

Revitalizing Tourism in Crisis: The Significance of Domestic Tourism in Covid-19 Recovery and Policy Initiatives in Top Tourist Destinations of the Amhara Region, Ethiopia

Asnakew Atlug Tegegne*, Girum Teshome Tadesse, Temesgen Fikadie Melsi

Department of Tourism and Hotel Management, Wollo University, Dessie, Ethiopia

*Corresponding author: Asnakew A. T, Department of Tourism and Hotel Management, Wollo University, Dessie, Ethiopia.

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Abstract

In time of COVID-19 and other crises, the focus of the tourism industry is to devise and implement strategies for its recovery. This study examined the role of domestic tourism in recuperating from the pandemic, policy initiatives, recovery strategies, and challenges in top tourist destinations in the Amhara Region. The research employed a mixed method approach with a descriptive design, and 384 questionnaires were distributed to respondents selected through convenience sampling, while 15 key informants were purposefully interviewed. The findings revealed that domestic tourism played a significant role in mitigating the impact of the pandemic and building resilient tourism businesses. It was found to be an "incredible crisis absorber" and crucial for rebuilding customer confidence.

The study also showed that most features of domestic tourism, such as pilgrimage travel, proximity and ease of access, visiting families and relatives, and the use of road transportation and less standardized hotels, played a significant role in revitalizing the tourism sector. As various policies and recovery strategies have been implemented by governments worldwide, the Amhara Region's Culture and Tourism Bureau developed a two-phase COVID recovery strategy (response and recovery phases) aimed at protecting and supporting tourism activities. Conversely, high costs at destinations, the lack of comprehensive domestic tourism development and marketing strategy, poor infrastructural development, and a mismatch between the services offered and the demands of tourists were found to be major hindrances to the growth of domestic tourism in the region.

Keywords: COVID-19, Domestic Tourism, Policy Initiatives, Recovery Strategies

Introduction

Tourism is an indecisive and seasonal industry that demands peace (Kunwar, 2010). It is frequently described as fragile and highly vulnerable, susceptible to crises such as wars, pandemics, terrorism, economic fluctuations, political instability, and other factors [1-3]. A tourism crisis is an unexpected event that can affect travellers' confidence and damage the marketability and reputation of a tourism business or an entire tourism development in a particular region [4]. In the 21st century, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a significant negative impact including pause in tourism activities, loss of traveler motivation

and a halt in traveler mobility [5]. It has brought the socio-economic structures of the world to a standstill and the tourism and hospitality industry has been hit hardest, with a decline of 74% in international travel in 2020 though the industry demonstrated a 4% increase in 2021 compared to the previous year, has shown the industry resilience [6-9]. However, there is still a lack of knowledge on how to design and implement crisis recovery and response strategies to build a resilient sector, and how crises can foster industry change and innovation, and inform research to shape thinking in the new normal [10]. Thus, destination planners need to develop strategies to tackle such crises and maintain

the positive impacts of tourism on countries' growth and development [2]. Hence, the industry has shifted its focus to domestic and regional markets, which has been a common response in destinations during crises [9].

Domestic tourism has been recognized for its resilience during crises and has the ability to sustain the tourism industry during difficult times [10]. It is an essential form for many countries, as it helps to keep the country's currency outflow, prevent inflation, enhance cultural pluralism within the country (Hirut and Yechale, 2018), foster democratic governance, and is the largest portion in terms of tourist generation. Additionally, domestic tourism is widely recognized for its ability to redistribute national income, from richer to poorer [11-14]. It is also important in keeping national currency inside the country, which helps to prevent inflation and high costs of goods [15]. Furthermore, domestic tourism can reduce seasonality and is preferable due to its reliability at all times, as domestic tourists travel around their country for various reasons, such as conferences, sports, business, medical reasons, holidays, and visiting family and friends [16, 17].

The development of domestic tourism has not received adequate attention from governments or academic research, and it is often overlooked in favor of international tourism due to the need for foreign exchange earnings and the wrong attitude that tourists are considered to pass through long transport and customs bottlenecks [17-19]. Consequently, many developing countries have not developed strategies to promote domestic tourism, and it remains underdeveloped, despite accounting for the majority of travel and tourism spending [20, 21, 17]. In Africa, domestic tourism initiatives have been slow to grow, although some countries, such as South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya, have made some efforts to improve domestic tourism by offering reduced accommodation for local travelers [16]. According to Mazimhaka and Mustapha, domestic tourism in developing countries is often constrained by several factors, such as a lack of data, inexperience and awareness, poor economic performance, weak policies, and the absence of long-term strategies.

Domestic tourism in Ethiopia has been largely overlooked as a significant contributor to the country's tourism industry; despite the rich cultural and natural heritage it possesses [22]. This is due to the fact that efforts to promote domestic tourism have been a scarce and less attentive tourism development policy, primarily focused on international tourism with little consideration to domestic tourism [21]. Despite this, few studies have been conducted on domestic tourism in Ethiopia, specifically in the Amhara region. Joshi et al. investigated the role of domestic tourism in promoting democratic governance in world heritage sites in Amhara and found that it encourages citizens to explore their own country and foster social justice. Similarly, Hirut and Yechale studied domestic tourism as a means of promoting cultural pluralism in the region and concluded that it is a powerful force for global diplomacy and cultural understanding. In light of the dynamic nature of the tourism industry, it is necessary to investigate how the industry can recover and sustain in Ethiopia.

As the role of domestic tourism as a resilient segment in times of crisis in Ethiopia has not been studied, this study aims to address this by examining the role of domestic tourism in recov-

ering from the COVID-19 pandemic, policy initiatives and the challenges it faces in the top tourist destinations in the Amhara region. The researchers made the following justifications to select the top tourist destinations of the Amhara region (Bahir Dar, Gondar, and Lalibela) as the study area. First, the numbers of tourists visiting these destinations were high compared with other destinations in the region. Second, the destinations are popular not only in Ethiopia but also worldwide because of their immense historical and architectural attractions, ancient history, and pilgrimage centers. Third, the local communities around Lalibela and Gondar are highly dependent on tourism, but these days they face challenges from the collapse of tourism. Therefore, researchers believe that examining the role of domestic tourism as a resilient segment and demonstrating recovery strategies is important.

Objectives of the Study

- To assess the roles of domestic tourism as a tool of recovery from COVID-19 crisis in top tourist destinations in Amhara region.
- To assess the policy initiatives and COVID recovery strategies made by regional tourism bureau.
- To identify the challenges of using domestic tourism as a recovery tool from COVID-19 crisis in the study area

Literature Review

Although domestic tourism has likely been practiced since the time of civilization, it is often overlooked in government agendas and scholarship programs in most developing countries, despite being the dominant form of tourism in terms of tourist arrivals and receipts globally [22, 19, 21]. This has resulted in a distorted image of the tourism industry, a lack of awareness among both visitors and locals about the importance of domestic tourism, and a failure to recognize the significant contribution of this form of tourism [22].

Domestic tourism significantly contributes to the development of any nation, playing a role in increasing tourism investments and expenditures, reducing the unemployment rate, promoting the development of natural areas, reducing seasonality, strengthening social attachments by Visiting Friends and Relatives, preserving national exchange within the country, preventing inflation, and mitigating financial outflows [22, 15, 11]. It also helps develop a sense of national pride, which influences locals to provide pleasant services to international tourists, thereby enhancing cultural pluralism (Hirut and Yechale, 2018), fostering democratic governance, advancing the lives of local communities, and reducing leakage [19, 23, 12, 24]. It is also important in times of crisis. For instance, the United States faced a drop in its tourism industry after the September 11th attacks on the country. However, the total revenue rose from 43.6 million in 2002 to 46.1 million in 2004, and the total revenue received from tourism raised from US\$600 billion to US\$ 525.3 billion, contributed by domestic tourists [19]. The same occurred in China and Thailand after the SARS outbreak in 2003, after the economic crisis in Bahamas in 2009 and in Sierra Leone, and five years after the 2014 Ebola outbreak. The tourism industry has shown resilience after past crises due to its large domestic visitors [25].

However, there are certain challenges that hamper domestic tourism development worldwide, which vary accordingly. One

of the major challenges in many developing nations is related to poor policy formulation and the lack of a domestic tourism strategic plan, which creates a problem in determining the exact figure of domestic tourists, their travel purpose, and spending [26, 27, 21]. On the other hand, financial shortages, high transportation costs, and limited organized tours are common challenges, especially for young travelers, lack of funding and inexperienced management, and poor marketing and development strategies [28, 29]. Moreover, in the 21st century, pandemics and epidemic diseases are major predicaments worldwide [6, 30].

Methods and Materials

Research Design, Population and Sampling Methods

The study employed a mixed research approach along with a descriptive research design due to the fact that mixed research approach is important to avoid the pitfalls of using a single research approach [31]. Experts from Amhara Culture and Tourism Bureau, Bahir Dar and Gondar Cities Administration Culture and Tourism office, Central Gondar Zone Culture and Tourism Department, Lalibela Town Culture and Tourism office, tour operators and travel agents based at Bahir Dar, Gondar and Lalibela and domestic visitors were the populations of the study. The study employed convenience sampling to take representative samples from domestic visitors in cross sectional survey. The data was collected based on the availability of the visitors who were presented in the study area during the study period based on the fact that convenience involves using what is immediately available [31]. Moreover, the study also employed purposive sampling to select tourism experts and travel agents. Consequently, 384 domestic visitors were taken using Cochran (1977) formula, for the researchers did not have a defined population.

Thus, $no = (z^2pq)/e^2no = (1.96)^2 (0.5)(0.5) / (0.05)^2$

Additionally, 15 key informants from office experts and travel agents were selected purposefully and interviewed in data saturation principle.

Data Collection Instruments and Interpretation Techniques

The study used both secondary and primary data sources. The primary data was collected using a survey questionnaire and semi-structured interview.

Questionnaire: A Likert scale survey questionnaire with two parts was adapted and distributed for domestic visitors at Bahir Dar, Gondar, and Lalibela. The questionnaire used a three-point scale ranging from 1 to 3: 1 = disagree, 2 = neutral, and 3 = agree on the issues. Therefore, the respondents provided answers based on their level of agreement on the role of domestic tourism in the recovery of the tourism industry and the challenges of domestic tourism development in the area.

Interview: As interviews were believed to provide a deeper understanding of social phenomena, semi structured interview was applied to elicit the idea of the key informants from tourism offices and travel agents.

Afterwards, the reliability of the instrument was checked using the widely used measure of consistency of scales called Cronbach's alpha as suggested by Hair et al., . Based on the results from SPSS, the alpha coefficient was 0.786 which was above the acceptable value of 0.70 proposed by Bernardi as an indicator of reliability. Finally, the quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive analysis, and qualitative data were analyzed thematically.

Results and Discussion

First the data were cleaned and edited to remove missing responses. Accordingly, from 384 questionnaires distributed, 352 (91.66%) questionnaires were properly completed and returned, 20 questionnaires were missing, and the other 12 questionnaires were discarded due to inappropriate responses.

Roles of Domestic Tourism to Recover from COVID-19 Crisis

As far as research on tourism and COVID-19 is concerned, beyond focusing on the multifaceted impact, there is an opportunity to withstand and mitigate the impact, and the tourism sector should not only recover, but also reimagine and reform the new normal [10]. Domestic tourism can be decisive in times of crisis, as it has proven resilient to several adverse events [32]. It is important to settle crises and recessions because they are less affected than international tourism.

Table 1: the role of domestic tourism for the recovery of tourism from COVID-19 crisis

Items	Scales			Mean
	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	
	% & N	% & N	% & N	
Proximity and easy access to the destination helps to rejuvenate the domestic tourism	8.8	9.9	81.2	3.94
	31	35	286	
Most of the domestic tourism is pilgrimage travel and visitors believe that they'll be blessed and minimize the fear of the pandemic while travel	9.1	9.9	80.9	3.93
	32	35	285	
Domestic tourism largely use of road transport so that it helps to recover from the pandemic crisis	10.2	18.8	71	3.85
	36	66	250	
One of the reason for quick recovery of domestic tourism is due to frequent travel largely visiting family and relatives	19.6	19	61.4	3.56
	69	67	216	

Stay for long period of time in less standardized hotels helps to motivate domestic tourists	23.5	28.7	47.7	3.33
	83	101	168	
Domestic tourism is less geographically concentrated and is relatively better distributed throughout the national regions	23.6	15.9	60.5	3.52
	83	56	213	
Domestic tourists are more aware of the current status and spread of COVID-19 in their nation so that they travel early	50.3	18.8	31	2.66
	177	66	109	
The local community believed that domestic tourists are less congested for COVID-19 than inbound tourists and this helps for the recovery of domestic tourism	30.7	12.5	56.9	3.38
	108	44	200	
Domestic travel is a perfect and safe way to get started through solo travel	61.1	15.6	23.3	2.48
	215	55	82	
Less travel restriction within the country helps to activate domestic tourism soon	29.8	24.1	46	3.29
	105	85	162	
Domestic tourists play role model for inbound tourists by promoting their country through starting visitation	26.4	21.3	52.3	3.39
	93	75	184	
Domestic tourism pave road to international tourism through creating favorable condition in the destination	43.2	17.9	38.9	2.95
	152	63	137	

Source: survey result (2021)

The survey result demonstrated that domestic tourism plays a significant role in several ways. The thriving segment following the downscaling of the coronavirus pandemic is visiting families and relatives (VFR); travel agencies should pay special attention to offer attractive packages, seat-only packages, etc., where travellers might switch towards more reputed, trustworthy, and low-cost alternatives. Domestic visitors in the study area were asked about their level of agreement in the way that domestic tourism could play a role in the recovery of the industry after the pandemic through VFR. Consequently, 61.4 % of the respondents agreed that 19.6% of the respondents were indifferent. The other key role of domestic tourism identified in this study was its proximity and ease of access to destinations. Thus, the majority of respondents (81.2%) agreed that proximity and ease of access to the destination played a role in the rejuvenation of the tourism industry, while an insignificant number of respondents (8.8%) disagreed with the idea.

Religious tourism is a predominant form of domestic tourism. As a result, 80.9% of respondents agreed that pilgrimage travel contributed to the recovery of tourism activities. This is because domestic visitors believed that they would get blessed in religious sites, minimize their fear of the pandemic, and revitalize the industry whereas 9.1% of respondents disagreed with this idea. The nature of domestic tourism can also be determined by the tourist facilities visitors will use in the destination. In this regard, tourists were asked if staying for an extended period of time in less standardized hotels motivated them to travel so that 47.7% of respondents agreed with this idea, while 23.5% responded differently. This finding supports the idea presented by Rogerson that domestic travelers prefer medium-quality or lower-priced accommodation as compared to international tourists, which is significant for domestic tourism growth. Additionally, 71% of respondents agreed that domestic tourism contributed to the recovery of the tourism industry by utilizing road transport, while only 10.2% showed their dissent.

Therefore, local and regional governments should take lessons from domestic tourism practices and consider it as their strategy to recover from the present tourism crisis. Domestic tourists play a vital role as ambassadors and role models for their nation, setting the pace for inbound tourists by visiting local attractions and destinations first. This creates curiosity among potential tourists from other areas who would also like to visit that particular destination [33]. Accordingly, 52.3% of respondents agreed that they could act as a role model for inbound tourists by promoting the destination through earlier visitation. Additionally, 62.8% of respondents showed their agreement on domestic tourism's role in restoring confidence among international tourists through earlier participation in tourism activities.

The UNWTO report also highlighted that domestic travel helps to boost and restore confidence in the tourism sector as it is a less affected segment, whereas international, long-haul, business travel, and events are considered the most affected segments. Moreover, domestic tourism is crucial for dispersing tourists into larger tourist destinations in different ways. It helps to reduce congestion while activating tourism activities in different destinations, supports and develops local and national pride, smooth seasonality, and supports the development of infrastructure. On the other hand, only 23.3% of respondents agreed that domestic tourism is the safest and best way to enter the industry through solo travel, while 61.1% of them disagreed with the idea. Furthermore, 50.3% of respondents agreed that they lack awareness about the current status and spread of COVID-19 in their nation, while 18.8% remained neutral on the issue.

The interview data also highlighted the significance of domestic tourism.

The regional tourism bureau destination development director said that if they need to enhance and strengthen tourism development, they need to work hard on domestic tourism because of the vulnerability of international tourism to any crisis, including the

outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, political unrest, and civil war. Thus, they are working to upsurge the share of domestic tourism by developing strategies to regulate and enhance domestic tourism as a way to recover from the crisis. Efforts have been made to collaborate with educational bureaus, technical and vocational colleges, and religious tour organizers to establish tourism clubs at school and office levels to stimulate domestic tourism.

Policy Initiatives and Recovery Strategies at Regional Level

According to key informant interviews, the government of Ethiopia and Amhara regional government considered tourism as a key sector to support the national economy. The tourism sector has shown tremendous growth of more than 15% over the last 10 years. However, since 2016, the industry has fallen into dreadful situations due to political unrest and the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, international tourism has dramatically downscaled since February 2019 and remains worthless. Consequently, the government attention was converted into the protection of the pandemic; hence, different measures were taken to tackle the problem as it was recommended by World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). Travel restrictions, VISA restriction, opening quarantine centers, creating awareness of the host community, and restricting meeting group size were among others. Consequently, the Amhara National Regional State Culture and Tourism Bureau developed a COVID recovery strategy having four objectives and two guiding principles. The objectives were; identifying and supporting the most damaged destinations and community segments, enabling hotels and service providers to recover from losses, making destination ready for a new tourism season and introduce existing and new attractions. To achieve those objectives, the recovery strategy developed the following two principles.

A. Response phase

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the tourism industry, as reported by Ranasinghe et al. and UNWTO. By formulating effective strategies to handle crises and capitalizing on post-crisis opportunities, tourism businesses can become more innovative, adaptable, and resilient, leading to future success [34]. Countries, including Ethiopia, have been following WHO protocols and destination-specific guidelines to minimize the pandemic's negative effects. In response to the first COVID-19 case in March 2020, Ethiopia implemented preventive measures such as banning international flights, mandating quarantine services, modifying transportation services, and closing nightclubs and recreational centers. These actions aimed to prevent the spread of the disease and support those affected by the tourism industry's disruption and were in line with the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) efforts of developing safe travel protocols that align with common health and safety standards, promoting a risk-based approach [35]. The Tourism Ethiopia emphasizes the importance of building resilience, adopting participatory and inclusive approaches, and utilizing holistic recovery measures to recover from the pandemic's impact.

B. Recovery phase

The recovery tools were developed considering three scenarios. The first scenario assumes that COVID-19 will be controlled internationally and nationally through medication, leading to the reopening of closed tourist destinations and the recovery of tourism activity. The second scenario focuses on COVID-19 as a

long-term presence that can be managed through protection protocols. In this scenario, domestic tourism is expected to recover sooner and is considered an effective shock absorber for the tourism industry [19, 36]. Consequently, the Amhara region of Ethiopia and the national government have implemented measures to promote domestic tourism and build a nation image, such as promoting tourist attractions and implementing prevention measures.

The recovery phase had the following basic pillars:

- **Sustaining:** In the recovery stage, sustaining the results of the pandemic and creating a sustainable environment for tourism activities is crucial. This includes the restoration and maintenance of heritage sites, infrastructure development, and preparation for excellent service provision.
- **Development:** In the developing stage, counteracting the negative impacts of COVID-19 and revitalizing the tourism movement through activities such as heritage and infrastructure restoration, hotel modernization, and souvenir production are important
- **Promotion:** Promotion activities should focus on solving existing destination problems, developing new tourism destinations, and organizing familiarization trips to sustain the tourism movement. Governments should offer early consumer incentives for travel spending and aggressively implement marketing and promotional activities, especially to motivate domestic tourists [35]. However, there is no separate domestic tourism policy and strategy, even the tourism development policy of Ethiopia (2009) is biased towards the economic contribution of tourism industry, without considering domestic tourism and its significance beyond its economic contribution [21].

Countries performed diverse mechanisms to attract the international community and to show that their destinations are safe. For instance, Portugal created a "Clean & Safe" certificate that recognizes companies in the tourism sector that comply with the minimum hygiene and cleaning requirements for the prevention and control of COVID-19 [37]. Likewise, Tourism Ethiopia in collaboration with regional culture and tourism bureau performed different activities including sanitizing top tourist destinations of Ethiopia. Following this, Ethiopia got "safety destination stamp" from the international community. Afterwards, Tourism Ethiopia launched reopening ceremony in different destinations in Amhara region particularly in Tis Abay/Blue Nile Falls, Lalibela, Gondar, and Debark. The regional government also made awareness creation to enhance the habit of visiting cultural and historical destinations, producing and supporting tourism clubs including "know your country club" at school level and government offices. In many countries, domestic campaigns are the first step towards re-starting tourism and revitalizing the tourism economy.

These efforts are followed by marketing and promotion initiatives aimed at attracting foreign travelers. While most countries are launching new domestic tourism campaigns, some are enhancing existing ones [38]. For instance, the regional government in Ethiopia operated a special travel campaign called "travel from Shewa to Agaw" in September, October, and Janu-

ary. This campaign included several destinations, such as Gishen Debre Kerebie, Lidet/Christmas at Lalibela, Timket/Ethiopian epiphany at Gondar, and Sekela (Zereabruk) and Seven class horse riding (in local language called “Agaw Feres Gugis”). As a result, the region attracted more than 7.4 million domestic tourists in the first six months of 2020 (Amhara Media Corporation, 5th April, 2021). According to UNWTO (2020a), tourism authorities are using different slogans to promote less-known destinations, rural and natural areas, or highlight their most iconic attractions and popular destinations. The main objective is to stimulate domestic demand and regain confidence in tourism.

Challenges of Domestic Tourism Development

The government of Ethiopia has been doing little efforts to develop tourism infrastructure and the growth of domestic tourism is very limited in the entire state, considered as an informal business and focuses vastly on religion or pilgrimage travel. So domestic tourism has to be re-considered and strategically designed to address the major challenges [21]. Different factors could challenge the overall domestic tourism development at the destination; identifying the challenges has huge relevance since tourism is easily spoiled sector and that could matter the overall tourism business development.

Table 2: challenges in using domestic tourism as a recovery tool for COVID-19 crisis

Items	Scales			Mean
	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	
	% & N	% & N	% & N	
High cost of the destination challenged me to travel to the area	2	1.7	96.8	4.42
	7	6	339	
Lack of government attention and incentives for domestic tourism	8.8	9.7	81.5	4.09
	31	34	287	
Absence of comprehensive domestic tourism development and marketing strategy	3.4	4.5	92.1	4.25
	12	16	324	
Poor service quality for domestic travellers in the destination	8.2	11.9	79.8	4.09
	29	42	281	
Biased service is given for domestic travellers	28.1	13.1	58.8	3.43
	99	46	207	
Underdeveloped infrastructure in religious sites and other facilities		6.3	93.7	4.38
		22	330	
Mismatch between demand of domestic tourists and supply in the destination	2	0.9	97.1	4.43
	7	3	342	

Source: survey result (2021)

Domestic tourism can face challenges despite its contribution to visitor and income generation, addressing crises, managing seasonality, and promoting destination appreciation. A survey found that high costs at the destination were a major obstacle for domestic tourism during the pandemic, with 96.8% of respondents agreeing that high prices discouraged travel. Service providers often set high prices assuming tourists will pay more. Interviews also revealed that high costs at the destination impact both local people and tourism businesses, but poor attitudes towards domestic tourists are a major factor. To promote tourism, it's important to charge reasonable prices and provide products and services that cater to different types of tourists, as well as creating a pleasing experience. Offering flexible rates and encouraging visitors to change their bookings is also crucial.

Modifying existing policies, such as implementing flexible rates and ensuring strict hygiene policies, can also help. Additionally, providing reduced hotel rates can encourage employee participation in domestic tourism activities [39]. Moreover, 92.1% of domestic visitors surveyed said a lack of comprehensive domestic tourism development and marketing strategy is a major challenge hindering domestic tourism recovery in the region. Al-

though some limited tourism promotion activities have been performed by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, a comprehensive strategy has not been implemented. One of the travel agents in Gondar gloomily explained that there is no separate domestic tourism development policy and tourism marketing strategy and disgracefully, the COVID-19 recovery plan overemphasized the role of domestic tourism as a resilient mechanism and or give petty attention for domestic tourism development. During the persistent COVID-19 pandemic, tourism destinations try to restore intention to visit by implementing recovery marketing strategies on domestic tourism markets [9].

For instance, the Croatian and Slovenian governments provided vouchers to promote domestic tourism, while the main challenge identified in the study was a lack of attention from regional governments and a lack of travel incentives [37]. Respondents agreed that the government's focus is still on international tourism, with 81.5% of respondents supporting this claim. Only 8.8% of respondents disagreed, while 9.7% abstained. The absence of travel incentives limits people's motivation to travel domestically, despite infrastructure development's significant contribution to stimulating domestic tourism. Respondents were highly dis-

couraged by the underdeveloped infrastructure in religious sites, with 93.7% of respondents agreeing with this statement [38-40].

Nearly all respondents (97.1%) observed huge gaps between the demand of domestic tourists and the supply in the destination, indicating that less quality service provision, biased services, and mismatch with domestic tourists' needs were major problems. The tourism sector and local communities must change their attitudes and reshuffle their business models to cater to domestic tourism as well. Data from the Lalibela Culture and Tourism Office showed that the mismatch occurred due to an awareness gap among service providers, with accommodation, transportation, and food and beverage services being offered for international tourists, despite most domestic tourists being unable to afford such services [41-45].

According to the interview data collected from Amhara region culture and tourism bureau, the misguided attitude towards domestic tourism is seen in both service providers and the local communities including potential domestic visitors. Similarly, Lalibela culture and tourism office expert said that:

Even though the local community is largely dependent on the tourism business, tourism activities in Lalibela have dropped following government measures to protect against the outbreak of COVID-19 in Ethiopia. Almost all standardized hotels, travel agents, and traditional restaurants have closed. In addition to the protection measures taken by the government and the loss of tourists, most tourism business operators, including travel agents based in Lalibela and hotel owners have awareness gaps regarding domestic visitors. Their services depended on foreign visitors; it was assumed that tourists meant the white people coming from abroad or maybe the diaspora so that domestic visitors could not afford the price.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the tourism industry with the closure of international borders and a decline in international tourism. Domestic tourism is the dominant form of tourism in terms of tourist arrivals and receipts worldwide, while it remains neglected in the tourism business agenda and research in most developing countries, including Ethiopia. This study aims to examine the role of domestic tourism in recovering from the COVID-19 crisis, policy initiatives, strategies, and the challenges hampering it in top tourism destinations in the Amhara region [46].

The study's findings suggest that domestic tourism has emerged as a means of recovery for the industry, with some regions experiencing an increase in domestic tourist visits. Domestic tourism has played a significant role in mitigating the impact of the pandemic and building a resilient tourism business. It has also helped in building customer confidence and creating crisis absorbers. Tourism activities in the region have been re-bounced by large pilgrims, proximity, and ease of access to the destination. Domestic tourism, in the form of religious travel and visiting families and relatives (VFR), is also a blooming segment after the pandemic. The revitalization of the tourism sector is largely due to the use of road transportation and staying in less standardized hotels. Domestic tourists serve as role models and ambassadors for destinations, which can motivate international tourists. To support industry transition, it is important to launch diverse

policy initiatives and recovery strategies, focusing on protecting the pandemic, supporting the tourism sector, enhancing service provision standards, supporting investment in tourism, standardizing destinations, and promoting domestic tourism [47].

However, the mobility of domestic tourists in the region is not as significant as expected due to the poor application of the COVID recovery strategy and the absence of domestic tourism policy at the national and regional levels. Moreover, the high cost of the destinations, absence of comprehensive domestic tourism development and marketing strategy, poor infrastructural development, wrong attitude, and huge gaps between services offered and demand of tourists were the major hindering factors in effectively using domestic tourism as a recovery strategy in top tourism destinations in the region [48].

Practical Implications

Despite the fact that domestic tourism is the dominant form of tourism worldwide, it has been neglected in the tourism business agenda and research, particularly in developing countries like Ethiopia. Thus, there is a need to recognize and prioritize domestic tourism as a valuable sector that can contribute significantly to the tourism industry. In addition, domestic tourism has played a crucial role in mitigating the impact of the pandemic and building a resilient tourism business. It can contribute to the revitalization of the tourism sector by attracting tourists and creating positive experiences that can motivate international tourists. This implies that domestic tourism can be an effective strategy for recovery in the aftermath of a crisis like a pandemic.

As a result, the regional culture and tourism bureau and city administrations culture and tourism offices should develop and launch clear and well-articulated comprehensive domestic tourism development plan and fully pledged domestic tourism marketing strategy as a recovery approach. The study also identified several challenges that hinder the effective use of domestic tourism as a recovery strategy in the top tourism destinations of the Amhara region. Therefore, addressing these challenges is essential to fully leverage the potential of domestic tourism for the recovery and development of the tourism sector in the region; the regional government should develop infrastructure like road and other facilities, invite and support private tourism business operators in the destinations. Awareness creation campaigns should be given by each city's administration culture and tourism offices for the local community (believed to be domestic visitors) to visit and admire their own history, culture and nature.

Moreover, tourism business operators, including hotels, travel agents and other tourism service vendors should provide quality services for domestic visitors at reasonable prices and should understand and consider that domestic tourism has long-lasting benefits and a resilient segment. Therefore, the price offered for domestic tourists should encourage repeat visits, and the price of tourism business providers in the destinations have to be reviewed considering domestic travellers.

Travel agencies should pay special attention to the modified packages such as attractive packages, seat only packages, etc. to attract more tourists with low-cost alternatives.

Therefore, based on the findings, the following recommendations were drawn.

- The cultural and tourism authorities of the Amhara region should create and implement comprehensive domestic tourism development plans and marketing strategies to support the recovery.
- The regional government should develop infrastructure, such as roads and other facilities, invite and support private tourism business operators in the destinations.
- Awareness creation campaigns should be given for the local community to visit and admire their own history, culture, and nature.
- Tourism business operators including hotels, travel agents, and other service providers, should offer quality services at reasonable prices for domestic visitors.
- Travel agencies should pay special attention to modify their packages, such as attractive and seat-only packages, to attract more tourists with low-cost alternatives.
- The local community should promote domestic tourism by engaging in tourism clubs and religious travel associations to explore tourism destinations and foster a culture of appreciation for tourism resources, culture, and history.
- To encourage domestic tourism recovery, Tourism Ethiopia, and regional tourism bureau should focus their marketing efforts on promoting nearby attractions and destinations

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