

Tourism Development in Northeast India: Learning from Thailand's Sustainable Tourism

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Abstract

This paper explores the potential for tourism development in Northeast India by drawing insights from the best practices of Thailand's vibrant tourism industry. Northeast India, known for its rich cultural diversity, stunning landscapes and unique heritage has remained largely untapped in terms of tourism potential. It examines how Thailand, a global tourism hub, has successfully leveraged its natural beauty, cultural heritage and strategic marketing to become a tourism powerhouse. Key challenges identified in Northeast India include limited awareness among potential tourists, lack of amenities, inadequate marketing efforts and issues related to security and accessibility in certain areas. Key learning from Thailand includes sustainable tourism practices, community involvement, infrastructure development, pro-tourism government policies and effective marketing strategies. These lessons can be applied to the Northeast Indian context to unlock the region's tourism potential while preserving its natural and cultural assets.

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Introduction

Tourism contributes to Thailand's GDP in a big way. NE being the gateway of Southeast Asia for India and sharing similar topographical features with Thailand, developing the NE's tourism potential in cooperation with Bangkok makes much sense. Although pristine beaches are one of the major tourist attractions in Thailand, Bangkok's success in turning its mountainous northern regions into tourist hubs can set a model for NE's tourism ambitions. Given that topography of the highlands in the northern provinces of Thailand are very much similar to that of vast parts of NE, the latter can learn much about tourism development.

Thailand boasts a diverse and breathtaking landscape, from the lush jungles of Chiang Mai in the north to the pristine beaches of Phuket in the south. The country's geography, which includes mountains, rainforests, rivers and coastlines, has laid the foundation for eco-tourism to thrive. However, this biological wealth has faced numerous threats due to unregulated tourism and development. Thailand recognized the need to shift its tourism paradigm toward eco-tourism to safeguard this biodiversity. Thailand's journey toward promoting eco-tourism began several decades ago. The government, along with various stakeholders, implemented policies and initiatives to strike a balance between tourism development and environmental preservation. Thailand's eco-tourism promotion, its successes and challenges offer lessons for other nations striving for sustainable tourism.

The eight states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim in northeastern India have a wealth of natural and cultural diversity, making them prime tourist destinations. A region rich in natural and cultural diversity, Northeast India (NE) is poised to become a major tourist destination in the Bay of Bengal region. The tourism industry can also contribute towards NE's long-term peace and prosperity. By stimulating regional economies and providing new job opportunities, the tourism sector has the potential to help alleviate the region's social and economic challenges such as high unemployment, low living standards and

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socio-political violent uprisings. The NER can draw tourists from all over the world because of its numerous distinct cultural heritages and its abundance of distinct flora and faunas. Traditional art, culture, handicraft, fairs and festivals from a wide range of ethnic groups and the mountains, hills and rivers offer ample opportunities for outdoor pursuits, including mountaineering, trekking, rafting, and other leisure water activities like boating, rowing, etc. In terms of weather, the area is perfect for spas and wellness centers.

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NER has historically seen fewer visitors than other parts of India. Despite enjoying “unique tourist attractions like the cleanest village in Asia, the only floating national park in the world and the world's largest river island, out of 6.9 million foreign visitors to India in 2022, only around 0.1 million had NER's locations in their itinerary.”¹ Similarly, even among the domestic travelers, all eight Northeastern states put together accounted for just around 0.4 per cent of total domestic tourists count.² Thus, given the untapped tourist attractions in the NER, the scope for attracting both domestic and foreign travelers is huge.

Table 1: Foreign Travelers count to Northeastern states from 2017- 2021

State/Year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Arunachal Pradesh	7147	7653	7825	961	182
Assam	21760	36846	26878	7285	536
Manipur	3497	6391	13608	3139	648
Meghalaya	12051	18114	25813	2311	411
Mizoram	1155	967	2249	265	234
Nagaland	4166	5010	5577	518	325
Sikkim	49111	71172	133388	19935	11508
Tripura	69899	102861	154405	31877	5
Total	170803	251032	371762	68311	15870

Source: Data Bank of North Eastern Development Finance Corporation Ltd. (NEDFi) and Department of Tourism, Government of India.

Lack of adequate transport infrastructure, security concerns and the complexity of securing approval for foreign tourists into the NER have all contributed to its historical neglect by major international actors in the tourism industry. Nonetheless, in recent years, travel to Northeast India has increased thanks to rapid improvements in infrastructure and security in the region. NER's transportation system has undergone a dramatic transformation during the past decade. Today, there are 17 operational airports in NER, out of which two are international airports, one in Guwahati and the other in Imphal. The expansion of Guwahati International Airport has the potential to transform the city as a hub of tourism connectivity in the region. Similarly, the railway sector has also seen rapid improvement since 2014. In a mission mode, Indian Railways has stepped up efforts to connect all capital cities of all NER states with the national rail network by 2025. The highways are also rapidly built to connect all states in the region. Increasing the region's accessibility by air, rail and road will be a major infrastructure fillip that will hopefully draw visitors worldwide to the Northeast region.

To promote tourism in Northeast India, the central and state governments have been undertaking various initiatives. For instance, the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) ministry has been “developing 100 viewpoints comprising wayside amenities, eating places, outlets for selling local products and selfie points to come up across the northeast³ Similarly, the union government has sanctioned Rs 58.63 crore under the Swadesh Darshan scheme to develop Thenzawl and South Zone and eco-adventure circuit in Mizoram.⁴ The government has also taken steps to increase tourism in the region by facilitating easier access for foreign tourists from neighboring countries like Myanmar, Bangladesh and Bhutan.

Given the already present natural environment, the potential for recreation, adventure, culture, wildlife, heritage, and ecotourism is clear and attainable. Yet another type of tourism—medical tourism—holds substantial promise for the region's economic future. Nature enthusiasts will find NER's hills, mountains and tea plantations to be paradise on earth. It has enormous potential as a destination for medical tourists, particularly those from the BBIN region and Myanmar. An estimated 1.4 million⁵ medical tourists visited India in 2022. This number is increasing year by year. For instance, in 2020 and 2021, the number of medical tourists visiting India was 1.83 lakhs and 3.04 lakhs, respectively.⁰ In fact, more than 35 per cent⁷ of foreign travelers to India (excluding

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Indian Diaspora visitors) in 2021 were for medical reasons. However, a very small portion of these patients relies on medical facilities in the NER, as most rely on hospitals in metro cities like Chennai, Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, and Bangalore.

Table 2: Distribution of Foreign visitors to India from BIMSTEC countries for Medical Purposes, 2021 (in percentage)

Country	Percentage
Bangladesh	77.6%
Bhutan	15.4%
Nepal	0.5%
Myanmar	56.2%
Sri Lanka	3.4%
Thailand	0.1%

Source: Ministry of Tourism, Government of India,

<https://tourism.gov.in/sites/default/files/202209/India%20Tourism%20Statistics%202022%20%28English%29.pdf>

As we can see from the Table 2, people who visit from Bangladesh and Myanmar are mostly for medical purposes. However, most rely on cities like Kolkata for their medical needs. Given its geographical proximity, NER can establish itself as a major medical tourism hub. Healthcare facilities in Guwahati have improved tremendously in the past decade. As an entry point for international travelers to the Northeast, Guwahati's medical infrastructure attracts the maximum number of patients from the BBIN region. Similarly, the Shija hospitals and research centre at Imphal also caters to significant numbers of patients from Myanmar. Nonetheless, compared to the demand, the supply of medical services in NER is low. Improvement of health infrastructure of hospitals and other complementary facilities as well as technologies and skills, are also required to fully utilize the region's potential in medical tourism.

Thailand's Success Story

As the "Land of Smiles," Thailand is adored by travelers more than any other destination in Asia, if not the entire world. Thailand has something for everyone: the bustle of Bangkok's urban city

centre, the tranquil sandy beaches of Koh Samui and Pattaya, historical buildings and monuments and cultural, traditional and authentic Thai experiences. With incredible growth from 15 million in 2010 to 40 million in 2019 number of visitors⁸, the travel and tourism industry alone contributed around 22 percent of Thailand's GDP 2019.⁹ Despite the Covid-19 pandemic severely impacted Thailand's tourist business, the sector has since quickly recovered, with over 10 million¹⁰ international visitors visiting the country until end June 2023. The number of Indian tourists visiting Thailand has steadily increased over the past several years. India ranked second only to Malaysia as a source of visitors to Thailand that year (2022). In 2022, about one million Indians were among the over 11 million international tourists who visited Thailand.¹¹ The importance of the travel and tourism industry to Thai society can be seen in the way the major political parties pitch for pro-tourism policies as one of the main promises in their campaigns during elections.¹²

In the 1960s, during the Vietnam War, many American servicemen and veterans visited Thailand for a well-deserved break from the stresses of military life.¹³ Around the same time, international mass travel began to pick up steam, and Thailand's hospitality business made the most of it. The economic boom of the 1980s throughout much of East Asia was particularly helpful to Thailand. Apart from exotic tourist spots and an economic boom in the region, the consistent pro-tourism policies by the Thai administration have also played a crucial role in turning the country into one of the world's major tourist hubs.

For instance, be it the recent decision to do away with Thai passes for foreign visitors, which required a cumbersome process, or the policy of giving VAT refunds to tourists. To help out the country's economy and lessen the disparity between the well-known tourist attractions and the rest of the country, Thailand has adopted a number of measures to encourage tourism in 55 second-tier (non-major) provinces.¹⁴ On the flip side, mass tourism has also created several socio-environmental problems in Thailand. Notwithstanding these challenges, the tourism industry has continued to be the backbone of the Thai economy. The Thai government's unwavering commitment to fostering a thriving tourism industry through supportive policies and strategic initiatives has been instrumental in maintaining Thailand's status as a premier global travel destination.

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Promotion of Tourism Infrastructure

One of the cornerstones of Thailand's successful tourism sector is its robust infrastructure. The Thai government has consistently invested in developing and maintaining transportation, accommodation and communication systems to ensure seamless connectivity experience for visitors. Key initiatives include expanding and modernizing airports, the construction of new highways and investing in public transportation systems such as the Bangkok Skytrain and the MRT subway system.¹⁵ These developments have improved connectivity within Thailand and made it easier for tourists to access various attractions across the country.

Furthermore, the government's support extends to the hospitality sector. Through various policies initiatives, incentives and partnerships, Thailand has seen a proliferation of high-quality hotels, resorts and guesthouses. The establishment of a broad range of accommodation options caters to different types of travelers from budget-conscious backpackers to luxury seekers. This diversity ensures that the tourism sector remains inclusive and accessible to a wide range of tourists.

Visa and Immigration Policies

Thailand's government has also been proactive in making it easier for tourists to visit the country by introducing visa waiver programs and visa-on-arrival options that have significantly simplified the entry process. These policies encourage spontaneous travel and have contributed to Thailand's reputation as a hassle-free destination.

Moreover, the government has implemented policies to extend the stay for tourists, allowing them to explore the country more thoroughly. Visa extensions and multiple-entry visas are among the measures taken to promote longer stays, ultimately increasing tourist spending and economic benefits. This approach aligns with Thailand's goal of attracting tourists who are not only interested in its renowned beaches but also its rich culture, cuisine and heritage.

Cultural Preservation and Promotion

Thailand's rich cultural heritage is a major attraction for tourists and the government has recognized the importance of preserving and promoting its cultural assets. Various initiatives have been put in place to safeguard historical sites, temples and traditions while encouraging tourists' exploration.

For example, the Thai government supports cultural festivals and events throughout the year¹⁶, showcasing the diversity of the country's heritage. The annual Loy Krathong and Songkran festivals are prime examples, drawing in tourists from around the world to experience Thai customs and traditions firsthand. The government's involvement in these events ensures their continuation and growth, benefiting the tourism sector and local communities. Additionally, efforts to designate and promote UNESCO World Heritage Sites such as Ayutthaya and Sukhothai Historical Parks have boosted cultural tourism. These initiatives draw tourists and generate income for the preservation and maintenance of these historical treasures.

Marketing and Promotion

Effective marketing and promotion are essential for any tourism industry's success and Thailand's government has been proactive in this regard. The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), a government agency, plays a central role in marketing the country as a prime travel destination. TAT conducts extensive international marketing campaigns, participates in major travel trade shows and collaborates with airlines and travel agencies to promote Thailand. For instance, the "Amazing Thailand" campaign has successfully branded Thailand as a must-visit destination. Additionally, digital marketing and social media strategies have allowed Thailand to reach a broader and younger audience, keeping the country relevant and appealing in the digital age.

Crisis Management and Resilience

In times of crisis, such as natural disasters or global health pandemics, the Thai government has shown resilience by quickly adapting its marketing strategies to reassure tourists and maintain its image as a safe destination. This adaptability has played a crucial role in the swift recovery of the tourism sector after such incidents.

Thailand's tourism sector has faced various challenges, including political unrest, natural disasters and global economic downturns. The government has demonstrated its commitment to the industry's resilience by implementing crisis management strategies. For instance, during the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the Thai government took swift action to rehabilitate affected areas and restore confidence in the safety of its beaches. Around 14 percent of the relief budget of the Thai government was dedicated to revive the tourism industry in the Andaman areas.¹⁷ Likewise, in the

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wake of political protests, the government implemented measures to ensure the safety of tourists and maintain a welcoming environment.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented an unprecedented challenge to the global tourism industry, and Thailand was no exception. However, the government swiftly introduced measures to protect public health while also providing financial support to affected businesses and workers in the tourism sector.¹⁸ This comprehensive response has positioned Thailand as a model for crisis management in the tourism industry.

Investment in Digital Technology

Thailand's government recognizes the importance of digital technology in modern tourism. The country has made significant investments in infrastructure to support the digital needs of tourists, including widespread internet connectivity and the development of mobile apps and online platforms for travelers. Digital technology has enhanced the tourist experience in various ways, from enabling online bookings and contactless payments to providing real-time information about attractions and transportation options. The Thai government's support for these advancements has made it easier for tourists to navigate the country and access services, enhancing their overall experience.

Collaboration with Private Sector

The Thai government has fostered a close partnership with the private sector to drive innovation and growth in the tourism industry. Public-private collaborations have been instrumental in the development of new tourist attractions, infrastructure projects and hospitality offerings.

Joint ventures between the government and private enterprises have created world-class resorts and theme parks, attracting visitors from around the globe. Furthermore, the government has offered incentives and gives full cooperation to private investors in the tourism industry.¹⁹ This collaboration ensures that the tourism sector remains dynamic and competitive, continually offering fresh and exciting experiences to visitors.

Training and Skill Development

Thailand's government recognizes the importance of a skilled workforce in the tourism sector. Policies and programs have been implemented to provide training and skill development opportunities for individuals in the industry, ranging from hotel staff to tour guides. The Ministry of Tourism and Sports, in collaboration with various agencies and organizations, offers training programs and certifications to enhance the professionalism and service quality of those working in tourism-related jobs. The programs like 'Thailand Specialist Programme' are open to anyone who wants to sell the ideal Thai vacation.²⁰ This ensures that visitors to Thailand receive high service and hospitality, enhancing their experience. Furthermore, initiatives to improve language proficiency among service providers have been put in place to cater to the diverse range of tourists visiting Thailand.

Eco tourism Certifications

To promote eco-tourism, Thailand has implemented a range of sustainable tourism initiatives that strike a balance between economic growth and environmental protection. These initiatives have garnered international recognition and have set the standard for responsible tourism practices. One of Thailand's key strategies for promoting eco-tourism has been the implementation of certification programs for hotels, tour operators and other tourism-related businesses. For instance, the Green Leaf Foundation's certification²¹ acknowledges businesses that meet specific environmental and social criteria. This incentivizes businesses to adopt sustainable practices, such as reducing energy consumption, managing waste and supporting local communities.

Community-Based Tourism

Thailand has embraced community-based tourism as a way to involve local communities in the tourism industry. By allowing tourists to engage with and learn from local cultures, traditions and lifestyles, this approach provides income to remote communities and fosters a deeper appreciation for nature and indigenous knowledge. Hill tribe trekking in Northern Thailand²² and homestays in rural areas exemplify such community-based tourism initiatives.

Eco-Friendly Transportation

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The Thai government has invested in eco-friendly transportation options, including electric tuk-tuks²³ and hybrid buses. Furthermore, there has been a push to develop cycling routes in urban areas to reduce carbon emissions and promote sustainable mobility. These initiatives align with Thailand's commitment to reducing the carbon footprint of its tourism industry.

Elephant Conservation

Thailand's dedication to environmental conservation plays a pivotal role in promoting eco-tourism. Various organizations and government agencies work tirelessly to protect natural habitats and address the challenges posed by rapid urbanization and tourism.

Thailand has been a focal point for elephant tourism, raising concerns about the welfare and treatment of these magnificent creatures. To address these concerns, Thailand has taken steps to promote ethical elephant tourism²⁴ by discouraging activities like elephant riding and instead focusing on sanctuaries and rescue centres that prioritize the welfare of elephants.

National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries

Thailand has established an extensive network of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, preserving its natural treasures. These protected areas serve as habitats for a wide range of flora and fauna and offer visitors a chance to experience the wonders of untouched nature. Iconic parks like Khao Sok National Park and Doi Inthanon National Park have become popular eco-tourism destinations, attracting visitors interested in hiking, birdwatching and wildlife observation.

Education and Awareness Campaigns Eco-tourism in Thailand is not just about enjoying nature; it's also about learning and raising awareness about environmental issues. Education plays a vital role in creating responsible tourists who appreciate the significance of preserving the environment. The government and various organizations have been running awareness campaigns both within Thailand and internationally. These campaigns highlight the importance of responsible tourism, such as reducing plastic waste, conserving water and respecting local customs and traditions. Educational initiatives have been introduced to inform both locals and tourists about sustainable tourism practices.

Tourism authorities in Thailand in cooperation with international organizations like UNDP conduct eco-tourism workshops for local communities, tour operators and guides.⁰ These workshops

emphasize the principles of sustainable tourism and provide practical guidance on minimizing the ecological footprint of tourism activities. By educating stakeholders, Thailand ensures that eco-tourism remains a top priority.

Thailand's Tourism Sectors: Lessons for Northeast India

NER can learn several valuable lessons from Thailand in developing its tourism industry. Sharing similar geographical landscapes such as mountains, hills and rivers as well as rich cultural heritages, there is a lot that Northeast India can draw from Thailand's experiences not only to contribute to the economy but also to develop sustainable tourism.

Effective utilization of cultural heritage: Thailand has successfully capitalized on its rich cultural heritage, promoting it as a major tourist attraction. Northeast India, with its diverse tribal cultures can similarly showcase its unique traditions, folk dances, music and crafts to attract tourists interested in cultural experiences. India can collaborate with several ASEAN and BIMSTEC members, including Thailand, to develop and promote the Buddhist circuit covering the region between Nepal and Cambodia. Developing Buddhist circuits within their respective nations has already been a priority for bilateral and regional ASEAN members, including discussions with India. The Tai-Ahom community of Assam traces its roots back to Thailand and there are strong cultural similarities between the two regions. Organizing cultural exchange programs, festivals and events demonstrating the shared heritage, traditions, music, dance and cuisine can attract tourists from Thailand interested in exploring their cultural roots. Such cultural exchanges can build stronger people-to-people ties and through greater interactions stakeholders in Northeast India can learn from their counterparts in Thailand how to leverage cultural heritages for tourism.

Marketing and Promotion: Thailand has adopted successful marketing strategies to promote its tourism business internationally. Northeast India might take inspiration from Thailand's marketing strategies and designs focused on advertising campaigns to promote its distinctive offerings, cultural variety and scenic beauty to potential tourists. Launching joint promotional campaigns in Thailand and other international markets can create awareness about the unique tourism opportunities in Northeast India. Thailand has made progress in promoting eco-tourism and environmentally friendly practices. Northeast India has the opportunity to implement eco-friendly

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practices, create nature paths and provide responsible tourism experiences that protect the area's biodiversity and natural beauty.

Streamline visa processes: Thailand has implemented visa policies that facilitate tourism, including visa-on-arrival and e-visa systems. Thailand allows visa-free travel for more than 60 countries²⁶ and visa-on-arrival options to people from more than 19 countries including India. Simplifying visa procedures for international visitors can encourage more tourists to explore the attractions of Northeast India.

Enhance hospitality and service standards: Thailand is renowned for its warm hospitality and excellent service. Northeast India can focus on training local communities and tourism professionals to provide a high standard of customer service, ensuring that tourists feel welcomed and are well-cared for during their visit.

Capacity building of youths in Northeast India to develop the tourism industry is an important initiative that can contribute to the overall growth and development of the region. This can be achieved through promoting skill development, fostering entrepreneurship, facilitating cultural exchange programs, digital skills training and collaboration with industries to provide internships and jobs in the tourism sector. Gerald Duia (owner of an eco-tour agency in Shillong), one of the delegates who participated in the Thailand Exchange program recently, highlighted the professionalism of people working in the tourism sector in Thailand. He advocates for developing a similar work culture among the people in the tourism industry in Northeast India apart from improving public sanitation standards to impact visiting tourists to the region positively.²⁷

Collaborate with the private sector: Thailand has successfully collaborated with the private sector to develop tourism infrastructure and marketing initiatives. Northeast India can foster partnerships with private businesses, tour operators and hospitality providers to invest in tourism development and jointly promote the region. Prashanth Pakhrin, Assistant Director of Information and Publicity, Tourism & Civil Aviation Dept, Government of Sikkim, a delegation member that visited Thailand recently, argues that he was amazed to see the level of independence that the private sector enjoy in the tourism sector in Thailand. He argues that the private stakeholders' dependency on the government is very low in Thailand.²⁸ The Thai government has played a crucial role in supporting and promoting tourism through favorable policies, incentives and regulations. Northeast India can

work on creating a conducive environment for tourism growth by implementing supportive policies, providing incentives for investments and establishing regulations that balance tourism development with environmental conservation.

Livelihood Generation for Local Communities: Thailand has successfully implemented community-based tourism projects, where local communities actively host and guide tourists. Northeast India can adopt a similar approach by involving local communities in tourism activities such as homestays, guided tours and cultural performances. This empowers the local population and ensures they benefit directly from tourism revenue. Northeast India can invest in vocational training programs that equip local people with hospitality, language and guiding skills. This enables them to secure employment opportunities within the tourism sector and enhance the quality of guest experiences.

Focus on safety and security: Thailand has prioritized safety and security of tourists by establishing tourist police units and implementing measures to ensure visitor well-being. Northeast India can enhance safety measures, create tourist-friendly environments and provide necessary information to tourists to instill confidence in their travel experiences. Thailand has been implementing various measures to deal with hawkers in the tourism sector. Several measures are taken in this regard, such as designating specific areas known as "Hawkers Centre"⁰ and registering them by issuing licenses. The Northeast can also adopt such measures in developing its tourist spots.

Conclusion

Tourism development can significantly contribute to the economic growth of Northeast India. Increased tourism activities will generate income and employment opportunities for the local communities in the region. Nonetheless, the tourism industry in NER still has a lot of challenges to overcome. These include limited awareness among potential tourists, inadequate marketing efforts and issues related to security and accessibility in certain areas. Thai investments in hospitality infrastructure, hotels, resorts and tourist facilities will create new business opportunities, attracting more visitors and boosting the local economy. Moreover, investments from Thai companies in the tourism sector of NER would, in addition to setting up amenities to draw more tourists, make it easier to divert travelers arriving in Thailand toward Northeast India.

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Besides, Thailand and India have rich and diverse cultures. Cooperation in tourism can facilitate a greater exchange of cultural experiences between the two countries. Recently, Thailand and India have decided to explore mutual recognition/cooperation agreements (MRAs) in medical tourism³⁰By studying and implementing the best practices from Thailand's successful tourism industry, Northeast India can enhance its tourism potential, attract more visitors, create employment opportunities and generate economic growth. In addition, NER states can also work towards attracting Payment for Ecosystems (PES) investments in the tourism sector. PES investments, especially in rural tourism, could enable rural communities to use PES to access capital to support their natural conservation activities and develop community-centered eco-tourism. Adapting these practices to the region's unique characteristics and maintaining environmental sustainability is crucial.

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