

# Unlocking Potential: A SWOT Analysis of Cruise Tourism in India

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## Abstract

*Background:* Cruise tourism, subset of tourism, represents a dynamic and nature-based of the tourism industry that offers a variety of experiences including overnight and same-day cruise across rivers, seas, and canals. Cruise tourism in India is important not tourism but it also helps to sustain waterbodies for maintenance purpose.

*Purpose:* The purpose of the study is to examine key SWOT factors affecting cruise tourism in India and to evaluate strategic recommendations for enhancing its global competitiveness as a cruise destination.

*Methodology:* This study employs a qualitative, descriptive-exploratory approach using secondary data and expert interviews. Data were analyzed through SWOT and TOWS frameworks to derive strategic insights in tourism and maritime sectors.

*Results:* India's cruise tourism shows strong growth potential but faces infrastructural and policy gaps. Strategic reforms-centralized governance, integrated ports, public-private partnerships, and sustainable practices- are vital to unlock opportunities, enhance competitiveness, and align with global eco-tourism and regional cooperation trends.

**Keywords:** Ports, Public-Private-Partnerships (PPPs), Eco-Tourism, Sustainable Tourism

waterways (over 20,000 km) (Draft MOT 2023). Cruise tourism is positioned as a key driver for economic growth, employment generation, and cultural integration.

## Problem Statement

Cruise tourism in India significantly remains underdeveloped despite its extensive coastline and growing tourism economy. Therefore, it is needed to evaluate systematically evaluate internal capabilities and external opportunities/challenges to make a frame for effective policy interventions.

## Research Questions

Based on the problem statement, it is needed to find the answer of the questions:

What are current the offerings strengths and weaknesses of India's cruise tourism infrastructure? What are external opportunities and threats facing Indian cruise tourism sector? How can strategic interventions enhance the performance and appeal of cruise tourism in India?

## Objectives

Based on the emerging research questions, the following objectives of the study are: to identify and analyse the key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats influencing the development if cruise tourism in India. And, to evaluate strategic recommendations that can enhance India's position as a competitive cruise tourism destination.

## INTRODUCTION

Cruise tourism is basically nature-based segment allowing overnight and same-day cruises across seas, rivers, and canals. It includes various types such as ocean cruises, river cruises, coastal assets, national waterways cruises, and leveraging islands.

India has significant potential for cruise tourism due to its extensive coastline (7500 km), numerous ports (12 major and 200 minor), and a vast network of navigable

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## Scope of the Study

The geographical scope is Indian coastal cities and cruise terminals such as Mumbai, Kochi, Goa, Chennai, and Visakhapatnam. The thematic scope is Tourism policy, port infrastructure, consumer demand, marketing strategies, and environmental impact. And temporal scope is the analysis has covered development over the last 10 years, with focus on current and prospects.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Cruise tourism is emerging. It, a significant segment in India's broader tourism strategy. It is leveraging the country's vast coastline, cultural richness, and economic ambition to become a regional maritime hub. A SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) is useful framework which has been extensively used in academic and policy literature to assess the readiness, potential, and gaps in India's cruise tourism sector.

### Strengths

India has several inherent strengths in cruise tourism. India has geographical advantage with over 7,500 kilometres of coastline and a plethora of cultural heritage sites makes it an ideal cruise destination (Bhatia, 2013). Indian Ports have diversities; Mumbai, Kochi and Goa adds to its appeal (Srivastava & Lahiri, 2024). Additionally, Sagarmala, the government of India's Project, has aimed at modernizing ports and integrating them with inland transport. It has given a new thrust to maritime tourism (Rastogi, 2023).

### Weaknesses

India has several advantages, but India's cruise sector faces infrastructural bottlenecks and regulatory complexities. The weaknesses, deficiencies of dedicated cruise terminal, low-quality passenger services, and inconsistent policy frameworks, are persistent challenges (Baby & Sujatha, 2024). Port tariffs in India are highest in Asian countries and it is making the country less competitive compared to regional peers (Rastogi, 2023).

## Opportunities

The cruise tourism market of India has significant opportunities as the global growth of the cruise tourism market. India has potential domestic customer base as the growing middle class and rising their disposable incomes (Gurunathan & Lakshmi, 2024). Integration of wellness, cultural, and eco-tourism with cruise offerings could help India position itself uniquely in the regional cruise map (Avdimiotis et al., 2009). There is also potential in developing home-porting facilities, especially in Mumbai and Chennai. Those potential development could reduce reliance on foreign cruise operators.

## Threats

There are several environmental concerns, such as marine pollution and coastal erosion. Those are serious pose threats to sustainable cruise tourism (Kwong, 2023). The COVID-19, pandemic, exposed the vulnerability of the cruise industry to global health crises. Also, there are well-established cruise destinations' competition like Singapore, Dubai, and Malaysia which threat India's ambitions unless swift improvements are well addressed (Chong, 2014).

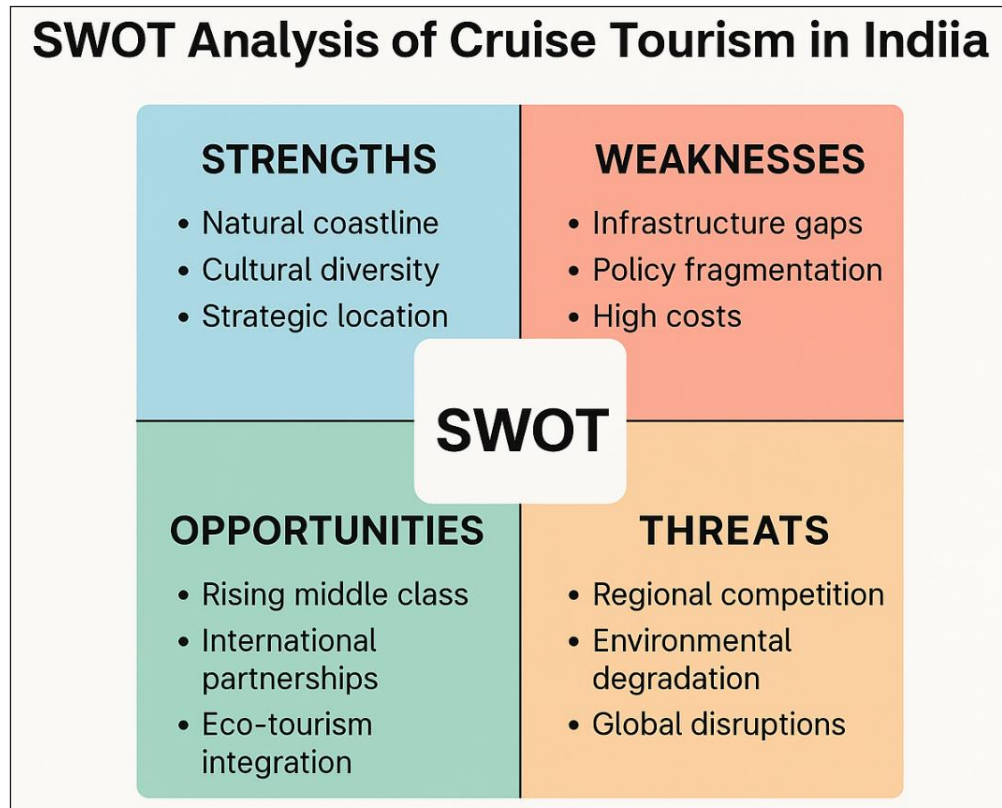
## Comparative Insights

Cruise tourism researchers compare India's cruise tourism position with other countries. India's cruise tourism infrastructure is not suitable as compared to Penag, Malaysia, which successfully developed sustainable cruise practices through strong environmental governance and investment in port facilities (Kwong, 2023).

## Policy and Strategic Recommendation

The Indian Maritime vision 2030 includes cruise tourism as a key strategic initiative. A holistic approach is necessary- involving private participation, public infrastructure investment, and global marketing. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) and streamlined customs procedures are needed for future growth (Srivastava & Lahiri, 2024).

## Conceptual Framework



Source: Sagarmala.

**Fig. 1: Conceptual Framework**

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive and exploratory research design. It is suitable for examining emerging trends and formulating strategic insights in a complex, evolving context. The descriptive component helps document existing conditions and industry frameworks. And the exploratory aspects enable the investigation of new perspectives and strategy formulations within the tourism and maritime sectors.

### Approach

Qualitative research was applied to understand a nuanced of the subject matter. The study utilizes secondary data

synthesis to derive insights from variety of established and credible sources.

### Data Sources

The secondary data were collected from government reports (Ministry of tourism, and the Sagarmala initiatives), academic journals, focusing on logistics, maritime infrastructure, tourism development, and strategic management, Industry White papers from reputed such as FICCI (Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry) and CRISIL, offering sector-specific data and forward-looking projections.

To complement documentary analysis, the study also incorporated primary qualitative inputs through 10 expert interviews. The participants were professionals and subject matter experts from academia, industry, and

policy-making bodies, thereby enriching the research with practical insights and contextually grounded context.

### Analytical Tools and Techniques

SWOT analysis, analytical tool, was applied to find the internal strengths and weaknesses of the sector, and

identify external opportunities and threats that influence its development trajectory. To build upon SWOT analysis, the TOWS (Threats, Opportunities, Weaknesses, Strengths) matrix facilitated strategic mapping by aligning internal capabilities with external environments to formulate viable strategic recommendations.

## RESULTS

**Table 1: Secondary Data Analysis Results (Derived from Secondary Sources- Literature, Reports, etc.)**

Category	Key Finding(s)	Source(s)
Strengths	Long natural coastlines, high cultural heritage, and geostrategic location for cruise Networks.	Ministry of Tourism; Sagamala Reports; FICCI White paper.
Weaknesses	Fragmented Policy execution, underdeveloped port infrastructure, lack of standardized cruise terminal, and high service costs.	CRISIL Sector Reports; Academic Journal on Maritime Infrastructure.
Opportunities	Emerging middle-class demographics, government push via Sagarmala, increasing foreign investment in maritime tourism, eco-tourism potential.	Sagarmala Vision Document; Academic research in strategic tourism.
Threats	Intense regional competitions (e.g., Singapore, UAE), environmental vulnerability due to coastline pollution, and disruptions like pandemics and fuel costs.	UNWTO reports; Environmental assessments; industry analyses by FICCI, NITI Aayog.

**Table 2: Primary Data Insights from Expert Interviews (N=10)**

Theme	Expert Insight Summary	Frequency
Infrastructural Gaps	Inadequate port amenities and low cruise berth capacity cited as critical bottlenecks.	8
Policy and Regulation	Experts criticized disjointed jurisdiction between central and state maritime bodies.	7
Market Demand	Consensus that India’s rising middle class will drive demand if prices are optimized.	9
Strategic Advantage	India can become a regional cruise hub if routes are integrated with southeast Asian tourism circuits.	6
Environmental Concerns	Growing pressure from sustainability groups and a lack of eco-cruise policies were highlighted.	5
Investment Needs	Experts emphasized public-private partnerships and international collaborations for infrastructure and branding.	7

## DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

Table 1 synthesizes a secondary data which is based on SWOT analysis of the cruise tourism sector using literature, policy reports, and industry assessments. The identified strengths highlight the country’s long natural coastlines along its vast and diverse cultural heritage, and its geostrategic location. Collectively all the tourism products enhance and appeal as a cruise tourism hub. These characteristics are documented by the Ministry of Tourism and reports from Sagarmala and FICCI.

Sagarmala and FICCI position the country as a potential significant player in regional cruise networks.

But there are several structural weaknesses constrain the effective utilization of these strengths. The weaknesses are fragmented policy execution, underdeveloped port infrastructure, the absence of standardized cruise terminals, and high service costs. All highlighted limitations are well documented in CRISIL sectoral reviews and scholarly assessments of maritime infrastructure. These barriers, a broader issue of inadequate institutional coordination and

logistical preparedness, stifle the sector's ability to meet international benchmarks and reduce operational inefficiencies.

Opportunities for growth remain considerable. The middle class, rising numbers in demographic with increasing disposable income, combine with governmental backing through initiatives like the Sagarmala program, introduces favourable conditions for expanding cruise tourism. Also, the sector can pull foreign investment and align with global trends such as eco-tourism and sustainable travel. All opportunities are strengthened by academic studies in strategic tourism and policy-oriented research. It is indicating both market readiness and institutional willingness.

Of course there are prospects, but the sector is not protected to external threats. Regional competition, basically cruise destination Singapore and the United Arab Emirates, presents substantial competitive pressure. Environmental vulnerabilities, including coastal pollution and ecological degradation, pose risks to sustainability. Also, exogenous disruption, pandemics, and volatile fuel prices, add layers of uncertainty to the sector's future. These are validated through UNWTO assessments, environmental analysis, and policy reviews by FICCI and NITI Aayog. Agencies (FICCI and NITI Aayog) stress the need for robust mitigation strategies.

The Table 1 finally reflects high potential but low-readiness scenario. There are significant natural and strategic advantages, but sector's development is hindered by several factors such as institutional, infrastructural, and competitive constraints. The observed imbalance between potential and actual performance indicates that unless these foundational gaps are addressed through integrated policy frameworks and infrastructural modernization. The country may fall short in capitalizing on emerging trends.

The Table 2 summarized the insights derived from expert interviews (N=10) on Indian cruise tourism sector. Six major themes were identified: Infrastructural gaps, policy and Regulation, Market Demand, Strategic Advantage, Environmental Concerns, and Investment Needs. The frequency count of each theme provides a measure of thematic views across interviews. A critical interpretation of these data provide direction for policy, investment, and academic inquiry in maritime tourism development in India.

## Analysis of Thematic Insights

### Infrastructural Gaps (n=8)

The most frequently mentioned barrier, cited by 80% of participants, was the inadequacy of port infrastructure. Experts unanimously criticized the lack of modern berths, passenger amenities, and intermodal connectivity. This corroborates earlier findings by Raj and Dutt (2020), who reported that infrastructural bottlenecks contribute to India's marginal presence in the global cruise map. The high frequency emphasizes an urgent need for targeted upgrades in port facilities and integration with tourism zones.

### Policy and Regulation (n=7)

Disjointed governance structures between central and state maritime bodies were seen as detrimental to efficient decision-making. This regulatory fragmentation hinders synchronized policy formulation, creating bureaucratic inertia. Particularly, Sharma (2019) identified similar jurisdictional challenges in India coastal shipping. These insights suggest the necessity for a centralized cruise authority or streamlined regulatory framework. It is possibly modelled on Singapore's maritime and Port Authority.

### Market Demand (n=9)

Nearly all experts emphasized India's emerging middleclass as a key driver of domestic cruise demand. The frequency (90%) highlights strong agreement on the market's latent potential, conditional on affordability. This resonates with consumer segmentation studies (e.g., Kapoor & Thomas, 2021), which identify price sensitivity as a core determinant of uptake in leisure travel among India's urban tier-2 populations. The data clearly indicate that demand stimulation through dynamic pricing could significantly elevate cruise tourism.

### Strategic Advantage (n=6)

Six experts believed that India could serve as a hub connecting Southeast Asia's tourism network. This finding is analytically significant as it reframes India not

only as a destination but also as a transit node. Previous strategic blueprints by the Ministry of Shipping (2018) have hinted at this potential, but the insight here provided grounded validation from practitioners. A corridor-based cruise strategy linking Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Thailand via Indian ports could unlock regional synergies.

### Environmental Concerns (n=5)

Half of the experts acknowledged environmental sustainability as a growing imperative. The absence of eco-cruise standards or carbon emission in Indian regulations raises a red flag. This aligns with global policy critiques, such as those by Watson et al. (2022), who stress that cruise tourism's environmental footprint is often underregulated in developing economies. This theme, through less frequent, has long-term implications and reflects an ethical shift in the maritime sector's development narrative.

### Investment Needs (n=7)

Investment requirements were discussed by 70% of experts, with a consensus favouring public-private partnerships (PPPs) and foreign collaboration. These views mirror global port development models, where infrastructure expansion is often co-financed by cruise lines and sovereign funds (UNCTAD, 2020). Importantly, branding was tied to investment. It was indicating that financial inputs alone are insufficient without coherent marketing strategies targeting international cruise operators.

### Interpretation and Synthesis

The thematic frequencies point to clear priority hierarchy—Market Demand and infrastructural Gaps dominate the strategic conversation, while Environmental concerns and Strategic Advantage are comparatively underemphasized. But thematic frequency should not equate with strategic importance. While demand is immediate, environmental sustainability and strategic integration are long-term value creators. The interdependence among themes is also important. For instance, investment and policy reform are prerequisites to addressing infrastructural deficit, and regulatory clarity could facilitate sustainability practices.

Also, the emphasis on India's middle-class consumer base hints at a domestically anchored growth model. It is deviating from the traditional dependency on international cruise liners. This shift is both economically and geopolitically significant, especially in the post-COVID-19 context where domestic tourism resilience has become central to national strategies.

## CONCLUSION

The Cruise tourism sector stands at a pivotal point. It is characterized by abundant natural strengths and rising strategic interest but restrained by structural inefficiencies and policy discontinuity. Effective exploitation of opportunities such as a growing middle-class demographic and government-led initiatives demands the resolution of key infrastructural deficit and the harmonization of fragmented policy framework. Additionally, the sector must adopt long-term sustainability measures to guard against environmental degradation and exogenous disruptions. Strategic interventions, including the formation of a centralized cruise tourism authority, the implementation of standardized port infrastructure, and the encouragement of public-private partnership, are critical. These measures would not only strengthen the sector's internal foundation but also enhance its resilience and competitiveness in the evolving global cruise tourism landscape.

The expert interviews collectively reveal a sector at the cusp of transformation, but constrained by systematic inefficiencies. High market potential is counterbalanced by infrastructural, regulatory, and environmental shortcomings. Policymakers must prioritize integrated port development, rationalize governance, and incorporate sustainability standards. Public-private synergy and regional integration represent forward-looking strategies that can reposition India in the global cruise tourism ecosystem.

### Recommendation Through SWOT-TOWS Matrix

The Fig. 2 indicates integrates India's internal strengths and weaknesses with external opportunities and threats using the SWOT-TOWS framework. This approach provides a comprehensive method to evaluate policy

interventions, tourism development pathways, and competitive positioning within the cruise tourism industry.

India’s SO (Strengths-Opportunities) strategies focus on leveraging its natural coastlines and strategic location to connect cruise routes with ASEAN tourism circuit. This is aligned with the paper of (Chavan & Bhola, 2014). The development of eco-tourism along the biodiversity-rich coastline is also emphasized, which aligns with sustainable tourism trends noted in studies by Roy (2022) and Selvarasu (2015). These strategies promote niche tourism segments and seek to create

heritage tourism clusters in partnership with global cruise operators, echoing recommendations by Dugar (2007) for collaborative tourism ecosystems.

ST (Strengths-Threats) seek to counter external threats through deployment of India’s strength. For example, cultural diversity is proposed as a differentiator from regional cruise competitors such as Singapore and Malaysia. This approach is supported by Srivastava and Lahiri (2024), who suggest that soft power and cultural diplomacy can serve as effective geopolitical tools in tourism diplomacy.

		INTERNAL/EXTERNAL O	
		SO Strategies Use strengths to maximize opportunities	ST Strategies Use strengths to minimize threats
EXTERNAL	INTERNAL Strengths (S) 3 Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leverage natural coastline and strategic location to develop cruise routes integrated with ASEAN tourism circuits</li> <li>Promote eco-tourism along the coast using India's biodiversity hotspots to attract niche cruise segments</li> <li>Develop heritage and coastal tourism clusters in partnership with global cruise operators</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Utilize cultural diversity to differentiate India’s cruise experience from regional competitors</li> <li>Use strategic location as a countermeasure to regional competition (e.g., develop India-Maldives-Sri Lanka circuits)</li> <li>Launch campaigns using soft power and cultural diplomacy to offset geopolitical disruptions</li> </ul>
	Weaknesses (W) WO Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Address infrastructure gaps via international partnerships and foreign investment (FD) in port development</li> <li>Integrate eco-tourism models to reduce high is. by promoting sustainable and small cruise models</li> <li>Engage in public-private partnerships (PPPs) to</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Formulate national cruise tourism policy to avoid fragmentation and improve policy alignment</li> <li>Adopt green port initiatives to mitigate environmental concerns and attract sustainable cruise operators</li> <li>Develop crisis-resilient policies (e.g., insurance, fuel subsidies) to buffer global disruptions</li> </ul>

**Fig. 2: SWOT-TOWS Matrix: Strategic Mapping for Cruise Tourism in India**  
 SO (Strengths-Opportunities), ST (Strengths-Threats), WO (Weaknesses-Opportunities),  
 and WT (Weaknesses-Threats)

Additionally, India's strategic location is advocated for use in regional cooperation circuits such as the India-Maldives-Sri Lanka corridor- a perspective similarly emphasized by Kwong (2023) in regional case studies.

In addressing internal weaknesses, the WO (Weaknesses-Opportunities) strategies target infrastructure development through foreign investment and public-private partnership. As Srichandan et al. (2023) and Rastogi (2023) argue, overcoming infrastructural gaps is essential for position India as a viable cruise destination. Also, the integration of sustainable and small cruise model mirror global trends toward eco-conscious travel experiences. The literature suggests this not only reduces environmental risk but appeals to a more ethically conscious tourist demographic (Kwong, 2023; Roy, 2022).

The WT (Weaknesses-Threats) outlines defensive strategies to buffer against threats and internal limitations. Key among these is the formulation of a national cruise tourism policy to improve coherence and avoid fragmented development. This aligns with observations from global comparative research by Sariisik et al. (2011), who found that policy alignment is critical in nascent cruise market. Also, the promotion of green port initiatives and crisis-resilient policies, such as insurance and subsidies, mirrors the strategies proposed in the blue economy literature to mitigate environmental and geopolitical shocks (Srivastava & Lahiri, 2024).

Basically, this matrix is well-aligned with international best practices and academic discourse on cruise tourism development. Its effectiveness will depend on inter-ministerial coordination, investment in port infrastructure, and the ability to brand India's cruise offerings uniquely and sustainability.

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