

Resurgence and transformation: the impact of COVID-19 on Myanmar's tourism industry and future trends

Impact of
COVID-19 on
tourism
industry

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper analyses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Myanmar's tourism industry, identifying challenges and innovations, and predicting future trends to foster a resilient and sustainable sector.

Design/methodology/approach – The study uses a comprehensive analysis of tourism trends, government and private sector responses and changes in tourist behaviour, employing data, case studies and policy reviews.

Findings – The pandemic significantly disrupted Myanmar's tourism, causing economic losses and shifts towards sustainable, outdoor and cultural experiences. Effective strategies by the government and private sector are aiding recovery and suggesting a more diverse and resilient future.

Research limitations/implications – The research is limited by the availability of data during the pandemic, highlighting the need for ongoing strategy adaptation.

Practical implications – The study recommends digitalization, health protocols, domestic tourism focus and sustainable practices for a robust post-pandemic industry.

Social implications – The study emphasizes the pandemic's social impact on tourism-dependent communities and the need for inclusive, sustainable tourism practices.

Originality/value – It provides unique insights into COVID-19's multifaceted impact on Myanmar's tourism, offering valuable information for future sector strategies.

Keywords COVID-19, Myanmar tourism, Industry transformation, Sustainable practices, Future trends

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

There has been considerable expansion in Myanmar's tourist sector prior to the COVID-19 outbreak (Clifton, Hampton, & Jeyacheya, 2018). The nation had started to gain popularity as a Southeast Asian tourist hotspot due to its beautiful scenery, friendly locals and storied past. Political reforms that welcomed foreign tourists, infrastructure upgrades and heightened interest in Myanmar's distinctive products and services all played a role in this expansion (Su & Li, 2021). An ever-increasing number of tourists were flocking to popular sites like Bagan's old city, Inle Lake and Yangon's Shwedagon Pagoda (Rich & Franck, 2016). Tourists and businesspeople alike were enticed by Myanmar because of its convenient placement among China, India and Southeast Asia.

The intricate relationship between politics and tourism in Myanmar is a subject of increasing importance in research literature. This complex dynamic is shaped by both

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internal and external political forces, making tourism a prominent and contested political issue. Various groups, particularly the government, use tourism as a political tool, reflecting their distinct interests and agendas (Henderson, 2003). The Myanmar Tourism Master Plan 2013–2020, based on “Responsible Tourism” and sustainable development, faces challenges in implementation due to internal and external factors. Furthermore, domestic tourism, often overshadowed by inbound tourism, has evolved post-2010 political transition (Kongsasana & Theerapappisit, 2014). Changes in travel patterns, such as increased private car travel and the evolution of pilgrimages into leisure activities, highlight a shift towards more individualistic and hedonistic practices, reshaping Myanmar’s domestic tourism landscape (Michalon, 2018).

With its substantial contributions to GDP, employment opportunities and promotion of socioeconomic development in different regions, the tourism sector has grown into an essential part of Myanmar’s economy (Su & Li, 2021). Investment in marketing campaigns, more accessible visa procedures and collaboration with international organizations to promote sustainable tourist practices were all steps taken by the government in response to the promise of tourism (Aung, 2019). During this time, Myanmar welcomed a wide variety of tourists, from those on a tight budget to those in search of more luxurious accommodations and genuine local experiences. Small businesses and towns were also able to reap the benefits of the tourism industry’s expansion, which was good news for everyone concerned (Htet, 2022).

The graph in Figure 1 illustrates the growth in tourist numbers and tourism revenue in Myanmar from 2015 to 2019, before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. As shown, there was a consistent upward trend in both the number of tourists visiting Myanmar and the revenue generated from tourism during these years. This graphical representation provides a clear visual depiction of the tourism sector’s growth in Myanmar, leading up to the pandemic.

COVID-19 posed new and unprecedented difficulties for the travel sector around the world. Worldwide travel ground to a halt as nations instituted lockdowns and border closures to contain the outbreak. Many people cancelled their flights, hotel reservations and tour plans

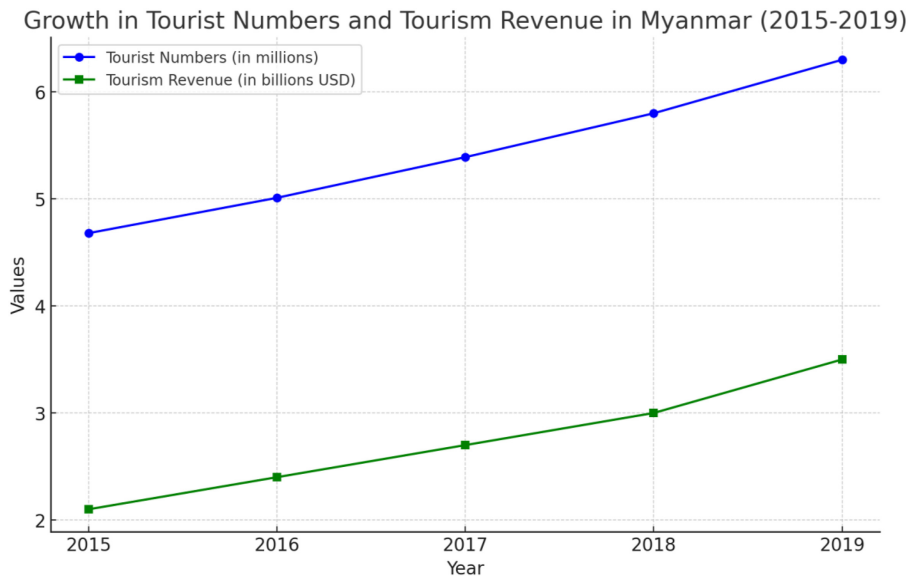


Figure 1.
Pre-COVID tourism
trends in Myanmar

Source(s): World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) (2021)

because of the epidemic, which caused a huge drop in revenue for the industry as a whole. Reports from the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) indicate a precipitous decline in international visitor arrivals, which has had a domino impact on tourist-dependent businesses (Bharwani & Mathews, 2021).

Not only did the pandemic hinder travel, but it also changed the way tourists behaved and what they preferred. People started looking for different kinds of vacation spots and activities as a result of health and safety concerns taking centre stage. Demand for outdoor activities, private accommodations and less congested locales surged (Fotiadis, Polyzos, & Huan, 2021). An uptick in virtual tourist experiences and contactless services was another consequence of the crisis hastening digital revolution in the sector. Financial assistance and the establishment of health and safety standards to regain the trust of tourists were among the swiftly developed plans to bolster the floundering industry (Zreik, 2023a).

This study seeks to offer a thorough examination of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected Myanmar's tourist sector, taking into account both the industry's expansion prior to the pandemic and the worldwide difficulties caused by the virus. One of the many goals is to determine how the pandemic has already affected Myanmar's tourist industry, taking into account things like economic losses, changes in visitor numbers and how the government and commercial sector have responded. Second, this study aims to delve into the various innovations and methods that have been implemented in response to these issues. Some examples include the adoption of health protocols, the rise of domestic tourism and the transition to digital platforms.

The methodology of this study is an analytical descriptive approach, focusing on a thorough review of existing literature, reports and secondary data pertinent to Myanmar's tourism industry before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. This method involves critical analysis and synthesis of various sources, including academic articles, industry reports, government documents and tourism statistics, to gain insights into the sector's dynamics, challenges and emerging trends. The data collected were analysed to identify patterns and implications of the pandemic's impact on tourism, while ensuring a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the industry's response and adaptation strategies.

Understanding the dynamics of shifting tourist tastes and behaviours during and after the pandemic, especially in relation to responsible and sustainable tourism, is another key objective. To help the tourist industry in Myanmar recover and remain resilient, this study will also analyse how government policies and international collaboration have played a part. In the post-COVID era, a more sustainable, inclusive and resilient tourism model is needed; lastly, the study seeks to predict future trends and find possible prospects for the business. Contributing to the strategic planning for the revitalization of Myanmar's tourism industry, this study aims to provide insights and recommendations to policymakers, industry stakeholders and researchers through its analysis.

2. The immediate impact of COVID-19 on Myanmar's tourism industry

2.1 Decline in international visitors

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded globally, Myanmar's tourism industry, like many others, faced immediate and profound challenges. A notable effect was the precipitous fall in tourists from other countries (Boughton *et al.*, 2021). A large number of tourists were unable to visit Myanmar because of the country's and the world's harsh travel restrictions. Before the pandemic, Myanmar was experiencing a growing influx of international tourists. This trend saw a significant increase, such as in 2016 when the country welcomed around 2.9 million visitors. This upward trajectory in tourist numbers sharply contrasted with the sudden decline experienced during the pandemic (Clifton *et al.*, 2018; World Travel and Tourism Council, 2016).

The bar chart in [Figure 2](#) displays the sharp decline in international visitor numbers to Myanmar during the pandemic years, from 2019 to 2021. The graph starkly illustrates the significant drop in tourism, particularly highlighting the drastic reduction in international visitors as a result of travel restrictions and global health concerns. This visual representation effectively communicates the immediate and severe impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Myanmar's tourism sector.

This drop was mostly caused by the quarantine measures taken to stop the spread of the virus, which included the cancellation of all international flights and the closing of borders. Tourist permits were put on hold, and numerous nations warned citizens against unnecessary travel, especially to areas hit by the pandemic ([Holloway & Humphreys, 2022](#)). People were already hesitant to travel during the pandemic out of concern for contracting the virus. This sudden halt in foreign travel had serious consequences for Myanmar, a nation that relied heavily on tourism for both revenue and economic progress.

Many people and organizations involved in the tourism industry felt the effects of the drop in visitors. Businesses in the area, such as hotels and tour operators, that relied greatly on tourists from other countries were hit hard financially ([Radivojević, Dimovski, & Mitić, 2023](#)). Businesses in popular tourist areas were among those that had to temporarily or permanently close their doors, causing economic hardship and the loss of jobs for many people employed there. Indirect beneficiaries of tourism, such as supplementary services and local communities, also felt the effects ([Headey et al., 2022](#)).

This incident demonstrated how susceptible Myanmar's tourist industry is to worldwide disturbances and how urgent the need is for measures that are more robust and diverse. The industry woke up to its reliance on foreign tourism after seeing a precipitous fall in international tourists, which led to the investigation of potential future models that are less reliant on this revenue stream.

2.2 Economic losses and employment challenges

The economic fallout from the decline in international tourism due to COVID-19 was deeply felt across Myanmar's tourism sector. An unexpected and severe slump befell this industry, which had grown into a lynchpin of the country's economic growth, making substantial contributions to GDP and employment ([Mahmud & Jabin, 2022](#)). There was a domino effect

Decline in International Visitor Numbers to Myanmar During the Pandemic (2019-2021)

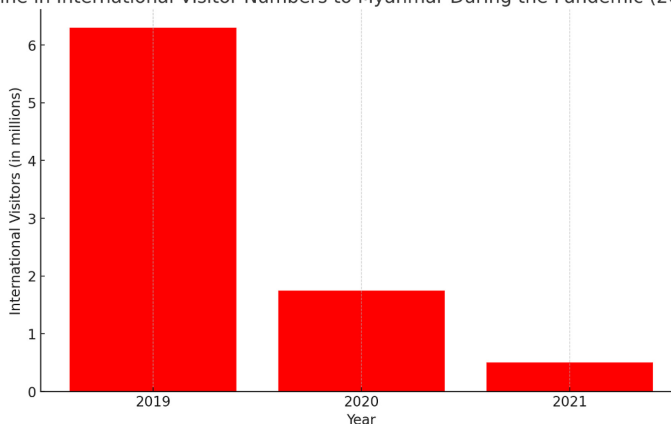


Figure 2.
Impact of COVID-19 on international visitor arrivals

Source(s): United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) (2020)

that affected many related sectors when people stopped travelling internationally, including transportation, hospitality and local crafts, which led to a precipitous drop in income from tourists (Boughton *et al.*, 2023). The tourism sector in Myanmar, like many others globally, faced significant challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a dramatic decline in tourist arrivals and tourism income in 2020 compared to 2019 (World Bank, 2020).

In the years leading up to the pandemic, hotels, resorts and tour operators had been enjoying rising revenues. However, all of a sudden, they were hit with cancellations and unfilled bookings. The lack of activity for an extended length of time was too much for many of these firms, especially the smaller ones that were owned by locals. Many companies had to make the tough choice to lay off workers or shut down completely as a result of the extensive financial strain that ensued (Ferreira, Salvucci, & Tarp, 2021).

The impact of COVID-19 on Myanmar's tourism industry, crucial to its GDP, has been significant. Research involving 100 stakeholders from Yangon used random sampling and questionnaires to reveal the sector's vulnerability due to its dependence on international tourism. Economic effects were marked by financial losses and disrupted demand and supply chains. Socially, business owners faced stress and anxiety (Htoo & Kyaw, 2023). This situation requires enhancing stakeholder capacity and promoting public-private partnerships for future growth. In addressing the pandemic, Myanmar also contended with a military coup in February 2021, complicating recovery (Htet & Batra, 2021).

There were extensive and serious problems with the job market. Unemployment rates spiked in areas of Myanmar that rely largely on tourism as a result of the mass layoffs in the country's tourism industry (Hudson, 2022). This was especially difficult in a nation where a large portion of the people depends on their income from day-to-day activities. A wider range of economic sectors felt the effects, not only individuals directly involved in the tourist industry. Street sellers, tour operators and artists were among of the most impacted informal workers because their livelihoods were directly tied to the number of tourists (Kandpal, 2023).

The line graph in Figure 3 presents the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on revenue, employment and business closures in Myanmar's tourism sector from 2019 to 2021. The graph illustrates a significant increase in revenue loss, job losses and the number of business closures over these years, highlighting the severe economic consequences of the pandemic on the tourism industry. Each line represents a different aspect of the impact – revenue loss, job losses and business closures – offering a comprehensive view of the challenges faced by the sector during this period. This figure effectively communicates the multifaceted economic repercussions of the pandemic on Myanmar's tourism industry.

The necessity for a tourist business in Myanmar that is more robust and sustainable was further brought to light by this economic crisis. The pandemic highlighted the need to diversify the tourist sector and the peril of depending largely on foreign tourists. To lessen the blow of future crises like these, it highlighted the need for improved safety nets and professional development opportunities for sector workers.

2.3 Government and private sector responses

After COVID-19 devastated Myanmar's tourist industry, the government and corporate sector worked together to implement a variety of measures to lessen the impact of the crisis and set the stage for recovery. Because of the sector's importance to the economy, the government took many steps to help companies and workers hit hard by the recession. Businesses in the tourist industry were among those that were eligible for financial aid programmes that provided loans and subsidies to help them weather the pandemic. To further alleviate the financial strain on tourism companies, the government also sought to revise tax policies and provide tax relief (Wai *et al.*, 2021).

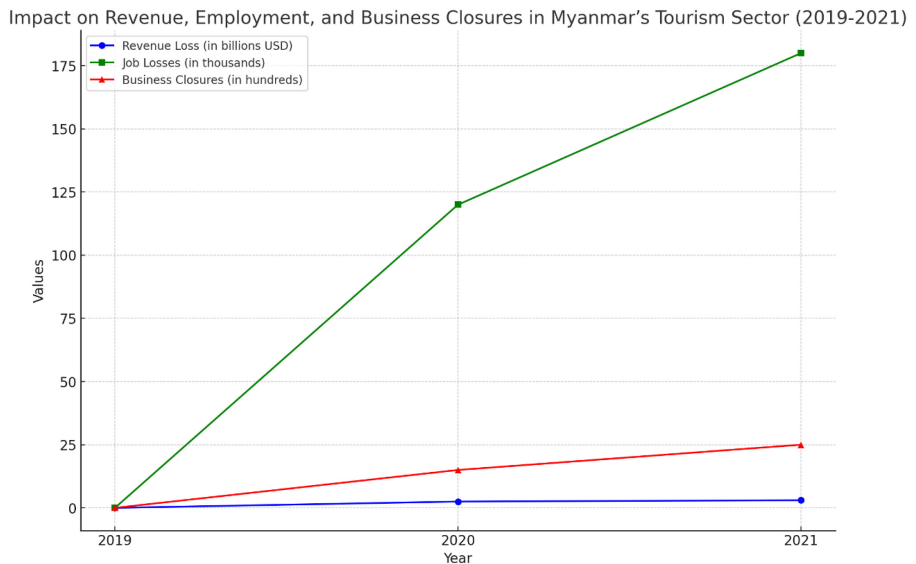


Figure 3.
Financial impact on
Myanmar's tourism
sector

Source(s): World Bank (2022)

Even if it was in a different light, the country's profile as a tourist destination was also kept up. Campaigns promoting Myanmar as a secure destination, with health and safety measures in line with international norms, were initiated by the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism in conjunction with international organizations (Allaberganov, Preko, & Mohammed, 2021). These steps were critical in restoring faith among tourists and laying the framework for their eventual return.

Also, the private sector was lightning fast in responding to the new threats, showcasing incredible creativity and agility. For example, several tour companies and hotels shifted their focus to domestic tourists, offering special deals and packages to entice people from the area (Kahveci, 2023). Although it was at a reduced level, this change helped keep some businesses afloat and jobs available. The private sector's reaction was heavily influenced by digital transformation. Many companies shifted their marketing efforts to digital channels as a result of the limitations on physical travel (Zreik, 2023b). In order to stay relevant and ready for the recovery, businesses started using virtual tours, Internet marketing campaigns and better online booking systems more frequently.

More importantly, the crisis prompted a paradigm shift in the tourist industry, placing a premium on eco-friendly and socially conscious activities. In an effort to broaden their customer base and make sure that locals felt the full impact of tourism, a few companies in the private sector started looking at community-based tourism projects. Both the shifting tastes of tourists, who were looking for more genuine and ecologically conscious adventures, and the worldwide movement towards sustainable tourism were met with enthusiasm by this strategy (Lapko *et al.*, 2021). The importance of working together in these endeavours was acknowledged by both the public and private sectors. Training programmes for workers to enhance their abilities in line with the changing market demands were developed as part of initiatives for the sector's recovery through public-private partnerships (Ullah, Haji-Othman, & Daud, 2021). The concerted response to the crisis was made possible by this collaborative approach, which laid the groundwork for a more robust and diverse tourist business in Myanmar after the pandemic.

3. Adaptive strategies and innovations

3.1 Health and safety protocols

Similar to other countries, Myanmar's tourism industry had to swiftly adjust in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, placing a premium on health and safety measures to safeguard both residents and tourists. As a result, the industry's plan to deal with the crisis and be ready for recovery revolved around strict health and safety regulations. The government, in conjunction with health agencies and international groups, drafted detailed regulations for several parts of the tourist industry (Grundy-Warr & Lin, 2020). Health screenings at entrance points like airports and bus terminals, social distance in hotels, restaurants and tourist sites, and the required use of face masks were all measures included in these rules. Ensuring safety was the primary goal of these measures, but rebuilding traveller confidence was also an important part of getting the industry back on its feet.

Personnel involved in the tourist value chain were educated on these new protocols through training programmes. Training on the successful implementation and management of these health measures was provided to key stakeholders, including hotels, tour operators and transport providers (Tiwari, Séraphin, & Chowdhary, 2021). The protocols had to be in place and continuously followed, and this training made sure of that. Certifications pertaining to health and safety also gained popularity. Businesses were certified when they met the safety standards, which made them more trustworthy to potential tourists (Davras & Durgun, 2022). Tourists could rest easy knowing that Myanmar was a welcoming and safe destination because of these credentials, which could be seen in many promotional materials.

3.2 Digitalization and virtual tourism initiatives

In order to stay afloat and continue growing, Myanmar's tourist industry had to undergo a digital change, which the COVID-19 pandemic hastened. In response to the travel restrictions, stakeholders quickly embraced digital solutions to sustain the industry and continue engaging with prospective tourists. Virtual tours of important sites like Mandalay, Bagan and Inle Lake rose to prominence as part of a larger trend towards virtual tourism (Su & Li, 2021). The virtual experiences showcased Myanmar's cultural and natural treasures to an international audience, ensuring that the country remained prominent in the minds of potential tourists. Despite the worldwide travel embargo, interest in Myanmar as a vacation spot persisted, thanks in large part to these creative Internet experiences that highlighted the country's attractions.

Digital marketing also saw a dramatic upturn in the sector. The tourism industry as a whole, from five-star hotels to mom-and-pop tour operators, has recently undergone a digital makeover, expanding their audience reach through digital advertising and social media (Myat, Sharkasi, & Rajasekera, 2023). Focus on three- and four-star hotels during the pandemic showed their adherence to international safety standards and WHO protocols. Interviews with guests and hotel managers in Mandalay and Muse confirmed their commitment to ensuring health and safety, a key industry concern (Oo & Batra, 2020). This change was essential in creating an online link between Myanmar's tourist attractions and the international travel community, thereby allowing people to feel connected even when they can't physically visit the country.

The improvement of online payment and booking systems was another important area of digitization. In the wake of the pandemic, the travel industry embraced more advanced e-commerce systems to facilitate speedy, contactless transactions (Headey *et al.*, 2022). In addition to enhancing safety and convenience during the pandemic, this improvement set the sector up to better fulfil the demands of a tech-savvy customer base in the years after the event.

3.3 *Shift towards domestic tourism*

A strategic movement towards domestic tourism in Myanmar was initiated by the pandemic, which disrupted international travel. This move was driven by need and presented an opportunity for the business. The tourism industry had to shift its focus to domestic travellers in order to survive when borders were closed and international travel came to a standstill. Realizing the home market's unrealized potential led to this change, which was more than just a quick fix for the crisis.

The various landscapes, historical locations and rich cultural history of Myanmar have long held the ability to captivate local audiences. But getting people from other countries to visit had been the main goal before the outbreak. Tourist businesses adapted their services to better suit the needs of the locals in response to the unexpected shift in demand. Marketing initiatives aimed squarely at Myanmar citizens, more reasonably priced vacation packages and experiences tailored to local interests were all part of the plan (Boughton *et al.*, 2023). Businesses and towns that relied significantly on tourism for revenue also benefitted greatly from efforts to boost domestic tourism. Attractions, hotels and resorts in the area shifted their focus to domestic tourists by lowering their prices and introducing new deals (Ferreira *et al.*, 2021). Not only did these programmes aid companies in staying afloat, but they also contributed to the nation's enduring love of discovery and travel.

More people became aware of and appreciated local places as a result of the emphasis on domestic tourism. As a result, more individuals felt a sense of belonging to their nation and pride in its diversity and beauty. In addition to boosting local economies, this domestic tourist push helped disperse the country's economic advantages more uniformly. There will be long-term benefits for Myanmar's tourism industry from the trend towards domestic tourism. It has shown how important it is to take a balanced approach that considers local and international tourists equally, so that the tourism industry may be more robust and viable in the long run.

4. **Changing dynamics in tourist preferences and behaviour**

4.1 *Growing interest in outdoor and cultural experiences*

There has been a noticeable uptick in interest in cultural and outdoor experiences among tourists since the COVID-19 outbreak. People started looking for places and things to do that would naturally make them feel more isolated from others while providing them with fulfilling experiences as the globe struggled with the limitations imposed by the pandemic. For instance, the resurgence of interest in the ancient city of Bagan offers an insightful example. Tourists are increasingly drawn to Bagan not only for its breath-taking landscapes and historic pagodas but also for the opportunity to engage in unique cultural experiences like traditional Burmese cooking classes, local artisan workshops and interactive community tours (Soe, 2023). This does not only corroborate the identified shift in preferences but also provides actionable insights into how other destinations in Myanmar can adapt to these emerging trends.

Urban attractions, amusement parks and overcrowded beach resorts were popular alternatives before the pandemic, so this change was a big deal (Zreik & Abumamous, 2020). This shifting dynamic became apparent in Myanmar as an increasing number of tourists, both local and foreign, began to take a keener interest in the country's extensive cultural history and breath-taking natural scenery. Tourist interest increased at popular destinations such as Bagan, home to thousands of temples, the ancient city of Inle Lake and the Mergui Archipelago, known for its pristine beaches (Md Shahin & Hasan, 2023). These locations not only provide the peace and quiet of open, less populated areas, but they also gave visitors the chance to immerse themselves in Myanmar's rich cultural heritage and enjoy some truly unforgettable adventures.

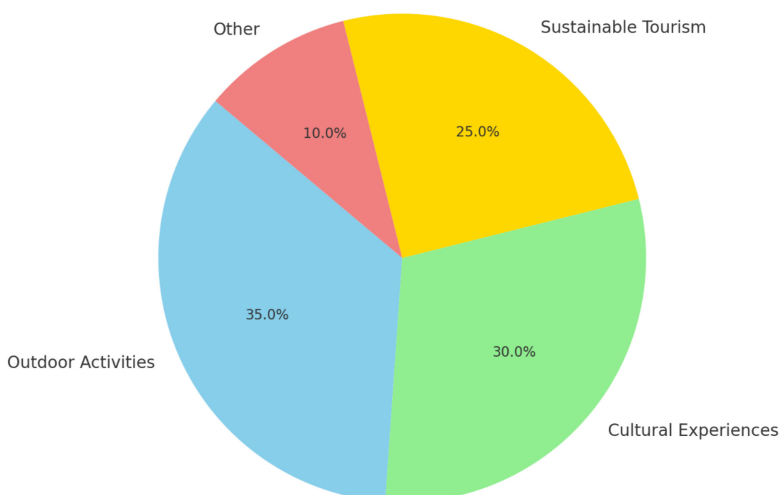
An additional benefit of the pandemic was the rediscovery of the value of cultural immersion experiences. Tourists started looking for ways to engage with locals on a deeper level, to learn about their traditions and culture. A worldwide movement towards responsible and experience tourism coincided with this change. Village homestays, traditional craft workshops and cultural excursions guided by local experts are just a few examples of the more customized and authentic experiences that tour operators and communities in Myanmar began to provide in response. Local economy and cultural preservation were both bolstered by these experiences, which also met the changing tastes of tourists (Htoo & Kyaw, 2023).

Outdoor pursuits such as bicycling, bird-watching and trekking also saw a surge in popularity (Buckley & Westaway, 2020). In addition to satisfying a rising demand for health and wellness-focused vacations, these activities gave visitors a chance to see Myanmar's breath-taking natural beauty. Outdoor activities offered the ideal combination of excitement and health advantages, which had become more important due to the pandemic.

The pie chart in Figure 4 illustrates the shift in tourist preferences towards different types of experiences in the post-pandemic era. It shows the distribution of interest among various tourism experiences, with outdoor activities, cultural experiences and sustainable tourism making up the significant portions. This visual representation highlights the changing landscape of tourism preferences, where there is a clear inclination towards experiences that are more in harmony with nature, culturally enriching and environmentally sustainable. Such insights are valuable for understanding the evolving trends in tourist behaviour and can aid in strategizing the future direction of Myanmar's tourism industry.

A more sustainable, authentic and wellness-oriented travel industry is emerging, and this trend for outdoor and cultural activities is a microcosm of it. Because of its abundant cultural and ecological attractions, Myanmar stands to gain a new audience of tourists in the aftermath of the pandemic if it takes advantage of this shift.

Shift in Tourist Preferences Towards Different Experiences Post-Pandemic



Source(s): International Monetary Fund (2021)

Figure 4.
Shift in tourist
preferences
post-COVID

4.2 Sustainability and responsible tourism

The pandemic's disruption of the global tourism industry has catalysed a significant shift towards sustainability and responsible tourism, a trend that is particularly relevant for a country like Myanmar (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). Travellers and industry players alike are becoming more aware of the negative effects that tourism may have on society, the environment and the economy, which is driving this change.

Because of the tourist embargo, Myanmar was able to take stock, re-evaluate and refocus its efforts on becoming a more sustainable destination. Striking a balance between the economic advantages of tourism and the need to conserve the country's cultural and natural treasures became increasingly apparent as the key to recovery and long-term success. The importance of expanding tourism in a manner that promotes cultural heritage, supports local communities and respects the environment was once again highlighted after this revelation.

As a result of several efforts, sustainable tourism in Myanmar started to take form. Among these, it is important to highlight eco-friendly lodgings and eco-conscious vacation packages (Hameed, Hussain, & Khan, 2022). Reducing trash, conserving water and using renewable energy sources are just a few examples of the eco-friendly practices that hotels and resorts have begun to embrace. Not only did this cater to the growing number of environmentally concerned tourists, but it was also in line with worldwide environmental concerns.

Additionally, there was a movement towards community-based tourism projects, the goal of which is to make sure that local communities get their fair share of the tourist boom. Homestays, community-led tours and traditional activity participation were some of the ways in which these programmes immersed visitors in local life while also reinvesting a large sum of money into the local economy. Both the local economy and cultural traditions and crafts are benefitted by these kinds of experiences.

Ethical considerations, such as preserving native customs and languages, promoting equal job opportunities in the tourism industry and limiting visitors to environmentally fragile regions, became more prominent in the context of responsible tourism (Koščak & O'Rourke, 2023). A culture of respect and sustainability was promoted through campaigns that tour operators and government entities launched to educate both tourists and locals about responsible tourism practices. The tourist business in Myanmar has undergone a significant transformation, with a focus on sustainability and responsible travel. It lays the groundwork for a more robust and ethical tourism industry while simultaneously catering to passengers' evolving tastes. Environmentalists, community members and Myanmar's tourism industry as a whole stand to gain in the long run from this strategy.

5. Government policies and international cooperation

5.1 Policy measures for tourism sector support

The government of Myanmar took numerous steps in reaction to the pandemic-induced tourist industry crisis, with the primary goals of bolstering the sector immediately and setting the stage for a long-term recovery. The government launched a number of programmes to mitigate the effects of the pandemic and aid in the recovery of the industry because of its critical role in generating economic growth and jobs. In 2019, Myanmar's tourism industry welcomed over 4.36 million tourists. However, the numbers dropped drastically due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with only 0.9 million tourists in 2020 and 0.13 million in 2021 (Myanmar Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, 2021).

Introducing financial assistance packages was one of the main policy actions. Businesses in the tourist industry were the intended recipients of these packages, which comprised subsidies, low-interest loans and other forms of fiscal relief (Allaberganov *et al.*, 2021). Many industry small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) relied on this financial assistance

because they were having trouble making ends meet when tourism came to a sudden stop (Radivojević *et al.*, 2023). The plan all along was to give these companies a financial boost so they could weather the storm and hold on to their workers.

Both monetary aid and regulatory changes were made by the government to better suit the new situation. Businesses in the tourist industry, for example, have had their licensing procedures simplified and regulatory impediments reduced in an effort to facilitate their ability to innovate and adapt to new circumstances. Businesses were able to swiftly adapt to changes in the market, such as a focus on domestic tourism or the implementation of new health and safety regulations, thanks to the regulatory leeway (Holloway & Humphreys, 2022).

In addition, the government has made measures to improve the tourist industry's infrastructure and capacities. Among these measures was funding digital infrastructure to facilitate the sector's transition to digital platforms and immersive virtual experiences (Myat *et al.*, 2023). Workers in the tourist industry were also given training and capacity-building programmes to help them become more knowledgeable and prepared for life after the pandemic. The government of Myanmar took these policy steps, which helped the tourist industry right away and set the stage for its eventual revival. The government's action in resolving the industry's financial, regulatory and capability issues shows its dedication to bolstering and reviving a critical sector of the economy.

To address the role of government policies in aiding the recovery of Myanmar's tourism sector, it is recommended that the government develops comprehensive recovery plans encompassing financial support, tax reliefs and regulatory adjustments for tourism businesses. Investing in infrastructure, with an emphasis on sustainability and accessibility, is crucial to attracting a broader spectrum of tourists. Moreover, the government should implement targeted initiatives to promote domestic tourism, which can serve as a buffer against international market fluctuations and sustain the industry during periods of decreased foreign tourist arrivals.

5.2 Role of international agencies and partnerships

As the COVID-19 situation unfolded, the importance of international agencies and collaborations in bolstering Myanmar's tourism economy grew. The sector was able to recover from the pandemic and become more resilient in the future, thanks to the invaluable advice, resources and knowledge offered by these partnerships. Important international organizations that provided strategic counsel and financial aid were the World Bank and the UNWTO. Myanmar was able to better align its recovery strategy with worldwide best practices because of the insightful analysis of global tourist trends. The development of local policies and activities that were effective and in line with global trends in the tourism industry relied heavily on this direction.

Projects aiming at sustainable tourist development and infrastructure improvements also received substantial financial backing from international organizations. In the wake of the pandemic, these monies went into improving Myanmar's tourist infrastructure, making the country's attractions more welcoming and secure for visitors. To further guarantee that tourism's advantages were dispersed more fairly and in line with sustainable development objectives, they also backed community-based tourist initiatives.

Through collaborations with global NGOs and professionals in the field, knowledge in sustainable tourism practices and digital marketing tactics were brought to the table. In order to better adapt to the changing terrain, Myanmar's tourist sector was able to benefit from knowledge transfer and capacity-building through these partnerships (Grundy-Warr & Lin, 2020). Skills and expertise were shared through workshops, training programmes and collaborative projects, which improved the sector's overall competency. More than that,

though, these partnerships with other countries raised Myanmar's prominence internationally. Myanmar should convey its preparedness to welcome tourists in a responsible and safe way by interacting with international organizations and partners. The country's cultural and ecological treasures were able to reach more people through these collaborations, which kept and increased interest in Myanmar as a tourist destination.

In terms of international cooperation, strengthening partnerships with global tourism organizations is essential for knowledge exchange, financial assistance and access to best practices. Encouraging foreign investment in sustainable and eco-tourism projects will not only boost the sector but also promote environmentally responsible tourism. Collaborative marketing efforts with neighbouring countries to promote regional tourism and create attractive multi-destination packages can also play a significant role. These measures, when combined, are aimed at fostering a more resilient, sustainable and diversified tourism industry in Myanmar, capable of withstanding future challenges and contributing effectively to the country's economic recovery.

6. Future trends and potential opportunities in Myanmar's tourism

There are new possibilities and threats for Myanmar's tourist industry in the post-pandemic age. As the globe adjusts to the new normal, a number of trends and opportunities for growth will determine Myanmar's tourism industry future. Not only do these tendencies mirror the pandemic's effects, but they also line up with larger worldwide patterns in travel and tourism. Resumption of travel, albeit with altered focus and tastes, is a major forecast for Myanmar's tourist industry following the pandemic. Travellers will look for places with well-defined and consistently enforced safety measures, suggesting that health and safety will remain a top priority. Tourism providers in Myanmar must remain steadfast in their commitment to upholding high standards of cleanliness and health safety in order to combat this tendency.

Digital nomadism and work-friendly tourism from remote locations will also be big trends. Destinations that can accommodate digital nomads, such as those with stable Internet, coworking spaces and long-term housing choices, are likely to witness a surge in demand as the pandemic hastens the transition to remote employment. Myanmar may be able to entice this new type of tourist due to its beautiful landscapes and rich cultural history.

The trend towards environmentally conscious and sustainable vacations is only going to heat up. Tourists are looking for sustainable experiences that are both educational and enjoyable, as they are more aware of the impact they might have on the environment. This trend is in line with Myanmar's current initiatives to promote eco-tourism and its many natural features. To appeal to this expanding demographic of tourists, it will be essential to create and publicize environmentally conscious lodgings, excursions and activities.

There are a lot of chances for Myanmar's tourist industry because of the emphasis on sustainability (Łapko *et al.*, 2021). The nation can maintain its cultural and environmental treasures for the sake of future generations and provide tourists with memorable experiences if it places an emphasis on sustainable practices. Making sure that tourism development does not lead to environmental deterioration is part of this, as is assisting local communities through community-based tourism programmes and promoting conservation activities.

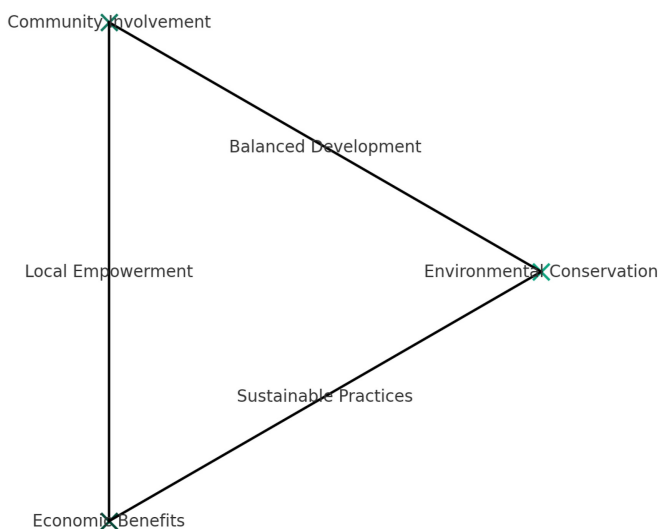
An additional potential avenue for development is inclusive growth. In underdeveloped and rural areas, in particular, the tourist industry has the potential to spur economic growth that is good for many people. Myanmar has the potential to promote more economic and social inclusion through the creation of tourist goods and experiences that include locals and distribute the advantages of tourism more fairly. This method guarantees that the local community reaps the benefits of tourism while also improving the experience for tourists through genuine relationships.

The model in Figure 5 succinctly captures the essence of sustainable tourism development, integrating three core elements: environmental conservation, community involvement and economic benefits. It underscores the necessity of preserving natural resources and reducing the environmental footprint of tourism, while actively involving local communities in the tourism development process to ensure they reap its benefits and their cultural heritage is preserved. Simultaneously, it emphasizes the economic potential of tourism, advocating for equitable wealth distribution and economic growth. The model highlights the interdependence of these elements, advocating for balanced development, local empowerment and sustainable practices, to foster a tourism sector that is not only economically viable but also environmentally and socially responsible.

Another promising area is the incorporation of technology into tourist experiences. Technology has the potential to improve both the visitor experience and the efficiency of service providers; for example, virtual reality tours of Myanmar's attractions or tailored travel advice powered by artificial intelligence can greatly benefit both parties. The key to seizing this opportunity lies in investing in digital infrastructure and capabilities. The tourism sector in Myanmar has a great opportunity to capitalize on the country's rich cultural history through cultural tourism. Myanmar can set itself apart from other tourism destinations by creating experiences that let visitors fully immerse themselves in the rich cultural heritage of the country. In addition to fostering cultural preservation, these encounters can draw in a diverse group of tourists.

New opportunities for expansion are opening up in the specialty tourist industry, which includes activities like culinary tourism, wellness tourism and adventure tourism. Myanmar may attract a wider variety of tourists and lessen its reliance on any one market by tailoring its services to individual interests and tastes.

Key Components of Sustainable Tourism Development Model



Source(s): Asian Development Bank (2021)

Figure 5.
Framework for
sustainable tourism
development

7. Conclusion

When it comes to tourism, the COVID-19 pandemic has utterly devastated Myanmar. Despite the many difficulties, this crisis has provided opportunities for growth, creativity and resilience. By implementing health and safety protocols, using digital technology and shifting towards domestic tourism, the sector has shown its resilience and adaptability in reaction to the pandemic.

Looking ahead, the emerging trends and prospects provide a road map for the revival and development of Myanmar's tourist industry. Not only are there wider changes in global travel preferences, but there is also a rise in interest in outdoor and cultural experiences, a movement towards responsible and sustainable tourism and even the possibility of adopting digital nomadism and technology-integrated tourism as a response to the pandemic.

It would not have been possible during this time without the vital assistance and guidance provided by the government and international partnerships to the business. International cooperation and policy actions to provide financial and regulatory assistance have set the stage for future growth and recovery. Sustainable and inclusive development should be the guiding principles of Myanmar's tourist sector as it adapts to life after the pandemic. This includes making sure that local communities and other stakeholders reap the advantages of tourist growth while also making the most of the country's abundant cultural and natural resources. The key to a resilient and successful tourism sector is to embrace sustainability, leverage technology and prioritize the well-being and interests of both tourists and inhabitants.

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