



ISSN: 2230-9926

Available online at <http://www.journalijdr.com>

IJDR

International Journal of Development Research

Vol. 16, Issue, 09, pp.70972-70975, September, 2026
<https://doi.org/10.37118/ijdr.31109.09.2026>



RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

TOURISM IN MEGHALAYA: EMERGING TRENDS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 18th June, 2026
Received in revised form
19th July, 2026
Accepted 29th August, 2026
Published online 30th September, 2026

Key words:

Meghalaya, Tourism, Problems,
Economic, Development.

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ABSTRACT

Meghalaya is one of India's most promising tourism destinations, renowned for its exceptional natural beauty, rich biodiversity, historical landmarks, tea gardens and vibrant cultural heritage. Characterised by pine-clad hills, terraced landscapes, serene river valleys, majestic waterfalls and a diverse range of flora and fauna, the state possesses immense potential for tourism-led economic development. The tourism sector can play a pivotal role in stimulating economic growth by generating employment opportunities, enhancing household incomes, attracting investment, promoting regional development and contributing to state revenue. Despite these significant comparative advantages, the tourism industry in Meghalaya remains underutilised owing to inadequate infrastructure, limited accessibility, insufficient promotional efforts and other structural constraints. Drawing on secondary data, this study seeks to examine the growth and performance of tourism in Meghalaya over the years and to identify the major challenges that hinder its sustainable development and economic contribution.

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Citation: Dr. Koyel Roy. 2026. "Tourism in Meghalaya: Emerging Trends and Future Prospects". *International Journal of Development Research*, 16, (09), 70972-70975.

INTRODUCTION

Meghalaya, located in the north-eastern region of India, possesses immense tourism potential, although the sector has yet to fully capitalise on the opportunities available. The state is widely recognised for its breathtaking natural beauty, rich biodiversity, historical landmarks, indigenous heritage, tea gardens and vibrant cultural festivals, all of which make it an attractive destination for tourists. Tourism in Meghalaya is primarily centred on nature-based attractions, tea tourism, historical sites, ethnic cultural heritage and eco-tourism. The state's national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, rivers, lakes, waterfalls, hot springs, forests and diverse flora and fauna are among its major attractions. Globally, the tourism industry has emerged as one of the fastest-growing sectors, contributing significantly to economic development by generating income and employment opportunities for local communities. It also promotes cultural exchange by enabling visitors to experience the religion, language, traditions and customs of different societies. For many countries, tourism serves as a major pillar of the economy. In general, tourism refers to the movement of people from one place to another for leisure, recreation, adventure, cultural exploration or business purposes. Tourism promotes cultural exchange between visitors and local communities while contributing to infrastructure development, employment opportunities for young people and increased government revenue. It has become one of the fastest-growing

sectors of the global economy, playing a vital role in generating income, creating jobs and fostering regional economic development. In India, tourism has emerged as a key driver of development due to its strong linkages with sectors such as transportation, hospitality, handicrafts and other service industries, thereby making a significant contribution to the country's economic growth. According to the Ministry of Tourism, the sector plays a vital role in promoting inclusive growth, particularly in less developed and peripheral regions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bishnoi (2007) in his book addresses the need and importance of tourism for economic development. As a result of fast expansion of tourism, a large number of economic benefits are flowing from this industry. The book mainly highlights the tourism potential of Chilika Lake in Orissa. Srivastava (2011) highlighted that tourism plays a significant role in promoting mutual understanding among people, generating employment opportunities, earning foreign exchange and improving living standards. The study focused on the city of Agra which in addition to the Taj Mahal is home to several historically and architecturally significant tourist attractions including Fatehpur Sikri, Agra Fort, Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary and Sikandra. However, the study observed that many tourists remain unaware of these equally significant destinations. Consequently, the research examined the economic benefits

generated for the state through tourist arrivals in Agra and emphasised the need to promote its lesser-known heritage sites to enhance tourism development. Chowdhury (2013) described Assam as a region endowed with remarkable natural beauty and cultural richness, characterised by dense forests, heavy monsoon rainfall, diverse flora and fauna, vibrant folk music, traditional dance forms, festivals and distinctive handloom and handicraft traditions. The study emphasised the significant potential of tourism in promoting economic development in the state. It also examined tourist inflows into Assam and the revenue generated from tourism activities. Furthermore, the paper proposed several measures to improve the tourism sector, highlighting its role as an important instrument for fostering economic growth and development in Assam.

The objectives of the study are

- To assess tourism growth over the years in Meghalaya using percentage analysis.
- To analyse the major challenges affecting tourism development in the state.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is based on secondary data collected from reliable sources, including the Ministry of Tourism, Government of Meghalaya; India Tourism Statistics and peer-reviewed academic journals.

Need for the study: The present study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the tourism sector in Meghalaya by examining its growth and development over the years and identifying the major challenges that impede its progress. Through an assessment based on secondary data, the study seeks to generate valuable insights into the performance of the tourism sector and its contribution to the state's economy. The findings are expected to serve as a useful reference for policymakers, tourism authorities and other stakeholders in formulating appropriate policies and strategies to promote sustainable tourism development, strengthen the sector's competitiveness and enhance its contribution to economic growth and regional development in Meghalaya.

DISCUSSION

Meghalaya possesses an exceptional wealth of natural resources and diverse landscapes, establishing it as one of India's most promising destinations for nature-based and adventure tourism. The state's distinctive physiography, characterised by rugged terrain, mist-laden mountains, cascading waterfalls, lush subtropical forests, pristine lakes and an extraordinary diversity of flora and fauna, provides a strong comparative advantage for the development of a sustainable tourism industry. These unique environmental assets support a broad spectrum of adventure and recreational activities, including trekking, hiking, rock climbing, caving (spelunking), water sports and speed boating, thereby enhancing the state's appeal to a wide range of tourists. Beyond its scenic landscapes, Meghalaya has emerged as a leading ecotourism destination, where the conservation of natural ecosystems forms the corner stone of tourism development. The active participation of local communities in preserving forests, water bodies, wildlife and other ecological resources has played a significant role in maintaining the

state's environmental integrity while fostering responsible and sustainable tourism practices. Consequently, the majority of tourist attractions in Meghalaya are centred on its natural and ecological heritage, reflecting a development approach that seeks to balance economic growth with environmental conservation. The Garo Hills region is home to important eco-tourism destinations such as Nokrek Biosphere Reserve, Balpakram National Park, Siju Cave, Tura Peak, Pelga Falls and Katta Beel which attract visitors for wildlife, trekking, cave exploration, waterfalls and birdwatching. The Khasi Hills are the state's principal tourism hub, with Shillong offering attractions such as Elephant Falls, Shillong Peak, Ward's Lake, Lady Hydari Park and the Don Bosco Centre for Indigenous Cultures.

Other notable sites include Mawphlanur, Sohtyngkhur, Nongkhnun River Island and Kyllang Rock, which are known for their scenic beauty and opportunities for eco-tourism and adventure activities. The Jaintia Hills are famous for waterfalls, caves and historical sites, including Nartiang Monoliths, Ialong Park, Moopun Waterfalls and Rynji Falls. In Ri Bhoi district, Umiam Lake is a major attraction offering boating and water sports while Lum Sohpetbneng is an important cultural and religious site. Collectively, these destinations showcase Meghalaya's unique combination of natural beauty, cultural heritage and ecological diversity, making the state one of the leading nature-based and sustainable tourism destinations in Northeast India.

District-wise Tourist Places in Meghalaya

District	Tourist Places
East Garo Hills	Chisobibra, Rongrengiri Reserve Forest, Domre Falls, Naka Chikong
West Garo Hills	Nokrek Biosphere Reserve, Tura Peak, Pelga Falls, Rongbang Dare, Wadagokgre, Sasatgre, Chibragre, Rombagre.
North Garo Hills	Jolding Wari, Radi Nokat, Na. ka Chikong, Rasna Dare, Chitintim Dare, Ganna Ramram lake, Rongma Gitil, Rangdokram, Sawal Wari, Rangjokram lake.
South Garo Hills	Wari Chora, Balpakram National Park, Boldak Matchu Karam, Chidimak, Matchru, Areng Patal, Goncho Dare, Dikkini Ring, Rongsaljong Agal, Rongsobok Rongkol Siju Cave.
South West Garo Hills	The tomb of Mir Jumla II, Katta Beel.
East Khasi Hills	Shillong City, Don Bosco Centre for Indigenous Cultures, Lady Hydari Park, Ward's Lake, Cathedral Catholic Church, Capt. Williamson Sangma State Museum, Golf Course, Elephant Falls and Shillong Peak
West Khasi Hills	Sohtyngkhur, Mawphlanur, Nongkhnun River Island.
Eastern West Khasi Hills	Kyllang Rock, Mawmai Cave, Living Root Bridge
East Jaintia Hills	Moopun Waterfalls, Rynji Falls, Umbyrlein Falls, Sahksaw, Lumchyrimit, Moolamyllyang.
South West Khasi Hills	Jakrem Hot Spring, Symper rock, Umngi River, Phlangja Ud-Cave, Rilang View Point, Tynrong Synrang Murin, Bombell Rock, Synrangbah Cave, Dongnob Falls, Synrang Sngi Rock, Tynrong Manbasa, Tynnai View Point, Ranikor, Gomaghat, Kyllai Lyngsngun Peak.
West Jaintia Hills	Tyrshi Falls, Thlu Muwi, Nartiang Monoliths, Ialong Park
Ri Bhoi	Umiam Lake, Lum Sohpetbneng, Orchid Resort, Dwar Ksuid, Lum Nehru Park.

Source: District Website of Meghalaya

Year-wise Tourist Arrivals in Meghalaya

Year	Domestic	Growth Rate (%)	Foreign	Growth Rate
2011	667504	-	4803	-
2012	680254	1.91	5313	10.62
2013	691269	1.62	6773	27.48
2014	716469	3.65	8664	27.92
2015	751165	4.84	8027	-7.35
2016	830887	10.61	8476	5.59
2017	990856	19.25	12051	42.18
2018	1198340	20.94	18114	50.31
2019	1245633	3.95	25813	42.50
2020	24734	-98.01	2311	-91.05
2021	154409	524.28	411	-82.22

Source: India Tourism Statistics Report

From 2012 to 2019, domestic tourist arrivals in Meghalaya recorded positive annual growth, with the highest increase of 20.94% in 2018. Foreign tourist arrivals also experienced substantial growth during this period, peaking at 50.31% in 2018. In 2020, both domestic and foreign tourism declined sharply by 98.01% and 91.05% respectively due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although domestic tourist arrivals increased by 524.28% in 2021 compared to 2020, the number of tourists remained well below pre-pandemic levels because the increase was from a very low base. In contrast, foreign tourist arrivals continued to decline in 2021, registering a further decrease of 82.22%. The annual growth rate of tourist arrivals reflects the performance of Meghalaya's tourism sector over the study period. The positive growth observed in domestic and foreign tourist arrivals from 2012 to 2019 reflects the expansion of tourism activities in the state. An increase in tourist arrivals generally contributes to economic growth by generating higher expenditure on accommodation, transportation, food services, handicrafts and other tourism-related activities. This in turn, creates employment opportunities, increases income for local communities and supports the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises.

The sharp decline in tourist arrivals in 2020 and 2021 demonstrates the tourism sector's economic vulnerability to external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The drastic reduction in tourist inflows likely affected business revenues, employment and government income derived from tourism-related taxes and fees. Although domestic tourist arrivals recovered substantially in 2021 compared with 2020, they remained below pre-pandemic levels, indicating that the tourism sector had not fully regained its contribution to economic activity. Overall, the positive growth in tourist arrivals before the pandemic suggests that tourism played an important role in supporting Meghalaya's economic growth and regional development by increasing income generation, creating employment, attracting investment and spurring infrastructure development.

Problems and Challenges Affecting Tourism Development in Meghalaya

- Despite its exceptional natural beauty, rich cultural heritage, and abundant biodiversity, the tourism sector in Meghalaya remains underdeveloped due to structural, infrastructural, environmental and institutional constraints. Although the state possesses significant potential to emerge as a leading tourism destination, addressing these challenges is essential for ensuring

sustainable tourism development and maximising its contribution to economic growth.

- Inadequate Road Connectivity**-Many tourist destinations are connected by narrow, poorly maintained or damaged roads, making travel difficult and time-consuming. The situation becomes particularly challenging during the monsoon season, when heavy rainfall often causes landslides and road blockages thereby affecting tourist access.
- Limited Transportation Facilities**-The availability of public transportation to several tourist destinations, particularly those located in remote areas remains inadequate. Consequently, visitors are often compelled to rely on private taxis or hired vehicles, increasing travel costs and limiting accessibility.
- Environmental Pollution**-The rapid growth in tourist arrivals has contributed to increasing levels of littering, plastic waste and pollution of rivers, forests, caves and other ecologically sensitive areas. Inefficient waste management practices further exacerbate environmental degradation.
- Overcrowding at Major Tourist Attractions**-Popular destinations such as Wari Chora and the Living Root Bridges experience excessive tourist inflows during peak seasons. Overcrowding diminishes the quality of the visitor experience while placing considerable pressure on the natural environment and local infrastructure.
- Inadequate Tourism Infrastructure**-Several tourist destinations lack essential infrastructure including quality accommodation, hygienic sanitation facilities, adequate parking spaces, visitor information centres and other basic amenities required to ensure a comfortable and satisfactory tourist experience.
- Environmental Degradation and Ecological Stress**-Unregulated and unsustainable tourism activities pose significant threats to Meghalaya's fragile ecosystems. Increasing human intervention had contributed to the degradation of forests, wildlife habitats, caves, waterfalls and other natural resources, thereby undermining the long-term sustainability of tourism.
- Insufficient Marketing and Promotion**-Despite possessing numerous unique and unexplored tourist attractions, Meghalaya has not been adequately promoted in domestic and international tourism markets. Limited destination branding, marketing initiatives and digital outreach have restricted the state's tourism potential.
- Shortage of Skilled Human Resources**-The tourism and hospitality industry in Meghalaya continues to face a shortage of professionally trained personnel, including tourist guides, hospitality professionals, multilingual interpreters and customer service specialists. The lack of skilled human resources adversely affects service quality, visitor satisfaction and the overall competitiveness of the tourism sector.
- Socio-cultural and Resource Pressures on Local Communities**-The rapid expansion of tourism had

increased pressure on local communities, natural resources and public infrastructure. Growing tourist inflows may contribute to the commercialization of indigenous cultures and traditional lifestyles while increasing demand for water, energy, waste management services and other essential public utilities. Balancing tourism development with cultural preservation and environmental sustainability therefore remains a significant policy challenge.

CONCLUSION

Meghalaya has strong tourism potential due to its natural beauty, cultural diversity and heritage sites. However, the sector's growth is limited by inadequate infrastructure, poor connectivity, socio-political constraints and uneven promotion. These challenges reduce tourism efficiency and its contribution to income generation, employment and overall economic development. Despite these limitations, tourism remains an important source of livelihood for local communities. Strengthening infrastructure, improving transport and accessibility, promoting sustainable tourism practices and enhancing destination marketing can significantly improve sector performance. Such measures would support inclusive and sustainable economic growth while preserving Meghalaya's ecological and cultural resources.

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