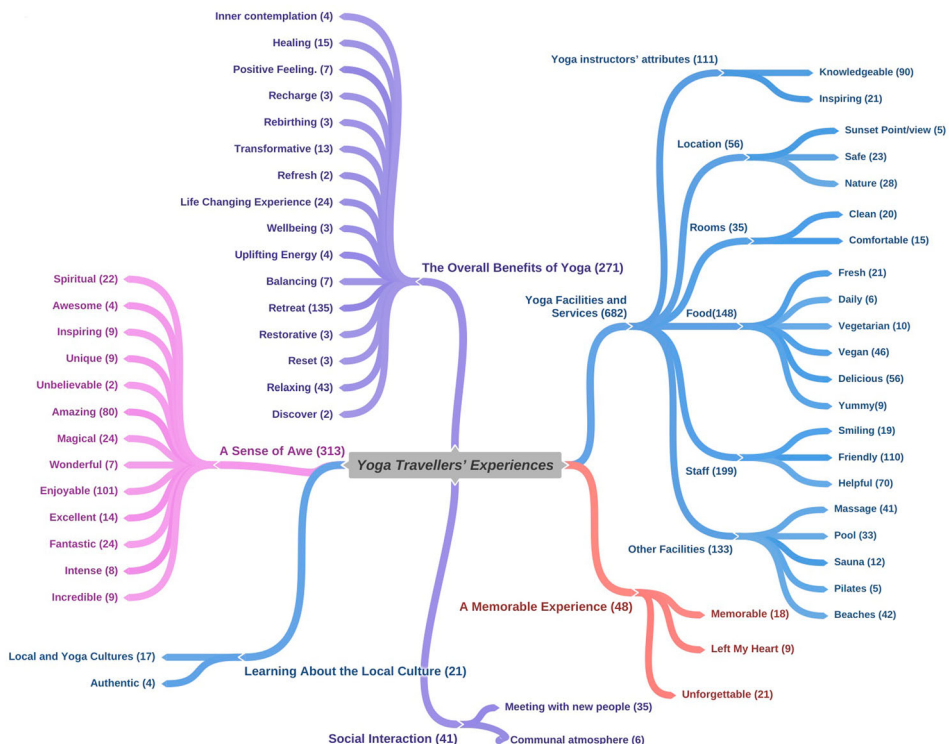


**Figure 2.** Components of travellers' guided yoga experiences (**Note:** The numbers in brackets show the frequency of each theme and subtheme).
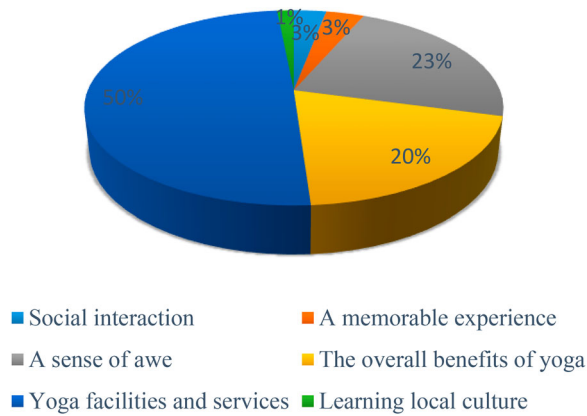
**Figure 3.** Share of each major theme.

*vegan diet which I appreciated)'* **(P811)**. This result is in line with the results of other studies examining the experiences of travellers. For instance, Seyitoglu et al. (2020) stated that facilities are significant factors affecting travellers' experiences.

### 4.2. A sense of awe

Most of the yoga travellers asserted that having 'a sense of awe' was important to their experience. The most frequently mentioned terms referring to this included 'spiritual', 'awesome', 'inspiring' and 'unique' (see Figure 1). For example, one traveller's review read: *'Unique and incredible experience! Excellent Yoga instructors, incredible excursions, and authentic life-changing spiritual meditation!'* **(P123).** The relevant literature has put forward that experiencing a sense of awe is important component for travellers experience (Tian et al., 2015).

### 4.3. The overall benefits of yoga

The overall benefits of yoga was another prominent theme affecting yoga travellers' experiences. 'Life-changing experience' and 'retreat' were frequent terms used by the yoga travellers, with one traveller declaring that: *'This place is like medicine for people with good intentions, who came here to find some inner peace, to connect their minds, bodies, and souls, to recharge, and just be present in this moment* **(P27)**. Our finding is consistent with Oznalbant and Alvarez (2020) study.

### 4.4. A memorable experience

A memorable experience is another remarkable component emphasized by yoga travellers. 'Memorable', 'left my heart' and 'unforgettable' were frequently mentioned indicators that reflected memorable experiences. For example, one traveller's review read: *'I will have these memories in my heart for the rest of my life'* **(P630).** Tourists expect memorable moments throughout their experience (Hosany & Prayag, 2013). A memorable tourism experience is recalled after the event (Kim et al., 2012) and is one of the key aspects of travellers' experiences (Ye et al., 2021).

### 4.5. Social interaction

It is clear from the travellers' comments that social interaction is a significant component that affects their experiences. They showed that yoga travellers met new people in the destination they visited,

and the social atmosphere was considered a major aspect of their overall experience of the services offered in the guided tours. One yoga traveller commented on their experiences of social interaction as follows: '*The other guests were wonderful people and I have made some lifelong friends*' **(P382).** Similarly the existing literature indicates that travellers are eager to meet new people and make new friends from around the world (Thyne et al., 2005).

### *4.6. Learning about the local culture*

The last component of yoga travellers' experiences obtained as a result of the content analysis is 'learning about the local culture', which participants stated that they achieved as an indirect result of the yoga. One of the travellers stated: '*I learned a lot, both about yoga, meditation, and Indian culture as well as about myself*' **(P37).** It is also highlighted in the existing literature that culture is one of the key components of yoga travellers' experiences (Oznalbant & Alvarez, 2020).

## 5. Conclusion, contributions and limitations

This study identified six main components of yoga travellers' experiences. These themes were mentioned in various ways by the yoga travellers; however, they did not differ greatly between destinations. Therefore, it can be concluded that all themes were interpreted in all three destinations. Our findings contribute to the existing pool of studies on yoga tourism and may be useful to scholars who desire to research yoga experiences. Moreover, as reflected in the current study's findings, the yoga tourism industry is evolving rapidly. Thus, these platforms may attract future researchers' interest in the coming years. Although some of the components are similar to those of previous research (Oznalbant & Alvarez, 2020), the importance of a memorable experience and a sense of awe are yet to be further investigated.

Our study has some suggestions for yoga practitioners as to what they should consider offering in their services. First, the services and facilities in yoga experiences have been found to be major themes in travellers' reviews and ratings. Therefore, yoga practitioners or service providers should improve their service opportunities to enhance the quality of their visitors' experiences. These can contribute to other components, such as creating a memorable experience or inspiring awe. Second, local culture is another vital part of yoga experiences. Thus, more information on local culture can be captured to increase yoga travellers' knowledge of the destination's culture. Third, yoga instructors' attributes, such as being informative and inspiring, have been found to be factors that improve yoga experiences. It is therefore suggested that these attributes be focused on and improved to create positive interactions between instructors and travellers.

While our study opens a new door for future studies, it has fewlimitations. The current study used online reviews to unveil key components of the experience of guided yoga tours. Future researchers can interview yoga travellers to capture their yoga experiences first-hand. This research was mainly focused on yoga travellers' experiences in guided tours and neglected to compare non-guided yoga experiences. Scholars can consider researching the experience of non-guided tours by exploring the main differences between those and guided experiences.

## Disclosure statement

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# Appendix A: Distribution of travellers by countries

| Sri Lanka | | India | | Thailand | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Traveller's Countries** | **N** | **Traveller's Countries** | **N** | **Traveller's Countries** | **N** |
| Great Britain | 29 | Great Britain | 40 | Great Britain | 26 |
| Germany | 21 | Australia | 16 | Anonymous | 92 |
| Portugal | 3 | USA | 36 | Indonesia | 1 |
| Spain | 10 | Belgium | 3 | Thailand | 73 |
| USA | 22 | Anonymous | 32 | Netherlands | 7 |
| Switzerland | 10 | Spain | 16 | Cambodia | 2 |
| Anonymous | 68 | Sweden | 6 | Australia | 17 |
| France | 9 | Germany | 12 | Israel | 6 |
| Netherland | 11 | Indonesia | 9 | Germany | 7 |
| Sri Lanka | 3 | Italy | 3 | Hong Kong | 7 |
| Finland | 3 | Switzerland | 3 | Malaysia | 2 |
| UAE | 1 | Netherlands | 7 | China | 3 |
| Sweden | 2 | France | 15 | Spain | 7 |
| Norway | 4 | Israel | 1 | USA | 47 |
| Ireland | 7 | Malaysia | 2 | Sweden | 1 |
| Denmark | 3 | India | 8 | Indonesia | 2 |
| Belgium | 6 | Lithuania | 2 | Singapore | 4 |
| Austria | 4 | Mexico | 7 | Kazakhstan | 2 |
| Canada | 3 | Slovakia | 1 | Denmark | 6 |
| Italy | 2 | Denmark | 4 | Greece | 1 |
| Luxembourg | 1 | Cambodia | 2 | Japan | 3 |
| Czechia | 1 | Japan | 3 | Namibia | 1 |
| **Total** | **223** | Turks and Caicos Islands | 1 | Ukraine | 1 |
| | | Montenegro | 1 | Malta | 1 |
| | | Taiwan | 1 | Canada | 1 |
| | | Turkey | 2 | Pakistan | 1 |
| | | Polynesia | 1 | UAE | 5 |
| | | Vietnam | 3 | Indonesia | 2 |
| | | Georgia | 1 | France | 9 |
| | | Norway | 1 | Mauritius | 1 |
| | | Philippines | 3 | Vietnam | 4 |
| | | Canada | 7 | Belgium | 1 |
| | | Austria | 1 | Austria | 3 |
| | | Hungary | 1 | Switzerland | 5 |
| | | Ireland | 3 | Laos | 1 |
| | | Hong Kong | 5 | South Korea | 1 |
| | | Latvia | 1 | Czechia | 1 |
| | | Chile | 1 | Canada | 5 |
| | | UAE | 2 | Afghanistan | 1 |
| | | New Zealand | 3 | Kenya | 1 |
| | | Romania | 1 | Finland | 1 |
| | | Azerbaijan | 1 | Sudan | 1 |
| | | Malta | 2 | Philippines | 1 |
| | | Sri Lanka | 3 | Ireland | 1 |
| | | Thailand | 1 | Portugal | 1 |
| | | South Korea | 1 | Morocco | 1 |
| | | Singapore | 2 | Taiwan | 1 |
| | | South Africa | 2 | New Zealand | 1 |
| | | Egypt | 1 | **Total** | **369** |
| | | Ukraine | 1 | | |
| | | Kuwait | 2 | | |
| | | Brazil | 1 | | |
| | | Finland | 1 | | |
| | | Poland | 1 | | |
| | | Rwanda | 1 | | |
| | | Maldives | 1 | | |
| | | **Total** | **288** | | |