



Prospects of Wellness and Medical Tourism in Soreng District, Sikkim: A Sustainable Development Perspective

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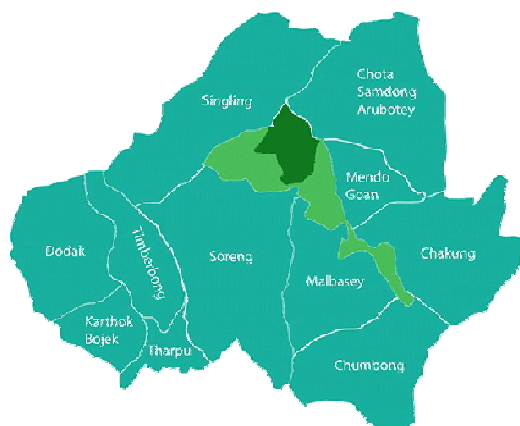
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Abstract: *Soreng District, carved out as a separate district in 2021 and nestled in the western hills of Sikkim, with its pristine Himalayan environment, organic farming traditions, Buddhist spiritual heritage, and emerging community-based tourism model, provides a unique landscape for developing this niche sector.*

Keywords: *Medical Tourism, Wellness, Soreng District, Global Wellness Institute (GWI).*



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sikkim_districts_after_2021.svg



<https://soreng-chakung.in/>

Introduction: The district has recently been recognised as the “Most Promising New Destination” at the Travel & Tourism Fair (TTF) Calcutta 2025, and the Government of India has identified the district as an Aspirational District with significant eco-tourism potential. The Prime Minister has himself recognised that “Sikkim has immense scope in eco-wellness tourism,” with 1,000 homestays being built across the state.

Purely based on secondary data—collected from government reports, academic literature, policy documents, regional news sources, and reputed journals—the current study aims to grasp the concept of wellness tourism as a theory and also to analyse the opportunities and challenges for developing a sustainable wellness tourism product in Soreng District. The study identifies significant opportunities, including pristine natural environment, spiritual and cultural resources, organic farming and healthy lifestyle, growing demand for wellness tourism, scope for community-based and homestay wellness tourism, slow tourism and digital nomadism, adventure tourism integration, and policy and funding leverage from the ₹18,455 crore state budget for 2026-27, the Vibrant Villages Programme Phase II, and the Buddhist Circuit initiative. Major challenges include lack of infrastructure, scarcity of skilled human resources, inadequate destination marketing, environmental fragility, seasonal and climatic constraints, high cost of travel and services, regulatory and standardisation issues, and the digital divide.

2. Introduction and Rationale

2.1 The Concept of Wellness Tourism: Wellness is an idea of life which is related to optimal health and well-being, involving body, mind, and spirit, with the natural and social environment. In this day and age, tourism as a concept has transcended the boundaries of leisure and sightseeing and has landed in the realm of wellness, health, and holistic well-being. The convergence of the global tourism industry and the global wellness market has given rise to a distinct segment called wellness tourism. As per the Global Wellness Institute (GWI), wellness tourism exists at the ‘powerful intersection’ of tourism and wellness industries. In short, wellness tourism is a subset of tourism that deliberately intermingles elements of wellness, like healing, rejuvenation, self-improvement, mindfulness, etc., with travel experiences.

2.2 Soreng District: An Emerging Destination: The district comprises four serene villages—Soreng, Chakung, Sribadam and Mangalbarey—and is surrounded by lush green hills, famous for the wide variety of flowers and birds available in the region. The district is home to several historic Buddhist monasteries, including Sang Ngag Yangtze Monastery at Rinchenpong and Rinchen Chholing Monastery at Meghi Dara, and the Kanchenjunga National Park—regarded as one of the most important biodiversity hotspots in India—lies in this area.



<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1365423622258044&set=pcb.1365424548924618>



https://www.facebook.com/singshorebridge/photos/beautiful-rinchen-choling-monastery-and-cultural-centre-at-meghi-dara-near-rinch/568413355793739/?_rdr

The administrative elevation of Soreng to a full-fledged district has strengthened governance mechanisms and improved delivery of public services. Soreng has emerged as a model for community-driven tourism, and the government has officially reclassified Soreng as an **‘Aspirational District’** with the highest growth potential in the state.

2.3 Recent Recognition and Policy Support: The year 2025 marked a significant milestone for Soreng’s tourism journey. The district was honoured as the **“Most Promising New Destination”** at the Travel & Tourism Fair (TTF) Calcutta 2025. The Sikkim Pavilion was among the most visited and vibrant stalls at the event.

In May 2026, Union Minister of Culture and Tourism, Mr Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, visited Soreng District on an official tour, participating in review meetings and interacting with local youth and tourism stakeholders to assess the tourism potential and developmental prospects of the district. The visit highlighted the district’s rich cultural heritage, natural beauty and growing eco-tourism potential, with the Union Minister stressing the need to effectively market tourism destinations through digital platforms.

The Prime Minister has himself recognised that **“Sikkim has immense scope in eco-wellness tourism”**, with 1,000 homestays being built across the state.

3. Literature Review: The main frame of literature on wellness tourism has highlighted three different dimensions (Hartwell et al., 2018): on health and well-being tourism destinations, on the impact of tourism on tourists’ health and well-being, and its impact on destination communities’ health and well-being (Dini, M., et al, 2021). Wellness tourism can only be defined from a wide-angle view (Adams, 2003) that takes into account people’s lifestyle, as it is connected to various social and individual dimensions (Dunn, 1959). Some eminent scholars agree (Bushell and Sheldon, 2009; Smith, 2007; Steiner and Reisinger, 2006; Mueller and Kaufmann, 2001), and they emphasize the multidimensionality of an individual’s wellness, a condition founded on balance and spirituality that combines physical and mental health with social and environmental elements.

Other studies (Corbin et al., 2001; Hales, 1997) also associate wellness with multidimensional facets of a person; these are identified in six dimensions: physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, social and environmental. Smith and Puczko (2014, p.208) used wellness tourism in the following context: health of body, mind and spirit; self-sufficiency; physical strength; aesthetics; healthy nutrition; relaxation;

meditation; mental activity; education; environmental awareness; and sensitivity to social relationships (Dini M. et al, 2021).

Recent developments have created a new context for wellness tourism in Soreng District. The concept of “**slow tourism**” —an approach that invites travellers to immerse themselves in the rhythm of rural life, explore natural beauty at a relaxed pace, and develop authentic connections with local culture and communities—has gained significant traction in Soreng. Soreng has emerged as a model for community-driven tourism, with ambitious plans to position the destination as a hub for slow tourism.

4. Objectives of the Study: The key goals of the study are:

1. To examine the theoretical understanding of wellness tourism,
2. To analyse the opportunities and challenges for developing a sustainable wellness tourism product in Soreng District, Sikkim, in the current policy context, and
3. To suggest a roadmap for academicians, policymakers, stakeholders and practitioners seeking to develop evidence-based wellness tourism in fragile Himalayan regions like Soreng.

5. Methodology: This is a policy analysis paper, based solely on secondary data. Data have been collected from:

- (a) The Ministry of Tourism, Government of Sikkim
- (b) Regional news and statistical reports
- (c) Academic and technical reports on Sikkim’s wellness sector
- (d) Sectoral reviews on wellness tourism development
- (e) Recent government policy documents including the 2026-27 state budget, the “Nomad Sikkim” programme, and central government announcements
- (f) Reputed journals and articles

6. Dimensions of Wellness Tourism

Key Components	Details
A. Physical Wellness	Yoga, fitness retreats, naturopathy, physiotherapy, and Ayurveda treatments
B. Mental & Emotional Wellness	Meditation, mindfulness, stress-relief programs, counselling, and sound healing. Sikkim’s expanded counselling and preventive mental health programmes have contributed to a decline in suicide rates by nearly 15.8%—from 43.1 per lakh population in 2022 to 36.3 in 2024
C. Spiritual Wellness	Spiritual retreats, pilgrimages with wellness activities, and Buddhist meditation centres. Soreng is home to several historic monasteries, including Sang Ngag Yangtze Monastery at Rinchenpong and Rinchen Chholing Monastery at Meghi Dara
D. Social & Lifestyle Programs	Community-based healing, healthy eating, organic diets, and lifestyle modification programs

7. Opportunities and Challenges

7.1 Opportunities

A. Pristine Natural Environment: Soreng's Himalayan landscape, clean and fresh air, lush green hills, and tranquil atmosphere together create an ideal setting for wellness activities such as yoga, meditation, nature therapy, and spiritual retreats. The district offers panoramic views of Mt. Kanchenjunga, trekking trails, and rich biodiversity.

B. Spiritual and Cultural Resources: The strong influence of Buddhism, with monasteries such as Sang Ngag Yangtze Monastery at Rinchenpong and Rinchen Chholing Monastery at Meghi Dara, along with indigenous healing traditions, provides a solid base for spiritual wellness and holistic healing tourism. Plans for a Vrindavan Dham at Dodok near Soreng will further enhance spiritual tourism offerings.

C. Organic Farming and Healthy Lifestyle: As part of India's first 100% organic state, Soreng offers chemical-free food, herbal products, and traditional diets that support detoxification, immunity-building, and preventive healthcare.

D. Growing Demand for Wellness Tourism: Rising global and domestic awareness about physical, mental, and emotional well-being—especially in the post-pandemic period—has increased demand for safe, serene, and health-oriented destinations like Soreng. GST reforms have reduced GST on wellness services from 18% to 5%, making wellness tourism packages significantly cheaper.

E. Scope for Community-Based and Homestay Wellness Tourism: Wellness tourism can be integrated with homestays and village tourism, creating livelihood opportunities for local communities, women entrepreneurs, and small-scale service providers. The Tourism Department has allocated 33% of the permit quota specifically for Namchi and Soreng Districts.

F. Slow Tourism and Digital Nomadism: Soreng is being positioned as a hub for “slow tourism”—an approach emphasising immersive, meaningful travel experiences that prioritise local culture and sustainable practices. The upcoming Digital Nomad Village at Gumpa Dara, featuring co-working hubs, reliable internet, eco-friendly pathways and community-driven cultural activities, will attract remote workers and long-stay wellness travellers.



<https://www.instagram.com/p/DMH15RjPEXX/>

G. Policy & Funding Leverage: Alignment with government goals opens opportunities for grants, infrastructure investments and priority marketing. The ₹18,455 crore budget for 2026-27 prioritises tourism and healthcare. The Vibrant Villages Programme Phase II (VVP-II), approved with an outlay of ₹6,839 crore till FY 2028-29, aims to develop border villages through improved infrastructure, livelihood opportunities, digital connectivity and eco-tourism. Border villages in Soreng, Daramdin and Rinchenpong constituencies are likely to be included under the scheme.

H. Adventure Tourism Integration: Plans for an adventure tourism park with attractions ranging from ATV rides and paragliding to bird watching will complement wellness tourism offerings.

7.2 Major Challenges

A. Lack of Infrastructure: Limited road connectivity, transportation facilities, healthcare infrastructure, and high-quality wellness centres restrict the growth of organised wellness tourism. While the 2026-27 budget plans to construct nearly 570 km of climate-resilient roads, progress remains slow.

B. Scarcity of Skilled Human Resources: A lack of professionally trained wellness practitioners, therapists, yoga instructors, and hospitality staff affects service quality and global competitiveness.

C. Lack of Effective Destination Marketing: While Soreng has gained recognition as the “Most Promising New Destination”, it still requires stronger digital marketing and destination branding. The Union Minister has stressed the need to effectively market tourism destinations through digital platforms.

D. Environmental Fragility: The Himalayan ecosystem is highly sensitive. Unplanned tourism development may lead to environmental degradation, threatening the sustainability of wellness destinations.

E. Seasonal and Climatic Constraints: Harsh winters, landslides, and monsoon-related disruptions affect accessibility and tourist flow, posing operational challenges.

F. High Cost of Travel and Services: Limited accessibility and dependence on external supply chains increase the cost of wellness packages, making them less attractive for some tourists.

G. Regulatory and Standardisation Issues: The absence of definitive standards, certification, and monitoring mechanisms for wellness centres may affect service trust and credibility.

H. Digital Divide: While the Digital Nomad Village project promises high-speed Wi-Fi, rural areas may still face connectivity challenges that could hinder the integration of wellness tourism with digital infrastructure.

8. Key Development Projects

8.1 District Hospital: The district hospital is **over 90 per cent complete** and is expected to significantly improve healthcare access in the region. This forms a critical foundation for any medical tourism initiative.



https://www.designconceptsofficial.com/projects-3/100-bedded-district-hospital-at-soreng?pgid=ldtsjiui1-f9fdf3_55d61e2917ce4dbc813b9d757725c46cmv2

8.2 Digital Nomad Village at Gumpa Dara: Following the successful inauguration of India’s first “digital nomad village” at Yakten in Pakyong district, Sikkim is set to establish another such hub at Gumpa Dara in Soreng. The initiative is part of the state’s ‘Nomad Sikkim’ programme, designed to blend tourism, digital connectivity and sustainable local development. The Gumpa Dara project envisions:

- High-speed internet and co-working hubs
- Eco-friendly pathways
- Community-led cultural activities
- Upgraded homestays for remote professionals

ADC Bista highlighted Soreng’s natural attractions, including panoramic views of Mt. Kanchenjunga, trekking routes, monasteries, and homestay culture, as strong advantages for the initiative.

8.3 Vrindavan Religious Site: The priority development of the Vrindavan religious **site** at Dodok near Soreng is expected to bolster the district’s cultural and tourism profile. A project titled “Stairs to Heaven” is also being developed at Daramdin, around 23km from Soreng.

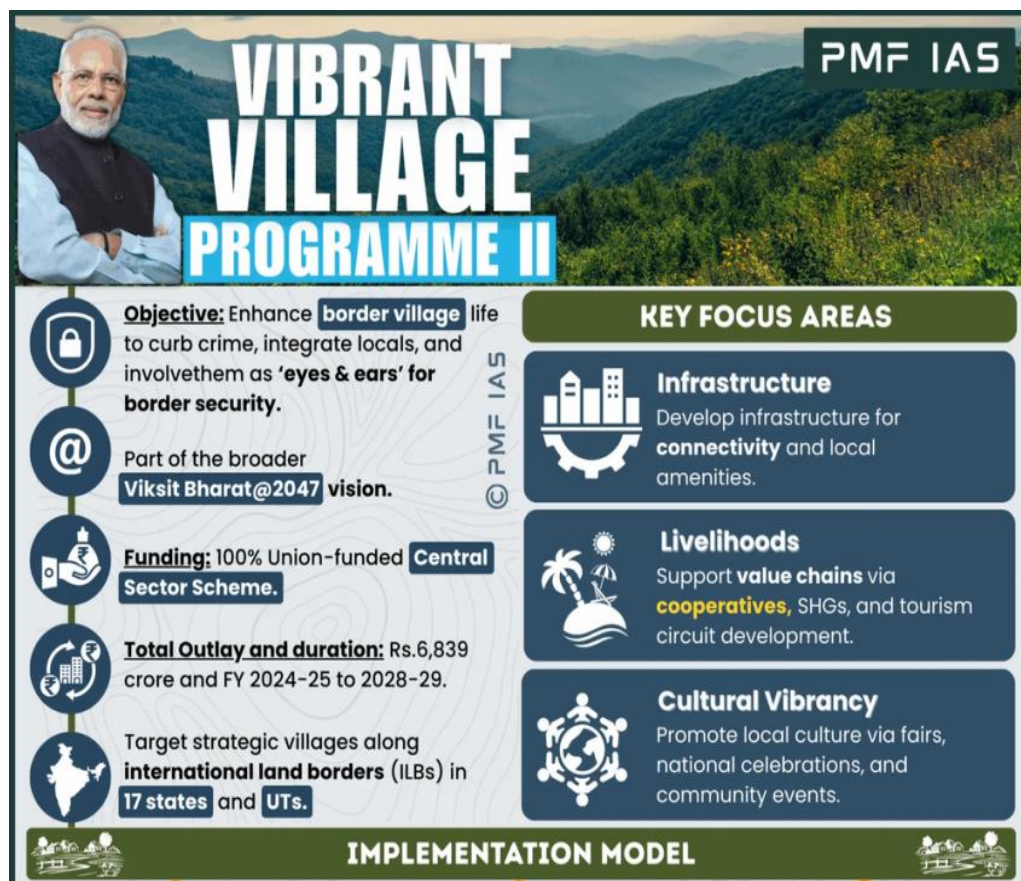


<https://www.facebook.com/sikkim2016/posts/an-aerial-view-of-the-under-construction-vrindavan-dham-in-dodak-soreng-district/1060922959405055/>

8.4 Connectivity Infrastructure: The tendering process for a modern taxi stand has been completed, while the widening of the Zoom-Salghari road—pending for over 25 years—has finally commenced.

8.5 National Initiatives: Two major national initiatives are expected to further accelerate Soreng’s transformation:

A. Vibrant Villages Programme Phase II (VVP-II): Approved with an outlay of ₹6,839 crore till FY 2028-29, this programme aims to develop border villages through improved infrastructure, livelihood opportunities, digital connectivity and eco-tourism.



B. Buddhist Circuit Initiative: Announced in the Union Budget 2026-27, this scheme aims to boost religious tourism across six northeastern states, including Sikkim, focusing on preserving monasteries and heritage sites, improving connectivity and enhancing visitor amenities.

9. Strategic Roadmap for Sustainable Development

9.1 For Academicians

- Conduct empirical research of socio-economic and environmental impacts on wellness tourism in Soreng District.
- Document indigenous healing practices, traditional knowledge, and Buddhist spiritual heritage of the region.
- Develop sustainability metrics and measurement models for fragile Himalayan ecosystems.
- Support policy through data, case studies, and best practices.
- Study the impact of recent policy changes—including the “Nomad Sikkim” programme, infrastructure projects, and GST reforms—on wellness tourism outcomes.

9.2 For Stakeholders (Local Communities & Entrepreneurs)

- Promote community-based and homestay-led wellness tourism, leveraging the 1,000 homestays being built across Sikkim.
- Use local resources, organic food, and traditional therapies responsibly.
- Guarantee women and youth participation in wellness enterprises.

- (d) Maintain cultural authenticity and environmental care.
- (e) Participate actively in training programmes and leverage the Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP).
- (f) Form a 'Homestay Development Committee' for cluster development tourism initiatives.

9.3 For Policymakers

- (a) Frame clear wellness tourism policies and standards.
- (b) Ensure environmental safeguards and carrying-capacity limits for the Kanchenjunga National Park and other sensitive areas.
- (c) Invest in eco-friendly infrastructure and connectivity—prioritise road development and completion of key projects.
- (d) Conduct skill development and certification programs for wellness practitioners, therapists, and hospitality staff.
- (e) Leverage the ₹18,455 crore budget strategically for wellness tourism infrastructure.
- (f) Develop wellness tourism circuits integrating monasteries, organic farms, homestays, and adventure sites.
- (g) Expedite the completion of key projects including the MangerjungMangsari project, Vrindavan Dodak, and the Stairs to Heaven project at Daramdin.
- (h) Strengthen digital marketing efforts as emphasised by the Union Minister.

9.4 Others

- (a) Strengthen destination branding based on wellness, sustainability, and Soreng's "Most Promising New Destination" recognition.
- (b) Encourage public—private—academic collaboration.
- (c) Balance tourism growth with ecological and social resilience.
- (d) Capitalise on the "Act Fast" policy for the Northeast.
- (e) Promote the "slow tourism" philosophy and the Digital Nomad Village concept as unique selling propositions for wellness travellers.

10. Business Implications: According to the Global Wellness Summit (2020) and Global Wellness Institute (2020), the demand for wellness tourism signifies one of the fastest-growing market segments worldwide (Csirmaz and Pető, 2015). Wellness tourism has noteworthy business implications for Soreng's economy:

- **Destination Recognition:** The "Most Promising New Destination" award at TTF Calcutta 2025 provides Soreng with a competitive advantage in attracting wellness tourists and investors.
- **Slow Tourism Premium:** The "slow tourism" philosophy allows for premium pricing on longer-stay, immersive wellness experiences.
- **Digital Nomad Economy:** The Digital Nomad Village at Gumpa Dara will attract high-spending remote workers who combine work with wellness.

- **Homestay Economy:** Soreng's community-driven tourism model creates a distributed, community-owned hospitality infrastructure ideal for wellness retreats.
- **Tax Advantages:** With only 5% GST on wellness services, wellness tourism packages have become significantly cheaper.
- **Adventure-Wellness Synergy:** The proposed adventure tourism park creates opportunities for combined adventure-wellness packages.
- **Pharma and AYUSH Integration:** Sikkim has emerged as a pharmaceutical manufacturing hub, and an International Yoga & Naturopathy College along with a 30-bedded Sowa Rigpa Hospital is planned in Sikkim, creating opportunities for integrating medical tourism into wellness offerings.

11. Conclusion: Soreng District's pristine Himalayan environment, rich Buddhist spiritual heritage, organic lifestyle, and strong focus on community-based and sustainable tourism make it a promising destination for wellness tourism. The recognition as the "Most Promising New Destination" at TTF Calcutta 2025, the identification as an Aspirational District, and the Prime Minister's endorsement of eco-wellness tourism in Sikkim have collectively placed Soreng on the national tourism map.

The policy landscape in 2025-26 has created unprecedented opportunities. With the "Nomad Sikkim" programme and the Digital Nomad Village at Gumpa Dara, the ₹18,455 crore state budget, the Vibrant Villages Programme Phase II, and the Buddhist Circuit initiative, the ecosystem for wellness tourism in Soreng has never been more favourable.

In order to tackle the existing issues, we need to focus on careful planning, evidence-based policies, community involvement, and sustainable tourism practices. The "slow tourism" philosophy provides a suitable framework for Soreng's development—prioritising quality, authenticity, and sustainability over mass tourism. With strategic interventions and responsible management—particularly addressing connectivity bottlenecks and skill development—wellness tourism can contribute meaningfully to inclusive economic growth, environmental conservation, and long-term well-being in Soreng District.

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