

**A STUDY OF THE EFFECTS OF LOCAL COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT ON GUEST
SATISFACTION IN JUNGLE RESORTS**

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ABSTRACT

This research was conducted to understand the ability of employees from local communities to provide customer service that is perceived to be good by the guests of jungle resorts. These resorts have been developed as an alternative to regular tourist experiences which afford guests, an experience that is quintessentially Indian. The development of RESORTS brings much needed income to local communities as well as providing them with sources of employment. However, it is as important to secure customer satisfaction at RESORTS as it is in other sectors of the hospitality sector. The quantitative technique was used to conduct this research. The primary data collection tool was a questionnaire administered over an eight-week period to guests of resorts at the Bandhavgarh National Park in Madhya Pradesh to measure guest satisfaction levels with customer service provided to them at the resort. It was found that they rated poor levels of satisfaction levels. From this it can be inferred that while the jungle resort model is something that has great potential as a tool for the development of local communities, this will depend on the latter developing the expertise and the willingness to render good customer service to their guests. Based on these findings various recommendations have been made on just how this may be achieved.

Key Words: Jungle, Tourism, Customer Service, Local Communities.

INTRODUCTION

Forest / Wildlife tourism has been promoted by the Government of India as a means of further boosting the tourism industry in the country. With its appeal of adventure, such forms of tourism (also known as Eco Tourism) provide its guests with an experience that is unmistakably Indian and unlikely to be replicated anywhere else in the world. As part of this promotion campaign, the government has opened numerous RESORTS either on its own or in collaboration with other service providers such as the Taj Group. In order to reduce resistance from local communities to such projects the government has extensively employed their members into the jungle resorts. Such employment provides local communities with supplemental employment and additional income which the government believes will help in the development of these communities. However, the success of the Eco Tourism model, just like all other areas of the hospitality industries, depends on its ability to attract and retain customers. One of the key methods by which this may be achieved is by providing good customer service. This research focuses on measuring the levels of customer service provided to guests of RESORTS and lodges.

OBJECTIVES

The main aims and objectives of this research are:

- To conduct a survey amongst guests of RESORTS to measure their satisfaction levels with customer service provided.
- To identify gaps in customer service if any
- To recommend on how these gaps in customer service may be closed

METHODOLOGY

This research is quantitative using both deductive and inductive techniques. Deductive techniques use secondary literature to identify the purpose of Eco Tourism, its potential and its challenges. The inductive technique used a case study approach to understand gaps in customer

service provided by employees recruited from amongst the local communities to guests of jungle resorts.

The case study considered in this research was the Bandhavgarh National Park. Details about this park have been taken from Taj Safaris (2010). This natural reserve is located across the Vindhya Hills in Madhya Pradesh. Bandhavgarh National Park consists of a core area of 105 sq km and a buffer area of approximately 400 sq km. Its topography contains a great variety of ground including steep ridges, undulating forest and open meadows. However, its greatest attraction is the Royal Bengal Tigers. The density of the Tiger population at Bandhavgarh is the highest in India. The park has a large breeding population of Leopards, and various species of deer. The four main zones of the national park are Tala, Magdhi, Khitauli and Panpatta. Together, these four ranges comprise the 'Core' of the Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve, constituting a total area of 694 km².

All these buffer zones are inhabited by tribes namely Ranza, Tala, Pataur, Bizhiriya etc. The main livelihood of these tribes is collecting medicinal herbs and wood from the surrounding forests, cattle and sheep rearing, small cultivation etc. Among these villages are located 50- 60 hotels ranging from small to five-star standard properties dominated by Taj Mahuakothi, SYNA Tiger Resorts, Infinity Resorts, Nature heritage, Bandhav Villas, Tiger Den, tree house, Samode jungle lodge etc. The development of these hotels has yielded good job opportunities for locals in the tourism sector too. They are employed in these hotels as security guards, waiters, gardeners, drivers, forest guides, kitchen helpers, etc. Since the hotels do not attract qualified professionals from the big towns and cities, the management relies extensively on local communities for their manpower needs.

This zone along with its hotels is typical of RESORTS across the country and hence it was chosen for this study.

In this research questionnaires were circulated to guests staying in three of the five-star hotels in the park. The questionnaire tested main elements of overall customer satisfaction including:

- Service at front desk (Reservation, Reception, cashier)
- Restaurant (service, Food quality)

- In room (Housekeeping, Room service)
- Public Area (Cleanliness)
- Safari (Driver assistance, Guide / naturalist assistance)
- Security (feel of safety,)
- Recommendations or repeat arrival intentions

Both close and open-ended questions were included in the questionnaire. The Likert scale was used for marking. The questionnaires were placed in the guest rooms and filled out ones were collected from the reception. This process was conducted over an eight-week period and 103 responses were elicited. This data was then analyzed through the descriptive statistics tool of excel.

DISCUSSIONS

The Tourism Industry in India plays a vital role in the economy of the country. Between 2000 to 2010 it contributed a cumulative amount of \$ 2.1 billion to the national exchequer (Barot, 2011). It contributed 6.3% to the Indian GDP and employed 9% of the total workforce in 2010 alone (Gibson, 2010). The tourism industry is expected to contribute to \$ 54.1 billion to the Indian GDP by 2015 and employ 7.2% of the total workforce by that time (Gill and Gill, 2012). Growing at an average annual rate of about 9.4% during the decade beginning 2000 revenues are expected to increase by 42% during the period 2007 – 2017 (Barot, 2011). By 2019 India is projected to become the third most favored travel destination in the world (Barot, 2009).

There are several drivers for the growth of the tourism industry in India. With its mix of history, culture and tradition India is an attractive destination for leisure travelers. In 2009 India obtained a rating of 4 amongst the world's "must see" countries, up from the 9th slot it occupied in 2003 (Rushmore, 2009). The marketing of India through such campaigns as "Incredible India" and the quintessential Indian concept of "*Atithi devo bhava*" (Guest is God) has branded the country as a tourist destination (Krishnan, 2009). In recognition of the economic potential of this sector the Government has given a slew of incentives for its development. This includes establishment of Special Economic Zones with world class infrastructure. The opening of the aviation sector to competition, a friendly tax structure for hotels, quick process of tourist visas and immigration services, quick allotments of land for hotels and establishment of guest houses and

encouragement of specialized types of tourism such as “Hospital Tourism”, “Education Tourism” and “Religious Tourism” (Page, 2009). Another initiative undertaken by the government is the establishment of RESORTS to promote wildlife destination tourism in India. It realizes that one of the unique selling points of the whole Indian experience is to interface with Indian wildlife and features of the country that cannot be replicated anywhere else in the world. In this sense, wildlife tourism can also serve as a feature that attracts repeat tourists to the country.

However, this move to establish centers of tourism in the middle of jungles and forests has always brought the government in conflict with local communities present there as well as with conservationists who fear that such intrusion would destroy local habitats, local lifestyles and cultures (Macefield, 2009). In order to preempt such fears and to develop sustainable eco-tourism model the government has adopted a policy of collaboration with local communities by employing them in its RESORTS and lodges. It has also mandated that private sector players must employ from amongst the local populations to run their facilities in jungle areas (Piselli, 2009). Such a model, the government believes will provide additional employment to members of local communities which will also witness an increase in prosperity and standards of living. Such tourism is thought to be responsible, promoting quality life amongst hitherto underprivileged remote communities.

However according to Rathod et al., (2010), the jungle resort model will become viable business only if it is able to attract sufficient numbers of tourists. The modern tourist is a discerning individual who demands value for money spent (Beech and Chadwick, 2009). The whole tourist experience is viewed through the prism of customer service along the lines of tangibility, responsiveness, reliability, safety, assurance and empathy. Across the world, it has been proved, that securing these six dimensions are key to ensuring that customer service provided to guest is perceived as being ‘good’ (Gee, 2008). Good customer service in turn results in brand loyalty, repeat visits and positive word of mouth all of which translates into large turnover, profits and market share for the model/firm. This is as true for the jungle lodges as it is for other sectors of the hospitality industry.

Hence there is need to evaluate the quality of customer service provided in jungle resorts. Whilst much research has been conducted on customer service levels afforded to guests in five-star hotels, very little research has been made with regard to jungle lodges. This research will address this gap.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

From the open-ended questions, it was possible to construct a profile of staff in jungle hotels and resorts, the facilities on offer as well as the schedule of the guests. It was found that each hotel had a resort manager who together with the front office manager and the naturalist was mainly responsible for co-coordinating guest activities. These three persons also happened to be the only qualified members of the staff team in these resorts. They were aided in their tasks by a chef, housekeeping staff, drives, guides, security personnel, receptionists and electricians and plumbers. Figure 1 provides a synopsis of the profiles of typical staff at jungle resorts.

S.No.	Position	Qualified	Remarks	Profile
1	Resort manager	Yes	Stays there	Outsider
2	Front office Manager	Yes	managed by naturalist	Outsider
3	Housekeeping manager	Rarely	Trained staff managed by Front office manager	Outsider and local
4	Chef	Rarely	qualified only in very few hotels	Outsider and locals for supporting jobs
5	Naturalist	Yes	Mostly all of them are qualified and having a strong knowledge of flora & fauna. They are highly determined to work in such places and have enormous potential in making up the short falls.	Outsiders
6	Driver	Yes		Locals

7	Guides	Yes	Trained by forest department	Locals
8	Security	Can read and write		Locals
9	Waiters	No	Trained	Locals
10	Receptionist	No	Trained	Nearby area
11	Electrician/ Plumber	No	Trained	Locals

Figure 1 – Profile of Staff at Jungle Resorts

It was also found that the guest spent a maximum time of two nights and three days at the resorts. They spent their time mainly in outdoor activities such as treks and safaris. The rest of the time was spent in the restaurant and other indoor activities such as watching tribal dance performances or in the indoor swimming pools, library and health clubs. At all times, they are accompanied or interface with one or another of the hotel staff such as guides whilst trekking or the waiters & housekeeping people whilst indoors. Thus, it may be inferred that their experience at the lodge is as much a function of the service provided by the hotel staff as it is by the facilities provided on the site.

From the answers elicited to the close ended questions, it was found that the guests rated customer service levels in various areas such as reception, room service, housekeeping and security as being poor to mediocre. In terms of the tangibles such as physical appearance and grooming, all the respondents gave very low scores as can be seen in Figure 2.

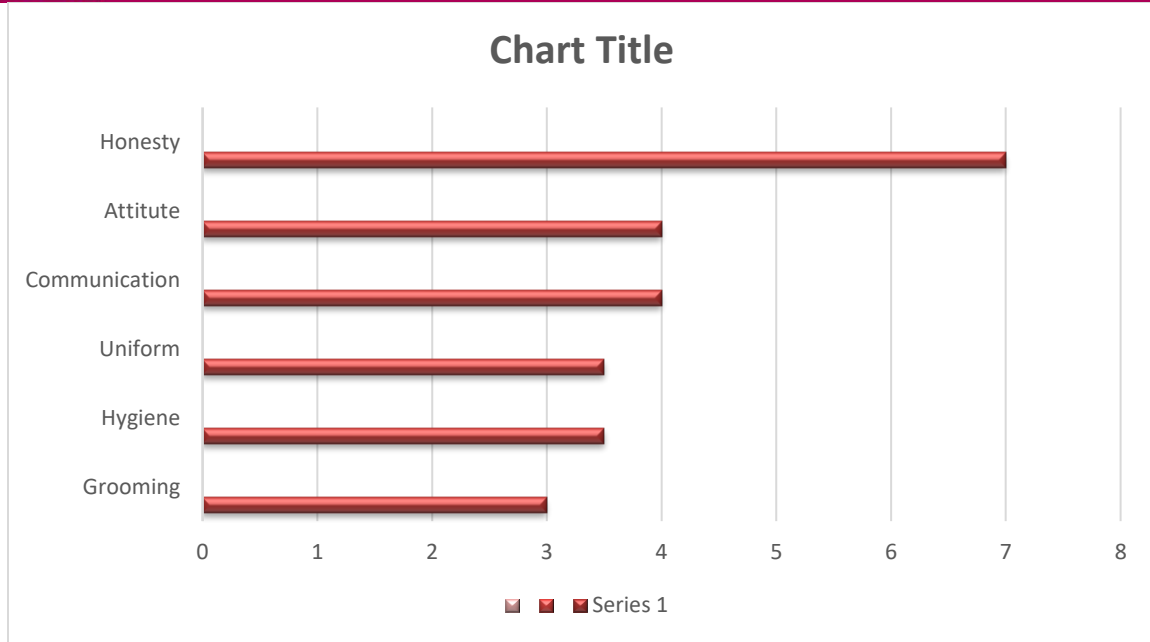


Figure 2 – Low Score accorded to Tangibles

Other tangibles however were rated pretty high. These included the facilities provided by the hotels and the arrangements made for the animal safaris. However, these while contributing to the overall customer experience are not dependent on the local communities but are rather a measure of the investments made by the government / company. In addition, the three qualified persons in each hotel, namely the naturalist, the resort manager and the front office managers were given good scores by the guests. Their levels of knowledge and their support in arranging safari activities and tribal dance and talent shows were much appreciated.

There are two inferences that can be made by this. The first is that there is a lack of training given to members of local communities who work in RESORTS and the second is that with proper training, development and grooming, the latter can develop in a manner that enables them to fulfill the ‘tangible’ aspect of customer service to their guests.

Figure 3 shows that the staff scored very low on other aspects of customer service as well including responsiveness, assurance, empathy, safety and reliability.

Many of the guests reported not feeling safe. It was found that lighting, particularly in open areas were very poor and there was inadequate security patrolling as well. All this contributed to the feelings of not being safe for the guests.

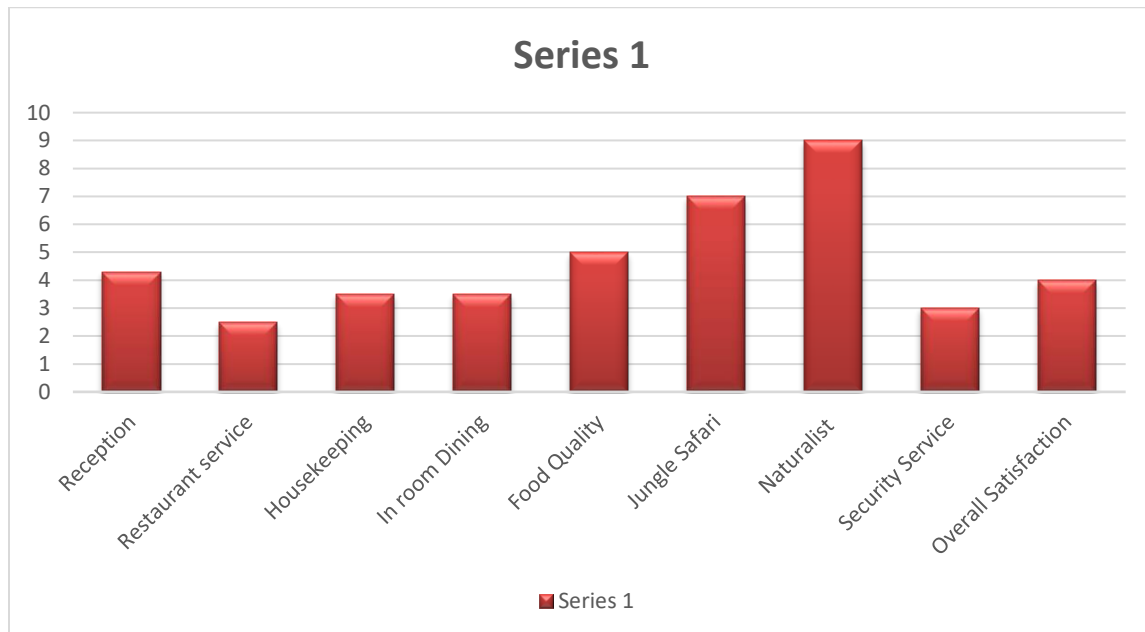


Figure 3 – Low Score accorded to other five dimensions of customer service

In terms of responsiveness, it was found that the waiters were unable to speak English and did not have any knowledge about what was on the menu as well. The bartenders were reported as being incapable of mixing drinks. Inordinate delays were reported in the serving of meals with the reception person being unable to answer even the simplest of queries and having instead to resorting to the front office managers for everything.

One of the areas where guests feel reassured is in the area of dining. However, from the responses obtained guests complained of long periods of time taken in preparation of a la carte orders. Moreover, room service was reported to be slow with the food being cold by the time it was served. Whilst the food served in the restaurant was good, the service was very slow. All of this contributed to a feeling of not feeling very assured by the guests.

The reliability and empathy parameter were also scored very low. The housekeeping department was unable to provide on demand services neither was the laundry performed to the satisfaction

of the guests. The cleanliness in the rooms pertaining to cleaning, dusting, replacement of sheets etc. left much to be desired. In addition, many requests were left unfulfilled. All this contributed to the feeling that the tariffs charged were too high for the levels of service accorded to the guests.

Conclusion

It is evident that the concept of jungle lodges and resorts is very innovative because of its ability to provide tourists with an experience that is quintessentially Indian. However, from the research conducted above, it is obvious that the levels of customer service given currently afforded to guests, their chances of returning are very slim. It appears that trained persons from outside the forest reserves have more stakes in ensuring the success of the model rather than employees from local communities. However, it is precisely the latter that have the most to lose in terms of income and employment, should the model fail due to poor levels of customer service. The recommendations given in the section 5 have to be implemented so that all the stakeholders in this model including the government / resort owners, the guests, the employees and the local communities are benefited.

On the basis of the above findings, the following recommendations may be made to improve the levels of customer service provided by guests at RESORTS and lodges.

A rigorous program of training and development has to be instituted for the staff of jungle resorts. Such program has to cover the finer points of customer service, grooming, hygiene and training in English Language. Moreover, such programs have to be continuous and supplemented by strict evaluation criteria.

Wherever possible, incentive has to be given to incorporate trained personnel in RESORTS in India. Persons from local communities can be attached to these persons in the capacity of apprentices. This will provide hands on experience and exposure to localities on world class service standards.

There has to be an improvement in communication skills so that the staff can understand guest requirements and fulfill them. Thus, apart from English they must also be fluent in Hindi to take care of domestic tourist requirements.

The benefits of such employment must be clearly told to localities. This is so that they understand the importance of promoting eco-tourism in developing their local communities as well. This will also enthruse them to learn and develop themselves.

It is very clear that customers at RESORTS do not take into account nuances of locals being employed and hence a drop in customer service levels. They expect the same kind of service they are used to even in jungle lodges. This has important implications for hoteliers and for the government. If they wish this very novel and innovative model to succeed, it is imperative that they device all possible means to provide very good customer service.

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