

# URBALTOUR: Examining the Rise of Tourism in Kohima, Nagaland

BERTRAND LEFEBVRE,<sup>1</sup> AKUMTONG IMCHEN,<sup>2</sup> ROVITHONO YHOME<sup>2</sup>

The URBALTOUR project examines the intersections between urbanization and tourism in the mountainous regions of South and Southeast Asia. With the significant rise in domestic tourism, hill stations and cities established during the colonial era in India, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia are undergoing rapid transformations. Funded by France's National Agency for Research, this multi-sited project is based on two hypotheses about tourism:

- (i) It acts as a potent catalyst for the dissemination of globalized urban models.
- (ii) It also contributes to restructuring the systems of actors and influences the modalities of public action in terms of planning, town planning, and economic development.

**Keywords:** homestays, hospitality sector, Hornbill Festival, Kohima, Nagaland, northeast India, tourism growth, urbanization

## Introduction

Although it was not a hill station during the colonial period, Kohima serves as a site to analyse how the growth of tourism is reshaping a city historically known for its administrative and military functions. Following the cease-fire agreement of 1997 between the Government of India and the NSCN-IM armed faction, and with travel restrictions for outsiders gradually lifted, Nagaland and Kohima began attracting tourists from India and abroad. The Hornbill Festival, held annually since 2000, has played a crucial role in positioning Kohima on India's tourism map. By combining ethnic (Hornbill Festival), memorial (WWII battle), and environmental tourism (Khonoma village, Dzüko Valley), Kohima is attracting an increasing number of visitors. With the upcoming establishment of a railway station and new developments in the hospitality sector, Kohima aspires to become a major tourism hub in India's northeast region.

Our team examines how local government and private stakeholders are striving to reinvent the city and transform it into a tourist hub. Specific attention is given to the interactions between the administration,

- 
1. French Institute of Pondicherry
  2. The Highland Institute

village councils, and private entities involved in the tourism and leisure sectors. The economic and environmental impacts resulting from the growth of tourism are investigated not only for the city of Kohima itself, but also for its neighbouring villages. We analyse who benefits from and actively participates in tourism growth. Additionally, we seek to understand how this growth prompts reflections on the functioning of Kohima as a city and its interaction with its rural hinterland. Our interest extends to understanding why tourists visit Kohima and what their experiences are.

## Methods

The project started in 2022, involving interviews with key informants in the tourism sector, representatives, and visits to tourist sites in and around Kohima. To gather comprehensive data on the city's history, urban development, infrastructure, and the hospitality sector (including hotels and homestays), a dedicated Geographic Information System was developed. Given our dual focus on tourism and urbanization, it was essential to organize complementary fieldwork activities. These activities aimed to evaluate and characterize the tourism and hospitality sectors' impacts in Kohima, while simultaneously gaining insights into how Kohima operates as a city, its challenges, and its governance. To ensure a holistic perspective, interviews were conducted with four main groups:

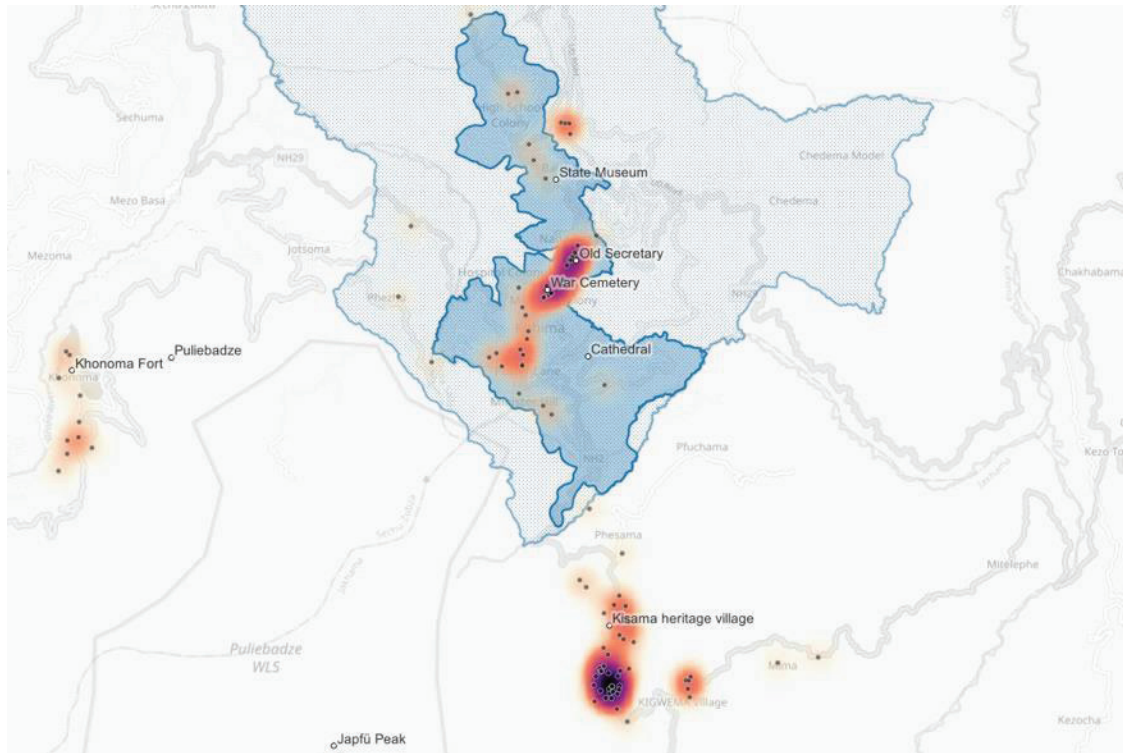
- Institutional stakeholders, spanning the tourism department, urban affairs department, Kohima Municipal Corporation, and village councils.
- Owners, managers, and workers at hotels and homestays.
- Shopkeepers and traders selling products to tourists, particularly during the Hornbill Festival.
- Tourists visiting Kohima.

## Early results

Although the project is ongoing, several preliminary results are already available for discussion. We identified and surveyed 136 hotels and homestays in Kohima and nearby villages. In recent years, the hospitality sector in Kohima has experienced substantial growth, with 55 per cent of Kohima's bedrooms being created after 2015. Homestays, comprising 66 per cent of hospitality establishments, play a significant role, with hotels averaging 14 beds and homestays five beds on average. While Kohima city hosts the largest hotels and the highest share of bedrooms, the homestay sector's strongest growth is observed in villages south of Kohima, such as Kigwema and Zakhama, as depicted on the map (Fig. 1).

## *Hornbill Festival*

The Hornbill Festival has played a crucial role in transforming Kohima's image and attracting domestic and international tourists. Stretching over ten days in December, the festival is a key event, boosting the local economy for hotels, homestays (some open exclusively during the festival), restaurants, and shops in Kohima and its surroundings. However, with the festival's increasing popularity after 25 years of existence, questions arise about its sustainability. The large influx of visitors over ten days strains the city's infrastructure, exacerbating issues like traffic jams, water stress, and waste management. This heightened seasonality poses a challenge for more active and sustained participation in tourism beyond the Hornbill Festival. The ongoing challenge is to attract tourists to Kohima during the remaining 11 months. For example, the months of May to June are suitable for Dzūko Valley and Mount Japfu visits.



**Figure 1:** Heatmap of the hotels and homestays in the Kohima region in 2023

While the Department of Tourism actively promotes tourism in Kohima, there is a perceived disconnect between the department's goals and the stakeholders involved. Limited financial and human resources necessitate reliance on Central Government programmes, some of which have political implications. Meanwhile, rural communities engaging in tourism and related activities express a desire for more government support in terms of training, improving local amenities, and promoting their offerings. Through fieldwork, we discovered that many small rural communities actively participate in tourism, leveraging social media for connectivity. Kigwema Village, for example, has many homestays, guest houses, and lodges, providing unexpected livelihood opportunities.

In Kisama Heritage Village, central to the Hornbill Festival, tourists and locals find a hub hosting various activities, exhibitions, and shops representing all Nagaland tribes. Our survey of 181 shops and stalls during the 2022 and 2023 Hornbill Festivals revealed that the majority are run by Nagas, especially women diversifying their incomes. Surprisingly, few shops and stalls at Kisama Heritage Village are managed by locals, as the festival now attracts craftsmen and businesses from across Nagaland and even other northeastern states, Jammu and Kashmir, or Himachal Pradesh. The *morungs* (traditional-style buildings) of different tribes sell ethnic cuisine, entertain tourists with cultural performances, and provide a glimpse into the rich diversity of local customs and traditions (Fig. 2).

### ***Growth at the grassroots***

Our ongoing project underscores the pivotal role tourism now plays in empowering local communities, providing individuals, including women, with opportunities to initiate their own businesses, such as managing homestays or selling homemade food products, thereby diversifying their income streams. The emergence of homestays, particularly in villages around Kohima, demonstrates how tourism has become a catalyst for economic growth at the grassroots level. This unexpected avenue has not only facilitated financial support but could also ensure the sustainability of rural communities.





**Figure 2:** Cultural artefacts from the Konyak tribe of Mon District on sale at the Hornbill Festival

### *Need for better collaboration*

During our extensive interviews with various stakeholders (Fig. 3), a consistent demand emerged for improved planning and management of the tourism sector in Kohima. There is a collective call for a collaborative platform where professionals, village councils, and government departments can work together to define common goals and strategies. Such collaboration is deemed essential to mitigate the negative impacts of tourism while enhancing the equitable distribution of its benefits. The creation of a unified approach would not only streamline the management of the sector but also contribute to Kohima's overall sustainable development. Beyond the immensely popular Hornbill Festival, a wealth of opportunities waits to be explored. The picturesque landscapes, historical sites, and cultural richness of Nagaland provide a foundation for developing diverse tourism offerings. As part of our research and dissemination activities, we are trying to foster connections among different stakeholders. By initiating discussions on the future of tourism in Kohima, we aim to encourage a collaborative effort to access this untapped potential.

**Photo credits:** Akumtong Imchen





Figure 3: Rovithono Yhome interviewing tourists from Delhi and Bangalore