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Private trains by April 2023

The Ministry of Railways has recently invited Request for Qualifications (RFQ) for private participation in the operation of passenger train services through introduction of 151 modern trains over 109 pairs of routes, divided across 12 clusters on the Indian Railways' network.

Manas Dwivedi

This is the first initiative of private investment for running passenger trains over Indian Railways network. The identified clusters are Mumbai-1, Mumbai-2, Delhi-1, Delhi-2, Chandigarh, Howrah, Patna, Prayagraj, Secunderabad, Jaipur, Chennai and Bengaluru. The project would entail private sector investment of about ₹30,000 crore.



VK Yadav
Chairman
Indian Railway Board

The objective of this initiative is to introduce modern technology rolling stock with reduced

maintenance, reduced transit time, boost job creation, provide enhanced safety, provide world-class travel experience to passengers, and also reduce demand-supply deficit in the passenger transportation sector. These private trains will

They will have to ensure 95 per cent punctuality and record not more than one failure per lakh kilometre of travel

be over and above the already existing trains. The private entity shall be responsible for financing, procuring, operation and maintenance of the trains.

VK Yadav, Chairman, Indian Railway Board, says that pri-



private players in passenger train operations will mean a quantum jump in technology and coaches that run at higher speeds.

"Allowing private companies to run passenger trains is a step towards bridging the demand-supply gap in Indian Railways' operations. This would also mean that trains will be available on demand and that the passenger wait

list will decrease. The private players will also share revenue with Indian Railways through competitive bidding. They will have to ensure 95 per cent punctuality and record not more than one failure per lakh kilometre of travel. If any performance indicators are not met in train operations, they will be penalised," he shares.

"Private train operations are likely to begin by April 2023;

all coaches will be procured under 'Make in India' policy. Fares in private trains will be competitive, and prices on other modes of transport like airlines, buses will have to be kept in mind.

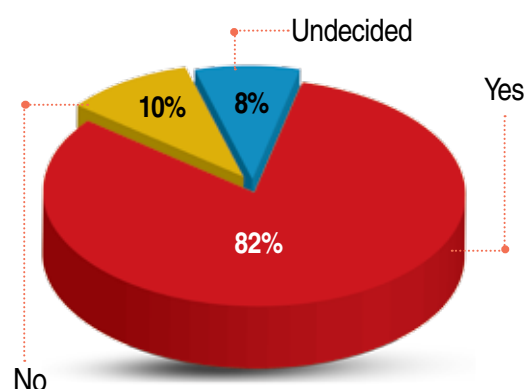
The government estimates 13 billion passengers will travel by train in FY2030, compared to 8.4 billion passengers in FY2020," he further adds.

Bidding and selection process

The private entities for undertaking the project would be selected through a two-stage competitive bidding process comprising Request for Qualification (RFQ) and Request for Proposal (RFP). RFQ process will be for pre-qualification, and shortlisting of the bidders will be based on their financial capacity, who will be required to offer share in the Gross Revenue at RFP stage (bid parameter) for undertaking the project. The private participation in passenger train operations will only be five per cent of the existing 2800 Mail/Express trains over the Indian Railways.

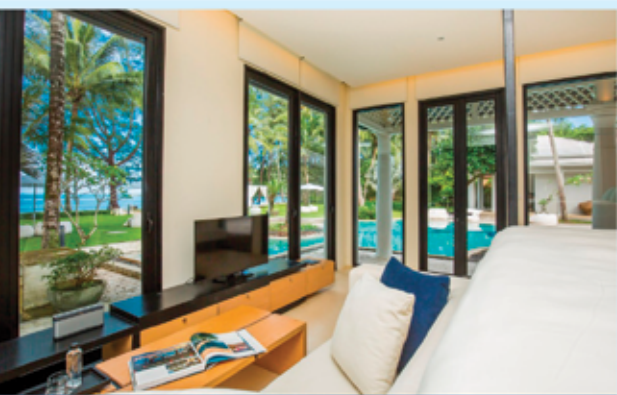
Does an IATA membership help?

The Indian travel industry is still debating the refund process for air ticket cancellations, and agents are bearing the brunt. TRAVTALK dug deeper into the issue and inquired if being an IATA member helped relieve some of that burden and were they willing to renew their membership. While 82% agents said they will be renewing it, 18% either refused or were mulling the decision. Could this be the beginning of a decline in membership?





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TAFI demands complete refund

The Travel Agents Federation of India (TAFI) has put its foot down and demanded that agents receive complete cash refunds from airlines, during a virtual meeting with Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA) representatives on July 11.



Hazel Jain

The Travel Agents Federation of India has said a complete and resounding 'no' to credit shells from airlines they have booked with, during a virtual meeting with Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA) on July 11, 2020. Sharing more details is **Pradip Lulla**, Acting President and VP, TAFI, who says, "We want complete refund instead of credit shells. What happens to these credit shells if the concerned airline goes bust? This is unsecured credit and we don't accept it."

He adds, "We would want all international airlines on the IATA BSP platform to give refunds in the seven-day cycle as it was being done earlier or in cash in our account within a month so that we can then refund the same to our clients to maintain



Pradip Lulla
Acting President and VP
TAFI

our own credibility and their confidence in us. In the domestic LCC model, where we have to provide cash deposits on our login account with airlines, refund should be given in cash in that account. It should be our option if we want to transfer it to our bank account. This will lead to the agents giving cash refunds to our clients. It is very important to maintain a proper refund policy to maintain a posi-

tive cash flow and credibility for all. Any other form of future use of credit shells will only prevent the passengers to buy a ticket in advance. Our member travel agents have lost money in the past by not receiving any refund

✦ What happens to these credit shells if the concerned airline goes bust? This is unsecured credit and we don't accept it ✦

from failed airlines since there is absolutely no protection extended to them."

Only 8% refunds for Jet Airways
In another blow to the industry, Lulla said that it received a letter from IATA that states that agencies will receive only 8% of the total refunds from Jet Airways. The letter says, "Unfortunately, the balance of the Security Deposit held by IATA (after settling 100% of all refunds up to the date of suspension) was



not sufficient to cover all the remaining refunds that have been approved by Jet Airways in the post-suspension refund process. Therefore, IATA will have to pro-rate the total refund against the net remaining balance withheld, which means that your agency will receive approximately 8% of the total refunds approved by the airline." This will be automatically included in their billing. Refunds that have been rejected by the airline will not be processed

Virtual convention

Speaking on member engagements this year, Lulla adds, "Since a regular convention is not possible this year, we will conduct a virtual convention in November 2020 for our members. We are in discussion with a couple of technology partners and sponsors and will announce the details soon." TAFI is also in talks with Israel Tourism to conduct a webinar for its members. ↴

Case hearing moved to July 20

The hearing date for the sole petition filed by TAFI on June 5, 2020 in the Supreme Court against MoCA and DGCA, which was earlier July 13, has now been moved to July 20.

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VIEWPOINT

Staring into the abyss

India, the third most affected country in the world by rising COVID-19 cases after the United States and Brazil, cannot be ready to receive international visitors, can it? At 878,254 confirmed cases (at the time of going to press) according to the World Health Organization's latest statistics on the spread of the disease, not far behind Brazil at this rate which stands at 1,839,850 cases, the door to receiving foreign tourists is far from ajar. In fact, it is sealed shut!

Is it then the right time to mull a strategy to woo the foreign traveller? Today, countries that are gradually opening up have already begun formulating policies and putting safety measures in place. Some others, in fact, have even begun welcoming foreign tourists while having done away with quarantine requirements altogether. Spain, once the second most-affected European country that stands at approximately 253,908 cases, has already declared that foreign visitors will no longer have to undergo a 14-day quarantine. But, is India anywhere close? Which are the right predictions and which aren't when the nature of the virus is such that it changes things every minute? Who has the right answers?

Another concern that arises out of a prematurely hatched strategy besides our unconfirmed preparedness in terms of safety infrastructure for foreign arrivals (including those at tourist facilities and hotspots), is the competitive edge that our neighbouring countries are gaining each second that confirmed cases in India surge. As willing tourists begin to flock to these newly-secure destinations, India could be losing out on an opportunity and hence, a strategy formulated today may not be viable a few months (an optimistic estimate) down the line.

That brings us to the subject of advisories and assurances. Today, we need a unified set of travel guidelines for India's 28 states and 8 Union Territories, an absence of which could curtail the predicted growth of domestic tourism. We must also look at the readiness of tourism ancillaries such as insurance providers. Once we have that in place, and the regional and domestic traveller begins to gain confidence to travel, should we think about a strategy for international arrivals. Let's not act in haste; let's pre-empt a disaster in the making should we open that door to foreign tourists.

Revival in 2021 still not certain

CAPA India has been tracking the progression and impact of COVID-19 since January 2020. Based on current indications, its near-term assessment is that demand will remain subdued until Q2 2021, with no certainty of revival in H2.



CAPA India estimates that demand-related risks are now much higher than any of its earlier estimates. Since the resumption of domestic operations on May 25, 2020, demand has been weaker than expected, with the industry achieving a load factor of around just 55 per cent in Q1, and that too whilst limited to 30 per cent of capacity.

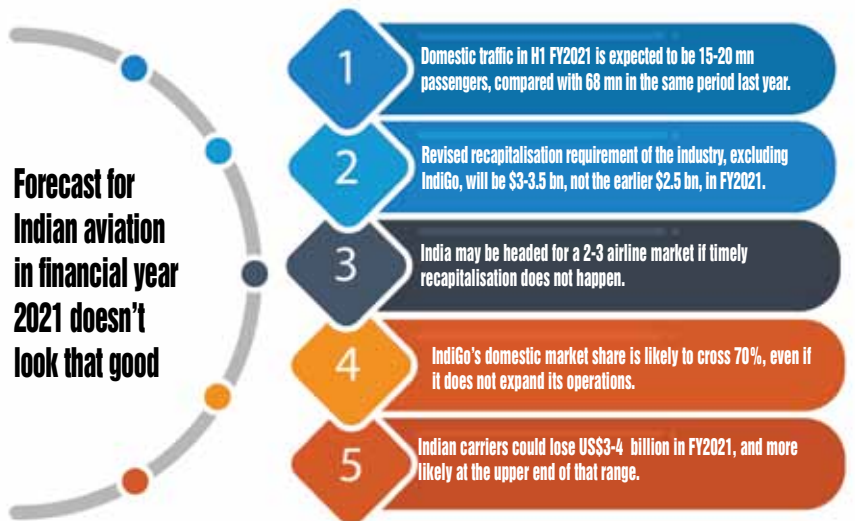
The pent-up demand for traffic has proven to be less than expected, largely due to inconsistent and confusing state-wise quarantine requirements,



which have regularly changed. And with the number of daily new COVID-19 cases in India accelerating, consumer confidence is weakening. Some key estimates reveal:

- ❖ Domestic traffic in second quarter of FY2021 is expected to reach 100,000-125,000 daily passengers.
- ❖ Airlines have recently been given permission to operate 45% of their capacity, up from the earlier 30%. While this is welcome, given the weak demand outlook until the end of August, airlines may be reluctant to increase capacity as this could actually increase risks and losses.

Forecast for Indian aviation in financial year 2021 doesn't look that good



- ❖ International operations may resume in Aug-2020, but are not expected to reach any meaningful scale until Q3.
- ❖ The second quarter is increasingly looking like a

washout. The outlook for Q3 will depend upon how fast the infection curve can be flattened so that consumer confidence is restored. But at this stage, the public does not appear to be in any rush to return to the skies,

especially when it comes to international travel.

❖ Traffic between metros has been impacted more significantly than non-metro traffic, primarily because metros have seen the largest outbreaks of the disease and are considered to be higher risk.

❖ The temporary imposition of fare caps and floors by the regulator is impacting demand. This pricing restriction means that airlines have less flexibility to offer lower fares to stimulate the market. The impact may be even greater in Q2 as demand is historically weak during this quarter. Continuing with price controls beyond August would be a strategic mistake by the regulator which could further harm airline financials.

Earlier projections vs likely outcome

CAPA India's projections for the impact of COVID on the aviation industry are mostly aligned with likely outcomes:

- ❖ An earlier projection stated that domestic traffic in FY2021 will decline to 55-70 million. Full-year traffic is now expected to be towards the lower end of this range.
- ❖ Int'l traffic in FY2021 was likely to decline to 20-27 million. While it is yet to resume, CAPA India continues to maintain this projection.
- ❖ Indian airlines were expected to have a surplus fleet of 200-250 aircraft over 6-12 months. At the end of 12 months, the projected surplus is expected to still be 200-250 aircraft.
- ❖ It was estimated that Indian airlines would terminate and return 100+ leased aircraft. This remains likely based on indications from airlines.
- ❖ The workforce employed in Indian aviation was expected to be reduced by at least 30%; this remains a likely outcome.



CAPA India also estimates that the impact of COVID-19 could trigger market consolidation and deliver a record consolidated Indian airline industry loss of at least US\$3 billion, and possibly closer to US\$4 billion in FY2021, based on current estimates. Who will grow the market when conditions normalise? If airlines are unable or unwilling to expand, this may result in sustained damage to connectivity in India, with structural implications for the economy.



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IATA agent members vexed

An air of dismay surrounds travel agents today owing to lack of support from IATA that has left them grappling for refunds. Agents, especially the smaller ones, across India are in a dilemma over renewing their IATA membership at all. Has IATA been reduced to just a name and logo?

“ I think agents have a valid point if they feel like giving up their IATA certification as no assistance is being given to IATA members and it is only extended to the airlines. Airlines should be penalised instead. Also, they have been increasing the membership fee yearly. In these times, IATA should at least help the travel agent to get refunds processed. If they cannot protect our money, what is the use of getting an IATA recognition? ”



Manoj Saraf
Managing Director
Gainwell Travel

“ The travel agent is spending around ₹60,000 pa for IATA. With so much money that agents give them, it is the responsibility of IATA to give services or some remuneration, which is not happening. It is time IATA understands that the agents have to be remunerated for the services being rendered by them for airlines. Travellers would depend on intermediaries who are answerable to customers and the airlines, and we are making that shift. ”



Zahoor Qari
Chairman
TAAI - J&K Chapter

“ IATA was always for airlines and never for the agents. On an average, an agent pays around ₹70,000-1,00,000 annually as fee for IATA. Without paying all that, they can get a ticket from a consolidator. However, during COVID, agents are worried because consolidators have not been able to pay the money either since they have not received it. Airlines are refunding money in credit shells that can only be used to issue more tickets. ”



MP Khanna
Managing Director
Diplomatic Travel

“ Increasingly, the relevance of IATA is becoming less for the travel trade. The kind of umbrella protection that IATA is supposed to provide to a legitimate agent is instead loaded in favour of airlines in practice. Whenever there has been a default on the part of an agent to IATA, in 80-90 per cent of the cases, the money has been recovered. But, we have seen almost 30 airlines going bankrupt in the last 30 years, and the agents had to take the brunt of losing money. ”



Biji Eapen
President
IAAI

“ Our money is stuck and they have created this notion that it is a credit shell, wherein IATA has not played any positive role for travel agents. In J&K alone, certain travel agents have said that they don't want to continue with IATA because their concerns have not been addressed. The rates we get on IATA GDS are higher than what is given to consolidators. IATA is only for the purpose of a logo. They should have restricted airlines to not issue stock or cabin facility with non-IATA agents. ”



Harmandeep Singh Anand
Managing Director
Jagsons Travels

Contd on page 16 ▶

Tourism Breaking News

- Ayodhya gears up for religious tourism; conducts guide training
- Now, any tourist vehicle operator can apply for national permit online
- Maha CM hints at concessions for hotel industry
- 1st private jet terminal to become operational in Delhi this month
- Tourism suspended in Darjeeling till 31st July amidst rising cases
- Alternate transport options to pave way for hotels & restaurants
- 3-week wait for permission to shoot films in ASI monuments
- Gujarat's Tent City 1 now a venue for destination weddings

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Cross Hotels re-opens properties



Thailand-based hospitality group Cross Hotels & Resorts has recently opened some of its properties for guests, and has ensured that all hygiene and safety measures are in place so they have not a worry in the world. These six properties are based in Koh Samui, Chiang Mai, Koh Kood, Kanchanaburi and Buriram.

TT Bureau

After months of lockdown and travel bans, the time is finally here to re-open! Cross Hotels & Resorts has resumed operations at six of its superb properties, with others to follow suit. Now would be the ideal time to pick the property of your choice and set the ball rolling on your future travel itinerary.

X2 Koh Samui - A Spa Retreat

X2 Koh Samui – A Spa Retreat, with over 100 metres of uninterrupted beachfront, offers to guests serene views of the Gulf of Thailand. The island has its own airport and is just an hour-long flight from Bangkok. The resort also offers a bouquet of activities! Guests can try their hand at a game of Pétanque, paddle a kayak on the calm ocean waters, or take a bike out for a spin along the coastline

and through nearby villages. They can also dip into the resort’s magnificent centrepiece – an expansive swimming pool, the deepest resort pool on the island.

Away Chiang Mai Thapae Resort

Tucked away on a quiet lane, Away Chiang Mai Thapae Resort immerses you in a world of holiday bliss. Feast on delectable vegetarian cuisine that includes an array of both Thai and Western dishes made using the finest

and freshest of ingredients. The cuisine is health-centric and follows the Thai Buddhist value of abstinence.

X2 Vibe Chiang Mai Decem

Whether you wish to experience Thailand’s legendary northern slow life or venture through hip and exciting activities, X2 Vibe Chiang Mai Decem has it all! Begin your day discovering the blend of big-city décor and the magnificent nature through



chanaburi Dheva Mantra portrays the influence of Western architecture that captures the beauty of a bygone colonial era. Less than 130 kilometres west of Bangkok, the resort is situated along the transverse length of the famous River Kwai, offering breathtaking panoramic scenery. Spread amidst a lush tropic green cover, Away Kanchanaburi Dheva Mantra is the ideal escape from a stressful lifestyle.



the hotel’s vertical garden and saltwater pool. Later, spend the day discovering the sites of the old town and the Doi Suthep Buddhist temple said to have been founded in the 14th century when the first stupa was built here. Be sure to end the day with a fine cocktail from the extensive menu.

touched island with a reputation for tranquillity. That very reputation is evident in the design and setting of Away Koh Kood Resort, which features spacious luxury bungalows with private terraces and sea views from almost every room. It has the largest activity & dive centre on the island for guests to enjoy the beauty and serenity of the place.

Away Koh Kood Resort

This is the epitome of an island hideaway. Koh Kood is an un-

Away Kanchanaburi Dheva Mantra

From lavish woodcarvings to exquisite artwork, Away Kan-

X2 Vibe Buriram

This 68-room, 5-storeyed hotel is a delightful location for sports lovers who can experiment with their adrenaline rush by regularly going out and diving into the aggression of the games. The hotel is ideally located in the vicinity of the Buriram United Stadium and speedway race circuit. It also has supermarkets and a shopping mall close by.



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'We will look at online approvals'

In a webinar conducted by Federation of Hotel & Restaurant Associations of India (FHRAI), Minister of Commerce & Industry and Railways, **Piyush Goyal**, shared his thoughts on demands that are viable and the actions that need to be taken both by the association and the ministries.



Piyush Goyal
Minister of Commerce & Industry
and Railways, Government of India



Hazel Jain

Addressing the hotelier and restaurant community across India via a live webinar conducted by the Federation of Hotel & Restaurant Associations of India (FHRAI) on July 13, 2020, **Piyush Goyal** said that his department is willing to look at single-window clearances for the industry. "Yes, we will look at single-window clearances and simple online approvals. This can also take care of bureaucracy and corruption," he said.

Goyal added, "You have brought out some key points and we will take some of them up with our ministry as well as the Finance Ministry. I will also request our Minister of Culture & Tourism, Prahlad Singh Patel, to look at

We will have a joint meeting between OTAs and the industry to understand what their practices are, to see if they are doing predatory pricing for data gathering

- Piyush Goyal

some of them and see which ones can be resolved viably. There are very few restrictions from the Centre now. We have asked the states to take a call on the re-opening since they know the local conditions better. But, I will speak to the Home Ministry as well."

The minister also responded well to the request for curbing illegal, unlicensed accommodation units in the country, especially those that are listed on OTAs. He said, "We will get this legally examined. There must be an element of registration or licensing that should be brought in for record-keeping purposes. Otherwise there is a risk of health and security. We must examine the legal implications."

Pradeep Shetty, Vice President, HRAWI, brought up a connected issue and said, "These OTAs, especially MakeMyTrip and OYO Rooms masquerading as e-commerce platforms, have completely distorted our market. All they are doing is just aggregating

all our rooms and ensuring all traffic goes to them."

To this, Goyal responded by saying, "We will have a joint meeting between OTAs and the industry to understand what their practices are, have their balance sheets examined to see if they are doing

predatory pricing for data gathering. We must examine this carefully. I want a report on this in the next three weeks."

Responding to the point of SEIS (Service Export Incentive Scheme) slab system suggested by FHRAI, he said, "We should

look at the MSME category for charting out revival strategies." The FHRAI team will now draw up specific and substantial ideas before it reverts to the minister. The minister also lauded the efforts made by this industry for stepping up and giving up their hotel rooms to essential health and govern-

ment staff as well as distributing free food to the needy.

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According to CAPA, as of the start of 2020, India's largest airline, IndiGo, was the 10th largest in the world by weekly seat capacity. The four largest carriers were all based in the US.

Branching out, not stepping out

Agents across the country are taking the pragmatic approach and turning their passion into a second, alternative profession. But tourism remains their first love. TRAVTALK speaks to a few of these entrepreneurs who have branched out without stepping out.

Bengaluru

“ We have started home delivery of organic and natural products such pickle and papad. Tourism is my core competence and I have done my Masters in tourism administration. So this second venture will be an additional business; once tourism starts full-fledged, my wife will take care of it. ”



Tsering Wange
Managing Director
Himalayan Holidays

New Delhi

“ I have diversified into wholesale trading and picking up government tenders of hygienic products. However, travel is my passion and I will surely continue my travel business. Diversifying was the need of the hour. I think every individual will have to take a call according to their circumstances. I utilised this time to improve my health as well. ”



Shreya Barbara
COO
Landscape Safari

Mumbai

“ The idea of starting ‘Bima Karlo’ came to me when we saw so many of our brethren jobless or with no means to continue earning. Therefore, as market leaders, we decided to set up an alternate business model. We put in many months of research into this. While agents earn about 8-10 per cent selling travel products,

insurance commissions start only at 25 per cent. This product includes life, general, health, fire and travel insurance. Also, we wanted to tie up with insurance brokers who would have dozens of contracts with dozens of companies. For this product, we have tied up with Robinhood. They will help us train the agents on how to sell insurance. We have launched the training module in June and after 15-day training, we give them a certificate. There is a portal and mobile App that recruited POS agents can use. The commissions will come directly from the insurance company but we will be ensuring that it's paid. We hope to make a difference to the economic lives of thousands in the travel and hospitality industries. ”



Arvind Tandon
Co-Founder
Bima Karlo

Guwahati

“ I have been doing tourism in Northeast India for over two decades, but it's on hold right now. So I am engaged as a member of ATOMY, a South Korean company which deals in e-commerce. ATOMY is financed by the South Korean government. In the present situation, an alternative career is not a choice but a necessity; it's about survival. I see a bright future in ATOMY. ”



Aravind Kumar
Managing Partner
Crimson Holidays



Tushar Jain
Group MD, BTC Tours & Travels and Vibrant Tours

Guwahati

“ Education is my passion. I have a PhD in Linguistics and I've started online courses for students in the Northeast who want to learn English with minimum fee. I'm now trying to set up an online education institute for this. I've been in the travel industry for 14 years, so I wouldn't want to leave it, provided it continues to be a revenue source. ”

Contd on page 11 ▶

The Fern opens in Karnataka



The Fern Hotels & Resorts has opened its 88-room Harsha The Fern in Shivamogga in Karnataka – its first new upscale Fern hotel in South India this year. This takes the number of hotels managed by the company to 80 currently operational or opening shortly across the country as well as in Nepal and Seychelles.

Recovery could take 2 years

Majority of hotel operators in India expect up to two-year revenue recovery period, reveals JLL in its report titled ‘Impact of COVID-19 on the Indian Hospitality Industry’.



JLL recently conducted a survey with 15 leading hotel operators in India having adequate presence across hotel segments in both business and leisure markets. The survey was conducted to understand the effects of the pandemic on development and opening of new hotels, as well as the support required for the sustenance of the sector. Some key findings were:

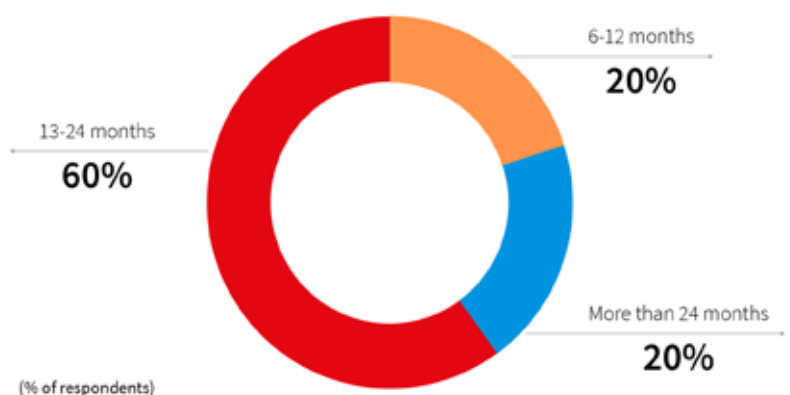
- ❖ 60% of the operators surveyed believe that it will take between 13 to 24 months for their portfolio to return back to 2019 RevPAR levels
 - ❖ 20% believe that their hotels could bounce back to 2019 RevPAR levels within 6 to 12 months from now
 - ❖ 53% of the total leading hotel operators have shut down more than 80% of their inventory during the nation-wide lockdown period
 - ❖ 53% of the respondents believe that key business cities are likely to witness an early pick-up in room-night demand
- Currently, 47 per cent of the operators expect to re-open their hotels for operation within two weeks of lifting of lockdown / travel restrictions by the respective state governments. Almost all operators believe that most hotels in their portfolio would need working capital infusion to continue or re-start operations. ↴

Making vows a possibility



Three back-to-back weddings were organised at Toshali Sands Puri, with all related functions held between June 10 and July 2. All weddings were telecast through live streaming for the virtual participation and blessings of extended family members, relatives and friends.

EXPECTED TIME FOR HOTELS TO RETURN BACK TO 2019 REVPAR LEVELS



It's time to follow your passion

New Delhi

“ I strongly feel that every obstacle in our way serves as a springboard for growth. We have created a Human Resources division to connect our industry colleagues with the right company where their individual expertise can be recognised and ensure their livelihood. We are in dialogue with many companies to place the right candidate in the right organisation. I believe that we must be true to our passion and brave enough to turn it into a profession. ”



Ranjana Sharma
Managing Director
Trav n Tours International



Bhavna Jadon
Director
Overseas Tours

Indore

“ I have launched a cloud kitchen which follows the farm-to-fork system through the entire process of creation. It's organic, vegetarian, sugar-free breakfast dishes. We also have our own organic farm. This is the best time to start this as people are focusing on eating healthy even more to increase their immunity. I have realised that we should not keep all eggs in one basket. Once travel picks up, though I will go back to my business, I will also continue this as it is again something I enjoy. ”

Mumbai

“ I have developed an interest in trading in the share market and investing my time in trying to understand and study it. For me, this was a need of the hour, so when one of my mentors guided me, I started developing an interest and for sure I am going to continue with it in the future as well. I recommend that if you have a talent and passion for something, this is the right time to test it. I believe it is time for us to invest in multiple sources of income. ”



Shubhangi Chitre
Director
BTFL Travel



Joyson N
MD, Travel4seasons
Services and Vice Chairman
ETAA South India

Bengaluru

“ Since travel is going to take a long time to recover, I have started manufacturing and retailing of coffee, so I do not have to depend on a single source of revenue. I am also planning to involve people from the fraternity by asking them to be my distributors. We now realise that you don't have full control on your product that you are selling. Secondly, airlines and hoteliers had already started avoiding agents. So it is important to have an alternative business. ”

Chennai

“ Now that the travel business across the country and the world has taken a back-seat, I have started selling all COVID-19 products and it is keeping me very busy. I have not thought about this seriously as my first passion is tourism. This is a stop-gap venture. I would recommend others do the same because travel is becoming too competitive. I'm also worried about the Indian economy and whether people will risk travelling again. ”



Pawan Kumar Gupta
Managing Director
Peekay Holidays



Purvi Jhaveri
Director
Sunday Pure Holidays

Mumbai

“ In the 10th year of Sunday Pure Holidays, this year we created another offspring called Sunday's Pure Solutions. This solutions provider company was launched way before the pandemic. We are already in the process of partnering with corporates, NGOs and HNIs for providing a one-stop solution for their every need. We would encourage everyone who is passionate about their dreams to work towards making them a reality. ”

Inputs by Hazel Jain

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AAI mulls resumption of int'l Ops

Arvind Singh, Chairman, Airports Authority of India (AAI), shares the way forward for international operations, including potential air bubbles with the US, Canada and the Gulf, while stressing that airports are well-equipped to handle the increased traffic. However, there are multiple considerations before international operations are resumed.

Nisha Verma

Agreeing that despite resuming domestic operations it would take some time for normalcy in the aviation sector to return, Arvind Singh says that there is going to be substantial reduction in India in the scale of airline and airport operations in this financial year 2020-21. However, he adds, "Since domestic flights resumed on May 25, we have seen more than two million people travel to various parts of the country. It is a very large number travelling in over a month. On an average, nowadays we are operating 800 flights in the country and about 70,000 people in the country are using air as a mode to travel. Since the resumption of domestic flight operations, the cleanliness of every nook and corner of all airports is being ensured in the country, including



Arvind Singh
Chairman
Airports Authority of India

AAI and private JV airports, especially the larger ones at Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Bengaluru and Kochi. In fact, airports are receiving positive feedback for efficient handling of domestic operations with due precautions, and we are hopeful that airports will witness passenger traffic in the future while ensuring complete safety of passengers."

Insisting that there has been a persistent demand from the

Indian community from across the globe to restart scheduled international operations now, Singh says, "We must appreciate that in this changed situation, Government of India is regu-

While EU has banned flights from India owing to the rise in cases here, I am sure there will be positive outcome of talks with the US, Canada and the Gulf

larly holding discussions with its counterpart governments because they also need to be on board. This becomes very difficult not only due to the difference of opinion among country representatives, but also due to a host of different protocols and SOPs

within the states. Similarly, there are differences in perceptions as well as the scale of the pandemic in different parts of the globe. At Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA), those negotiating with different countries say that they are in constant touch and working on a consensus to start international operations, which is going to be in 'air bubbles'. Hence, talks are mainly going on with the US, Canada, Europe and the Gulf countries to start flights in these bubbles with Indian carriers and carriers of those nations. While EU has banned flights from India owing to the rise in cases here, I am sure there will be positive outcome of talks with the US, Canada and the Gulf."

In the interim, he adds, repatriation flights and charter flights are being approved by the government on a case-to-case basis. "Hence, from an airport perspec-

tive, we should be ready with additional measures to facilitate international commercial operations. If these negotiations fructify and operations start in July,



we should be ready. Once we get the go-ahead from the government and we get the guidelines from civil aviation authorities, we would be fully geared to facilitate the commencement of international flights," claims Singh.

Combating the ills of reduced traffic
Singh says that the government is also proactively thinking of measures to revive the atmosphere among stakeholders owing to the decline in traffic. "There is work going on for the easing of airspace used by ci-

vilian flights, because there is a large amount of airspace restricted for use due to defence and security considerations. We are debating on how we can release more concessions to MRO facility because maintenance and repair operations don't happen on a large scale in India. Hence, we are in discussion if some tax concessions could be given, and also to speed up the process of privatisation of AAI airports because this method has given good service to passengers and also yielded good revenue for AAI as well as the government in the past," he reveals.

On privatisation...

Talking about airport privatisation, he says, "While the AAI board has recommended leasing out six more brownfield airports, we are in the middle of seeking cabinet approval. Then the process of bidding will start."

Sterling Holidays CARES



The Sterling Ooty Elk Hill Resort follows a comprehensive programme called Sterling CARES. It is based on the guidelines by WHO and the FSSAI, and starts from pre-arrival of guest until check-out. The same SOPs will be replicated at all Sterling resorts across India.

A hockey stick recovery?

Here's what three industry heavyweights have to say about recovery of the aviation sector, and the factors that are hindering and helping it.

"If the opening is slow, the recovery will be slow. Implementation of safety measures must be universal and quick. Quarantine measures are an enormous issue; it is very discouraging for air travel. It is useless to implement quarantine if you systematically implement the measures given by International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). We are advocating serious and strong procedures to avoid quarantine. We are also working with insurance companies to put together insurance policies that can be made available to passengers in case of infections."



Alexandre de Juniac
Director General & CEO
IATA



Paul Griffiths
CEO
Dubai Airports

"I don't think there is enough reliable data to draw any extrapolations to where we are going to end up. I wonder if we will go back to carrying a digital version of the yellow book I remember carrying, which was my immunisation record and allowed me to enter certain countries because it was proof that I had been immunised against yellow fever, polio, etc. If we could get a digital version of that, we could certify that we are fit to fly and are not any virus-positive."

"The CAPA projections may change depending on where the infection goes and what the response of the authorities is in terms of opening up borders. What is also slowing growth is the totally uncoordinated closure of borders and their quarantine protocols. There is almost no bilateral discussion on this except maybe within the EU. It is going to be a major issue in terms of opening up international markets. We don't have any higher authority or leadership in terms of co-ordinating the opening up of air services."



Peter Harbison
Chairman Emeritus
CAPA - Centre for Aviation

Inputs by Hazel Jain

'IATA has its benefits'

Even though agents feel that the International Air Transport Association (IATA) has leanings towards the airlines, membership to this community comes with its own set of advantages.

 Hazel Jain

Membership to the hallowed tarmac of IATA comes at a price. And even when travel agents start questioning its relevance in times of crisis such as this, it's important to look at the benefits this membership offers agents.

Pradip Lulla, Acting President and VP, TAFI, feels that even though the IATA travel agents are vehement about trading credit shells with refunds right now, and are doubting the relevance of IATA membership for them, they must look at the other side of the coin. "The IATA membership comes with a host benefits such as access to their platform and to the GDS systems. But most of all, the IATA stamp lends credibility to the agent. Being accredited as an IATA agent helps in getting our money back in cash from the airlines. This is because



Pradip Lulla
Acting President and VP
TAFI

we can have a direct access to process refunds – either direct credit or filing a refund application and being in control of the refund process."

IATA offers two options to agents – GoStandard and GoLite. The GoLite accreditation option, that many agents choose, allows them to transact with airlines through IATA's BSP exclusively using the IATA's EasyPay and Card forms of payment. And since there's no cash

facility (deferred payments), GoLite agents can benefit from IATA accreditation with fewer financial requirements and lower percentage of bank guarantee.

✦ Being accredited as an IATA agent helps; we can have a direct access to process refunds, either direct credit or filing a refund application and being in control of the refund process ✦

Lulla adds, "The IATA platform is a great advantage to the participating airline with the global ratio in the range of 0.5% default. But, airlines don't take this advantage and give ticketing capabilities to maximum travel agents to garner more business with practically no risk." ✦

'IATA has no relevance'

Jyoti Mayal, President, Travel Agents Association of India (TAI), shares why IATA holds little or no relevance for travel agents today, when it should really be the agents' mouthpiece.

 Nisha Verma

After making a series of representations to different ministries, **Jyoti Mayal** says that the challenges are only growing for travel agents. "For us, the challenges are growing in terms of doing business. For existing issues, we are in continuous dialogue with IATA, MoCA and airlines regarding refunds because the amounts are huge. In fact, more than 50 per cent of the money blocked with the airlines belongs to the agents. In our country, we have a huge credit system and hence, we keep educating our members to look at this for the future," she opines.

Claiming that the industry is unsystematic, Mayal says, "In the last 10 years, the industry hasn't really developed to be a robust industry in the right format. That's why we are crying today for refunds. Credit



Jyoti Mayal
President
TAI

shells are not helpful and our 'upload' money with LCCs is not being refunded."

In this scenario, Mayal claims that IATA has no relevance for agents. "When travel agents are giving money and bank guarantees to one body, i.e. IATA, then it should be our mouthpiece. IATA should be the one protecting us, otherwise they don't have relevance. This way, the only relevance they have is the Billing and Settlement Plan (BSP),

which is the money they are taking from us. If IATA continues to be this way, they will certainly lose relevance. In that case, we will start negotiating with airlines separately. We will take the call that we don't need an IATA and we want to negotiate and talk to the airlines separately," she claims.

✦ IATA should be the one protecting us, otherwise they don't have relevance ✦

Adding further, she says, "If we pay one rupee less to IATA, we are branded as defaulters. If the airlines don't pay, shall we also brand them as defaulters and bar them from doing business? We wrote to the IATA DG even before the lockdown that we are fearing no refunds, but nothing happened. In fact, we

Contd on page 14 ▶



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'Government failed industry'

Sanjay Datta, Managing Director, Airborne Holidays, says that while he is keeping his team's morale high, there is going to be a serious impact on businesses and one has to work on new norms and practices going forward. He says that the crisis has led him to start from scratch once again.

 Nisha Verma

Staying afloat is a major focus today, says Sanjay Datta, adding that he is keeping everyone motivated around him one way or the other. "For our business, we have developed a new concept of web conferencing for which we are already in touch with some of our existing clients as well as new clients. We did one conference recently with WHO, which was attended by almost 500 people," he shares. Apart from that, clients keep checking in on resumption of flights and other information, for which they are trying to help people. "We have done a few



Sanjay Datta
Managing Director
Airborne Holidays

charter flights also for people in need. We are trying to survive in any manner possible, and today everyone must cut costs drastically because the future of travel and conferencing in person will not be very lucrative, at least not

for the next six to eight months. People like me have grown from the ranks. I started my agency in

Today, the matter is not that the support didn't come from airlines, IATA or associations. It's the government that failed to support the industry

1991, and now it's a restart after 30 years. While our clients have assured us that they will stay, one cannot take clients or airlines for granted," he says.

The future

"In 2021, I definitely see that people who cannot manage their cash flows and fixed costs would either close shop or do some alternate business. Hence, many would be leaving associations, suspending their IATA certification and renewals, to avoid any extra spend. People who are doing corporate business would be slightly better off than those doing B2B business, which would be affected to an extent."

— Sanjay Datta

Addressing refunds

Insisting there will be new norms for working with the airlines, Datta says that they would decide how to deal with airlines because not all of them have refunded the money which was owed to clients. "It has instead been put into credit shells. The cash flow issue is there, hence, one will have to find ways of managing the business, which is very difficult. People will have to relook at businesses and rework normal practices so that new norms and practices can come into place. The crisis is

going to change how we deal with people, airlines, corporate clients, etc. Unfortunately, we will have to do with much less staff and much less office space. Cash will be the king. Those who have cash will do well, and those struggling with cash would find it tough going forward," he insists.

Changed relationships

Speaking on the relevance of associations and IATA, Datta shares, "Today, the matter is not that the support didn't come from airlines, IATA or as-

sociations. It's the government that failed to support the industry. This automatically failed the associations in front of members. However, to counter that, somebody came up with the MSME concept, where also the onus of repayment lies on an individual and not on the association. People who were smart enough had already enrolled for the same. However, the loans under MSME are not interest-free, but are free of collaterals and is against the amount of business one can do. Hence, loan will not be forthcoming to everybody and anybody who applies.

Every financial institution would consider the risk factor involved and then only would give a loan. From what I have heard, travel and tourism is a high-risk sector, and hence loans might not be forthcoming."

 Destination Analysts reveals that as a record number of cases continues to be reported throughout the US, 63% travellers feel the situation is going to get worse in the next month, dramatically up from 34.7% at the beginning of June.

'MoCA has a balanced role'

► Contd from page 13

recently got a letter from IATA that the refunds we will be getting for those stuck in Jet Airways will be 8 per cent of the amount. What is the use of IATA if things like these happen?"

On the other hand, Mayal has been in constant touch with Ministry of Civil Aviation also regarding refunds. "MoCA has been trying to play a very balanced role and hearing us out. We have made the bridge strong with them and they consider us as part of the aviation industry now," she informs.

Booking repatriation flights

Regarding the issue of agents not being able to book repatriation flights, Mayal says, "We have been working very closely with the national airline, but the agents were kept at bay when it came to booking the Vande Bharat flights. This was the time when business was limited, but the few tickets agents could have done, would have given a boost to their morale towards revival. However, with this happening and airlines going direct, we are shaken even more. I think all the repatriation flights should come into the GDS. They couldn't do it till

now, because initially many processes, countries and ministries were involved. Now that they are established, I am sure they will open it to us. This is the time the agents also need support of the airlines. The government has to be the bridge between us."

Mayal also had a meeting with **Amitabh Kant**, CEO, NITI Aayog. Sharing details about the same, she says, "We wanted to discuss a broader aspect of how our money can be protected. We've asked for remuneration, as now there is a capping of fares, and that credit cards be allowed."

TAG requests tax waivers

The Tour Operators & Travel Agents Association of Gujarat (TAG) met the Gujarat tourism minister to seek relief for the trade and suggest measures for reviving tourism in the state.

 TT Bureau

To help revive tourism in Gujarat, Tour Operators & Travel Agents Association of Gujarat (TAG) has submitted a document to the state tourism minister, Jawahar Chawda, seeking relief measures through tourism aid and restructuring package. The travel agents have sought industry status for travel and tourism sector. That apart, they have sug-



Pankaj Gupta
President
TAG

gested several measures for reviving tourism in the state.

Pankaj Gupta, President, TAG, said, "Rannotsav and Statue of Unity attract tourism in Gujarat and thus, travel agents who help bring in bookings should be incentivised. Tourist-friendly infrastructure including stopovers with proper amenities needs to be developed along the key state highways and national highways leading to tourist destinations. We have also asked for refund of cancellations from state government-owned institutions such as wildlife parks to all without any cancellation charges." The association also asked him to help arrange a meeting with the Chief Minister.

One of the points in the document is a request for complete waiver of the following for the year 2020-21: all fixed electricity and other utility charges, property tax, RTO tax (Road and Passenger) waiver till March 2021.

List of measures TAG requests

- ❖ Incentivise highest sellers of Rannotsav and Statue of Unity
- ❖ Approve 30% TAC for all bookings at Toran hotels
- ❖ Refund from State government-owned institutions, without cancellation charges
- ❖ Provide canter safaris/jeep-sharing safaris at Sasan Gir
- ❖ Develop stopover spots on key highways with good amenities
- ❖ Media Fam trips to key destinations to showcase readiness
- ❖ Sanctioning budget for promotion of tourism into Gujarat to all key associations, starting with Rs50 lakh
- ❖ Industry status with benefits for licences, cost of utilities
- ❖ State-level tourism task force
- ❖ Interest-free working capital repaid by all within five years

First cruise line to resume Ops



Genting Cruise Lines has announced the restart of cruise operations for Dream Cruises with Explorer Dream operating two and three-night 'Taiwan Island-Hopping' itineraries beginning from July 26, 2020, departing from Keelung and calling at Penghu, Matzu and Kinmen islands.

Low visibility on demand for OTAs

Six experts discuss the emerging credibility gap being built in the travel chain and the challenge of predicting green shoots of demand, during an OAG webinar. A key challenge that remains, all agree, is the dynamic nature of policies today, leaving the intermediary and the traveller, and oft times the airline, in a fix.

“ Many airlines have never built sufficient cash reserves to withstand normal events, let alone something like COVID-19. Many LCCs live from month to month on cash flow. So, a learning for the industry from this is that there must be some sort of requirement for a bond or a cash reserve to be established for airlines that want to trade in international markets, to avoid such events happening again. ”



Chetan Kapoor
Co-Founder & Chief Strategy Officer, VIDEA

“ A lot of consumers don't realise the difference between the Meta and the OTA, and they will call us to change their bookings. We have introduced into the search results what airlines are flying and when, and which countries have restrictions, and putting it upfront in the search results so people are more aware while they are searching because there are so many changes happening on a daily basis. ”



Muzzammil Ahussain
EVP - Consumer Travel Unit Seera Group

“ The challenge is also in terms of the airline policy changing within a few days of making a particular announcement. So you inform your customers about the policy and within no time the airline has changed it. This creates further confusion and impacts the credibility of the retailer as well as the intermediary. Changing market dynamics and policies at government level are also influencing airlines to flip-flop on their decisions ”



Gilles Karlé
Chief of Strategy Kiwi.com

“ TCapacity is being changed at the last minute by many airlines, sometimes three days prior to the flight. This builds a lot of complexity for retailers and travellers. Cancellation rates have become, in some cases, 10 times higher than normal. This poses a huge challenge in terms of cash flow for retailers. Excessive capacity optimism is probably unrealistic and therefore anyone booking more than two months in advance is very brave. ”



John Grant
Chief Analyst OAG



Dean Wicks
Chief Flights Officer Wego

“ Dealing with flight cancellations has been a challenge. The important thing to do right now is to be transparent with customers. The credibility gap is in two areas. One is that airline refund processes are extremely cumbersome now and most won't give refunds. That's been a big problem in maintaining trust. So we are restructuring a lot of our processes during this time. For instance, informing them about the airline policies before they book. ”



Rajeev Kumar
Founder - CEO and Managing Director, Mystifly

“ Cash flow for an agent or an OTA is significant at this point. And honestly, I don't think it has anything to do with the processing time of airlines for refunds. They are just holding on to cash that they have already spent so they don't have it anymore, to be blunt. They are just keeping hostages. The key is to be agile in adapting to any change because there are going to be many changes coming. ”

Inputs by Hazel Jain

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'Au revoir', says Jean-Michel Cassé

Jean-Michel Cassé, Chief Operating Officer (COO) – India & South Asia, Accor, is retiring from his position and moving to France. In his farewell interview to TRAVTALK, he shares what makes the Indian market so dynamic and advises hoteliers to not cut rates in the present COVID-19 crisis.



Nisha Verma

Q How was your experience in India?

I have been associated with Accor and the hospitality industry in this region for more than a decade. This journey and experience, with the support of our partners and colleagues, has been a tremendous one. From being just one hotel in Hyderabad to now more than 50 hotels, I have seen the group progress at every step as each of these properties is unique with individual memories attached. Our current portfolio is a healthy mix of diverse quality brands that also enjoy the benefit of great locations.

Q How is India different from other countries you have worked in before?

An amazing quality which sets India apart from other countries is the sense of cooperation and oneness. This industry never



Jean-Michel Cassé
Chief Operating Officer - India & South Asia, Accor

treats you like an outsider. Be it our employees, our partners, media fraternity- it is like a huge family gathering with deep-rooted values, and this is true for every city I have been to and every person I have met along the way. We have so many competitors in the market, but when you meet them at various conferences or meetings, there is never a sense of any rivalry. In fact, we all meet like a family and as an industry that sees a great potential in the region for everyone.

The Indian hospitality market has great potential and there is so much more to explore. The region has helped newer segments and brands to grow, and this is testimony to the increasing demand of quality products and services. Having said that, in India, we have only 160,000 branded inventory and compared to other countries, we have a lot of scope for new development.

Q What makes Accor a household name in India?

All our efforts and innovations have been possible with the help of our owners who trusted us and helped us in the growth. There have been various initiatives, campaigns and innovations through the years. ALL- Accor Live Limitless, our loyalty programme, is a feather in our cap in terms of a key growth initiative. Our teams have been working to provide exclusive

customer experiences through various partnerships and campaigns. Another important aspect is food innovation- not just at our restaurants but also for our MICE segment.

Do not drop rates now because occupancies will return in due course, however, if rates are cut down, it will take the industry back to where it was 10 years ago

Q How well do you think Indian hospitality industry is dealing with the COVID-19 situation?

The hospitality industry across the globe has taken the worst hit. With hotels being shut, we witnessed very little revenue flow through and even after being in

Cassé's message to India

I would like to take this opportunity to thank our owners and partners, especially InterGlobe Enterprise, for the tremendous support in the brand's growth through the years. Also, the media fraternity continues being supportive and has helped us to reach out to more customers. Lastly, my journey would have been incomplete without the help of the tremendous team and hotel staff who have worked tirelessly to make Accor a successful brand in the country.

the unlock phase, we have not witnessed enough footfalls. The industry saw layoffs, pay cuts and furloughs, and we do not foresee the industry getting back its glory for another year now. Having said that, all hotel groups have been announcing recovery plans, offers and vouchers to entice consumers, implementing strict safety and hygiene measures and much more.

To revive the industry, my suggestion would be to not drop rates now because occupancies

will return in due course, however, if rates are cut down, it will take the industry back to where it was 10 years ago.

Q How would events at hotels change, in your opinion?

The industry and banqueting venues will have to rethink their strategy, ensuring that all available spaces be utilised in the most productive way to make up for reduced capacity. While the number of attendees is restricted, this gives us and the clients an opportunity to deliver.

Customer is ready. Are you?

Wipro's webinar on building a resilient future for travel agencies focused on how they should draw up a blueprint to bring about their digital transformation.

It's very easy for a tech-savvy person to say that technology is available – you just have to take it, it's so easy. It's not! For someone who doesn't know or understand technology, using it requires learning. And to take that first step, travel agents need help. We work more on relationships in the travel industry in India. To transition to using technology will require time and effort. It's also a factor of cost and choosing the right product for the agent. But now is the time to adapt because we will be starting from ground zero.



Amit Madhan
President & Group Head, IT & eBusiness
Thomas Cook India

I believe that there is no behavioural change that is required in a customer. And that is because it has already happened. There is a lot of technology available but you have to be creative in using it. Just look around you; there is so much innovation happening in everyday life. In future, you will have many different solutions similar to what you have in the iOS environment. You will have Apps that will be suitable for some travel agencies and not others. This isn't a time for optimisation but looking at a new way of doing things.

Technology can be intimidating but it is totally worth it. One thing that agencies should look at is service design. Reimagine how a service is rendered into the world and what is needed to interact with the customer as well as at the back-end. This pandemic has put into perspective how services need to run. It's no longer enough to give information. Agents need to ask what is the value proposition they bring to the client; how can they use their professional relationship to connect a chain of service for clients.



Peyush Agarwal
Managing Director
Designit

Inputs by Hazel Jain

Only a matter of reputation

Contd from page 7

Firstly, the relevance of IATA has reduced because one is keeping it just for reputation, as ticketing was primarily being done by everybody else. In today's scenario, one is let down in a big way on matters of refund. Most people are stuck with consolidators for refunds. The consolidators are also not paying up, which is also not safe. For IATA, GoLite is going to be an issue for many agents who do not want to give bank guarantees, etc. The end bank in this case is Yes Bank, which people are not confident about. We don't know what to do. We have to take lakhs of rupees from airlines. Still, we don't have anything to sell, despite Vande Bharat flights being sold off in an hour on the airline websites. If airlines go bust, who will you take money from?



Bhagwan Ramnani
MD, Vensimal Leisure
Holidays

This is an unprecedented situation, hence, there is no historical data of right or wrong. Airlines, the major sponsors of IATA, are also facing challenges and so are we. Saying that IATA has not done much and we should leave IATA is something I don't think is correct. People are frustrated, confused and they don't have direction. Even airlines don't have direction since they have their aircraft on ground and so many of them are on the verge of closure. Many airlines are getting support from their governments, but agents have no support from any agency and are also on the verge of closure. This is a time IATA should come forward to play a balancing act to resolve pending issues of agents like restoration of commissions, creating guarantee fund at the cost of airlines to secure agents from airline default & failures.

I got my IATA certification in 2004, and it used to be a prestigious thing at the time. Today, IATA doesn't have much relevance and it is the time of consolidators, as everything is in their hands. IATA only has use as a logo. One would rather give up the IATA recognition. If an agent makes a mistake, he should be ready for the ADM. Today, if we book a ticket directly, we must give service charge, but if we take it from a consolidator, then they have deals across India and they would give me 3-4% extra. Plus, I am taking service charge and I don't have any trouble of getting an ADM or debit note. I can make a booking by transferring it to them, and they will issue my booking and my ticket is made.



Pradeep Rai
Managing Director
Skyline India Travels

Inputs by Nisha Verma



Jyoti Mayal
President
TAAI

Etihad: World-class aviation

Etihad Airways has become the first international airline to address the travel trade in India directly via a webinar. The airline, along with Abu Dhabi Tourism, discussed its readiness as well as new services for passengers – both visitors as well as transit. A set of stringent guidelines for the safety of all has also been put in place.

 Hazel Jain

In an hour-long webinar titled 'Flying Through Covid-19' under the TRAVELTALK Agent Connect series, Etihad Airways and Abu Dhabi Tourism explained to the travel agents joining in about the readiness of both the airline as well as the destination in receiving not just visitors but also transit passengers. Etihad Airways is the first international airline in India that has come forward to speak to the trade directly at a public forum.

Duncan Bureau, Senior VP, Global Sales & Distribution, Etihad Aviation Group, said, "We have been touched by the support we have received from our trade partners in India in these difficult times. We have therefore introduced a range of waivers to help ease the burden of travel and provide maximum flexibility. We want our trade partners to book with us with full confidence."

Explaining this further, Bureau added that the airline offers flexible travel for the future. Unlimited date changes are permitted on all new flights but before August 31. If the guest is unable to travel, they will receive Etihad



Duncan Bureau
Senior VP, Global Sales & Distribution, Etihad Aviation Group

We have been touched by the support received from trade partners in India. We have therefore introduced a range of waivers to provide maximum flexibility

- Duncan Bureau

Also part of the panel were **Neerja Bhatia**, Vice President (Indian Sub-continent), Etihad Airways, and **Saeed Al Saeed**, Destination Marketing Director, Department of Culture & Tourism (DCT), Abu Dhabi. The webinar saw more than 1,700 participants signing in. Attendees were also given prizes based on their questions. There was also a lucky draw for those who watched the entire webinar. The

ity'. This takes care of everything – whether it is at Abu Dhabi airport or on board the flight. Under this, we have introduced an industry-first initiative called 'Etihad Wellness Ambassadors'. They have undergone specialised training in Abu Dhabi and are present at every touchpoint to help passengers. Flyers can even email their queries once their booking is done."

Etihad has also recently opened a webchat on its website as well as Etihad Hub which will resolve all queries. Wellness Ambassadors will be present on every aircraft to look after passengers as well as across the Abu Dhabi airport. Bhatia continues, "We



Neerja Bhatia
Vice President - Indian Subcontinent, Etihad Airways

have recently announced our expanded network for July and August. This takes us close to 58 destinations across the globe wherein we will be connect-

of the largest markets for Etihad outside its home market today – the airline has been repatriating Indians who want to return to India. "We are doing this even to cities that we don't even have a scheduled service to such as Bhubaneswar, Lucknow, Kannur and Gaya," Bhatia says.

A touchless environment

Speaking about creating a touchless environment for the passengers, Bureau says, "We are blessed with the kind of partnership we have, whether it is Abu Dhabi Tourism or the Abu Dhabi government. There is a lot of collaboration going on in terms of creating a safe environment for everyone. For instance, the Abu Dhabi airport has created a touchless environment and some of our technology partners have come up with a way of using cameras as a screening mechanism to determine people's temperature and heart rate. So we are creating a very fast process through the airport which greatly improves

We have recently announced our expanded network for July and August. This takes us close to 58 destinations across the globe via Abu Dhabi, which is open for transit

- Neerja Bhatia

customer experience. It is this same for inbound as it is for outbound traffic."

From an on-board experience, one of the things that is aligned with DCT is its 'Go Safe' certificate which ties very nicely with the Etihad Wellness programme. "Even if you look at HEPA filters on board the aircraft, they filter the air every three minutes, making it cleaner than the air in any building by cleaning 99.9 per cent of any allergen or viruses," he adds.

Aligning with consumer behaviour

Speaking about safety on ground, Saeed Al Saeed says, "One of the main things that we did over the past few months is work on a certification programme to get hotels and attractions certified as per specific guidelines that we have put in place along with our Department of Health. It is called the 'Go Safe' certificate and is one of the most stringent guideline policies that I've seen. This is to ensure that the risks of this pandemic are mitigated to the nth degree."

He adds, "We are not waiting for a vaccine. We are dealing with what we are facing as we speak. Consumer behaviours have al-

ready shifted. There are certain things we will have to adapt to as part of our daily lives now whether it is wearing masks or scanning through heat detection regards to weddings, at this point of time we follow the mandate set by the government and there will be a limit to the number of people that can gather. We're playing it by ear. But for now, there is a restriction on the number of people that can attend any kind of gathering."

Addressing the question on visa policy, he says, "The visa policy remains the same for now. With

Codeshare with Air Arabia Abu Dhabi

Etihad has a new asset in Air Arabia Abu Dhabi. The airline will place its 'EY' code on to Air Arabia Abu Dhabi's inaugural services to the Egyptian cities of Alexandria and Sohag effective July 9. Abu Dhabi's first low-cost airline is based on an agreement between Etihad Airways and Air Arabia and will also operate into India in time.

Reassurance to passengers

Speaking about offering ancillary services, Bureau says, "All airlines will look to monetise anything that is deemed important by the customer and is separate from the



Saeed Al Saeed
Destination Marketing Director
Department of Culture & Tourism
Abu Dhabi

units at malls and hotels. These are things we need to adapt to. Even in terms of testing, all our front-facing staff is tested every two weeks. We do not open any attractions unless these systems are in place. We have conducted almost 10,000 tests for 2,000 people within an 11 km radius on Yas Island called Covid-free Safe Zone. So we are taking extreme measures and investing a ton of money for it."

An evidence of this investment is the free-of-cost treatment that Abu Dhabi offers its visitors. "Every single person that tests positive for COVID-19 on UAE soil will be tak-

The 'Go Safe' certificate is one of the most stringent guideline policies to ensure that the risks of this pandemic are mitigated to the nth degree

- Saeed Al Saeed

seat. We will be looking at travel insurance which is something we are working with our insurance partners on to make sure that our guests are covered. Also in terms of space, real estate on board an aircraft is very valuable. So, seats with extra space or seats that are empty besides people – they would be willing to pay for that."

Special services to 6 Indian cities

Following the partial lifting of international flight restrictions by UAE and Indian authorities on travel for eligible individuals to and from Abu Dhabi to India, Etihad Airways will resume a limited number of special flights to six Indian gateways from Abu Dhabi: Bengaluru, Chennai, Delhi, Hyderabad, Kochi and Mumbai.



credit that extends tremendous flexibility and will have life beyond the next 12 months. If the guest is to travel before November 30, they can rebook their flight for free or use the credit for their next trip. Tickets should have been issued before August 31. In terms of flexibility with rebooking, guests can change their date flight for free and rebook before November 30. This will apply to any destination in its network.

An industry-first

Sharing details about the health safety and hygiene protocols put in place, Bhatia said, "On that front, Etihad has put together an entire health and hygiene proposition into a wellness programme called 'Your Wellness, Our Prior-

winner receives two air tickets plus a three-night stay in Abu Dhabi courtesy DCT. The second lucky draw winner receives a goodie bag.

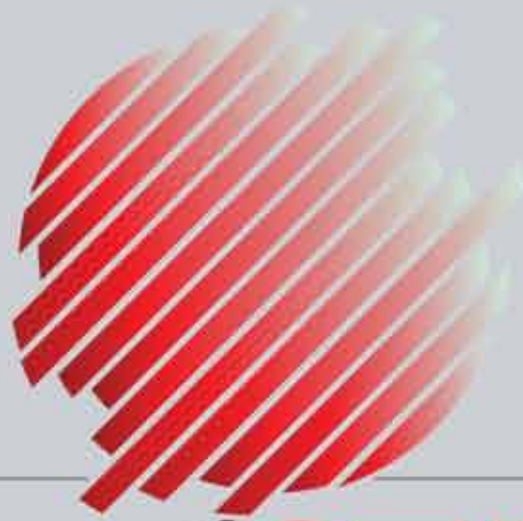
ing East and the West via our home Abu Dhabi, which is open for transit." She adds that since India is a very important market for the airline – it is by far one

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Goa may keep pre-booking clause

The pandemic seems to have forced Goa Tourism to do some house-cleaning and re-look at tackling short and long-term issues such as curbing illegal hotels and improving data collection that follows a faulty system and pegs the number of arrivals in the state approximately 20 per cent short of actual numbers.



Hazel Jain

Menino D'souza, Director, Department of Tourism, Government of Goa, said during a recent webinar that his department will be looking at tackling fundamental issues both in the short term and long term. "One good thing that is coming out of COVID-19 that we will also adopt for the future is making pre-bookings of hotels mandatory for tourists entering the state. We are looking at maintaining this system to curb mass tourism that Goa is attracting. Only persons having booking will be allowed to enter the state," he said.

D'souza also brought the issue of collecting statistics. "Currently, we don't have an accurate data for tourist numbers. The process we are following now is not correct. According to that,



Menino D'souza
Director, Department of Tourism
Government of Goa

we have 80 lakh tourists coming to Goa every year. But we commissioned a survey with KPMG which shows that data is not captured at certain entry points. Even where data is captured, it is not accurate. So we are trying to put in place a correct system to capture all and complete data. Figures show that we receive more than a crore of tourists into Goa. So we are putting a new software in place to resolve this," he shared. He added that Goa

will also look at re-orienting its promotion and marketing strategy with more focus on developing hinterland tourism rather than its beaches.

Streamlining processes

Underlining the need to curb illegal businesses, D'souza said that his department has proposed an amendment to make



the process of registering easier. "We need to protect our brand and profits need to seep down. But if demand is not met legally, it is met illegally and rightful businesses suffer. Illegal hotels are also a security risk as well as dent the state treasury. We have now proposed to have only two to three NOCs for hotels.

Once this amendment has been approved by the government, within a month maybe, it will be put into practice. This will surely plug the loophole. Talking about



Serafino Cota
President, Small & Medium Hotels
Associations

aggregators, all OTAs have to register with us and enlist only registered hotels," he explained.

Agreeing to this point was **Serafino Cota**, President, Small & Medium Hotels Associations. He said, "There is a huge issue

Hotels reopen in Goa

More than 260 hotels that had applied for permission to re-open are now operational in Goa and are listed on the Goa Tourism website. Tourists entering the state must get a COVID-19 negative certificate issued by Indian Council of Medical Research 48 hours prior, or submit themselves to test once they land in Goa until results are out. Until then, they will be kept in isolation at their hotel.

✦ Illegal hotels are a security risk as well as dent the state treasury. We have now proposed to have only two to three NOCs for hotels ✦

- Menino D'souza

of illegal hotels in Goa. They are not registered and all that revenue is lost. It is a very high number and it includes illegal beach shacks. We suggest the

tourism department to come up with a policy for homestays that have four or more rooms with the owner staying there. They also need to be registered with Goa Tourism as it is very expensive to set up even a small hotel. Such illegal hotels cause a huge leakage in the system of more than 70 per cent or more revenue." Cota also requested D'souza to update the Goa website and make it like a directory of hotels. It is currently very basic with very old, with inaccurate information. ✦

Switzerland launches its 'Clean & Safe' label



TT Bureau

As the country opens its borders with a gradual relaxation of rules, the need for information on the safety and cleanliness measures adopted remains high. Recently, Switzerland Tourism initiated the 'Clean & Safe' campaign along with tourism industry associations to create a 'Clean & Safe' label that will indicate that



the establishments have made a conscious commitment to comply with protection plans. The campaign has been introduced as a measure to assure tourists about Switzerland being a safe and clean travel destination. "The campaign is to bring together associations in Switzerland to foster a safe and welcoming environment for travellers," says **Ritu Sharma**, Deputy Director, Switzerland Tourism India. ✦

RARE's new travel agents network

RARE India recently launched three initiatives, namely RATAN, RAIN and Beautiful Planet, in a bid to grow the community of environmentally conscious people and travel enthusiasts who believe in sustainable living. **Shoba Mohan**, Founder, RARE India, shares details...



Nisha Verma

RARE Travel Agency Network (RATAN) and RARE Influencer Network (RAIN) are directed towards inviting partnerships from travel agents as well as independent influencers to jointly promote conscious luxury travel. Speaking on the same, **Shoba Mohan** says, "RATAN is meant to create a very focused group of tour operators & travel agents, to train them on how to use sustainability in promoting luxury travel and experiences. We need tour operators who believe in RARE. We need tour operators who go the extra mile to understand what it actually means and implement their promotions and marketing skills to strongly promote a hotel, which is a part of RARE India or a part of the responsible tourism society of India. They should be people who follow certain guidelines and principles where the integrity of the destination or the commu-



Shoba Mohan
Founder
RARE India

nity is impacted positively. One should be able to explain why a sustainable luxury hotel is premium and exclusive, that it ensues a certain value to it."

Adding that she has been thinking about RATAN as a concept for a long time, Mohan says, "We do need people to engage with us, to believe in what we are doing, trying to understand it better, and use it in their promotions. We want to create a tribe or network. This concept has been on the cards for a very long time, and

the lockdown has given us time to do this."

RAIN engages people who want to be associated with RARE. "There are a lot of people on

✦ We are constantly picking up ideas to engage people to get them excited about promoting RARE, while also trying to create a change in mindset ✦

social media who like what we do and the ethos of RARE. They feel as part of that tribe and use their offices to influence people to take the idea of sustainable

luxury through the community of RARE far and wide in the sub-continent. The idea to engage such people came when on social media, so many people expressed interest in working with us because they genuinely love what we do and want to do it. I think it was a great opportunity to pull them in and create a business opportunity for all of them sitting wherever they are."

Talking about Beautiful Planet, Mohan shares that the concept is close to her heart and "it would focus on doing live stories from young people, who are doing fantastic work in terms of travel, climate change, sustainability and want to make a difference," she mentions. She further adds, "We are constantly picking up ideas to engage people to get

them excited about promoting not only RARE, but we are also trying to create a change in mindset. We are trying to encourage people to start thinking about sustainability now in the COVID world, instead of setting it aside." Today, RAIN is in 10-12 cities, while RATAN is in 40 cities across India. "Our aim is to have them in over 100 Tier-II cities in the country," says Mohan.

Talking about the criteria behind RATAN, she adds, "They should have the ability to promote to a network of travel agents around them; they should have a dedicated person from the company to attend trainings so they can understand RARE; and finally the inclination to promote hotels not just as a business idea but also to transform it." ✦



The Secretary-General of UNWTO, Zurab Pololikashvili, has paid an official visit to the Canary Islands to recognise the reopening of the destination and the steps the local authorities have taken to keep both visitors and tourism workers safe.

Curbing pandemics at airports

‘We live in exceptional times that call for exceptional measures, and this ignites adroit innovation,’ says **Arun Bright**, Lead Product Owner, Sabre Bengaluru GCC. Airlines and airport systems play a crucial role in containing the spread of contagious infection. But, how can these systems make a difference? Let’s take a look...

In early 2020, a travel embargo was in place around the globe and international borders were closed to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. When a contagious infection is confined locally within a country’s boundary, without exporting it to the global community, half the battle is won.

The scenario today

Border control security checks ensure travellers do not carry prohibited goods. Along with the existing security checks today, there will be additional checks of the traveller’s health condition and based on the results, they will either be allowed or denied boarding. Self-declared ‘Fit to fly’ certificates, sanitisers, face masks and social distancing that started with the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to be the norm for a while.



Expectations from tomorrow

Based on a country’s government regulations, an additional document could be needed for crossing international borders. This additional document will facilitate in assessing the health condition of travellers and determining if the traveller is fit to fly. For now, I call this document a ‘Health Passport’. Visualise a health passport as a document that holds the health record of a person in a digital format. It contains details

on travellers’ demographics, health history, allergies, vaccinations, current medical conditions, immunity details, etc. As part of check-in, Departure Control System will now transmit health details along with the passport and visa information for government bodies to decide if the traveller can enter a country.

IATA currently has a good reference in Timatic to validate travellers’ document requirements

to enter a country. When Timatic incorporates the health passport, advanced Departure Control Systems that are integrated with Timatic will have additional checks to validate passenger travel eligibility. Timatic refers to this Health Passport as an ‘immu-

✦ A Health Passport will hold the health record of a person in a digital format, with details on travellers’ demographics, allergies, vaccinations, medical conditions, etc ✦

nity passport’. When use of health passports mature and there are standards set to exchange health information across systems, health passports could as well be

christened to a term acceptable across the industry.

Also on the cards...

Check-in at the airport would be contactless by leveraging IATA’s OneID and Nextt initiative. These products will also be driven based on biometrics. Self-baggage tagging and electronic baggage tags will be widely used. AI-ML based products will evolve in predicting travellers who are potentially at risk based on their travel document details, social media feed, travel and health history.

After the 9/11 incident, world air travel changed. Travellers from the 80s would have never imagined airport security processes and systems to be as advanced as they are in today’s world. After the COVID-19 pandemic, world air travel will change again. These exceptional times will be

conquered by exceptional process measures for now. Next, it would be improvised with a smart IT system. Later, the pandemic will be trounced with an intelligent system backed by biometrics. With world air travel expected to double in 20 years, airports will have a mad rush again, but with intelligent systems in place there will be an order to the madness and the fear to travel will be forgotten.

(Views expressed are the author’s own. The publication may or may not subscribe to the same.)



Arun Bright
Lead Product Owner
Sabre Bengaluru GCC

How to build passenger confidence

Experts from the Indian travel and aviation industry feel that the series of progressive discussions, best practices and steps outlined by the industry embrace a proactive customer experience in air travel. They also highlight the seamless coordination between airports, airlines and other stakeholders in the travel value chain, as customers navigate the ‘new normal’ of flying.

“ We continue to rigorously follow recommendations and measures by our industry, international council, health and safety organisations and other stakeholders to restore confidence in air travel for our people in India. The ACP webinar discussion demonstrated that a collaborative approach between all stakeholders is the way to restore confidence and bring air travel back. ”



Amitabh Khosla
Country Director – India, International
Air Transport Association

“ The restart of aviation and for achieving future resilience, we can start by building confidence in the public about travelling, through harmonised and internationally bench-marked public health measures, and collective efforts by all stakeholders in the ecosystem. ICAO Council adopts new COVID-19 aviation recovery ‘Take Off’ guidelines to reconnect the world, developed by a broad base of consultants. ”



Salil Gupte
President
Boeing India

“ The COVID-19 pandemic requires a joint effort to minimise air travel health risks and restore public confidence in travel and aviation. As air travel resumes and restrictions ease, the industry needs to partner and collaborate to develop new solutions, build on the existing best practices, and provide a safe travel experience to travellers. The safety and well-being of everyone is a top priority for ACP and its members. ”

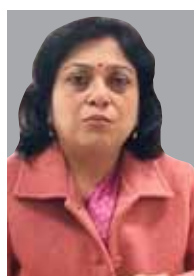


Ashmita Sethi
President and Country Head,
Pratt & Whitney, UTC India

“ All of us across the travel and tourism value chain face an uphill challenge if our customers are not travelling. It is time that we work together to restore confidence about travelling in the passenger who is apprehensive and hesitant today. It is important for harmonisation of processes among all stakeholders, and to recognise aviation’s role in economic growth, job creation, delivery of goods and services, and global connectivity. ”



Usha Padhee
Joint Secretary
Ministry of Civil Aviation



Dr. Shefali Juneja
Representative to India
International Civil Aviation
Organization

“ We are partnering with airlines, Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA), Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) and the industry to create a multi-layered approach focused on keeping passengers and airline crew healthy. Layered protection requires a system-wide approach extending beyond the airplane to the full travel experience. Having consistent, industry-recognised safety standards and protocols will be an important part of recovery as travel resumes. ”



Sandeep Bahl
Program Director
US-India Aviation
Cooperation Program

“ As air travel recovers, innovation and coordination between industry and government will be key to restoring confidence. We have been supporting our customers in India to meet the demands of the world’s fastest growing aviation market. During the lockdown, we continued to work closely with our airline customers, bringing in special charters to upgrade fleets, improving quick-turn MRO capabilities and reducing turnaround times. ”

Contd on page 26 ▶

Israel instils confidence in partners

While it is still uncertain when air connections between India and Israel will resume or whether there will be any change in the visa regime, Israel has continued to engage the travel trade here. **Sammy Yahia**, Director, Israel Ministry of Tourism – India and Philippines, shares more details.



Hazel Jain

Q Please share an on-ground update from Israel in terms of safety measures taken by hotels, attractions and other touristic places.

Israel's ministries of tourism and health, with support of the local municipal corporations and governing bodies, have created SOPs to ensure measures have been taken to reopen tourism. The ministries have outlined the 'Purple Standard' for operating hotels in the country. Restaurants and bars have been offered the opportunity to expand their seating area to public spaces to be



Sammy Yahia
Director, Israel Ministry of Tourism
India and the Philippines

able to comply with physical distancing rules.

Q How are you engaging the trade right now?

The Israel Government Tourist Office India (IGTO India) has

been working with agents and operators across segments during the lockdown. We have conducted virtual destination training sessions for them as well as their team members who are involved with selling the destination.

IGTO India has also taken care to keep our partners in the trade, corporates, and travellers aware of the developments in Israel, especially with regards to the new regulations implemented by the ministries of health and tourism that are in line with WHO guidelines. We want to ensure that all our partners feel con-

While we are keen to see Indian travellers visit Israel, it is our responsibility to ensure that tourists are safe while travelling to and from our destination

dent in Israel and this is being done through virtual meetings and presentations, press releases and newsletters, as well as connecting our partners in India with their counterparts in Israel.

The IGTO India team has also been working on an advanced programme to create an 'Israel Specialist' in select cities so agents have access to the destination.

The 'Purple Standard' for hotels

Israel's ministries of tourism and health have outlined the 'Purple Standard' for operating hotels in the country. For hotels to be in compliance with new procedures, they must maintain several benchmarks outlined by Ministry of Health that will deem the property safe for travellers. These include wearing face mask in public spaces, maintaining a minimum distance of six feet, and frequent hand washing, cleaning and disinfecting protocols for all public spaces and guest rooms, guidelines for cleaning the hotel water systems (such as pools), and a dedicated staff member to oversee all health procedures. Hotels are also required to conduct temperature checks for all staff, guests and visitors, installation of plexiglass partitions at reception desks, as well as restrictions to the number of guests in an elevator at a time.

Q Are you expecting any change in the visa regime for Indian nationals?

At the moment, Israel limits entry to Israeli passport holders, residence visa holders, and passengers with specific entry approval, and all arrivals must enter 14-day quarantine. Therefore, it is highly recommended

to contact the embassy prior to flying to inquire if entry will be permitted.

While we are keen to see Indian travellers visit Israel, it is our responsibility to ensure that tourists are safe while travelling to and from our destination.



The Union Cabinet has given its approval for declaration of Kushinagar Airport in Uttar Pradesh as an international airport. Kushinagar is located in the north-eastern part of Uttar Pradesh, about 50 km east of Gorakhpur.

Develop lighthouse tourism

Mansukh Mandaviya, Union Minister of State (I/C) for Shipping, recently held a meeting for developing around 194 existing lighthouses across India as major tourist attractions. During the meeting, which was attended by the Secretary, Shipping Ministry and DG, Directorate General of Lighthouses and Lightships, along with the other stakeholders, the minister said that the develop-

ment of lighthouse tourism will boost tourism activity not only in lighthouses but also in the surrounding area, and give an opportunity to know about the enriched history of lighthouses in the country.

Officials in the meeting presented a detailed action plan to develop lighthouses as tourism spots. Mandaviya advised officials to identify the lighthouses which are more than 100 years



Mansukh Mandaviya
Union Minister of State
(I/C) for Shipping

old. He put impetus on creating museums to showcase their history and working.

1st city to be 'Safe': RAK

Ras Al Khaimah has become the first city in the world to be certified as a 'Safe' destination by Bureau Veritas and the first emirate in the UAE to be given the Safe Travels Stamp by WTTC.



TT Bureau

Ras Al Khaimah Tourism Development Authority (RAKTDA) has confirmed that the emirate has been certified as a 'Safe' destination by Bureau Veritas, the global leader in testing, inspection and certification services, as it completes its 'Safeguard Assurance' programme. Ras Al Khaimah is the first Emirate in the UAE to receive the World Travel and Tourism Council's (WTTC) Safe Travels Stamp, the world's first ever global safety and hygiene stamp for the travel and tourism industry, designed specifically to address COVID-19 and similar outbreaks.

Through a strategic partnership with Bureau Veritas, the Authority has led the way in implementing stringent health, safety and hygiene measures across all Ras Al Khaimah hotels to mitigate any possible risk for employees and guests, and provide complete confidence in the destination. Through an ongoing series of in-



Raki Phillips
CEO
RAKTDA

dependent audits of all its hotels in the emirate, the partnership was designed to further validate the measures and processes already in place, and takes RAKTDA's 'Stay Safe' Hotel Certification Program to the next level.

Protocols under the WTTC Safe Travels Stamp were developed in collaboration with WTTC members (including RAKTDA), leading industry associations and international organisations, and covers operational and staff preparedness, ensuring a safe experience, re-building trust and confidence and implementing enabling poli-

cies. It also follows the current guidelines of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and will continue to be updated as new information about COVID-19 becomes available.

As travel starts to resume, our role as a tourism development authority is to ensure that measures are in place to protect our visitors

Raki Phillips, CEO, RAKTDA, says, "As travel starts to resume, our role as a tourism development authority is to ensure that robust measures are in place to protect our visitors." On India, he adds, "The wedding and MICE segment has gained momentum from India. The emirate has been home to some high-profile Indian weddings as it boasts a diverse array of natural landscapes that appeal to visitors."

SG attractions begin to open



As part of the resumption of activities in phase-2 after the Circuit Breaker, tourism businesses in Singapore have been permitted to resume operations in stages from July 1, beginning with 13 attractions. Singapore Tourism Board will also allow domestic tour operators to begin submitting their applications to resume operations.

The wedding saga in a pandemic

A panel discussion conducted by 1524 Delhi recently brought some wedding planners together who shared their perspectives on how this segment is likely to unfold and what innovative practices hotels could adopt to attract more weddings. Most agree that when they eventually do, weddings will be back with a bang!

“ Destination weddings will take a backseat this year and the segment will eventually see a V-shaped recovery. Indians are resilient and are risk-takers, and I’m sure that when the demand returns, it will be back with a flood. What hotels must look at is to conduct virtual tours for planners and list down specifications that are available for them to use during an event. ”



Sushil Shamal Wadhwa
Founder & CMD
Platinum World Group

“ In South India where I live, everything happens according to the *muhuratam*. We have already started getting inquiries for weddings in August and October, which are the two key months for weddings. Due to the restrictions here, a lot of these families are asking to do it outside India. But the big question is how and where. Charter flights are one option, but sanitisation is a question and so is hotel safety. ”



Mahesh Shirodkar
Managing Director
Tamarind Global

“ Encouraged by feedback from some of India’s leading wedding planners, we are optimistic that the Indian wedding industry will experience a V-shaped recovery post COVID-19. Ultra-wealthy clients will continue to favour destination weddings. In the early part of the upcoming wedding season, we expect the demand to be largely for short-haul destinations requiring no more than one flight. ”

An industry voice



Rajeev Jain
Director
Rashi Entertainment

“ Hotels stand to gain in the first wave, but the wedding planner may not have a big role to play. It may not be a viable proposition for us to put in that much effort for 50 people and not make that sort of revenue. So, hotels might be the bigger gainer. We will need to gear up with adequate resources and team members to be ready to handle the V-shaped recovery. I think we will see the real upswing from October 2021. ”



Vandana Mohan
Founder, Wedding Design Company & Backstage Productions



Dinaz Noria
Founder, 3D – Design & Décor by Dina

“ There are weddings in November and December, but the window of finalisation is going to be crunched. What could happen also is that wedding ceremonies might take place in India but couples may look at short-haul destinations in Southeast Asia and Middle East for post-wedding events. Flexibility in contracts and shortage of time in terms of confirmation from hotels is going to be the order of the day. ”



Karan Singh
Chairman & Co-Founder
1524 Delhi

“ Technology is a great value addition, but it can never substitute the real thing. A Zoom call versus taking a selfie with Alia Bhatt, which one would you choose? Of course, it is happening now, but these are substitutes. Don’t worry, keep the faith – the real thing will be back, albeit with safety measures in place. ”

Inputs by Hazel Jain

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Giving an edge to eastern India

Eastern Himalayas Travel & Tour Operators' Association (EHTTOA) has joined hands with both regional and national associations to revive tourism in eastern India, promoting domestic tourism to North Bengal and the Eastern Himalayan region. It has also tied up with key associations to promote cross-border tourism with Bangladesh.

 Nisha Verma

Tourism stakeholders in West Bengal have joined hands in a bid to revive the industry in the region. EHTTOA, Himalayan hospitality associations and Travel Agents Association of Bengal (TAAB) have tied up to bring to the fore issues that the region's tourism industry is currently dealing with.



Sandipan Ghosh
General Secretary
EHTTOA

Speaking on the subject is, **Sandipan Ghosh**, General Secretary, EHTTOA, who says, "Most of our members are facing issues with refunds and cancellations because people

had paid in January-February for travel in April-May-June. Now they are asking for refunds and most of the tour operators are not able to pay the money back, as most of it has been exhausted during the crisis.

Hence, we created a common cancellation policy so that people are not inconvenienced and members can create a credit shell for one year, which will be valid from date of travel and

✦ We have made this joint platform because as a single association, we thought our voices may not be heard properly ✦

not from date of booking. This would allow people to avail the



benefits and their money will not be waived off. They can also utilise the advance payments they have made and we, as tour operators, also don't have any problem in refunds but adjusting it with future tours."

Ghosh claims that they have also reached out to West Bengal Chief Minister Mamta Banerjee, and have put in a few points to be considered in line with what FAITH has been doing nationally. "We have also sought appointment with the CM and have requested

her to take certain measures as well as to create a taskforce so that tourism can be taken forward in Bengal, because unlike most other places, many parts of North Bengal are not that affected by COVID-19. Hence, we can start with domestic and cross-border tourism as soon as things are a little bit back in shape. We have also asked for waiver of some taxes and fees, including road tax, licensing fee and other periodic payments that come under the domain of the state government, he says."

In fact, Ghosh adds that they have also shared promotional ideas. "Many resorts in Doars, Kalimpong and Darjeeling opened from July 1, while Sikkim is still closed. We have decided to make promotional videos for tourists and are trying to ask West Bengal Tourism to also put their branding on

it, to bring in a sense of authenticity. The idea is to portray the region as safe to travel in terms of local people supporting tourists and also in terms of hygiene and sanitisation. We are also trying to get bytes from local hoteliers on how they have been sanitising their properties, so that people are convinced and consider the region as a safe destination for travel. We have made this joint platform because as a single association, we thought our voices may not be heard properly," he claims.

EHTTOA is already in touch with the regional director and minister of tourism of the state. In addition, the Association is collaborating with national associations. "Also, since the prospects of MICE tourism in this region are expanding, we are in talks with NIMA," Ghosh says. ✦

 *India ranks 96 among 163 developing countries in the 2020 Adventure Tourism Development Index, a joint initiative of The George Washington University International Institute of Tourism Studies and Adventure Travel Trade Association.*





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VFS Global starts limited operations

In a bid to get business going as the world starts to open, VFS Global has resumed operations, albeit restricted. Countries for which visa services have begun are United Kingdom, Italy, UAE, Turkey, Ireland, Belarus, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Norway, Portugal and South Korea. Applicants will have to schedule an appointment in advance on the VFS Global website.

TT Bureau

VFS Global has announced re-opening of Visa Application Centres in 11 cities for specific visa categories. After specific Embassies/Consulates as well as local authorities have given their approval, VFS Global's centres will accept visa applications for select countries with strict health and hygiene SOPs in place. Applicants will have to mandatorily schedule an appointment online, through the website www.vfsglobal.com, prior to visiting the Visa Application Centre.

In order to ensure a safe, productive work environment for employees, while still protecting communities to the maximum extent possible from the spread of the COVID-19 virus, VFS Glob-



al has established standardised protective measures to be followed across centres, including specific physical distancing and sanitation mandates. All customers may be required to undergo body temperature checks at the entrance of the centre. Customers exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms, including high fever, cough and difficulty in breathing, will not be permitted to enter the centre. They will be requested to reschedule their appointment and return once their health improves. All customers and VFS Global employees are required to wear a face mask.

Before you apply

❖ For UK visa, some optional, premium services will currently not be offered, including: Super Priority Visa, Priority Visa (for visit visas), Priority Visa for settlement visas, Flexi Time Service, and Walk-in Service. The available premium services will be listed on the website.

❖ All other VACs in South Asia remain closed until further notice. VFS Global will contact customers who had previously booked appointments at these centres to arrange for them to complete their application at a different location.

List of countries that will resume acceptance of applications

Country	Visa Categories	Cities	Restart Date
United Kingdom	All visa categories/passport collection	11 cities: Mumbai, Pune, Ahmedabad, Bangalore, Cochin & Hyderabad, Chennai, New Delhi, Jalandhar, Chandigarh, Kolkata	July 6, 2020
Ireland	Student and long-stay categories	11 cities (same as above for UK)	July 6, 2020
Italy	Re-Entry Visa Only	New Delhi	July 3, 2020
Belarus	All visa categories	New Delhi	July 1, 2020
Denmark	Residence permit, Employment, Dependents, Approval cases	New Delhi	June 29, 2020
Norway	Residence permit	New Delhi	June 29, 2020
Portugal	E6 for holders of expired Portuguese residence card, D6 for holders of expired Family Reunification D6 visas	New Delhi	June 29, 2020
South Korea	Long term applications only	New Delhi	June 29, 2020
Dominican Republic	Work/Resident/Business visa	New Delhi	June 29, 2020
UAE (DVPC – e-Visa for Emirates passengers, only for travel from July 7)	All visa categories	Online	June 25, 2020
Turkey	All visa categories	New Delhi	June 22, 2020

Recovery possible only through collaboration

Contd from page 21

“The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented crisis for the aviation industry. The recovery from this crisis can happen only by restoring public confidence in the health and safety of flying. The new mitigation measures introduced at airports with respect to sanitisation, cleanliness, hygiene and social distancing, as well as health screening procedures on departure and arrival, have significantly reposed confidence amongst the flyers, which is evident from the increasing number of air travellers. At Delhi Airport we have set up UV tunnels to sanitise baggage and baggage trolleys, installed highly efficient HEPA filters, etc.”



Pradeep Panicker
CEO
GHIAL

“Aviation is one of the safest modes of transport, and passenger confidence in air travel needs to be reinforced. India has lifted restrictions on domestic air travel, and international air travel is expected to resume soon. We are optimistic that the industry will bounce back and the new normal is here to stay. The collaborative efforts of all stakeholders of the aviation industry in making the passenger journey safe to overcome turbulent times is commendable. Airports are doing their bit to ensure the safety of all the passengers as well as employees.”



Videh Kumar Jaipuria
CEO
DIAL

Inputs by Manas Dwivedi

Trade reaches out to NITI Aayog

IATO, ATOAI and ADTOI recently met **Amitabh Kant**, CEO, NITI Aayog, to seek government's support for the survival and revival of industry, including financial assistance for tour operators. Here is what ensued...

Manas Dwivedi

The agenda of the recent meet with the NITI Aayog chief was to seek financial support along with long-term loans and a hike in SEIS incentive from 7 per cent to 10 per cent. The latter gave a patient hearing and has assured full support.

IATO sought an increase in incentives offered under SEIS from 7% to 10%, which would allow them to offer competitive packages vis-à-vis neighbouring countries

During the meeting, **Pronab Sarkar**, President, IATO, emphasised that inbound tour operators who bring in foreign tourists and earn valuable foreign exchange for the country are on the verge of collapsing



due to the COVID-19 pandemic and need urgent help to survive as there is zero billing and consequently zero cash flow.

“IATO has been raising concerns of members through all possible means and platforms and has been writing to all the concerned ministries directly and through Ministry of Tourism and also to PMO. We also approached the Chief Ministers of many state governments for relief to the tour operators at state level. We suggested that financial relief and non-collateral interest-free

long-term loans should be given to all 1043 Ministry of Tourism, Government of India recognised inbound, domestic, adventure tour operators, travel agents and tourist transport operators, in the form of one-time financial grant of 75-80 per cent of the gross salaries amount paid to the staff in financial year 2018-19,” said Sarkar. Apart from Sarkar, **Rajiv Mehra**, VP, was representing IATO. **Capt. Swadesh Kumar**, President, ATOAI and **PP Khanna**, President, ADTOI, were also present.

The delegation sought financial support to tour operators so they did not have to shut shop.

In addition, IATO sought an increase in incentives offered under SEIS from 7 per cent to 10 per cent, which would allow them to offer competitive packages vis-à-vis neighbouring countries. Kant assured the delegation of full support to the tourism industry. IATO and other tourism bodies sincerely hope and believe that the government would soon provide measures to mitigate the pain of the tourism industry.

Of tropical scenes and the

The Philippines is increasingly becoming a hub for solo travellers. All you need to do is pack your bags and fly to one of the most aesthetic places in the world, and enjoy yourself to the core. It is that simple! We bring to you five destinations in the Filipino archipelago that you can plan your next trip to once things open up some more.



The bustling city life and the quiet plush mountains are just the opposites you need to be attracted to. Let yourself soak the coolness of the water as you lazily swim under the balmy sun and your throat gushes with pleasure after sipping that fruit cocktail. The cheery birds, the light music, and the beautiful sky beckon you to discard any second thoughts. The Philippines is magic!

Palawan

The unspoiled Pamalican Island, in northern Palawan province, is the crown of the place. The untouched beauty of it will astonish you ruthlessly. The tiny islands, the underground rivers, and the groovy beach parties are better than any love notes your partner will leave for you. Let the bar tease you with its



boundless range of cocktails and the barbeque work under your orders and choice. A rare safari experience with zebras, giraffes, antelopes and the natural beauty awaits you, eagerly.

Bohol

Chocolate hills, unusual vegetation and dreamy wildlife

make Bohol as pretty as it is. The Cambuyo rice terraces and the Mahogany forests will be a delight to your eyes prone to seeing only skyrocketing buildings in the city. Head for a mushy dive with the dolphins or go kayaking with your brimming enthusiasm, a visit to Bohol is going to leave you with

happy memories underwater or above water.

Boracay

The fact that it had to close down due to overtourism is a subtle hint to the crazy nightlife that unrolls here from dusk to dawn. Kite surfing adventures, hikes on mountains and a variety of water activities will keep your enthusi-

asm brimming all day, only to be cooled down by wellness sessions offered by resorts. Being a solo traveller would have never been more fun.

Sagada

Sagada Island can leave you bewitched when you have a look at the spookiest spot on the cliffs of Echo Valley. We only do serious

business, you see. Wash down some great food with a mug of delicious coffee, let the water wash away the woes of yesterday, and the sun giggle the anxiety of the future out of you.

Manila

With the flavour of global and a dash of local, Manila has history and modernity in refreshing amounts. Be it the local culture or the nightlife, it never disappoints you. Collecting pretty souvenirs for loved ones, babbling about the mild weather, and shuffling their taste buds with the unique cuisine, you will find many solo travellers having the time of their lives. Long strolls along the Intramuros or hours of concentrated shopping, Manila has it all for you. The rich neighbourhoods bespeak its carefully preserved history and its clubs take it upon themselves to show you the power of music.





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ITQ-Vistara Webinar	12 pm	16
IATA Webinar on NDC	1:30 pm	17
TravTalk Middle East Tourism Conclave	11:30 am	20
CTC Online Masterclass	12:30 pm	22
Tourism E Conclave 2020	10 am	29-30
Discover RARE Virtual	2 pm	23
CAPA India Webinar	5 pm	24
Virtual Tour of Andamans	11 am	24

AUGUST 2020

IBTM China	Beijing	26-27
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For more information, contact us at: talk@ddpl.com

Keeping members e-engaged

In a bid to engage its members during these tough times of COVID-19, TAAI-Northern Region has been organising a number of webinars covering a range of topics and will be continuing the same in the future.



Nisha Verma



The latest webinar by TAAI-NR in the series was the Online Travel Webinar by Avi Arya. Sharing key takeaways is, **Neeraj Malhotra**, Chairman, TAAI-NR, who says, "The purpose behind the webinar was to learn how to use social media in business. Avi shared many points and it was amazing to see how one can grow their business just by using the right tools. The idea was to educate members on using social media in their business so that they can grow."

The team has already done some webinars earlier, says **Gaurav Dogra**, Hony. Secretary, TAAI-NR. "We did our first webinar on April 16 with motivational speaker Manish Behl, one with GMR on its readiness and preparedness before opening, and another with Expedia TAAP prior to this one. The next webinar will



Neeraj Malhotra
Chairman
TAAI-NR

be with OYO on July 16. All our webinars saw an attendance of around 100-125 members. Other than these, we have also conducted our members' meet and discussed many issues like airline refunds and even Vande Bharat mission flights. We will have another members' meet soon," he shares. Malhotra adds that they have been continuously organising such webinars ever since the lockdown started, so that the members remain motivated and sail through these tough times.

When asked about his views on IATA's relevance during a crisis such as COVID-19, Malhotra said, "Almost 90 per cent of our members have already renewed their IATA certification. However, it has not been of much help to the agents in COVID times. Our members are really disturbed about the way



The idea was to educate members on using social media in their business so that they can grow

- Neeraj Malhotra

They don't get anything from us. For us, they are just collecting payments and giving to IATA. Their main clients remain the airlines."

Malhotra further added, "Just like IATA has fixed dates to collect money from us, they should have fixed dates with the airlines as well to refund our money. We haven't received any money for refunds filed in March also."



Gaurav Dogra
Hony. Secretary
TAAI-NR

IATA has handled the entire situation. They are only working for the airlines and not the agents because all their revenue comes from the airlines.

Palladium re-opens hotels

Palladium Hotel Group has begun its summer season with the opening of seven properties across Spain. It has also tied up with SGS to develop a new hygienic-sanitary protocol in all the hotels.



TT Bureau

Palladium Hotel Group has opened seven of its hotels in Ibiza, Tenerife and Málaga, welcoming back national and international travellers to enjoy their holiday in three of Spain's favourite destinations.

In Ibiza, the company plans to open five of its hotels: Grand



Palladium Palace Ibiza Resort & Spa and Grand Palladium White Island Resort & Spa began their summer season on July 3 with first-rate services

Properties to open soon

Palladium Hotel Costa del Sol (July 16)
Hard Rock Hotel Tenerife (July 30)

for the whole family, located on the well-known golden sands of Playa d'en Bossa. Nearby, Hard Rock Hotel Ibiza opened its doors on July 10, combining modern décor with the characteristic essence of the island and the energy of the Hard Rock brand. Further north in Ibiza, in the exclusive area of Cala Nova, Bless Hotel Ibiza has been welcoming guests since July 10.

Visitors looking for an isolated and relaxed setting in Ibiza can seek quiet refuge at Agroturismo Sa Talaia. For those looking for a holiday in Spain's mainland, Palladium Hotel Costa del Sol offers the ideal location in Benalmádena, Málaga, southern Spain. Opening on July 16, this property underwent a complete renovation in 2019. While those who prefer the characteristic charm of the Canary Islands, Hard Rock Hotel Tenerife will be opening its doors from July 30.

Properties already open

Grand Palladium Palace Ibiza Resort & Spa
Grand Palladium White Island Resort & Spa
Hard Rock Hotel Ibiza
Bless Hotel Ibiza
Agroturismo Sa Talaia

Palladium Hotel Group looks to open these seven hotels with a firm commitment to the safety and well-being of its guests and collaborators which continues to be the highest priority for the company.

To do this, it has partnered with SGS for the certification of its new safety and hygiene protocol that includes new norms and processes, as well as improvements in the safety, quality, hygiene and health standards of all the group's properties worldwide.

RUTI appoints India Rep

The Russian Union of Travel Industry (RUTI) has appointed **Prashant Choudhary**, Managing Director, Salvia Promoters, as its Representative in India.



Manas Dwivedi



An organisation of Russia's top tourism industry stakeholders with a mandate to promote tourism to Russia, RUTI has developed a network of representatives in 15 countries, including India, which it sees as priority markets for the development of inbound tourism to Russia. The representatives' main task is to promote tourism opportunities to Russia. The RUTI Representatives abroad will provide cooperation with national tourism administrations and industry organisations, hold conferences, roadshows and seminars and other events in order to give fillip to tourism between Russia and their respective countries.

On his appointment, **Prashant Choudhary** said, "It is my honour to be appointed as Representative of RUTI in India. Russia and India have been tremendous friends over the last seven to



Prashant Choudhary
Managing Director
Salvia Promoters

eight decades, however, not much has been done in the field of tourism. The appointment and presence of RUTI in India will greatly help promote tourism between India and Russia. Around 100,000 Indians visited Russia in 2019. This amounted to a growth of more than 30 per cent compared to the previous year."

He added that with the introduction of e-visa for Indians from January 2021, getting a Russian visa will not only be easier for Indian travellers but will also

help increase the tourist flow from India. Russia is becoming one of the preferred outbound destinations among Indian travellers. Moscow and Saint Petersburg are particularly popular

Around 100,000 Indians visited Russia in 2019. This amounted to a growth of more than 30 per cent compared to the previous year

with them. In fact, Indians are also increasingly flocking to Sochi, known as the Switzerland of Russia and located on the Black Sea.

"We are also promoting the Murmansk region where travellers can see the Northern Lights and enjoy a number of activities. We are also promoting Lake Baikal, the purest lake in the world," informed Choudhary.

Road tripping in Nevada, USA

We previously shared with you the first in a three-part series covering the 'Cowboy Corridor' road trip in Nevada, USA. We spoke of the route from Reno to Winnemucca, a 267-km-long road trip that covered many a grand spectacle. The next leg in the series is the scenic route from Winnemucca to Elko, a 200-km-long trip that is sure to get your adrenaline rushing.



While many Nevada destinations are currently closed, in the meantime, we urge you to bucket-list your way around the state! Let's get started...

Battle Mountain: The first stop

From Winnemucca, continue east on Interstate 80 for about 45 minutes and you'll hit the



cryptically named Battle Mountain, a community of 3,635 people situated neither atop a mountain nor near the site of a battle. However, that's



cabra — and the fireworks mini "museum." Here, you can count on walking in as a customer and leaving as a friend. Learn about the area's history at the Battle Mountain Cookhouse Museum before hitting the trail again.

Elko: Legacy of the real-deal West

Founded in 1869 as a railroad town, Elko quickly assumed its

dles, bridles, silver, leatherwork, and other exquisitely handmade gear. Then head a couple doors down to the Cowboy Arts and Gear Museum, where you can learn the Garcia Bit & Spur story, as well as appreciate the kind of top-notch handiwork that's been sought worldwide by working cowboys, Hollywood stars, and collectors for over a century.



not to say the town is totally explosion-free. What you will find: Roller Coaster Fireworks Outlet, a legendary Interstate 80 Nevada attraction founded by the Cassoria brothers. Also, don't miss the amateur taxidermy — especially the chupa-

role as the centre of the state's cattle industry. Today, mining is Elko's major enterprise, but cattle ranches and other legacies of the region's cowboy and ranching past remain strong. Visit JM Capriola Co. to shop for (or simply admire) custom sad-

Cross the street and head into the Western Folklife Center, hosts of the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering, but also home to a gallery with international exhibits celebrating horseman and ranching cultures from around the world, a gift shop,

the Pioneer Saloon, and year-round Western arts and cultural events, all located in the restored Pioneer Hotel.

As you explore this still-plenty-Western town, arguably the centrepiece of your journey from Reno to West Wendover, be sure to stop by the Northeastern Nevada Museum to discover the area's local and natural history.

From the Northeastern Nevada Museum, travel about eight miles west of town on Interstate 80 for free admission to the California Trail Interpretive Center and get your fill of the stories of the quarter-million pioneers

who endured the 2,000-mile trek from Missouri to California between 1841 to 1869—and the route that still defines Nevada's history—in a series of hands-on exhibits.

'Basque' in some northern Nevada culture

Thanks to 19th-century Basque immigrants from Spain and France—many who took up sheepherding—Elko is still a major stomping ground for Basque culture and traditions. You can find plenty of them at the National Basque Festival in the form of music, dancing, woodchopping competitions, and savory Basque food waiting to be sampled and washed down with a picon punch or three.

The Ruby Mountains and beyond

Depending on the season, take in the beauty of the nearby Ruby Mountains by driving the Lamoille Canyon Scenic Byway into a glacier-carved canyon known for its beautiful fall foliage and spring waterfalls. The Ruby Mountains are commonly referred to as the Alps of Nevada, widely known for their recreational opportunities like hiking, fishing, and even heli-skiing. It's a 30-minute drive from Elko to the Ruby Mountains and the entrance of Lamoille Canyon, but many visitors opt to turn their exploration of this country into its own adventure. ↴



HOTEL ASSOCIATION OF INDIA

New Delhi

Former Tourism Secretary **Madan Prasad Bezbaruah** has been appointed as Secretary General of Hotel Association of India (HAI). He succeeds Founder Secretary General of HAI, RK Puri. Bezbaruah is a senior bureaucrat with close to four decades of experience working both at the Centre and State. He holds a Master's degree in Arts from Delhi University as well as a Master's in Public Administration from Harvard University. In the past, he has held important government positions, including Home Secretary Assam and Minister (Economic) in the High Commission of India, London.



Puneet Dhawan has been appointed as Senior Vice President Operations, India and South Asia, at Accor. Taking the reins from Jean-Michel Cassé, Chief Operating Officer (COO) – India & South Asia, Dhawan will handle the group's operations and strategies to ensure Accor's continued growth momentum in India and South Asia. He will be reporting to Garth Simmons, COO - Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and South Asia, Accor. Dhawan has now been with Accor for over two decades and has held key positions across Australia, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Singapore, India, the UAE and the Philippines. He was also instrumental in coaching and supervising 23 General Managers under his leadership.



ACCOR

Delhi-NCR

Satish Kumar has been appointed Senior Director Talent & Culture, India & South Asia, at Accor. He will succeed Ashwin Shirali as he departs for his retirement. With more than 20 years of experience in talent development, Kumar, in his new role, will handle India hotel operations management teams. He will be responsible for driving the team of 9,500 employees in 50 hotels. Kumar has been with Accor for a decade now and had joined the Group in 2010 as Learning and Development Manager at ibis and Bengaluru Outer Ring Road. His last role was as Director of Learning & Talent Development, India & South Asia.



THE LEELA PALACES, HOTELS AND RESORTS

Mumbai

The Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts has appointed **Ravi Shankar** as Senior Vice President - Finance. In his new role, Shankar will oversee the finance operational strategies and drive finance operations and initiatives for the brand. In a career spanning over 20 years, he has added many feathers to his cap, the latest being his stint as Chief Financial Officer at MH Lifestyle Hotels LLC Dubai. A well-known hospitality professional and a financial wizard, Shankar comes with extensive experience both within India and internationally. His career includes several noteworthy assignments with top corporate houses and hotels.



The Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts has appointed **Anjali Mehra** as Vice President Marketing. A passionate storyteller and a brand evangelist, she brings with her over two decades of rich and varied experience in hospitality brand marketing and communications. In the new role, Mehra will provide strategic counsel to the company's senior executive leadership team and be responsible for developing and implementing a comprehensive and integrated marketing and communication roadmap. Prior to joining The Leela, she was Senior Director Communications - Middle East and Africa at Marriott International.



COURTYARD BY MARRIOTT

Bengaluru

Neha Chhabra has been appointed as the General Manager of Courtyard by Marriott Bengaluru Hebbal. With over 18 years in the hospitality industry, she brings to the table extensive experience having worked with both The Oberoi Group and Marriott International at their iconic properties across New Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai. Well-versed in food and beverage, she has been a pivotal team player with ideating and launching new F&B concepts and driving revenue. Her previous position was at the JW Marriott Mumbai Sahar, a 588-room property, where she led the team as Director of Operations.



How COVID-19 can change travel

There is no denying that COVID-19 has re-shaped the world of travel and tourism. In fact, masks, physical distance and price hikes may not be the only things that will leave a lingering impact on the way we travel.

TRAVTALK lists seven things that could be here to stay.



TT Bureau

Attractions will invest in virtual experiences

These extraordinary times are driving digitalisation in travel. In the face of the current crisis, many attractions around the world are investing in and promoting virtual experiences. Many are also looking at requiring visitors to book time slots in advance to avoid crowding.

Local destinations become more attractive

Travellers around the world are significantly changing their



habits. Faced with closed borders and uncertainty over foreign travel requirements, they are discovering the benefits of close-to-home, domestic destinations. This will also lead to

development of local tourist amenities.

Travellers will need to plan much in advance

With different restrictions and

SOPs mandated by countries, journey time will increase with increased health check-ups at borders. Visiting popular attractions will also require a lot more pre-planning by travellers to figure out the new procedures at various sites.

Buffets on ships might be a passé

Buffets will be out and temperature checks in when ships return to sea. Temperature screenings, while incapable of catching asymptomatic travellers, will probably become the norm. The old-fashioned, dish-it-yourself buffet is expected to become a relic.



Interest in private travel is here to stay

The pandemic has created a greater demand for experiences away from crowds and being able to bypass the traditional airport experience is a big piece of that. The world of private travel offers social distancing in the sky — at a premium.

liness. This means that the things that might have mattered before — restaurants, pools, gyms, bars, make-your-own-waffle stations — will take a back seat.

Health certificates for cross-border travel

We might go back to carrying a digital version of the yellow book that travellers once carried which was an immunisation record that allowed them to enter certain countries. This digital record of inoculation will certify that the passenger is fit to fly and not any virus-positive. 🇮🇳

Cleanliness will become top priority

Hotels, airlines and airports are elevating a couple of key amenities these days: clean-



BEACH

IT'S MORE FUN THE THE PHILIPPINES



MOT ready for foreign tourists?

Speaking at PATA India Chapter's 9th Update & Outlook Meeting titled 'Resurrecting Inbound Tourism post COVID-19', **Meenakshi Sharma**, Director General – Tourism, addressed some key initiatives and strategies the government is taking to get ready to welcome tourists.



Nisha Verma

Unstinting that a number of steps are being taken by Ministry of Tourism to bring back inbound tourists, Meenakshi Sharma believes that they need to be ready with a strategy and action plan while awaiting flights to resume. The involvement of both industry and government must be there, she adds.

Keeping the interest alive

Sharma says that as a first step, one has to keep the interest alive in foreign travellers. "We know that India is a long-haul destination, hence, tourists coming to India would like to stay longer and the concept of staycation will grow. They would prefer to relish the experience of tourism and India has a huge opportunity there, offering a plethora of products. The challenge is to convey this message to potential tourists," she explained.

While cases of the virus are on the rise, India is not being seen as a country that cannot control the pandemic, thus creating a positive outlook to the world, Sharma believes. "India is still being seen for successful management of the disease. Now, only a vaccine will make travel easier in the long term and till that time, we are limited to creating confidence. There are various ways to look at it — one can look at the numbers we are dealing with and how hard we are trying to get a vaccine. The 'Stranded in India' project was a small experiment and was the need of the hour, but it created a lot of confidence that we are one of the best in providing hospitality and assurance," she claimed.

Assuring safety and hygiene

It is imperative, said Sharma, to make sure that the travellers

know they are safe and protected. "We have operational recommendations from MOT for all industry stakeholders; these are simple recommendations as per international standards. The challenge is to ensure that as an industry, these are followed. There are two ways to go about it— firstly, it's in every service provider's self-interest that these instructions are followed and declared. Secondly, we have joined hands with Quality Council of India that is coming out with a certification based on a simple assessment and a small questionnaire to support and handhold all service providers, from the smallest to the biggest. We can say that if you have this certification, there is a

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high level of assurance and it can create confidence. We are hoping that all the state governments and industry will support this initiative because that will create more confidence in travellers and there will be a single voice saying that India is ready to receive customers," she shared.

According to Sharma, MOT is also aware of challenge right now in different states following different quarantine rules but, she insists, once the numbers start coming down, there will be a uniform policy for the whole country, applicable to foreign and domes-

India must be fully ready

Jatinder Taneja, Vice Chairman, PATA India Chapter, in his address, suggested, "During the last six months, we have witnessed highs and lows because of the COVID-19 outbreak and its crippling impact has resulted in a recessionary trend for the industry. We cannot predict when exactly inbound business in India will commence, but we believe it will resume in a phased manner with a lot of precautions and preventive measures. We must convey the right and positive message to all our foreign tour operators in the coming months. As and when India opens for international tourism, we must not have any quarantine conditions in any Indian state, which can be a huge deterrent to tourist arrivals. All states must get united to promote inbound tourism and whatever safety precautions we need to implement, must be done at the time of granting visa."

tic tourists. Another assurance that is needed, according to her, is in terms of visa rigidity and she shares that MOT is working with Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Civil Aviation, Ministry of External Affairs, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, and other ministries to bring out a solution.

"Another angle which we are thinking about and which is still in a nascent stage is to bring the insurance part into it. We are internally discussing it, because it will be a new product, and is currently being discussed internationally as well. We will be happy to receive industry suggestions on that because it is about ensuring safety. I think with Quality Control of India (QCI) certification, it will give a lot of support to the travellers."

Support for industry

"We would like to know what the industry wants us to do. We are open for joint promotions. We are

coming up with a liberal market assistance (MDA) scheme for the international market, and it would be reaching the industry soon. We would be ready to do Fam tours, virtual or otherwise, in a while and we can bring some specific people here from the FTOs," said Sharma.



Meenakshi Sharma
Director General (DG),
Ministry of Tourism (MOT)



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