Why India's wildly remote islands are trending

India's coral islands of Lakshadweep piqued tourists' interest after Prime Minister Modi visited last month. But can the islands' fragile environment handle the growth in tourism?

By Riddhi Doshi on 18 Feb 2024

When you are about to land on India's archipelago of Lakshadweep in the Arabian Sea, 490 km west of the closest Indian city of Kochi, you'll see shades of blue all around. The narrow strip closest to the white beach, lined with hundreds of coconut trees, is light blue. A little further into the sea, the water is turquoise, while the deep sea is emerald blue.

"It's mesmerising, really," said Shradha Menon, a geologist from the Indian Institute of Technology, who visited the islands three times in the last two years to study their carbon sedimentation. Each time, she was one of just a handful of outsiders on the 36-seat plane from Kochi to Lakshadweep, carrying island residents and government officials posted there.

But recently there has been a lot more interest in the islands from Indian travellers after Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Lakshadweep in January 2024. Pictures of him walking on the white beaches and snorkelling in its crystal-clear waters were uploaded on his official account on X (formerly Twitter) and his YouTube channel, garnering hundreds of thousands of views. In his message to the public, he said, "The beauty of Lakshadweep can't be described in words. To those who like to visit beaches and islands around the world, I urge them to visit the Lakshadweep."

Since then, the archipelago has been thrust into the spotlight. Google searches for "Lakshadweep" soared to the highest they'd been In 20 years, according to The Economic Times. Travel articles suddenly appeared in mainstream media outlets, and YouTube videos and Instagram reels flooded the internet. MakeMyTrip, one of India's biggest travel booking portals, claimed a 3,400% increase to in-platform searches for Lakshadweep after Modi's visit.



Flights from Lakshadweep depart from Koshi on the mainland and land on Agatti Island (Credit: Mohijaz/Getty Images)

The phone lines of Lakshadweep's Society for Promotion of Nature Tourism and Sports (SPORTS) that handles tourism in the territory have never been busier. From one or two tourist inquiries a day, they have been getting at least 10 a day since last month, said Abdul Samad, one of SPORTS' two water sports instructors who helped Modi snorkel in the island in January. Meanwhile, Cordelia Cruises, which has been sailing from Mumbai, Kochi and Goa to Lakshadweep since September 2021, has witnessed a 2,500% increase in booking queries since Modi's visit. New beach and water villas are already being planned on the islands of Suheli and Kadmat, Samad confirmed, and India's finance minister Neermala Sitharaman even mentioned Lakshadweep in her budget speech on 1 February while talking about better connectivity to India's islands to grow tourism.

A blip in the Arabian Sea, Lakshadweep's 36 islands include 12 atolls, three reefs and five submerged banks. Its 10 inhabited islands have a population of about 70,000, mostly reliant on fishing and coconut cultivation.

The pristine, white-sand islands are not like other beaches found along India's coastline. Lakshadweep, which means a *lakh* (100,000) islands in the Sanskrit language, are the only atolls in India and lie just above sea level, explained Vardhan Patankar, who has worked in Lakshadweep for 15 years and is conservation director of GVI, which facilitates conservation projects around the world. These atolls are remnants of ancient volcanoes that erupted and then gradually sank to just above sea level, growing a ring of corals that jut out of the ocean's

surface. "Lakshadweep, which is just a few metres above the sea level, is protected by the coral reefs," said Patankar.



Modi's visit included walking on white sand beaches and snorkelling in crystal clear waters (Credit: Steven Wares/Getty Images)

Like most islands in the world, Lakshadweep has been impacted by climate change. According to The Lakshadweep Research Collective, the archipelago's land cover is rapidly shrinking due to coastal erosion, with the loss of an entire island (Parali 1, in Bangaram atoll) recorded in 2017. The islands have witnessed four major ENSO-related temperature anomalies (a climate phenomenon that causes variation in winds and sea surface temperatures) in the past two decades, together with three catastrophic cyclones within the last few years, resulting in widespread coral bleaching.

According to current, conservative predictions of scientists, Lakshadweep will submerge in the sea by 2050

"According to current, conservative predictions of scientists, Lakshadweep will submerge in the sea by 2050," said Patankar. "If there is added pressure on the island due to tourism and other development projects or industrial fishing, it could be disastrous to the islands and its ecology, hastening the submergence."

To temper the impact of increased numbers of tourists expected on the islands, SPORTS say they will continue to restrict numbers using a permit system. They are also inviting cruise ships and yachts to sail to the island, claiming that this will reduce the numbers of people

staying overnight and thus control the amount of waste generated and preserve the already limited ground water.

However, scientists believe the chances of large ships damaging the island's delicate coral reef wall, which prevents storm surges, can't be ignored. Nor can the high carbon footprint generated by high-end villas being built on the island or the damage caused to the reef during construction. Patankar also fears that once resorts are built on the land, the scale of commercial fishing, which presently is minimal in the island, will also increase to cater to the food needs of the tourists.

"Tourism growth on the island has to be highly regulated and must be able to sustain the ecology of Lakshadweep," added Menon.



Kavaratti, Lakshadweep's administrative centre, is home to a lighthouse with sweeping views across the island (Credit: Manish Gupta/Getty Images)

For travellers who visit Lakshadweep, it's important to travel lightly. Luckily there are myriad low-impact activities on offer.

Lakshadweep is one of the best places to snorkel and scuba dive in India due to the atolls' shallow waters and abundance of marine life and corals. "The visibility underwater is exceptional and as a result the reef looks spectacular during snorkelling and diving sessions," said Patankar.

While underwater, you may see snappers, groupers, moray eel, butterflyfish and black botched sting rays. Green sea turtles are also easily spotted, sometimes even from the beaches. Then there is the fascinating yellowmask surgeonfish that changes colour, from yellow to purple, as it reaches adulthood.

Lakshadweep is that beautiful, serene island where life seems to slow down and where a surreal sense of calm descends upon you

The night sky is another spectacle due to minimal light and air pollution. "I have never seen so many stars, constellations and shooting stars in my life as I saw in my three-day trip on the island," said Shalina CV who visited Lakshadweep with her family in September 2023. She added: "Lakshadweep is that beautiful, serene island where life seems to slow down and where a surreal sense of calm descends upon you."



Tourism activities include boating expeditions and other watersports (Credit: Mohijaz/Getty Images)

Another not-to-miss adventure is night fishing. Tourists can join fishermen on a boating expedition and try their hands at the less wasteful pole-and-line fishing to catch skipjack and yellowfin tuna. A couple of government-run dive centres also offer kayaking, wind surfing, parasailing and other water sport activities.

There are also many homestays run by locals that provide clean and comfortable accommodation, such as Abdul Rahman Homestay (+91 8547 660 936) and Feroze

Homestay (+91 9447 747 458) on Agatti island, or Kinak (+91 9447 474 332) on Kalpeni island. A few locals have also started private tourism companies, like Landiago, whose owner Shabab Ahmed takes tourists to visit the Juma Masjid on Minicoy Island or to an old lighthouse here. Booking trips with the locals ensures that the money goes directly to Lakshadweep's economy, plus it means they can share their unique knowledge and understanding of the islands.

"I think the island will be safest in the locals' hands. Working with them to empower and strengthen their ability to protect the islands is the best hope for the islands and its ecology," said Patankar.

Discussion Qns:

1. *What are some potential environmental impacts of tourism in Lakshadweep?*
2. *How will climate change alter the nature of tourism in Lakshadweep?*