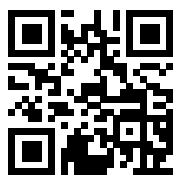


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# Blueprint to sell Brand India

The Indian Association of Tour Operators (IATO) is geared up for its annual convention, which is packed with ideas and activities to not only motivate the members, but also guide them for future recovery.



Nisha Verma

The state governments and stalwarts of the travel industry will participate in the 36<sup>th</sup> IATO Annual Convention from December 16 to 19, 2021 at The Leela Gandhinagar.

### Dignitaries galore

**Rajiv Mehra**, President, IATO has said that **Bhupendrabhai Patel**, Chief Minister of Gujarat, has agreed to be the chief guest of the convention. He also said **Shripad Naik**, Minister of State for Tourism, will chair the valedictory session of the con-



Rajiv Mehra  
President, IATO

vention, which will be held on December 18.

Mehra shared, "We will have participation from the Min-

istry of Tourism, GOI as well as the Gujarat government. **Arvind Singh**, Secretary of Tourism; **Rupinder Brar**, Additional Director General, Tourism; **Dr. V. Venu**, Chief Secretary, Tourism, Kerala; **Hareet Shukla**, Secretary of Tourism, Gujarat; **Jenu Dewan**, MD, TCGL; **Rajiv Jalota**, Chairman, Mumbai Port Trust; and **Dr. Abhay Sinha**, Director General, SEPC will participate in the business sessions.

In addition, senior industry representatives like **Nakul Anand**, Executive Director, ITC Hotels, **Puneet Chhatwal**, MD

and CEO of Taj Hotels, and **Anuraag Bhatnagar**, COO, The Leela Palaces Hotels & Resorts will also address the delegates. This apart, Mehra said that they are expecting the participation of as many as 15 state governments.

### Knowledge and recovery

**EM Najeeb**, Senior VP, IATO and Chairman of the Convention, has said that they are expecting more than 1,000 people at the convention, which is taking place after two years. Since everyone in the industry has borne the

Contd on page 9 ▶

# Sigh of relief in 2021

Travel fraternity is positive for the next year, 2022, especially when you compare the given upcoming period, with the year before.

### NTO

"In the post-pandemic era, we feel the Indian traveller will seek mono-destination journeys or focus on one or two countries, as against the earlier trends of planning a multi-country trip. The tourism sector has changed in last couple of years.

Although flight bookings to Spain seem to have decreased in 2021 compared to last year, as per our sources the outlook for the upcoming months is extremely positive, especially when you compare the given upcoming period with a year before.

A few factors that earlier played a role in selection of a tourism destination, are no longer relevant. Various factors such as entry protocols, ease of internal movement, health system of the destination, implementation of modern solutions to facilitate travel play a role when a traveller prefers one destination over another."



Elisa Robles Fraga  
Director, Tourism Office of Spain,  
Mumbai, India

Contd on page 12 ▶

# GRNconnect expands horizons

GRNconnect, apart from excelling in providing tech and hotel booking services to travel trade has now opened its DMC business in USA and will soon be expanding it in Egypt and India.



Nisha Verma

**Deepak Narula**, Managing Director, GRNconnect, has revealed that with innovation and adaptability being the key qualities of GRNconnect, in 2021, they will go live with Amadeus, i.e., Amadeus Values Hotels and their Switch module. "Very soon we will be available on their web service too. This apart, we are also connected with some major tech players, which has helped us with our inventory, price competitiveness, and ease of integrating APIs into our product. We launched a US DMC for which we were able to secure a good response," he



Deepak Narula  
Managing Director, GRNconnect

shares." In 2021, Narula said that their flagship product for hotel bookings, both the Login module and the API Out module, did well. "Also, our US DMC got a good response from our global agent

base, especially from India and the Middle East," he claims.

He added that during COVID-19, they focused a lot on technology and product upgradation by adding some key suppliers to their portfolio. "We have ambitious plans on the distribution front. We have made some major tie-ups and we will go live on these platforms as early as January 2022. We are also planning to launch a DMC for Egypt and a DMC for India," he revealed.

Sharing more details on his international business, Narula says,

Contd on page 25 ▶

# Tapping untapped markets

Kohima's three-day ITM highlighted the region's tourism potential in the domestic and international markets. Majority of this region is unknown to tourists with huge scope in border and wildlife tourism.



Nisha Verma

**Ajay Bhatt**, MoS, Tourism & Defence, inaugurated the three-day long ninth edition of the International Tourism Mart

(ITM), for the North East Region, at Kohima, Nagaland alongside **Neiphiu Rio**, Chief Minister of Nagaland, and **H. Khehovi Yeputhomi**, MLA & Advisor Tourism, Government of Nagaland. Also present on

the occasion were **Arvind Singh**, Secretary, Tourism; **Rupinder Brar**, ADG, Tourism; and other dignitaries from the central government and North Eastern states. The objective

Contd on page 27 ▶



Inauguration of the ninth edition of International Travel Mart, in Kohima, Nagaland.





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# Govt extends financial support

The Gol introduced the LGSCATSS scheme, to provide financial aid to travel experts to help them recoup after COVID-19. **G Kishan Reddy**, Minister for Tourism, Culture, and DoNER, gave sanction letters to stakeholders granted loans under the scheme.

Janice Alyosius

To fulfil the commitment of the Government of India towards the tourism sector that is going through a lot of stress, **Prime Minister Narendra Modi** extended support to those effected under the "Loan Guarantee Scheme for Covid Affected Tourism Service Sector" (LGSCATSS). He granted financial aid to the travel and trade partners. At an event in New Delhi, Union Minister for Tourism, Culture & DoNER, **G. Kishan Reddy**, handed over the cheques/sanction letters to the first lot of stakeholders who have been granted the loan under the LGS-CATSS. DG Tourism **G Kamala Vardhana Rao**, ADG Tourism, **Rupinder Brar**, and senior officers from the Ministry of Tourism and the participating banks were also present.

Financial support under the scheme is disbursed to approved tour operators, travel agents, tourist transport operators, and regional level and local guides by the state governments and union territories in the form of



**G Kishan Reddy**  
Union Minister for Tourism  
Culture, and DoNER

credit under the Credit Guarantee Scheme at concessional rates. The aim of this financial support to the tourism stakeholders was to mitigate their hardships due to COVID-19 and help them revive their business and livelihood.

Reddy said that the ministry is collaborating with other ministries to introduce tourist themes such as wildlife tourism, cruise tourism, aqua tourism, and eco and rural tourism. "In a short span, with coordination of various departments and ministries, we have worked towards the development of the sector." He also said that there are many regions in India that are unexplored and have potential for tourism.

The minister encouraged families to visit at least two tourist destinations each year, as this will help future generations learn about India's rich culture and heritage. The government is also working towards developing various circuits to make them accessible to the tourists. The Ministry of Railways is running special trains to connect Buddhist sites and the Ramayan circuit. The government intends to make India the focal point of Buddhist tourists domestically and internationally.

He mentioned that the government aims to spend ₹5,500 crore to develop tourism infrastructure at destinations chosen by states through the SWADESH Darshan scheme. "We plan to develop these destinations to international standards," Reddy said.

Under the Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav, 75 destinations have been chosen by the government, and will be developed in coordination with the other ministries to facilitate tourists. The said destinations will be made accessible to international tourists with infrastructure, which includes

international airports such as the Kushinagar Airport.

The minister also spoke about various initiatives and interventions taken during COVID-19 to develop tourism industry. Around five lakh visas will be issued to foreign tourists without any charges, and 170 nations

Govt aims to spend ₹5,500 crore to develop tourism infra at destinations chosen by states through the SWADESH Darshan scheme

are now a part of the e-Visa approval facility. The Government of India has also appointed exclusive officers to promote the country's tourism in 20 missions abroad in countries such as Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Singapore, Korea, and Japan.



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## TRAVTALK

## VIEWPOINT

## Goa Tourism Board

An interesting latest development has been the formation of Goa Tourism Board (GTB) to oversee the work done by the state and the private sector. All vital decisions pertaining to Goa as a tourist spot will be taken by the 19-member board, paving way for implementation of the tourism masterplan.

The GTB will be a statutory autonomous body and shall be responsible for formulating policies related to planning, development and marketing tourism in Goa. The board will appoint a CEO for a period of five years. The CEO will be responsible for the daily running of the board. Along with government representatives, Goa tourism board will include eight private sector members nominated from the industry and will meet every quarter to review the situation.

Tourism has always been an important sector for Goa and this change shows the evolved thinking of the state authorities to promote the destination. The tourism board is slated to have its first meeting in December this year but it's a wait and watch to see the success of the tourism authority.

## Rebellious Travel

Just a month ago, there was hope among tourism professionals, that the road to recovery seems more optimistic than ever before. And then came the new COVID-19 variant, Omicron.

Overnight, bookings were cancelled. India banned international flights from 'at risk' countries. The chaotic photographs from the airports deterred the travellers and made them rethink. But what has this taught us? Has the time to plan a holiday shortened? Have our itineraries evolved to facilitate this change? With foreign tourists finally allowed to visit India, can they plan months ahead or do they wait and watch? India will be incredible but needs a push from the private sector to evolve the destination presentation.

While preparing this issue of TravTalk, there was a lot of thought put into Brand India and the preparedness for inbound tourism. While the IATO has hit the nail on the head with the theme of their next convention, one waits to find if they drive home the message.

## Travel industry reviving steadily

Most of the respondents contacted by the mobile platform preferred short stays instead of long, luxurious vacations much to the happiness of the travel companies that have struggled under the influence of the pandemic, as per Glance Travel Report 2021.



TT Bureau

The travel industry is regaining some of its momentum, which came to a grinding halt during the COVID-19-induced lockdowns, is reviving steadily.

The Glance Travel Report 2021 which was conducted with an

62 per cent of the mobile users wish to spend more than ₹ one lakh on a trip.

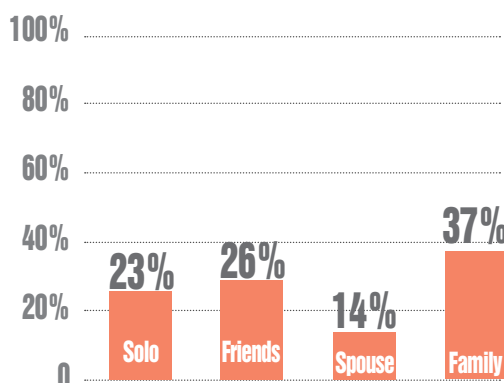
Around 69 per cent of respondents are looking to stay in four-star and five-star hotels, while 34 per cent of them are looking to book a combination deal — flight and hotel stay. Of these respondents, 48 per cent wish



whether or not to go on a vacation. Thirty-two per cent of the respondents are preferring to

ering. As much as 46 per cent of the respondents, according to Glance, are most likely to

## When are you planning a trip?



## December will see a travel boom

**46%** of the respondents are planning a trip in December

**49%** of the respondents who are not travelling this year have pushed their travel plans to H-2022

objective to see the face of the travel industry and consumer sentiment. As many as 1,400 respondents (mobile users) were contacted between the period — October 15 and October 20 2021.

According to the report, Indian travellers are preferring domestic vacations instead of international ones. Forty-six per cent of the respondents are planning a trip this month, while 49 per cent who are not travelling this year have postponed their travel plans. They may go on a vacation in the next year, they stated.

The respondents contacted by the Glance preferred short stays instead of long, luxurious vacations. This has come as a shot in the arm for the travel companies who have struggled under the wrath of the pandemic.

According to the statistics given by the report, 54 per cent of the respondents are planning a domestic tour in seven days, while

to travel by flights, 27 per cent by train and 22 per cent by bus.

While this was so, as much as 19 per cent of the respondents are looking to travel by flights only, while 34 per cent wish to fly to and from their vacation. According to the Glance

While 27% of the respondents are may shop for good worth ₹10,000 to ₹25,000, 30% of them will shop above ₹30,000

research, 27 per cent of the respondents are still undecided.

The report which has been diligently conducted by Glance, stated that 47 per cent of the respondents are planning vacations within the country, while 29 per cent prefer to go abroad. Twenty-four per cent of the respondents have still not decided

stay home over conventional hotels. As much as 70 per cent of the respondents contacted by Glance are planning to go on a shopping spree during their vacations, while 29 per cent want

shop both online and offline, 28 per cent of the respondents will stick to online channels, while 26 per cent will shop offline. As per experts in the business, it is as if the purchasing power of

## Percentage of travellers

**47%** India

**29%** Abroad

**24%** Not decided

to shop for clothes, 24 per cent for bags, 23 per cent for shoes, and 25 per cent for accessories. About 30 per cent have nothing on the agenda, the report stated.

The Glance report stated that the online shopping, which was most favoured during the pandemic, is slowly on the decline, with the industry steadily recov-

the Indians has increased after the twin lockdowns!

Shopping budget of each family is unlikely to go beyond ₹10,000. While 27 per cent of the respondents are likely to shop for good worth ₹10,000 to ₹25,000, 30 per cent of the respondents will shop above ₹30,000.



# A roadmap for sustainable tourism

**Arvind Singh**, Secretary, MoT, addressed tourism sector's move towards sustainable practices. The perception is that the destinations must adopt a holistic approach to demonstrate sustainable development management, maximise social and economic benefits, minimize environmental impact and safeguard cultural heritage.



Janice Alyosius



**Arvind Singh**, Secretary, MoT, delivering the keynote address on the tourism sector's move towards sustainable practices, said, "Tourism can be a driver of inclusive community development, contributing to resilience, inclusivity, and empowerment while safeguarding natural and cultural resources."



**Arvind Singh**  
Secretary, Ministry of Tourism

The Global Sustainable Tourism Council, the world's authority on establishing and administering sustainable travel and tourism standards, held a public webinar on 'Unpacking Sustainable

tourism, responsible tourism are aimed at strengthening sustainable tourism at the macro level, while providing tourism opportunities at the micro level.

The GSTC launched in 2010, is based on the global sustainable

tourism counsels' criteria. The perception is that destinations must adopt a holistic approach — demonstrating sustainable development management, maximising social and economic benefits, minimizing environmental impact of the destination, and safeguard-

ing the cultural heritage of the local destinations.

The way the sector operates, will change economically in the next few years, and the option will be to select cautious vacation options that meet acceptable sustainabil-

ity needs. "Various countries are imposing curbs on unsustainable travel, and we hope the global tourist industry will rise up to the challenge and adapt more sustainable methods, backed by policy," he adds. As tourism is a state subject, they should formulate policies to

promote tourism and implement conscious travel options, contributing to the emergence of acceptable sustainability standards. Many nations are adopting travel curbs for sustainable travel and working to adapt to new sustainable practices," Singh says.



The GSTC standards serve as a global benchmark for travel and tourism sustainability

tourism in India through the lens of the GSTC Criteria' to honor the launch of the GSTC India Working Group. Addressing the webinar, Singh said, "The GSTC standards are utilised in India and serve as a global benchmark for travel and tourism sustainability."

The principles of sustainable tourism apply to all forms of tourism, instead to only specific forms of tourism, he said. However, eco-tourism and adventure tourism, which have the potential for promoting sustainable tourism, are the focal point of the national strategy. "We have drafted a roadmap for sustainable tourism, emphasising on adventure, sustainable, and eco-tourism. This will aid in realizing the potential of adventure and eco-tourism," Singh said. Rural tourism, eco-tourism, adventure tourism, conservation tourism, community-based

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Average fares of AI, United, Lufthansa on air bubble flights comparable to pre-pandemic level

MoCA mandates 'Air Suvidha' portal for ease of travel for intl passengers

MOT plans to participate in Fitur and ITB, IATO members have shown interest: Rajiv Mehra

Coronavirus pandemic could cost global tourism \$2 trillion this year: UNWTO

WTTC calls for borders to remain open and safe travel to continue

Quarantines and travel bans aren't a long-term solution for COVID variant control: IATA

Kochi to host 11th edition of Kerala Travel Mart, in March 2022

# Regional outlook towards recovery

IATO's regional chapter heads share why it's important to bring forth issues to the attention of state governments and central government, so that they can look at gradual recovery while making sure that everybody moves forward together towards a new era of travel.

"IATO convention is a great platform to meet industry colleagues and exchange views. It helps to learn from experiences of others and the new trends and changes happening in the industry to move forward. The issues are at all levels from local city centric to state government level. The need for better infrastructure and balanced growth, priority to tourism and formation of state level advisory committees who meet every two month and monitor progress. We are in regular touch with various dept like ASI/DOT/Airport Authority/State Tourism and draw their attention to the problems being faced by tour operators and tourists."



Sunil C. Gupta  
Chairman, IATO Northern Region

"IATO convention is happening after two years. This will help the industry to understand the new trends post COVID-19. As for Marvel Tours, it's a great opportunity to meet with all our partners as we have not met for the past two years. The sessions at the convention would help members understand what to expect and how to handle situations. Each of the members of IATO has been going through a tough phase in terms of finances and manpower management. With experts talking on best steps at the convention, one can really help in coming out of the situation in the best possible manner and be ready for the season."



Sejo Jose  
Chairman - IATO Southern Region



J.K. Mohanty  
Chairman, IATO Eastern Region

"We are closely interacting with the government for the growth of tourism in the Eastern Region. Virtual meetings were conducted at regular intervals with the members of IATO Eastern Region and the suggestions were submitted to the government for promotion of tourism and growth of state's economy. Odisha has taken up far-reaching initiatives to create 'Inclusive Tourism'. Odisha has taken up initiatives in creating authentic and traditional experiences for tourists and this is supported by their push to create homestays. Odisha is also supporting its traditional industry like handicrafts and handlooms through tourism."



N.S. Rathor  
Chairman, IATO Western Region

"I have always requested all my allied members to get themselves MOT approved and become IATO's active members. We recently did a presentation with India Tourism advantages for members. They have simplified the process and given more leverage to the travel agents and tour operators. I also encourage my members to work with the association's own member network for rates so that the business remains within the family. Since international travellers start planning six months in advance, it is important to plan so that inbound tourism can open smoothly and safely. We also brought up the issue of promoting India through social media."

# Seeking resolutions for issues on hand

IATO state chapter heads on their part have been dealing with many issues in their respective states and have successfully been able to communicate to the state governments their plight and have even been successful in getting some benefits for the industry, which is heading towards recovery.

"IATO members don't have any issue in the state, except for the challenge posed by the pandemic to the tourism industry. Government hasn't addressed the tourism stakeholders so far in terms of pandemic, in spite of having NIL business. There are a lot of issues related to pandemic. IATO has approached the govt. on various aspects and taken adequate measures to bring relief to its members. I am confident that as always, IATO will succeed in bringing out an amicable solution for its members soon."



Manmeet Singh  
Chairman - IATO Punjab Chapter

"All India tourism and hospitality industry requirements are majority the financial relief expectations from government and secondly conducive earning environment in totality for tourism industry. It is the need of the hour that tour operators start getting business. Same is the requirement of hotels though many have started getting good occupancy. Earlier it was about pitching our concerns with government and giving courtesy calls to clients of their general well-being, but now we have started sales calls and visits which has led businesses towards a recovery path."



Pandian K  
Chairman - IATO Tamil Nadu, Andaman & Nicobar and Puducherry Chapter

"As the tour operators in the last couple of years found it difficult to sell packages due to 5 per cent GST levied on the total package cost that made it difficult for the tour operators to compete, as clients also approach hotels directly and the tour operators are left out, we have been appealing to the Finance Ministry to remove this 5 per cent. We hope that Govt will resolve this issue soon. The Tour Operators at their local and national association level have been insisting for the State Govt to recommend Finance Ministry to remove this 5 per cent GST."



Nasir Shah  
Chairman - IATO Jammu & Kashmir Chapter



S. Mahalingaiah  
Chairman - IATO Karnataka Chapter

"Retaining staff and managing offices with whatever domestic business we are doing is another issue. Following COVID protocols for few states is a cumbersome process. This has led to illegal practice at state borders. We are working with major chain of hotels to offer better deals than OTAs and are trying for uniform transport rates. We worked with the state and got ₹3,000 each to all tourist taxi drivers and ₹5,000 to government approved tourist guides. We were successful in getting our sector listed in priority list for vaccination offfront line workers."

"When the pandemic hit us, IATO tried its best to support its members. The association is very focussed on all policies related to infrastructure development for the promotion of tourism. We also achieved remarkable milestones for members, one is the recognition of the tourism industry and its service providers the West Bengal state government. This is an online procedure and extends many benefits including marketing support to those recognised. We were also instrumental in implementing the tourist guide policy for the state."



Debjit Dutta  
Chairman IATO West Bengal Chapter



Mohammad H Jadwet  
Co-Chairman  
IATO Andaman & Nicobar UT

"One issue facing the members of IATO and the tourism trade in the islands include insufficient connectivity and exorbitant airfares. This has made many tourism businesses, shut down. Representations have been made to the govt. to extend relief to the trade to help them get back on its feet. To tap revenge tourism, efforts are made to increase marketing and promote the islands as a safe destination with 100 per cent vaccination. We are also trying to establish international connectivity with the SEA countries."



# An endeavour to build Brand India

IATO office bearers are upbeat about the convention and are hopeful that the convention, which is being conducted with all safety precautions in place, might be the platform where not only members but industry at large would look at ways to move forward and build Brand India globally, whether the pandemic is here to stay or not.



**Ravi Gosain**  
Vice President, IATO

## Theme

This year's IATO convention's theme came out of all hardships, which tourism industry is facing since 20 months. We need to have a deep thought process and efficient planning to relaunch 'Brand India' for a strong presence globally post-COVID. Hence, we will discuss, how Brand India will make a comeback and the roadmap to recovery. It is quite challenging to organise physical convention under the present situation, but as we all know that COVID-19 will be

around and we need to learn to live with it. We have made it mandatory for all delegates to upload their fully vaccinated certificates at the time of registration and will keep a close check on masking and sanitisation during the event. Hotel staff and security personals have been briefed to follow strict protocols on COVID safety guidelines.

## Preparedness

We need to have a physical convention to boost industry and tourists confidence. However we must be vigil and follow safety measures. We have meticulously designed our sessions to have healthy discussions with various stakeholders and the government.

## Build brand India

MOT, Gol play an important role in rebranding India as a safe destination and are happy with the proceedings so far. There were new digital promotions planned for international markets but due to the new variant, they are put on hold. However, we look forward to come back strongly.



**Sunil Mishra**  
Hony. Treasurer, IATO

## Theme

The Theme of the convention being 'Brand India - The Road to Recovery for Revival of Business' is apt and will add to the efforts of taking Incredible India to the promotional endeavours of the stakeholders that is ably supported by the MoT, Gol. India is gearing up; it is ready to welcome tourists with all SOPs in place. The government is supporting the industry with its policies and the states are looking at seamless travel, while the stakeholders are keen on network-

ing. The recent COVID variant challenge has churned our thoughts. Consequently, it is imperative that we put our minds together and chalk out a plausible road map that shall steer India to the path of recovery. The case is thus ripe and a perfect fit for the theme of the convention.

## Preparedness

Also, the industry must apprise the MoT of the views of its members regularly, so that apt policy are initiated. MoT often calls the industry for discussions on key subjects. Here, the industry must participate, offer inputs, so that suitable strategies can evolve and be adopted.

## Build brand India

We are well prepared for the physical convention with full support from the Government of Gujarat, Ministry of Tourism, State Governments and above all our valued members. Time is opportune to show the world that our industry is well equipped with the new normal and have embraced all SOPs to welcome tourists.



**Sanjay Razdan**  
Hony. Joint Secretary - IATO

## Theme

The theme of the 36<sup>th</sup> IATO Convention is apt in the present circumstances. We are all waiting to revive tourism and what we are looking at is recovery now. It's high time we should meet physically with all COVID protocols and SOPs well laid out. We, at IATO are well-prepared and looking forward to meeting friends in the trade after almost 20 months. Secondly, the past 20 months have been quite difficult for all of us and we would love to hear from experts in the industry, how to proceed and what would be the new norm of doing business.

## Preparedness

All stakeholders of the tourism industry, including MOT, are the foremost brand ambassadors of India internationally. There has been a lot of information gap because of the messaging that goes out from the media. We need to raise awareness about India's preparedness to tackle COVID, for example, the number of vaccines that have been administered and are being administered daily.

## Build brand India

It is going to be a very competitive environment, and hence we need to ensure that Brand India is visible throughout the world. The government needs to increase its spending on advertisement and focus on not only our biggest markets but also new emerging markets that can be targeted. We are also hoping for increase in the MDA to support awareness at our own levels. This will hopefully ensure the recovery of our Industry.

# Hope for Incredible India 2.0

► Contd from page 3

impact of COVID, the convention will give a lot of hope to the industry, as they will get to meet their peers and it will be a great networking opportunity for the industry. There would also be knowledge-sharing sessions with excellent speakers. Also, we need to give thrust to domestic tourism as well, because that is going to happen without any hassle in India. Also, post-COVID, everyone will be looking at developing future tourism, how the government is going to behave, how they will support the industry and how the industry will try to move forward," he says.

## Rich sessions

All the sessions are very well designed and good moderators are appointed, says Najeeb. It's going to be a motivation for the members on how to take it forward because everybody is in a different kind of situation now. We have incorporated everything required for a good convention and people are looking forward to good interactions and deliberations," he adds.

## Brand India

**Rajnish Kaistha**, Hony. Secretary, IATO and Co-Chairman of the Convention, has said that to have this convention successfully, they have taken all the necessary precautions and protocols.



**EM Najeeb**  
Senior Vice President, IATO and Chairman of the Convention

next few days in Gandhinagar," he informs.

Speaking about Brand India, he says, "While Incredible India still holds its brand well at the international level, the



**Rajnish Kaistha**  
Hony. Secretary, IATO and Co-Chairman of the Convention

government may be looking at Incredible India 2.0 soon, which would be in line with the changes in the industry in the last few years."

## IATO Run

A major initiative at IATO convention every year is the IATO Run for sustainable tourism. Kaistha says that it is scheduled for this year as well. It will start outside the Leela Hotel and will be a good four km stretch," he informs.



## Blackpink with Korea

Korea Tourism Organisation (KTO) recently organised a movie screening in New Delhi for the most awaited movie, BLACKPINK: THE MOVIE. The film commemorates the fifth anniversary of the debut of the world's beloved group, BLACKPINK comprising four members, — Jisoo, Jennie, Rosé and Lisa. This K-pop band brought back the love for Korean music to Indian music lovers. The movie felt like attending one of the concerts of the band with interviews interspersed in between. The movie features various scenes, including "The Room of Memory" in which there is a showcase of five years of BLACKPINK's memory brought together after their debut, "Beauty". The Blackpink band looked incredible and the set-up was quite elegant. The movie was released in India on November 12.

# Right time to focus on recovery

IATO Executive Committee is all prepped for the convention and believe that the theme of the convention 'Brand India - Road to Recovery' is apt at this time, especially when the borders are opening and inbound operators are preparing to be back in business.

“The road to recovery is a global challenge, be it travel, tour, airlines or the hospitality industry. Brand India must be revived and a message shall be sent that India is ready for tourism. This is an apt time to have this convention, as we must learn to live with COVID. The Annual IATO Convention is a widely recognised and a much-awaited event. Domestic tourism is rocking and we are requesting the government to begin regular international flight operations to give fillip to inbound tourism. The time is not only right but overdue.”



Tony Marwah  
EC Member, IATO



Deepak Bhatnagar  
EC Member, IATO

“Post-pandemic, this theme could be the best. During the pandemic, we showed resilience both in dealing with COVID-19 and to ensure that industry remains together. As things seem to be coming in order, we need to go through various business sessions and discussions on strategies that may help the business to recover. Members are looking forward to attend the convention as they did not meet each other in last 20 months. As lots of changes took place within the industry, the convention will be a good platform to update members.”

“IATO members contribute to around 80 to 90 per cent of the total FOREX generated from tourism. As the govt. has not done anything for the stakeholders despite our repeated requests, we had to take the initiative of rebranding India as a tourist destination. I am sure the government will also follow the path, despite knowing the fact that there will be hardly any business in future. I believe that positivity is missing among members after series of new variants. Through this convention, they will be able to sneak into the way to survive and revive.”



Dr Manoj Matta  
EC Member, IATO



Zia Siddiqui  
EC Member, IATO

“COVID has greatly affected the travel industry. Hence, we shall focus to set all sessions to ensuring safe recovery of tourism. This way, India, as a tourism brand, is established greatly in the new world with new norms. The way domestic tourism is booming, it indicates that INDIA is a safe destination recovering fast. Over 100 million people have been vaccinated and international flights are set to start soon. Hence, associations are organising their conventions, that will give a message to the world that India is safe.”

“IATO organised several programmes trying to motivate its members during the lockdown. We ensured to hold the convention, once the situation improved, with the theme to highlight India on its tourism recovery. The message to the world being that, most of our members and citizens are vaccinated and India is safe to travel and we are ready to welcome our guests. The highlight of the convention is 'Destination Gujarat', an interesting place for the travellers to explore.”



P. Vijayasathya  
EC Member, IATO

Inputs by TT Bureau

## Adventure sports is our USP

For Natventure, the pandemic turned out to be a time to reinvent themselves, while making sure that sustainable travel is at the core of their adventure offerings in the Northeast region.



Nisha Verma

Jitu Pegu, co-Founder, Natventure, claims that they are a dedicated and professional group of adventure seekers, and is a JTI Group of companies based in Guwahati, Assam. We are the first and only adventure tour operator from NE India recognised by the MoT, and the only active member of the ATOAI in the region,” he says.

Natventure offers cycling in the challenging terrain of the snow-capped eastern Himalayas, green valleys, and the majestic rivers of northeastern India. "Apart from that, one can explore the region through trekking, river cruising, hiking, village walks, camping, customised to specific preferences. Setting foot in the less explored, idyllic terrain inhabited by tribes such as the Idu Mishmi, Adi, Galo, and Mishing tribes are the star moments in our itineraries," he adds.



Jitu Pegu  
co-Founder, Natventure

When it comes to USP, Pegu says that being eco-sensitive, having an experienced guide, serving local, healthy, and hygienic meals on our trips; not compromising on safety, using international standard equipment, and offering unique experiences, sets them apart.

During the pandemic, they did not lay off their staff. "We have undergone various exercises to keep them motivated. Today, people are eager to travel to less-explored destinations. This has motivated us to

re-design our product, in which we have decreased the group size, promoted homestays and camps during our tours, and have concentrated on customised tours, along with less explored destinations. The boat and bike tours in Assam are a

Our team explored new destinations so that new experiences could be offered to travellers

result of this effort. Our team explored new destinations so that new experiences could be offered to travellers. Besides, they have been trained in post-COVID travel practises and protocols so that a safe travel experience is ensured," he informs.

## Fortune Hotels open two more

Fortune Hotels announced the signing of two individual operating agreements for hotels in Katra and Amritsar, to strengthen the focus on pilgrimage destinations.



Janice Alysius

Fortune Hotels, a wholly-owned subsidiary of ITC Ltd announced the signing of two individual operating agreements for hotels in Katra (Jammu & Kashmir) and Amritsar (Punjab), thereby strengthening its growth strategy in key pilgrim locations and adding over 100 new rooms to its existing inventory.

Speaking about the group's current business development strategy and new alliances, Samir MC, Managing Director, Fortune Park Hotels Limited, said: "We are pleased to announce our entry into two of the most revered pilgrimage centres of India- Katra & Amritsar. These additions further strengthen our focus on pilgrimage destinations and add more depth to our existing portfolio of operational and hotels in pipeline in various locations like Tirupati, Madurai, Haridwar,



Dharamshala, Deoghar, Shirdi and Ajmer."

Fortune Park The Atrium, Katra set in the heart of Katra city home to the Holy shrine of Maa Vaishno Devi. This 58-room spacious hotel with a glass pyramid-shaped atrium roof, is poised to open in the summer of 2022 with refreshed contemporary interiors, modern facilities and impeccable services. Whereas, Fortune Inn Heritage Walk, Amritsar, is a 50-room boutique hotel conveniently located in close proximity to Jallianwala Bagh, just off the Heri-

tage Street and a 5-mins walk from the sacred Golden Temple.

Strategically located in their respective destinations both hotels enjoy a distinct positioning and address the growing accommodation demand for branded hotels in these high potential markets by offering quality stay options at an attractive value. With these signings, the premier domestic chain now adds over 100 new rooms across two key cities of India, bringing their existing inventory to over 4000 rooms across 46 cities.



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As the world continues to grapple with COVID-19, health and safety remain top priorities for international business events. MICE professionals need to think progressively and reimagine their operations to accommodate different types of engagement.

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Photo credit: Singapore Tourism Board



Photo credit: Marina Bay Sands

## PUTTING HEALTH AND SAFETY AT THE FOREFRONT

Singapore has demonstrated ingenuity in coming up with prototypes and protocols for a new era of events. Such innovations help maintain the highest standards of event safety without compromising the delegate meeting and networking experience.

For instance, at TravelRevive, 'meeting pods' were outfitted with protective plexiglass shields designed to reduce droplet transmissions. Similarly, geospatial technology was used to power the Safe Event platform, which was trialed at the Geo Connect Asia conference to help enforce health and safety measures.

## EVOLVING THE DIGITAL EVENT EXPERIENCE

To future proof themselves amidst these extraordinary times, Singapore's MICE venues have also strengthened their digital event offerings. Such technologies help to enhance and extend content delivery and engagement.

Marina Bay Sands' hybrid event broadcast studio has been a game-changer, enabling multi-format sessions to come to life on a physical stage fitted with LED walls and hologram capabilities. Meanwhile, the SingapoReimagine MICE Virtual Show used livestreaming to bring leisure tours and masterclasses to overseas audiences. Plus, a virtual 3D tradeshow gave participants a platform to connect remotely with exhibitors.

*The Singapore story is one of reinvention, and the local MICE industry's innovation mindset has enabled it to remain agile. With the country's future-oriented initiatives, event organisers and delegates can have peace of mind when doing business in Singapore.*

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# 2021 was full of optimism for us

► Contd from page 3

“Year 2021 has indeed been a very busy and fruitful year in trade and consumer engagements for us, despite the many constraints that we faced. Digital transformation has given a considerable boost to the sector and at the same time, changed tourist expectations. For example, contactless payments have become the norm and it is likely that this will continue to gain momentum over the years. Singapore has gone digital and contactless. Changi Airport's kiosks, for example, employ proximity sensors rather than touchscreens, immigration lanes use biometric face and iris ID, and terminal robots spray sanitizing mist. Some attractions have also gone contactless.”



**GB Srihar**  
IMESA, Singapore Tourism Board



**Sheetal Munshaw**  
Director, Atout France, India

“Some of the major developments we saw this year were easing of the travel rules and regulations for vaccinated travellers to overseas destinations. Also sustainable tourism and ways to travel responsibly, with a focus on protecting the environment have become a conscious effort adopted by most of the tourism organisations in the promotion of their respective countries. Digitalisation has also made its presence felt in a big way during the pandemic with contactless payment, travel and health applications and other travel modalities that have now adopted digitalisation into their processes. Digital parameters will be a mainstay for travel in times to come. Another important aspect is flexibility while booking the holidays.”

“The year 2021, was the year of rebuilding momentum for us. The restarting of international flights and the high rate of vaccinations across the globe were definitely big wins for outbound tourism from India. It was also impressive to see how quickly the industry adapted to the new technology. 2021 was a good year for us, especially considering the various global restrictions in place during the first half of the year. We are even more optimistic about the future, as vaccination rates are surging in all the states. We have been witnessing growing interest, demand and queries for South Africa as a tourism destination, since there is no requirement for quarantine in South Africa.”



**Neliswa Nkani**  
Hub Head – Middle East, India and South East Asia, South African Tourism

## TOUR OPERATOR



**Rajeev Kale**  
President & Country Head – Holidays, MICE, Visa, Thomas Cook (India)

“With easing restrictions, reopening of international borders and vaccine acceptance, we witnessed significant pent up demand for travel from various segments for both domestic and international destinations. As we moved from survival to revival, we implemented strategies to build scale and create a safe and contactless journey through digitalisation. Due to restrictions on international travel, destination India came into the spotlight and we saw domestic demand overtake that of our pre-pandemic 2019 levels. We also witnessed noteworthy green shoots in our MICE segment with corporate MICE keen on making the most of their unspent budgets of 2021.”

“Last year, the tourism industry passed through the worst ever crisis. In 2021, we managed to grow business with some ups & downs. We were further expanding and specialising by making all our GSA products into a separate independent entity as STIC GSA Services, and all our non-GSA activities like outbound and inbound tours came under STIC Travels. We saw an opportunity to transport stranded passengers, so we organised a few repatriation charters and restart some flights under the air bubble arrangement of the Gol. We also realised that we were focusing too much on outbound tourism, so we are now planning to get involved in domestic tourism, weddings and events.”



**Subhash Goyal**  
Chairman – STIC Travel & Air Charter Group and President – Confederation of Tourism Professionals



**Daniel D'souza**  
President and Country Head, SOTC Travel

“Year 2021 witnessed an encouraging revival of the travel business along with a boom of domestic tourism. The demand to explore offbeat domestic destinations within the country outstripped 2019. Our customers across segments (including but not limited to) multigenerational families, millennials/young professionals, business and b-leisure travellers, spiritual travellers, and honeymooners displayed a strong demand to explore India. Following the announcement by civil aviation on easing of restrictions on domestic airline operations, we witnessed significant demand for air-inclusive travel packages which further influenced customers to extend their holidays from four days to seven and even ten days.”

## AVIATION

“I see two very interesting developments in 2021. First, the launch of a new low-cost carrier for India, Akasa Air, as the fifth player in this space. Will it be able to create its own space in the domestic market that allows a successful low-cost carriers (LCC) strategy? Second is the announcement of the future of the airline, Air India. Like most of the aviation markets across the globe, closure of the borders has made an international strategy difficult, and, emphasis was, therefore, placed on how to build a stronger domestic push. But, unlike other major domestic markets, the country has the added challenge of capacity and flight caps on domestic services which did not allow them to exploit this opportunity.”



**Gavin Eccles**  
Managing Partner  
GE Consulting & Advisory

## HOTELS



**Puneet Dhawan**  
Senior VP Operations  
Accor India & South Asia

“Keeping the second wave and its repercussions on the hospitality industry in general aside, in 2021 we witnessed a significant improvement in occupancies and bookings. With continuous efforts towards vaccination drives and ease in travel restrictions, we are looking at a consistent recovery. Domestic travel this year was soaring, with leisure destinations such as Udaipur, Jaipur, and Goa dominating the market for leisure stays. Also, business travel is gradually rebounding in the country, and there is a moderate increase in corporate and MICE bookings. We are constantly monitoring the industry for any shifts. The hospitality industry is moving towards a new era - one with innovation in technology and unconventionality.”

“The beginning of the year 2021 has been quite a difficult one for most of us. The second wave of the pandemic has caused completely devastation to the hospitality industry. Now it seems the whole nightmare is over and we have become optimistic. The industry is rebounding to a desired future state that has vastly improved as compared to the first quarter. This has also increased the room occupancy. Sales in restaurants continue to increase too. The upcoming year, 2022, has a lot of hope and optimism riding on it. It will give us an opportunity to start afresh and work towards rebuilding what we have lost. Although we are entering the next year, it is best to let the past two years become memories and celebrate the upcoming year with a lot of joy and happiness. We have to work hard to go up to the pre-pandemic level.”



**Pushpendra Bansal**  
COO-Lords Hotels and Resorts

## ASSOCIATIONS



**Rajiv Mehra**  
President, IATO

“The year 2021 has given us one understanding that, apart from the tourism trade, we must have some other source of income. As soon as we have money, we must diversify into something not related to tourism. We have also learnt that we must keep surplus money with us. There has not been much development in inbound tourism, with no business at all. Yet, domestic tourism has grown, but most of it is direct business for the hotels. While 25% of the total business is happening through travel agents and tour operators, internationally there has not been much. Since November 15, when visas started, some FITs started coming, but now with the new Omicron variant and new quarantine rules, people, especially from the UK and Europe, are cancelling their tours.”

“While 2021 displayed some hope for revival, inbound tourism has been impacted the most. However, we did welcome our first client from Spain in November. Despite the good movement in domestic business, travellers preferred to make bookings directly. One of the major developments of 2021 was the finalisation of COVID protocols by the MHA. Also, India has started granting tourist e-visas to most countries. The long-pending SEIS demand of the travel trade was finally met, and that was a big relief to the industry. The boost we were prepared for, has been derailed again by the new Omicron variant. With new restrictions in place, international business that was just finding its footing after two years of devastation brought by COVID-19 has started to suffer again.”



**Jatinder Taneja**  
Vice-Chairman, PATA India Chapter



**EM Najeeb**  
Senior Vice President, IATO

“We are all going through an unprecedented crisis situation because the most affected businesses due to the pandemic are travel and tourism. However, our company has retained all of our employees. We have supported our employees, and they have stood by us. Now, we are on a recovery path with air bubble flights, and we expect to recover faster once normal flight operations and tourist arrivals are achieved. The pending SEIS demand of the trade has finally been met, giving the industry a big relief. However, if we are to go back to the pandemic days now that Omicron variant of coronavirus is here, the reopening and revival of the industry will be postponed, as the international arrivals from 'at risk' countries have been temporarily banned. The crisis has made us all learn something, one way or the other, to live with difficulties.”

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# 2021 a year of hope, frustration: Experts

► Contd from page 12

“There is a positive sentiment from the market as many people have been vaccinated and are now comfortable travelling. Leisure locations are attracting attention. However, branded hotels, resorts, and quick get-away places around metropolitan cities showed good recovery. However, smaller hotels in semi-urban areas did not reap the benefits as they had hoped. Most of the business was transacted online, so perhaps a little decline in the role of tour operators and travel agents. The hotels have also shifted to digitalisation and automation in operations. It has become necessary. Hotels had to look at their bottom lines of profitability. Therefore, productivity and efficiency in operations are receiving renewed attention.”



**Shravan Bhalla**  
General Secretary, OTOAI

“The year 2021 was a see-saw for the travel fraternity. In the initial months, the business was slow. With the horror of the second wave, people were scared to travel even domestically. However, with the vaccination in full swing and a decrease in the number of daily cases, we saw normalcy from August onwards. Since then, business has picked up and we have gone back into business. The demand was such that the airfares have skyrocketed. The current situation is again worrisome with the new variant, but we hope things get back to normal soon. Due to COVID, we saw local tourism booming, and we saw improved infrastructure, new projects, and unheard-of boutique properties come into existence.”



**MP Bezbaruah**  
Secretary General  
Hotel Association of India

“Having faced a tough time with no business or at least one business in 2020, this year was a sunny year for the tourism industry, with the major steps taken by the government, especially its vaccination drive. Initially starting with nearby popular tourist destinations or weekend destinations, it now covers pan-India destinations. The year has brought some cheers to the industry. Major developments include the change from virtual meetings, marts, and exhibitions to physical events of all kinds of tourism activities, and now with international flights operating from the country by the end of the year, other segments will also start, which has been awaited by travellers. The MoT and state tourism boards are very proactive in reviving tourism.”



**PP Khanna**  
President, ADTOI



**Gurbaxish Singh Kohli**  
Vice President, Federation of Hotel & Restaurant Associations of India (FHRAI)

“Hotel and restaurant business in general has been and continues to be severely impacted over the last two years due to the pandemic. When compared with the previous year (2020), this year (2021) has by far been the worst. Although the businesses were operating partly throughout the year, they were under a lot of stress. The entire year was non-productive and we cannot qualify 2021 as a year of business. The businesses will continue to bleed and underperform for at least the coming four quarters before we see any proper demand. Cooking and food went online, disposable crockery, cutlery and digital menus have become a trend, and a new vertical of cloud kitchens became immensely popular.”



**Rajeev Jainapurkar**  
Chairman, Indian Association of Amusement Parks & Industries (IAAPI)

“The amusement industry was allowed to reopen by MHA only after October 15, 2020, post the first lockdown. Few parks reopened since major states continued with their lockdown and reopened only after the situation was under control. The industry, which is high on Opex and Capex, was settling down and was looking forward to the summer season in 2021. Unfortunately, the second wave of April 2021 again forced lockdown. This completely thrashed the hope and aspiration to re-bounce. Footfall to the parks was at an all-time low due to COVID fears and a cash crunch. The amusement industry has already lost its biggest peak summer season and it will take quite some time for the parks to operate at their optimal capacity.”



**K. Ranga Reddy**  
Chairman IATO - Andhra Pradesh and Telangana Chapter

“Domestic tourism helped us to regain at least 40 per cent of our hope to remain in the tourism industry. They range from budget to deluxe clientele, and a couple of conferences with COVID-19 protocols took place in Hyderabad. Also, wedding destinations such as Ramoji Film City and other resorts on Hyderabad's outskirts boosted tourism survival. People slowly realised they needed to be careful with the government rules in terms of cleanliness, social distance, and wearing masks. This really helped people to plan and visit various tourist destinations. The beaches, as well as the hills of Northern India, benefited from the home stay concept, which is a game changer in terms of employment creation and experiencing the culture of the locals.”

“The year 2021 is not a business year, but a better way to call it would be to call it a year of “re-building business”. We have been through rebuilding, realigning, and re-engineering in a bid to create a strong foundation that was on a sabbatical during the pandemic. The objective is to lower our accumulated losses as soon as possible, re-breakeven, and grow again. Practically speaking, not only our business but other businesses in the sector, I hope, will take as many as three years in order to come to the pre-pandemic level. To reduce our pain and suffering, we have started to think and behave like a start-up, analysing the changed business environment. The re-gestation period will be based on new benchmarks rather than the pre-pandemic (2019-20) benchmarks. It has been a year of hope, optimism, rediscovery and learning for us!”



**Prateek Hira**  
Chairman IATO Uttar Pradesh Chapter



**Manmeet Singh**  
Chairman - IATO Punjab Chapter

“For the tourism industry, it is like being reborn. The only benefit from this endangerment is that we are reborn as adults, and not as children, so we have started with the knowledge base already acquired and the support of a huge loyalist client base, which has been carefully nurtured over so many years. The tourism industry, after opening up after the COVID-19-induced lockdowns, has got heavily dependant dependent on domestic tourism. Fortunately, since we have a domestic division and my offices were handling a swarm of domestic clients also, we have started getting business from the domestic tourism segment. This has kindled a spark of hope and optimism in us. But there is a lot more to be accomplished in order to reach to the pre-pandemic levels, and we are working strenuously towards it.”

“Due to the closure of international destinations, domestic tourism came as a blessing in disguise for us. There was a heavy rush of domestic tourists to destinations such as Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, and the North Eastern states. However, as far as destinations such as Gulmarg, Pahalgam, and Srinagar are concerned, we are in a dearth of four to five-star hotels. The government must invite more hoteliers to build star properties in these destinations. Due to shortage of hotels and heavy demand, rates have skyrocketed. Despite the COVID-19 variants, J&K Tourism Department continued its promotional activities. Besides, as many as 40 flights have been operating to Jammu and Kashmir in India ever since flying to overseas destinations have been stopped.”



**Nasir Shah**  
Chairman -  
IATO Jammu & Kashmir Chapter



**Sunil C. Gupta**  
Chairman, IATO (Northern Region)

“Inbound business in the year 2021 was almost nil for the complete inbound vertical. Although MICE, domestic tourism, and weddings are gaining momentum and are now bringing in quite some revenue. This being the wedding and festival season, it has become a great source of business for most of us in the hospitality and travel industry. We experienced growth in arrivals at Gwalior due to the introduction of thirteen flights into Gwalior and also at Varanasi, where trips could be extended to places like Ayodhya, Prayagraj, and Bodh Gaya. It was mostly domestic tourism that saw the growth and was largely “proximity tourism,” with self-drive holidays, since that was the safest means of travelling during the COVID-19 pandemic and people wanted to move out of their homes due to the Work from Home scenario.”

“We should be back to pre-pandemic level with less than 20 per cent, by the end of the financial year. It will take lots more time to recover from the losses of 2020-21. Major developments were the need to plan and be ready for such kind of situations in the future like more lockdowns, and be prepared with a back-up plan for survival in such scenarios. Over 2020-22, encouraging development of new products, having strong Standard Operating Procedures, and having a team that could deliver them became absolutely critical. A year of huge struggle, challenge, and innovation, but keeping open through the second wave was critical. Making sure the team was well motivated and working together to understand the developments, Standard operating Procedures, and keeping everyone safe was important to the business.”



**Vaibhav Kala**  
Vice President, ATOAI

## CRUISE



**Jurgen Bailom**  
CEO and President  
Waterways Leisure Tourism

“Cordelia Cruises was launched in September 2021. The response we have received so far is not only encouraging, but also overwhelming. It is twice as much as we could have ever anticipated. Indians are exploring vacation opportunities that are different than what they have done earlier and haven't been experienced by them, at all. We can safely make the statement, that we are in the right place at the right time. Enquiries and bookings for group holidays and weddings are pouring in. The sailings were to Goa, Kochi, Diu, and Lakshadweep. We have completed 20 sailings with 20,000 guests to date, and they are still growing. Cordelia Cruises has put India on the global cruising map.”

Contd on page 25 ►





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# UP devising new avatar for Ayodhya?

The UP government is working to promote tourism in Ayodhya. The city has become a popular religious site for tourists. UP has always been known for the world-famous Taj Mahal in Agra, but after the speedy development of Ayodhya, a new tourist triangle could come into the picture.

Janice Alysius

For many years, Uttar Pradesh has always been among the top three inbound tourist states, and for many years it has banked upon primarily two destinations, Agra and Varanasi, which became a major comfort factor for the state tourism department and also for a larger part of the industry that was happy selling run-of-the-mill itineraries, refusing to innovate and to expand its portfolio.

Uttar Pradesh is now rediscovering itself and expanding its portfolios. It's bringing in new destinations and recalibrating the existing ones to better place them in the market. With improved connectivity, routes are changing and new destinations are joining those that were previously popular.

The Government of Uttar Pradesh is diligently working to promote tourism in Ayodhya. The city has become very popular for the upcoming temples, making it a popular religious site for tourists. Uttar Pradesh has always been popular for the world-famous Taj Mahal, but after the speedy development of Ayodhya, the question that arises is "will Ayodhya take the limelight from Agra"? Will the popular golden triangle that used to be Delhi-Agra-Jaipur change?

**Prateek Hira**, Chairman, IATO Uttar Pradesh Chapter and President & CEO, Tornos, Director, River Rhapsody, stated that Uttar Pradesh, being a big state, has many lesser known

destinations that till now have not been brought forth or valued by the industry. COVID-19 gave a lot of time to tour operators to rediscover the state and re-plan tours with new flavours, so coming up with new itineraries will be an evolution and a welcome one. Speaking of changes in the travel itinerary of Uttar Pradesh, he said, "Changed" in my opinion is a wrong word; a better word would be 'evolved'. Just as products get redundant after a time when they reach their optimum sales, so does an itinerary. Law of diminishing returns very much applies here too," said Hira.

He added, "Ayodhya is the newest, so it obviously requires much more focus and investment, which the government is doing in order to bring it at par with other developed tourist destinations in the state. Agra is one of the inbound feeder destinations, not only for the state of Uttar Pradesh but also for many other states in India, so it has been and will always be at the top of the chart."

He further added, "Agra is one such destination that in itself is the crown of India's tourist destinations, what with a robust and well-developed tourist infrastructure that is constantly growing. The Agra metro is one example of it. The introduction of multiple flights to Agra is another. The smart city project in Agra is yet another example of the ongoing development of Agra, which will benefit Agra's tourism industry. The Government of Uttar Pradesh has also taken up the mammoth task of train-



**Prateek Hira**  
Chairman, IATO UP, Chapter and President & CEO, Tornos, Director, River Rhapsody

COVID-19 gave a lot of time to tour operators to rediscover the state and re-plan tours with new flavours



**Sunil C. Gupta**  
Chairman Northern Region IATO

Agra does not require any promotion, but since Ayodhya is in the process of developing, it needs attention



**Pradeep Kumar Rai**  
General secretary, Tourism Welfare Association, Uttar Pradesh

Most of the global tourists before the pandemic wanted to visit Agra, but now almost half of them diverted to Ayodhya

ing guides in Agra and Fatehpur Sikri, which is a welcome step as it wants to revive Fatehpur Sikri as a must-do excursion from Agra. Similarly, Bateswar is being taken up with all seriousness and so is Chambal Sanctuary and the Lion Safari, which are now a part of the eco-tourism circuit of Uttar Pradesh where the state forest department is doing a lot of work. All these places fall in close proximity to Agra and will surely help Agra to increase the average length of stay and offer much more than just the Taj Mahal."

**Sunil C. Gupta**, Chairman Northern Region, IATO, said, "Ayodhya is a place for religious tourism and Agra is a place for cultural tourism. Agra is well established and is famous globally. Therefore, Agra does not require any promotion, since Ayodhya is in

process of developing, it needs attention. When talking of inbound, Taj Mahal is in the top

Ayodhya-Varanasi-Allahabad, so a new itinerary can be expected to come into the picture.

ists before the pandemic wanted to visit Agra, but now almost 50 per cent of travellers will divert to Ayodhya, the reason being curiosity." Not only the tourists, but also the travel agents, are intrigued by the development of Ayodhya and want to explore places that are new. The travellers have visited Agra many times and now avoid repeating places. With the new upcoming destinations and infrastructure development, tourists are looking forward to visiting Ayodhya. Travel companies will definitely sell the traditional destinations, but changing the itinerary and showcasing other destinations will be good for tourism in Uttar Pradesh. "Ayodhya is a new attraction for travellers not only in India but abroad also.

It will become the world's largest spiritual tourist destination in coming years. It will help to



priority list of tourists. Ayodhya has just been added and the inbound travel is yet to start with full force and henceforth, the temple development will take few more years.

In my opinion, the two places offer different perspectives on tourism and cannot be compared.

He added, "The golden triangle will not change, but a new triangle can potentially be made." That could be Lucknow-

Also, a lot of international tourists are not religiously driven, meaning the expectation from the inflow of international tourists in Ayodhya is not very high but, if the tourists are driven then the reason would be Ayodhya being a developed, modern tourist spot that will flourish by 2024".

**Pradeep Kumar Rai**, General secretary, Tourism Welfare Association, Uttar Pradesh, stated, "Most of the international tour-

attract around five crore tourists every year, which is going to increase the possibilities for tourism in Uttar Pradesh. Revealing more, the government plans to make Ayodhya one of the world's biggest tourist cities in India. People from across the world are expected to visit the spot to offer prayers at the temple. Uttar Pradesh can potentially witness its own Golden Triangle of Varanasi, Ayodhya, and Agra; Lucknow will be the new centre point for all three connections.



*Situated on the fringe of the Sasan Gir National Park, where the last remaining Asiatic lions in the world co-exist with the semi-nomadic Maldhari tribe, "ARAMNESS GIR - The Ultimate Luxury Safari Experience in India", opened its doors to its first guests in Nov'21*





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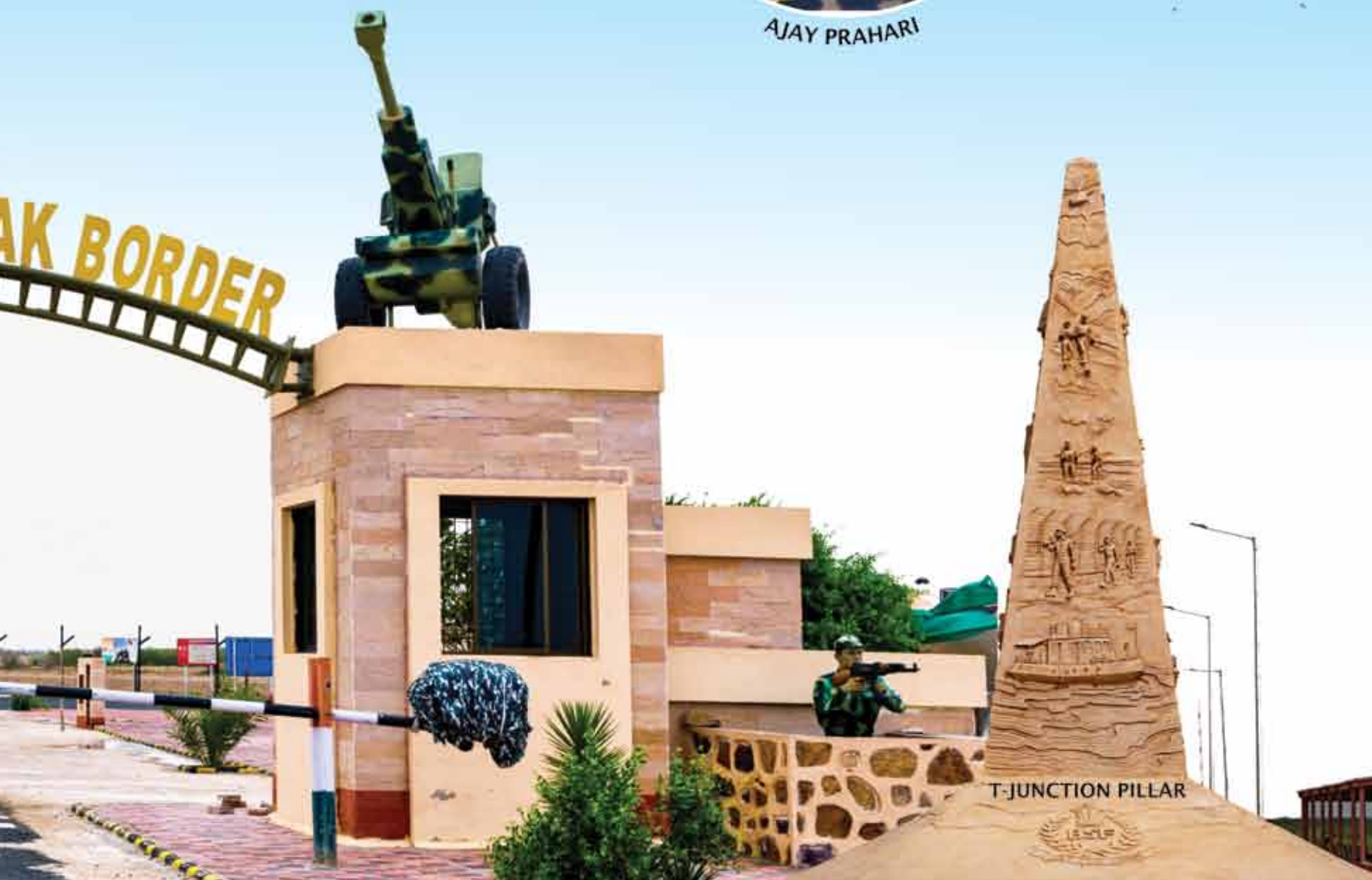
- Parade Ground
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- Jessore Sloth Bear Sanctuary
- Patola Heritage Museum - Patan
- Balaram Palace Resort - Balaram
- Mahadev Temple
- Ambaji Temple.



**AJAY PRAHARI**



**T-JUNCTION PILLAR**



# India, a wedding haven

Travel and hotel bookings for India, witness a strong growth on the return of the upcoming wedding season. TRAVELTALK spoke to segment experts who share their perspective on a massive surge in wedding travel and bookings that can revive the domestic tourism.



Hazel Jain

While small, intimate weddings are widely trendy, large-scale weddings are likely to rebound by early next year. **Arif Patel**, Regional VP - Sales & Marketing, Hyatt India, said on the surge in wedding travel bookings: "This wedding season has been great, and the future months look promising too. Unprecedented demand has seen, a majority of wedding destinations being fully booked, especially on say dates." Due to the increasing demand caused by COVID-19 and government-imposed limitations as well as closure of international borders, "our hotels in important wedding destinations are fully booked until February 2022, on both say and non-say dates. As a result, this season may turn out to be the busiest season for weddings," he says.



**Arif Patel**  
Regional VP - Sales & Marketing  
Hyatt India

According to him, the preference is obviously for destination weddings with Jaipur and Goa taking precedence, and this trend will rule the upcoming season as well. Patel added, "As international borders are still not open, international destination weddings have shifted to India. Due to huge demand, most wedding destinations are full till Mar 2022, so the demand is moving towards cities. Within Hyatt's portfolio, Goa, Kochi, Bishan-



**Vikram Lalvani**  
Chief of Revenue, Sales and  
Destinations, Sterling Holiday Resorts

garh (Jaipur) have been popular wedding destinations; however, we also do have a strong business on books in city hotels such as Andaz New Delhi, Grand Hyatt Mumbai, Hyatt Regency Chandigarh, and Kolkata."

## Budgets remain unchanged

As per Patel, the willingness to pay has increased. "The availability of the venue has become a top priority, and customers are willing to pay more to book in ad-



**Prashant Pitti**  
Co-Founder  
EaseMyTrip

vance." Many industry providers have increased their rates in order to fund the COVID-related protocols. Clients who spent more money on international destination weddings are ready to spend the same amount on a more luxury and enhanced experience," he opined.

## Bookings exceeded this year!

At the outset, Sterling Holiday Resorts has exceeded its pre-COVID numbers in wed-

## Data points

- ❖ There has been a more than 400 per cent jump in advance air ticket bookings across India for December.
- ❖ The most preferred domestic destinations for weddings are: Gulmarg, Goa, Udaipur, Jaipur, Mussoorie, Shimla, Nainital, Corbett, Rishikesh and Port Blair. The bookings have gone up by 50 per cent across these destinations.
- ❖ The most sought after international destinations include Dubai, Colombo, Maldives, Moscow, Paris and Switzerland. There is also a growing interest in the locales of Europe. The bookings have gone up by 30 per cent across these destinations.
- ❖ The top five hotels booked for this wedding season include Oberoi Udaivillas, ITC Grand Bharat, Taj Umaid Bhawan Jodhpur, Leela Palace Jaipur and Taj Lake Palace Udaipur.
- ❖ The period of November 14 to December 13, 2021 has also seen an airfare jump of around 20 per cent.

*Courtesy: EaseMyTrip data*

dings with an overall increase in wedding queries by 50 per cent to 60 per cent, claimed

**Vikram Lalvani**, Chief of Revenue, Sales and Destinations, Sterling Holiday Resorts." 🌸

## Enticing Indian travellers

The pearl-shaped island, one of the first few countries to open borders to fully vaccinated Indian travellers, has introduced an offer to bring more travellers to Sri Lanka.



TT Bureau

SriLankan Airlines has assured Indian travellers that it is committed to increase the number

ably after the travel restrictions were eased. Sri Lanka was one of the first few nations to have opened its borders and welcome fully vaccinated Indian travellers, including those

from and to India to bring about greater convenience and choice to Indian passengers.

"Adapting to the changing needs of the industry, the air-



*SriLankan airlines to re-establish its presence in Indian market*

of flights to a wide range of destinations many of which were temporarily halted due to the pandemic.

"India is our biggest market, and we are dedicated to re-establish full scale operations. We continued to operate both passenger and cargo flights to and from India even during COVID-19-induced lockdowns. The inflow of tourists from India has increased consider-

who have taken Covaxin, said **Ashok Pathirage**, chairperson, SriLankan Airlines.

SriLankan Airlines introduced a special 'buy one, get one free' offer to Indian travellers in the past four months in order to entice them to travel to Colombo and beyond on their flights.

Furthermore, the Airline increased its frequency of flights

lines played a vital role in facilitating the movement of people and critical supplies between the two countries.

**Dimuthu Tennakoon**, Head of Worldwide Sales and Distribution, SriLankan Airlines said the airline is now forging ahead with plans and investments to re-establish its presence in the Indian market. Also, there is a pan-India brand campaign in progress at the moment." 🌸

## Dearth of inbound bookings

While India has started issuing visas for international tourists, inbound operators are not seeing any concrete bookings yet, despite being at the cusp of peak season.



Hazel Jain

When the Ministry of Tourism issued visas for foreigners who desire to visit India, inbound travel operators were confident business would pick up. However, due to a number of challenges, things aren't moving as smoothly as planned. **Dharmendra Singh**, Director of Plaisir Hospitality Services and Chairman of the ADTOI, Maharashtra Chapter, says. "While the government has already begun issuing Indian visas for tourists, and the first flight arrived in India on November 15, our operators do not have any incoming bookings at this time," he said.

"I do not think international tourists will have any issues visiting India in the current scenario as far as safety is concerned," Singh added when asked about their top concerns while visiting India. India has set a new record in

terms of vaccination, hence our overseas agents are glad to know that all, at least in the tourism industry, are now fully vaccinated. So, if they send a



**Dharmendra Singh**  
Director of Plaisir Hospitality  
Services and Chairman of the  
ADTOI, Maharashtra Chapter

tourist to India, they may feel confident that they would be safe. The government is quite active, checking up on the vaccination drive to bring in foreign visitors."

When it comes to domestic tourism, though, things are looking up for ADTOI. "We do weddings and are

getting inquiries," Singh said. For the months of February and March 2022, two queries are nearing completion. Destination weddings in areas like Goa, Jaisalmer, Udaipur, Jodhpur, and Jaipur continue to be popular. We have reservations in Goa and Udaipur. Wedding budgets differ from

International tourists visiting India in the current scenario will not have any issues as far as safety is concerned

one client to another. It begins at ₹25 lakh. People have money to spend, and those who plan destination weddings have the financial means to do so. At least 10 to 12 luxury resorts open each year in India." 🌸



# Odisha Tourism recouping after crisis

While domestic tourists continue to play a huge role in filling up hotel rooms in India, the Indian Association of Tour Operators (IATO) Eastern Region is closely interacting with the Central Government and the State Government for developing tourism in the eastern region further.



Hazel Jain

**A**s the Chairman of IATO Eastern Region, **JK Mohanty** is a force to reckon with. He is also the Chairman, Hotel & Restaurant Association of Odisha and CMD of Swosti Group. Sharing his thoughts on the restart of inbound tourism, "After a long gap of 18 months, this is the first time India has allowed foreign tourists on commercial flights to enter the country. Fully vaccinated tourists on chartered flights were allowed to enter starting last month. India has now started allowing fully vaccinated foreign tourists to enter the country on regular flights, in the latest easing of coronavirus restrictions as infections fall and vaccinations rise. To encourage travelers to visit India, the government plans to issue 500,000 free visas through next March.

The moves are expected to boost the tourism and hospitality sector which was battered by the pandemic."

Mohanty informs that the Odisha Government is once again hosting the Men's Junior Hockey World Cup starting from 24th November 2021 at the Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar, where 16 teams around the world are participating. Having successfully hosted the 2018 FIH Men's Hockey World Cup at the same venue, the state will once again be lit up with some of the finest in the world battling it out for the coveted Junior World Cup trophy. The teams started arriving in Bhubaneswar and few teams are staying with Swosti Group.

As the Chairman of Hotel & Restaurant Association of Odisha and IATO Eastern Region, he is closely interacting with the



**JK Mohanty**  
Chairman, Hotel & Restaurant  
Association of Odisha  
and CMD of Swosti Group

Central Government and State Government for the growth of tourism in the Eastern Region. "Virtual meetings have been conducted in regular intervals with the members of HRAO and IATO Eastern Region and the valuable suggestions have been submitted to the Government for promotion of tourism as well as growth of state's economy. Domestic tourism is playing a big role in filling up hotel rooms in India," he says.

Odisha has taken up fundamental and far-reaching initiatives to create 'Inclusive Tourism'. One of the most important cornerstones is that Odisha has taken up initiatives in creating authentic and traditional experiences for tourists and this is supported by their push to create home-stays which is excellent. This not only gives the opportunity to showcase the true experience of Odisha to the tourist but also creates economic avenues for the community. Odisha is also supporting its traditional industry like handicrafts and handlooms through tourism. It is also excellent that Odisha is creating traditional wooden boats that will be manned by the local boatmen thus creating livelihoods for them

## Weddings season kickstarts

The Indian wedding season is in full bloom and hotels in In-

dia are expecting a good business and revenue during this season, says Mohanty. "It is going to be much better and bigger than previous year as

The New Year will be bigger and better as the government has increased gathering capacity limits

the Government has increased gathering capacity limits. We have been flooded with mails and enquiries from guests for marriage bookings and all hotels of Swosti Group have completely blocked on all marriage dates and on non-saya dates as well all the way through till the end of this year," he says.

Sharing some booking behavior, he says people continue to prefer destination weddings. "The concept of a destination wedding is fast catching eyeballs among the Indian millennials. Odisha, with its widespread forts, lake side, beach resorts have already made their name as prime wedding destinations in India. Needless to say, Swosti Chilika Resort situated at the Chilika Lake, the largest lagoon in the Northern Hemisphere, within a period of four years has been established as a famous wedding destination in eastern India. Swosti Chilika Resort has conducted many memorable destination weddings in the past and this year also we have good number of confirmed destination weddings. The budget for a destination wedding in Odisha is between ₹ 60 lakhs to ₹ 1 crore," he says.

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# Happy days are here again

With the association's annual convention just around the corner, the Indian Association of Tour Operators (IATO) Maharashtra Chapter members are relieved that physical events have restarted after a hiatus. **Jitendra Kejriwal**, Chairman, IATO Maharashtra and Dadra, Nagar Haveli & Daman Chapter, shares more.



Hazel Jain

In order to orient and prep its chapter members for the upcoming convention at Gandhinagar, the Maharashtra Chapter of the IATO held a physical event in Mumbai. This was the chapter's first physical event in the last two years. Sharing some updates from his chapter, **Jitendra Kejriwal**, Chairman – IATO Maharashtra and Dadra, Nagar Haveli & Daman Chapter, says, "We had invited around 135 members to come and interact with the National Secretary, **Rajnish Kiasth**, and VP from New Delhi. We have also invited **Valsa Nair**, Principal Secretary of Tourism and Culture Department, Maharashtra government and are awaiting confirmation."

He added that more than 45



**Jitendra Kejriwal**  
Chairman – IATO Maharashtra and  
Dadra, Nagar Haveli & Daman Chapter

While visas are being issued by India, there are no scheduled flights yet

members from the chapter have registered for the 36th IATO Annual Convention to be held in Gandhinagar from December 16-19, 2021, and more

are expected. The theme of the convention is 'Brand India – The Road to Recovery'. There are six options for the post-convention tours that include various sites such as Ahmedabad city tour, Gandhinagar, Modhera, Adalaj, Statue of Unity, Patan, Little Rann of Kutch, and Bhuj. Registrations are still open.

## Virtual sessions continue

While physical events have started, the chapter will continue its virtual meets. Kejriwal shares, "At the event, we also invited India Tourism to make a presentation on the advantages of registering with the MoT. Other than that, our team is also in dialogues with **Chandrashekhar Jaiswal**, Deputy General Manager, Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC), and Jayshree Bhoj, Managing Director of Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC). Now that inbound



tourism has started, we are talking to them to get more clarity on the process. We are also talking to them about website promotions."

While India has started issuing visa to inbound tourists, Kejriwal says that his company has not received any bookings so far. "Due to the new variant, the queries have paused for now. However, some of our members have seen some bookings trickle in. We expect that between January to March 2022, which is peak

season for the FTAs, we may get bookings. I understand that the visa issuing process is smooth so far and India is giving out some visas on arrival as well.

of ₹ 10 lakh easy bank loans that was promised by the government of India. "This has not been made available to us yet. Also, while visas are being issued by



We will know how the smooth the process is only later and that whatever was promised is being delivered," he opines.

## Other issues

He says that one of the main challenges facing his members are that of the monetary support

India, there are no scheduled flights yet which has led to very expensive air tickets from our main markets of Europe, US, and Africa. This defeats the purpose of issuing visas for foreign tourists. We hope 2022 will see some inbound movement," Kejriwal says.

# Call for policies on adventure travel

ATOAI is in discussion with the government for working towards building clear policy on adventure travel. In a meeting with the minister, ATOAI also insisted on working on national and international sanitization and awareness campaign for adventure travel to make India as a sustainable, safe, responsible outdoor adventure travel destination.



Janice Alyosius

ATOAI is functioning on various fronts of promoting adventure tourism. Domestic travel has picked up a bit and there is a new light on the horizon, but the members who handle Inbound still need to hold on for a couple of more months till there are clear policies on adventure travel and flow of international tourists begins.

In an interview **Vishwas Makhija**, President, ATOAI, spoke of the challenges, the association is facing. "The state does not have a unified policy on adventure tourism," he explained. They don't know as to how adventure tourism is growing as an industry. The main challenge is that if there is no clear policy on adventure travel in the state, everything would go wild. As a result, the states should adopt the national ATOAI



**Vishwas Makhija**  
President, ATOAI

safety guidelines that were approved by the ministry."

When asked about Covid's impact on adventure tourism, Makhija said that India is divided into two parts: the domestic market and the inbound market. The inbound market has been totally wrecked due to the pandemic, which has led to issues like unemployment. When it comes to domestic travel, though, there has been some progress in adventure travel. Domestic tourism has risen, ben-

efiting a lot of people, while inbound travel will take some time.

People desire to visit locations that were previously unpopular, and sites that were once famous only during certain seasons are now in demand all year. Tourist demand has evolved; they now want to visit areas that are lesser known albeit less crowded. "People do not want to be conducting typical tourism circuits to a greater extent," Makhija said. With the growth of adventure tourism in the local market, it will expand globally to places that are open and have policies and systems in place. Many Indian states are striving to revive tourism."

When it comes to the elements of adventure travel, every country stands out. "Kerala has made significant progress in terms of adventure tourism policies, and it is quickly becoming a popular

destination for active outdoor travel." There are many national parks in Madhya Pradesh that a lot of tourists would like to visit. Madhya Pradesh has worked hard to promote itself as a

The main challenge is that if there is no clear policy on adventure travel in the state, everything would go wild

global destination for national parks and wildlife tourism. Ladakh, as a union territory, has huge potential, and the UT government is bringing it to light. The government is working hard to promote the leisure and inbound tourism sectors," said Makhija.



"India needs to come out with a clear campaign, nationally and internationally, for including India as a sustainable, safe, and responsible outdoor adventure travel destination," Makhija said of their recent work with the government. We met with G. Kishan Reddy, India's tourism minister, and discussed a list of issues, including requesting that the Indian government launch a national and international campaign to promote adventure travel in the country. We asked the minister for a sanitization and awareness campaign wherein people will look for a recognised, specialist adventure travel firm that is both state and nationally recognised, as well as the rebirth of international roadshows."





# Luxury escape in Maldives

**Carla Puverel**, General Manager, Conrad Maldives, shares that after extensive refurbishment, they will soon be ready to welcome guests at Rangali Island, their adults-only island. It will be big attraction for the Indian market. They will also be opening a teen club after revamping the kids' club.



Nisha Verma

**C**arla Puverel mentions the relaunch of Rangali, which is their adults-only island with 50 water villas, of which 38 will have swimming pools and 12 have whirlpools. "These are the first water villas in the Maldives, built

them open by the December end or early January."

## Activities for Indians

Puverel shares, "A lot of Indian travellers love jet skis and water sports. There are also new eFolks, electric surfboards with a motor and a paddle boarding too. Also, we do many cooking



Carla Puverel  
General Manager  
Conrad Maldives

We are also opening a teen club after revamping the kids' club."

## Travel agent engagement

For travel agents, Conrad Maldives does many virtual Fam trips. "It's really important, as it allows us to show them the property and walk them through, as opposed to a general presentation with slides," she adds.

They also have Indian chefs and meet all types of dietary require-

ments. "We have a tandoori station in our main restaurant. We can prepare different items for breakfast, and tailor-made menus. 'Ithaa' undersea restaurant is in demand by the Indian market. It's the first underwater restaurant in the world with a special menu, and we can pair it with wine or mocktails, "Puverel offers.

## Different experiences

Puverel believes that the location of the resort is their main USP. "We are very close to Whale sharks, which can be spotted all year round. Also, one can watch manta rays from now till July, standing on the bridge between the two islands, which is an amazing experience. Our main draw card would be our 12 restaurants, particularly for the Indian market, which likes options, variety, and space," she claims.

Among the many experiences, Puverel claims that the whale shark trip in the area is special. "Swimming with these gentle giants is a bucket list experience. One can dive or even snorkel with them. We are reinventing all the time and we work a lot with

*Ithaa, the first underwater restaurant in the world is in great demand by the Indian market*

our marine biologist, who does many activities for the kids too," she reveals.

## MICE and business

While the property doesn't have meeting rooms, they do cater to niche groups as well as MICE.

"Out of India, we will be looking at YPO groups or small incentives, which may start again from mid-January next year," she shares.

## New developments

They will also relaunch their spa, along with a new gym and an outdoor area with battle ropes and TRX. "It will be a more interactive gym. There will be a focus on wellness, but we will go beyond yoga and stretching," she adds.

Puverel also says, "The Muraka is a first-of-its-kind, three-bedroom, two-level residence with a master bedroom submerged five metres below sea level. It's something special and tailor-made. We have a lot of last-minute travel, especially from India, where people come in their private jets. She adds that the Muraka is ideal for one-of-a-kind experience."



27 years ago. They are undergoing extensive refurbishment and renovation. We should have

classes and cocktail mixing. The adults-only bar, swimming pool, and beach are in high demand.

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# Celebrating with tour operators

Visit Utah, represented by Aviareps India and led by Ellona Pereira, organised an exclusive sit-down lunch for its select key tour operators at Sofitel BKC in Mumbai. Seven travel companies were part of this unique American Thanksgiving celebration as they discussed Utah. A special video message by Zach Fyne, Global Markets Specialist, Utah Office of Tourism, was also played during lunch.



# Strategy for growth of Hisar airport

Prime Minister and Government of Haryana plan the development of Maharaja Agrasen Airport in Hisar. The airport will provide opportunities for growth and development throughout the Hisar region and surrounding areas. It will be built on a 7,200 acres at an estimated cost of ₹950 cr. As per a study, passenger traffic from Hisar is forecast to reach 2.1 million by 2024.





# Getting into the 'Zone'

**Vikas Ahluwalia**, General Manager and National Head – Zone by The Park Hotels, says what makes the brand different, and they are opening six new properties to expand their presence.



Nisha Verma

Zone by the Park is a social catalyst brand for design-conscious and price-conscious travellers, said **Vikas Ahluwalia**. "It is a social catalyst brand for design-conscious and price-conscious travellers. We go beyond a high-quality room and service experience to be a spark," he said. Ahluwalia further said that they are a mid-scale, social catalyst, full-service hotel brand that was designed post-extensive research and addresses the needs of our guests and investors.

## Expanding

Ahluwalia shared that they have projects in pipeline at both Zone by The Park Hotels and Zone Connect with 1,600 rooms under development and will be opening six new properties in the coming 12 months and many more. "We are ex-



**Vikas Ahluwalia**  
General Manager and National Head – Zone by The Park Hotels

panding our foothold to cater to the needs of the domestic and international travellers," he revealed.

## Digital marketing

"During the pandemic, we used the digital platforms to promote various activities and experiences created for our guests. These efforts resulted in higher engagement and revenues for the hotel," shared Ahluwalia while explaining their marketing and promotional activities.

## Travel trade engagement

Ahluwalia goes on to say that they have been collaborating with the tourism industry on a regular basis. "Our sales and marketing teams have been sharing information with trade partners. S.H.I.E.L.D., our group-wide, all-encompassing safety and hygiene programme, draws special attention. We strictly adhere to all hygiene protocols since the safety of our guests and staff is crucial to us. We're organising more targeted and relevant itineraries instead of large FAM trips," he asserted.

## Taste the local

Guests visiting Zone by The Park will be treated to local experiences, apart from just offering stays. "As part of the Zone Philosophy, we have created the Zone Social Avatars, which uniquely allow the guests to explore the city through the lenses of these five avatars:

Adventurer, Foodie, Shutterbug, Networker, and Party Animal. Guests can make use of the Zone Scale, a simple tool that helps us curate and recommend experiences based on what keeps it social for you in

We're organising more targeted and relevant itineraries instead of large FAM trips

our city. We bring the online experiences to the offline and vice-versa," he said.

## All MICE

Zone by The Park Hotels has been designed to cater to all business segments, and MICE is no exception, he said. "We have been working with the



trade to drive this business segment across our hotels. Now, sales requests for MICE events are being converted to a hybrid setup. This middle path of combining physical, virtual, and digital technology is proving to be a boon in current times where packed banquets are a distant reality," he adds.

## Geared for 2022

Ahluwalia is all positive for 2022. "Next year, we look towards driving growth and entering newer markets. We are planning to expand through off-beat locations where young entrepreneurs can find space to network as well as relax. Zone Connect is an upscale brand which has up-

coming hotels in Goa, Tirupati, Gopalpur – Odisha, Phalodi – Rajasthan and Port Blair and they are slated to open early next year," he reveals.

He also shared that Zone Connect will have its presence in tier-III and tier-IV cities with a lower number of rooms, focused on functionality. Ahluwalia concludes, "The brand will give a boost to smaller hotel operators and owners who were on the verge of closure due to the many challenges they faced during the pandemic and the lockdowns to partner with us—a brand which has been in the industry for more than half-a-century."

# Demand for travel in India met

▶ Contd from page 14

## TECHNOLOGY

"2021 was an exceptional year for the industry due to the pandemic. However, the second wave of virus and uncertainty on resumption of flights kept the industry at bay. If we talk about our business, overall, we are stronger as an organisation and have diversified our portfolio to cater the changing landscape of the industry. 2021 saw a major overhaul when it comes to the travel industry. There has been a major shift to domestic tourism, and Indians are exploring their own country. Going forward, we feel that domestic and short haul travel demand will remain bullish."



**Sunil Talreja**  
Vice President-India operations, InterGlobe Air Transport

"It's been rough time for the entire industry. DEX Group's business verticals operate within the travel, tourism & hospitality sectors. The last year, adversely disrupted our industry like nothing seen before. From organisations winding up to job losses in millions, it has been a year that has made all of us stakeholders in this industry relook and risk-assess everything that we do. However, we have also seen some positive developments, which is the strong 'pent up' demand for travel among Indians that has led to a quick rebound in domestic tourism and surge in fare levels for intl travel. This trend will continue, moving forward towards the opening of borders and international scheduled flights."



**Varun Singal**  
Executive Director, Dex Group

"The years 2020 and 2021, were roller coaster rides. However, we have maintained the market presence by reminding travel partners about our hotel representations of upscale brands, mainly Far East Hospitality, small Luxury Hotels of the World and others. We used webinars, virtual training and quiz sessions ending with awards to engage and motivate travel partners. In the ongoing uncertainty, we were able to secure the India market representation for Conrad Maldives resort and The Fortress Resort & Spa, Sri Lanka. Outcome for Maldives has been productive, though not much for others in the absence of commercial flights to any other of our markets."



**Manas Sinha**  
Director, ISA Tourism



**Sarbendra Sarkar**  
Founder & MD, Cygnett Hotels & Resorts

"If you compare this year with 2020, I would say the business has been better. People wanted to travel and Cygnett Hotels & Resorts, as a responsible service provider, wanted to offer perfect conditions for the tourists to stay at. Giving them hygienic stay options were critical so as to pave the way for the success of the travel trade industry. Furthermore, the increasing vaccination rate gave a positive outlook to help the people ward off the pandemic fears. This has, in other words, led to an increase in bleisure travel — business as well as leisure — which proved to be integral to our better performance during the year in the given scenario."

Inputs by Hazel Jain

# Future with GRNconnect

▶ Contd from page 3

"The tourism sector is opening fast in European, North and South American countries. As such, our overseas business share is increasing consistently through our subsidiaries in Dubai and the US, as many new agents have started consuming

For the future, his advice to travel agents and operators is, "One should try and achieve value addition and uniqueness in the products and services offered, and initiate use of technology, though in small but consistent steps." Personalised services can never

## Year 2021 for GRNconnect

In 2021, with the tourism sector opening in Europe and American countries, we were able to generate some volume. However, that was still not close to pre-COVID levels. We are hopeful that there will be a boom in the tourism sector and we will surpass pre-COVID business volume.

our login and API out feed. Also, with the launch of our US DMC, we can cater to even the minute requirements of our agents for destination USA."

However, when it comes to the future looking brighter, Narula asserts, "Barring the few hiccups due to new COVID variants, we are hopeful that we will end this financial year on a high note, and we expect that in 2022, the tourism industry will boom back and will surpass the pre-COVID levels."

be replaced by an OTA, so don't fear OTAs. COVID is just a phenomenon, and this too shall pass. Stay positive," he requested.

He also stressed the need to concentrate on niche products. "Staying focused on a single product and making a niche for oneself is important, but not for a retail agent. Selling multiple products with consistent efforts and total transparency is the key to success for a retail agent," he asserted.



# Post Covid: Back to big, fat weddings

Raffles Udaipur, India's first Raffles hotel, that opened in August 2021 on a 21-acre private island set in the middle of Udai Sagar lake, has been witnessing some of the busiest months with guests moving back to big, fat Indian weddings from intimate weddings in a post-pandemic world.



Hazel Jain

**T**he launch of the Raffles brand in Udaipur has seen an overwhelming response from travellers since August 2021. With an upward trend in domestic travel and rising demand for luxury and exclusivity among travellers, the property is witnessing an encouraging growth trajectory. Abhishek Sharma, General Manager, Raffles Udaipur, said, "The location of the hotel on an exclusive island has captivated travel enthusiasts. With the festive and wedding season in India at its peak, we have been experiencing some of the busiest months, and expect the trend to continue with Christmas and New Year around the corner."

He added celebrations have played an important role when it comes to bookings at Raffles



Abhishek Sharma  
GM, Raffles Udaipur

Udaipur. "Travellers consider us not only for luxurious stay experiences but also look at Raffles Udaipur as the ideal destination for celebrations. We do not foresee a major change with respect to traveller behaviour in 2022. Safety and hygiene standards will continue to be a key focus area."

Adhering to stringent safety protocols through the implementation of Accor's safety label, ALLSAFE, our teams at Raffles Udaipur have been

trained to ensure sanitised stays," Sharma adds.

## What will 2022 bring?

In the coming year, guests will still be looking forward to private culinary affairs and curated tailor-made experiences. Sharma opines, "Their fondness towards exploring outdoor



Travellers consider us not only for luxurious stay experiences but also look at Raffles Udaipur as the ideal destination for celebrations

activities in and around the hotel, such as local treks, mountain trails, and even cycling around the Aravalli hills, would still be on the rise. In Q3 of this year, we witnessed a pattern where travel connoisseurs were opting for a minimum of two to three night stays at the hotel, which stands testament to the remarkable brand pull of Raffles Udaipur. Nestled on a private island, amidst the tranquil Udai Sagar Lake, the hotel has emerged as an undiscovered gem in the heart of Udaipur. We have observed that guests are choosing to get enchanted by the legendary Raffles service with longer

stays, and we expect this trend to continue in 2022 as well."

The 101-key Raffles Udaipur has been witnessing high occupancy and has been quite busy all throughout the wedding season. It has hosted a significant number of weddings in November and continues to see the same trend lined up for December as well. It has a grand ballroom of 9,000 sq. ft., including a pre-function area, multiple outdoor gathering areas, and an on-site temple. The hotel has hosted multiple corpo-

rate events for business founders, owners, and YPO, members and will be playing host to private equity board meetings as well. "We are highly focused on creating tailor-made experiences for our well-travelled connoisseurs for everlasting comfort and absolute luxury. For instance, during Hindu weddings, based on the auspicious date and time chosen by the guests for the phere, we gift the newly married couple a reflection of the stars, when the universe comes together to witness their union," he adds.

## What lies ahead

**T**he World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) of the UN calls out against the introduction of blanket curbs on travel, as witnessed in recent days. This call echoes the concerns raised by UNWTO Members during the 24th UNWTO General Assembly. Various countries called for immediate lifting of travel ban imposed on specific countries and for upholding freedom of international travel.

UNWTO took note of the declarations of the UN Secretary General and the World Health Organization Director General regarding the unfairness of the blanket travel ban against Southern African countries.

Since the pandemic, UNWTO has called for a coordinated approach to balance public health concerns keeping the lifeline of tourism intact. Recently, such an approach has been shown to be the most effective way forward.

# IMWF'21 hosts industry leaders

The opening ceremony of International M!CE & Wedding Forum kicked off with the "Squid Game" theme entrance of N. Fuat Ersoy, IMWF'21 Managing Partner followed by the speeches of the industry leaders from all over the world via panels. The main focus was environment and post-COVID era.



TT Bureau

**T**he International MICE and Wedding Forum 2021 (IMWF), attended by prominent people of the industry held forums, talks by experts, and B2B meetings during the day and different themed events each night.

Starting the event by thanking the main partners — Turkish



Airlines, Titanic Mardan Palace, and Inventum Global — N Fuat Ersoy, IMWF Managing Partner said it is important to be together again after COVID-19.

"Turkey is one of the leading MICE sectors. As per statistics,



TravTalk awarded for successful association as Media Partner at IMWF

Istanbul is one of the top destinations for international meetings, and events. We are not focusing on one goal; the potential of our country is to offer more than that," Turkish Republic Minister of Culture and Tourism Mehmet Nuri Ersoy said, starting the event.

He continued, "We have adapted to changes in our lives. These changes have become

standards in our lives, work, and principles of our sectors. The numbers and figures state that we are on the right path. I would like to conclude by thanking all the institutions, organizations, and individuals who have devoted themselves in order to realise IMWF."

Çağla Yöntem of Türkiye Tourism Promotion and Development Agency (TGA) said, "We

went through hard times. The industry will be better off when we see the pandemic off. People are bored of staying at home for a long time, they long to visit new places, have new experiences."

Dmitry Rogulev of ADA-Symposium gave a comprehensive speech about how harmful the materials used during the events could be. He talked about what the industry can do to avoid harming the nature as our world is going through a constant series of events caused by environmental pollution.

Prof. Dr. Emre Toros, Dean of Faculty of Communication, Hacettepe University explained how the people reacted to the crisis and the successful leaps forward for humanity during the pandemic. Angel Proffitt of Gsd Creative as a person coming from the same industry, knew

how the audience was feeling, and talked about how time should be managed properly to enhance the quality of life.

Awards were given to main partners Turkish Airlines, Titanic Mardan Palace, Türkiye Tourism Promotion and Development Agency, and Inventum Global, and others by IMWF Managing

Ersoy's promised to make the IMWF'22 as environmentally friendly as possible

Partner N. Fuat Ersoy. Later, the IMWF 2021 ended with a magnificent closing ceremony, live music, and stage shows.



# Shift in preferences

More and more travellers are now preferring to indulge in adventure activities. This is proving true, not just for domestic and short-haul destinations, but also long-haul holidays. TRAVTALK speaks to four experts.



Hazel Jain

**T**he pandemic has changed the behaviour of many consumers and travel comes as no exception. The industry is seeing surge in travellers opting for vast, open destinations that offer outdoor activity options. Sharing his opinion is **Bhanu Aravindakshan**, Vice President, Otila International.

He said, "Post COVID-19, we have seen a trend among the younger generation. They prefer adventure activities and travel to destinations, less crowded with the facilities to conduct outdoor games. One reason probably is because the travellers have been working from home." For this, he said, the prime destination is Switzerland and Utah in the USA. It has five major national parks and various adventure activities.



**Bhanu Aravindakshan**  
Vice President  
Otila International



**Vedant Marda**  
Director  
Vibrant Experiences

Mountain biking or hiking or spending time in the national parks, or just being out on the wild, thrill the tourists no end

"Spending time in the national parks, or just being out on the wild thrill the tourists no end.

Since the US has a lot of repeat clients, they want to do newer things in newer places in the United States

Activities such as river rafting, hot air balloon rides, mountain biking, or hiking have become

popular with young tourists and it is important for the operators to develop products accordingly," he added.

## Adventure need of the hour

**Vedant Marda**, Director, Vibrant Experiences, which offers bespoke tours, said the West Coast in the US has many mainstream cities such as LA or Las Vegas, popular with Indians for outdoor activities.

"I feel Utah is among the best right now. For hiking, for instance, it has interesting national parks such as Zion or Bryce. Since the US has a lot of repeat clients, they want to do newer things in newer places in the US. Adventure is the need of the hour for these tourists," he added.

**Himanshu Patil**, Director, Kesari Tours, averred that for long-haul travel, the first destination that



**Himanshu Patil**  
Director  
Kesari Tours



**Rajeev Kale**  
President & Country Head – Holidays, MICE, Visa, Thomas Cook (India)

Due to the pandemic, travellers are eager to get out in the open. New Zealand is also great for adventure

Utah offers diversity of experiences that inspires India's young professionals and millennials

comes to mind, is the US. "It has so many destinations that are great for adventure, but the one place that I can say is probably home for adventure is Utah. Due to the pandemic, travellers are eager to get out in the open – cycle, hike, or do self-drive. New Zealand is also great for adventure but unfortunately, it's not open yet," he adds.

## Diverse experiences

**Rajeev Kale**, President & Country Head – Holidays, MICE, Visa,

Thomas Cook (India), says, "We are witnessing increasing queries: From stays in a treehouse to an ice igloo while chasing the Northern Lights in Finland/Russia's Lapland, winter sports in Switzerland to hiking, biking and camping in the rugged yet spectacular terrain of Utah – the Zion Narrows, Bryce Canyon's Riggs Spring, Loop Bonneville Salt Flats or Saratoga/Diamond Fork hot springs. Utah offers a various experiences that inspire Indian young experts as also the family segment."

## Tourism on recovery mode

► Contd from page 3

of the event is to highlight the tourism potential of the region in the domestic and international markets.

The event was attended by over 300 delegates, including government officials, industry stakeholders, and local participants.

He also stated that through the programme, 50 students from various parts of the country will have the opportunity to learn about and understand North East India this year. "I would also like to ask the ambassadors of different countries to motivate the tourists of their countries to visit. The govt. is doing a lot for the development of tourism in the NE. To prepare the infrastructure, the government of India has sanctioned funds in the NE states under the "Swadesh Darshan" and "Prashad" schemes. Under the 'Swadesh Darshan' scheme, 16 projects have been approved in the North-East, which have been completed or are nearing completion. He also appealed to state governments to celebrate

Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav with great enthusiasm.

He added on the second day, "The Northeast region is endowed with diverse tourist attractions and each state has its own distinct features. Attractions are scattered over the entire region and are largely located in remote areas within a

The facilities for tourists to stay, eat, shop and enjoy entertainment are improving tremendously

highly fragile environment. The North East has huge potential for adventure and eco-tourism.

**Neiphiu Rio** expressed his hope, saying, "The ITM in Kohima will give a boost to the tourism and business sector not only in Nagaland but the entire North East. The North East will become a favourite destination in the country for tourism and

business. North Eastern India's rich natural beauty, serenity, and exotic flora and fauna are invaluable resources for the development of tourism, particularly eco-tourism. The facilities for tourists to stay, eat, shop and enjoy entertainment are improving tremendously."

On the second day, the state tourism departments of Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Sikkim, and Tripura gave presentations on their tourism potential and products. Following that, experts discussed various aspects of tourism and unique tourism products, including the potential of rafting, trekking, and road expeditions; the potential of fairs and festivals for tourism in the NER; and the potential of food and wine tourism in the NE.

A coffee table book on Nagaland was also launched. The event would allow tourism product suppliers from the region to reach out to domestic buyers to promote tourism. Domestic buyers will be engaging in business-to-business meetings with sellers from the NE Region as well.

## Hospitality all set to bloom

With the fear of the new variant, tourism and hospitality sector of India is witnessing a slow growth in business. Swosti Group is positive and confident about 2022.



Janice Alyosius

**A**s the Indian wedding season is here, hotels are expecting the business to improve. The government has increased the gathering capacity limits, which has really helped the hotels.

"We have been flooded with mails and enquiries from guests for marriage bookings and all hotels of Swosti Group are booked on



**JK Mohanty**  
CMD, Swosti Group, Chairman IATO, Eastern Region & Chairman, Hotel & Restaurant Association of Odisha

& Chairman, Hotel & Restaurant Association of Odisha.

Talking about the business in 2021, Mohanty mentioned that the Swosti Group is coming up with a Luxury Resort Property on the beach in Puri.

"Puri is an important place and is the tourist capital of Odisha. Presently there are no five-star hotels and Odisha is missing out in attracting high-end tourists to Puri. To fill up this gap, the Swosti Group has planned this resort in the right moment and we hope to complete the project

as early as possible. The Swosti Group is confident of making the Puri project a success because the in-house travel company, M/s Swosti Travels, established in the year 1986 is already linked with all domestic and international tour operators," he said.

Speaking of the expectations from 2022, Mohanty said, "After facing severe setbacks caused by COVID-19, the tourism as well as the hospitality industry is recovering slowly. In the coming year 2022, I forecast that business travel will grow. Further vaccine booster and vaccination plans for children will increase more travel both domestic as well as international tourists".

It is a great opportunity for the Eastern India to showcase its vast and rich tourism potential at the IATO Annual Convention which is being conducted physically after COVID-19," said Mohanty, speaking about the convention.

With vaccine booster, I forecast travel to grow domestically and internationally

all marriage dates and on non-saya dates. We are booked to full capacity till the year-end," said **JK Mohanty**, Chairman and Managing Director, Swosti Group, Chairman IATO, Eastern Region



# Future of sustainable travel business

The first International Summit Travel Management concluded in Cordoba, highlighting a specialised segment of corporate travel after the global health crisis. The discussions during the event focused on sustainable tourism and ways to make travel more eco-friendly.



TT Bureau

Cordoba played host to the International Summit Travel Management, the first meeting organized post pandemic that focused on corporate travel and its trends moving forward. The Spanish Association of Business Travel Managers, AEGVE, organised this event and invited representatives from across Europe to understand the future of business travel and realign expectations.

"In the current global scenario, it is considered an opportunity to hold the event that will serve as a reference point for both national and international participants," says Victor Rawinad, Chairman, AEGVE group.

Interestingly, the conversations moved beyond the current pandemic very quickly and focused



First international Summit for Travel Management in Cordoba

on the need for ease of travel. While border restrictions were discussed, they were something that one needs to live with but improve the overall customer experience to encourage travel.

Europe is preparing for a huge comeback of business travel, the need and desire to travel for work is still very strong and the industry sentiment focussed on that through the two day convention.

Sustainable travel remained significant and the need to reduce the carbon footprint continued to take centre stage.

The buzz words for business travel in Europe are people, planet and profitability where risk management and productivity are compared to carbon footprint, cost control and sufficient planning behind each trip. Flights vs train journeys have become

a heated discussion again and the sustainability in business travel will help define future travel trends. The ISTM analysed the health emergency's impact on corporate travel, the possible changes that would have occurred in this area, and the foreseeable evolution they will have in the coming years.

Day to day issues were also discussed during the business ses-

sions and strategies to integrate hybrid events were brought into the limelight. Organised against the beautiful backdrop of Cordoba, the ISTM highlighted the various MICE offerings in Andalusia and helped showcase the strength of the region in hosting business events.

## ISO 31030

A key takeaway from the event was the new travel risk

standard ISO 31030 recently launched to help travel risk managers develop a streamlined, integrated and effective process to ensure the safety

Flights vs train journeys have become a heated discussion again and the sustainability in business travel will help define future travel trends

of their travellers. ISO 31030 covers all aspects of corporate travel including authorisations, planning, policy, traveller assessment, transportation, destination, accommodation and much more.

## The 'liquid gold' hidden in Spain

With 250 million olive trees across the country, Spain is the world's leading producer of olive oil. In Andalusia, one can witness olive plantations as far as the eye can see, making it an ideal holiday destination to enjoy the country's liquid gold aka olive oil. An ideal MICE destination, it has varied experiences.



TT Bureau

A train journey away from Madrid is the beautiful city of Cordoba in Andalusia. An ideal MICE destination, the city has varied experiences to offer, along with quality conference facilities and attractive event backdrops.

World Heritage Sites declared by Unesco, cultural and gastronomic, the wide hotel offers, make Cordoba a clear reference, in addition with a claim of being a safe and accessible city, makes it a destination with great potential. From 2022, there will be a Centre for exhibition purpose, fairs, and conventions with a capacity of up to 1,700 helping Cordoba host events of any size," said Isabel Albás Vives, 1st Tte. Mayor and Councillor for Tourism, Cordoba City Council.

Welcoming the first ever international summit travel management, Alberto Ortiz de Saracho, Managing Director, Andalusian Tourism, said, "The development of these large events in Andalusia and, more specifically, in Cordoba has a great effect on the territory. It offers the possibility of knowing the Cordoba offer on-site. This block refers to the



phrase "an image is more valuable than a thousand words". These actions allow hundreds of professionals in the sector to learn about the excellent Andalusian tourist offer, an especially relevant fact, both from a professional point of view and personal. Lastly, they show an image of Andalusia as a safe destination, where to enjoy your holidays or hold meetings or events, within a safe environment that complies

with all the sanitary measures in order to reduce the negative effects that COVID-19 delivered as much as possible."

Moving beyond the MICE facilities, the region offers a perfect opportunity to explore the olive belt of the country. A short drive away from Cordoba, the region highlights its rural tourism offering with a chance to explore small towns and enjoy the cul-

ture along with some great wine and olive oil tasting.

A favourite is Priego de Cordoba, a town located in the south east of Andalusia, at the heart of the Sierra Subbética region. At the foot of fertile plains and under the shelter of the mountains of the Nature Reserve of the Sierras Subbéticas, Priego's exceptional setting was valued by Iberians and Romans, thus making it a

city full of culture and history. Priego, is a series of secluded streets and corners crammed with noble houses, architectural monuments and sculptures, all within a complex, irregular urban layout. Two things stand out in the town are water, which is abundant, and baroque architecture, which is predominant in Priego.

A wonderful way of going deeper into the culture of the area is to taste some of the culinary preparations, in which olive oil is clearly the main feature. No trip to the region can be complete without a visit to the museum and distillery of Anisette. Brewing anisettes and liquors, this experience is different from anything that the region has to offer.

While Andalusia continues to unfold its different offerings, the destination promises to be ideal for your next MICE trip.

Moving beyond the MICE facilities, the region offers a perfect opportunity to explore the olive belt of the country

"Cordoba has a unique historical legacy, with an unbeatable geographical location and excellent rail connections. The wealth of heritage (with four



# Explore Andalucía once again

Andalucía today is a modern region of Spain and while it is conscious of the need to move forward with times, it is also careful to maintain its cultural heritage and monuments, legacy of the region's ancestors.



**T**he diversity of landscapes and geographical terrain of Andalucía gives rise to an array of environments that go from the heat of the Guadalquivir River valley through to luxuriant mid-mountain areas, volcanic landscapes such as the Tabernas desert, and the snow-capped peaks of Sierra Nevada.

In barely 40 km you can go from Alpine mountain landscapes to tropical areas on the shores of the Mediterranean. The coast of Andalucía stretches for almost 900 km and is home to a large number of cities, towns and beaches. The ensemble represents a range of attractions for tourists that goes from impressive monuments in large towns to small villages, which are a constant source of inspiration for all kinds of artists.

## Live virtual session for Thomas Cook India

Turespaña Office in India, together in collaboration with the Andalucía Tourist Board and their participating tourism boards of Córdoba, Granada, Costa del Sol-Málaga and Sevilla, recently organised a two-hour live virtual training session for Thomas Cook India (TCIL). It was attended by



more than 130 employees of TCIL from across India.

Besides in-depth destination presentations by the official tourism boards, the interactive session had some light moments of 15 minutes live tutorial on flamenco dancing by an artist from Málaga, María Victoria Blanco Granado. The knowledge quiz captured much attention with winners taking away Amazon E-Gift Vouchers worth Rs 1,000 each for every correct answer.

## Córdoba

Cordoba today is a city of immense monumental wealth, having been declared a part of Humanity's Heritage in 1994, with art and history to be found in every alleyway, patio and

square. The city is best known for its Mosque, a unique building which highlights the splendour of this one-time Caliphate. We must not forget the Cathedral in-

ments such as the Alhambra, the Cathedral and the stunning landscapes seen from the viewpoint of San Nicolás; the sense of smell with its jasmine blossom

## Felicidades! Congratulations!

Preetika Sood	Aniket Khedkar	Sakshi Khanna
Erwin Fulgado	Praveen Roy	Deepali Wakkar
Naveen Kumar Bharadwaj	Vaibhav Girdhar	Jimit Patadiya
Devaki Apte	Deepak Kumar	Gopal Agnihotri

side the Mosque and the myriad of other charms and locations that this city has to offer.

## Granada

Granada is a city that will captivate all senses: your sense of sight with its impressive monu-

mented streets in the Albaicín district; the sense of hearing with the flamenco celebrations of the Sacromonte; the sense of touch when you cast your hand over the ancient stones of the buildings; sense of taste when you try the delicious local dishes. Granada is a city of kings.

## Costa del Sol - Málaga

Costa del Sol - Málaga is the gateway to Andalucía. The province of Málaga means beaches and nature, cosmopolitan cities, culture and history, inland land-

## Winners Speak

Travellers to Spain can dance their way to this Southern Surprise that awaits them. This beautiful region is inspired by the birthplace of the intriguing Flamenco art. The Andalusian region has something to offer for everyone - from pretty beaches, to deep-rooted history, delicious culinary experiences, culture and its friendly people!



**Erwin Fulgado**  
Senior Manager - Long Haul Products  
FIT Leisure Travel Outbound - MUMBAI



**Deepak Kumar**  
Branch In charge  
Leisure Travel  
Outbound Business - NEW DELHI

Andalucia has a lot to offer for everyone, be it a nightlife, beaches or nature. One of the best features of Andalucia's beaches, apart from the soft sand and clear waters, are the beach bars selling fresh fish and salads. The virtual session conducted for us was really good and we got to learn a lot more about Andalucia as a destination.

Andalucia, a destination that holds true to the fact there is something for everyone. Experience culture and history at the Mosque Cathedral of Cordoba, hiking at Sierra de Grazalema natural park, soak up some sun at Malaga. Such an experiential destination and not to forget the scrumptious food!



**Sakshi Khanna**  
Assistant Manager  
Trade Relationships - MUMBAI



**Devaki Apte**  
Assistant Manager  
Leisure Travel Outbound - MUMBAI

The training was absolutely brilliant, covering places like Seville, Malaga, and Cordoba. We were able to witness the culture of Andalucia through this training for e.g. watch a Flamenco performance. They also conducted a quiz which covered history, food and festivals. Thank you so much Turespaña.

## Flamenco, World Heritage



Image Courtesy: Maria Victoria Blanco Granado

On 16 November 2010 Flamenco was designated World Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO.

A fact which strengthens and asserts the importance of this hallmark of Andalusian artistic expression. Such significant recognition also highlights its national and international importance.

The year following its declaration as World Heritage, as an anniversary celebration for this event which commemorates the importance of our cultural heritage, the Andalusian Regional Government declared this date "Flamenco Day in Andalusia".

Since then, this important date is commemorated with many activities relating to Flamenco: conferences, exhibitions, concerts, and shows among others.

board of Costa del Sol-Málaga would love to inspire and share their knowledge about the destination.

Alcázares, the patios of its traditional houses, as well as an endless number of churches, which convert the ancient city centre



scapes and beautiful, postcard-worthy villages overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. It is the perfect place to escape to, discover new places and live out unforgettable experiences. The tourism

## Sevilla

Impossible to find another urban centre which boasts such varied and unusual monuments and places of such beauty as the Giralda, the Cathedral, Reales

into an open-air museum. Add to this, its taverns, its cuisine, its festivals, and the humour and hospitality of its people, you have a city that's full of tradition and modernity.



## EVENT TALK

Media Partners:



## DECEMBER 2021

Date	Event	Time
15	CAPA Live	Virtual
17-19	India Travel Mart - Jaipur	10:00 am
23-26	Thai International Travel Fair 2021	10:00 am
24-26	India Travel Mart - New Delhi	9:00 am

## JANUARY 2022

7-9	Holiday Expo-Coimbatore	Virtual
12	Dubai Accessible Tourism International Summit	10:00 am
13	Webinar with Cordelia Cruises	3:00 pm
17	Outbound Travel Roadshow Delhi	9:00 am
19-23	<b>FITUR</b>	<b>11:00 am</b>
21	India Travel Mart	10:00 am
21-22	International Conference on Tourism, Transport, and Logistics	TBA
21-22	India International Travel Mart Ahmedabad	10:00 am
23-26	IMPACT Sustainability Travel & Tourism	TBA
27-29	India International Travel Mart Cochin (IITM)	10:00 am

For more information, contact us at: [talk@ddppl.com](mailto:talk@ddppl.com)

## Promoting good tourism practices

The Dominican Republic will be a FITUR partner country for FITUR 2022 by IFEMA MADRID, to be held from January 19 to 23, 2022, under the slogan 'Embracing the World'. This year they are focussing on good tourism practices.



Following the milestone of FITUR 2021, the Trade Fair dedicates all of its efforts to its mission, to contribute to the recovery of tourism, in its 'Special Tourism Recovery' edition, backed by the entire value chain of the international tourism industry. The representation of the Spanish tourism industry has already been confirmed at its highest level, in terms of autonomous communities and cities, as well as positively in terms of companies, to which must be added the growth of official international participation, which stands at more than 70 per cent compared to the results of FITUR 2020 and represents a 240 per cent increase as compared to the May 2021 edition, two months before the event.

Thus, FITUR 2022, in alignment with elements such as the

gradual normalisation of tourism activities and the government's backing in declaring it as an event of exceptional public interest, as well as support from institutions, countries and destinations, hotel chains, travel agencies, and tour

the tourism market, with its sections FITURTECHY, FITUR KNOW HOW & EXPORT, FITUR MICE, FITUR HEALTH, FITUR ENTERTAINMENT, FITUR TALENT, FITUR LGBT+, FITUR LINGUA, and FITUR WOMAN, as well as



ing good tourism practices in terms of accessibility. FITUR will be held in eight halls: The US in Hall 3; Europe and the ME in Hall 4; APAC and Africa in Hall 6; Spanish official organisations in Halls 5, 7, and 9; and travel technology and companies in Halls 8 and 10.

The Dominican Republic, being the FITUR Partner Country, will have strategic visibility to showcase the country's tourist attractions. The country is the FITUR Partner for the second time. It aims to highlight its mild climate and people's hospitality, its connections with over 1,400 airports from 170 countries, and its proper handling of the pandemic in terms of tourism protocols, vaccination of the local population, and particularly tourism industry workers.



operators, technological companies, suppliers, transportation, will once again contribute all of its resources to tourism.

The event continues to focus on the various segments that drive

B2B events and programmes that will showcase future key points and challenges, with emphasis on the digital transition and sustainable development. The FITURNEXT Observatory is focussing this year on promot-

## SkyHelix Sentosa: Ready for a spin?

Mount Faber Leisure Group's got brand revamp from its previous corporate brand, One Faber Group. The revamp is a timely reaffirmation of its commitment to reinforce its position as one of Singapore's top leisure operators. Through this launch they seek to contribute to Singapore's vision of becoming a top sustainable urban destination.



Mount Faber Leisure Group's anticipated new attraction, SkyHelix Sentosa, is Singapore's highest open-air panoramic ride and will be the first carbon-neutral attraction in Sentosa.

Through the launch of this attraction, Mount Faber Leisure Group seeks to contribute to Singapore's vision of becoming a top sustainable urban destination.

Located within Imbiah Look-out, SkyHelix Sentosa is an unforgettable gondola ride that reveals breathtaking views as it gently rotates 35 metres above ground along a vertical helix-like structure. The ride's apex is 79 metres above sea level, making it one of the highest vantage points on Sentosa. The ride opens in Singapore on December 15, 2021.



Jean Ng  
Executive Director, Attractions,  
Entertainment and Tourism Concept  
Development, STB

Buhdy Bok, managing director, Mount Faber Leisure Group, said, "As Singapore eyes recovery of its tourism sector, the opening of SkyHelix Sentosa signals a message of hope and optimism for the industry. We believe the panoramic views of SkyHelix Sentosa will inspire diverse audiences."

Thien Kwee Eng, Chief Executive, Sentosa Development Corporation, said, "SkyHelix Sentosa illustrates how the

Sentosa community has come together to push ahead into the future, despite the challenges of the past year. SkyHelix Sentosa will join a diverse pipeline of new Sentosa experiences at Oasia Resort Sentosa, a perfumery experience at Scentopia, and the island's new lifestyle destination, Southside. We look forward to welcoming more guests to Sentosa, as we bolster our position as Asia's leisure destination."

Jean Ng, Executive Director, Attractions, Entertainment and Tourism Concept Development, STB, said, "As international travel gradually resumes, new attractions such as SkyHelix Sentosa will signal international travellers that Singapore is ready to welcome them. It also adds to the variety of family-friendly offerings that locals can enjoy. STB will continue to work with industry partners to support the development of innovative projects."

## Taking it to the next level

SkyHelix Sentosa will be a captivating addition to Sentosa's appealing leisure experiences, a short walk away from Singapore Cable Car's Sentosa station.

Guests will be seated in an open-air gondola for a 12-minute journey, including 10 minutes at the summit, during which the gondola will slowly spin. Guests can enjoy a cold beverage made particularly for SkyHelix Sentosa.

The attraction gives the passengers varied views of Sentosa, guaranteeing a new experience with each trip. Once the sun sets, the attraction is illuminated by energy-efficient LED lights, making it a beacon of light on Sentosa and a new addition to the Singapore cityscape.

To safeguard the health and safety of guests, SkyHelix Sentosa is available to vac-

inated guests only and children under 12 years of age. Prevailing Safe Management Measures (SMM), such as group size limits and rigorous sanitising regimes, will be implemented. Guests may reserve

The opening of SkyHelix Sentosa signals a strong message of hope and optimism for the industry and the country

their visiting date and time while purchasing tickets. Members of Mount Faber Leisure Group's Faber Licence annual membership programme will enjoy a discount of 20 per cent on tickets year round.

## Safety and sustainability

The SkyHelix Sentosa structure is designed and constructed by French company, Aero-Phile, a leading expert on high-point attractions.

Safety measures include an electronic safety mechanism to ensure guests are properly secured, emergency brakes, and power supply systems. The guests must meet a minimum height requirement of 1.05 metres to enjoy the ride.

As an added safety measure, an attraction host will accompany the guests on the ride to ensure all safety protocols are followed, while introducing the surrounding views and key landmarks as the gondola ascends.

SkyHelix Sentosa's energy-efficient design utilises minimal electricity for its operations.



# Rightly 'sensing' business in India

Six Senses Fort Barwara is the first property in India by the coveted Six Senses B rand, and the luxurious fort offers everything from quality service, comfortable stays, local experiences, great wellness escape and the best in hospitality. Six Senses have actively crafted experiences around the guest needs.



Nisha Verma

**S**ix Senses Fort Barwara, which formally opened its doors to the guests on October 15, 2021, is the most recent luxurious escape for connoisseurs of luxury and dedicated service in Sawai Madhopur, Rajasthan.

## Not run-of-the-mill

While Rajasthan has a panoply of heritage and luxury properties, **Sangjay Choegyal**, GM, Six Senses Fort Barwara, shared,

"As a brand, Six Senses has a vision to be a luxury resort where guests can reconnect with themselves, others and the world around them. Currently, every marquee hospitality brand has a presence in major cities of Rajasthan, but we wanted to tap untouched and unexplored places given the vast expanse and diversity of India. Six Senses Fort Barwara finds its home in a tranquil area of rural Rajasthan, and 30 minutes away from the Ranthambore National Park. We feel it is the perfect location to



**Sangjay Choegyal**  
General Manager  
Six Senses Fort Barwara

help you reconnect and explore what it means to be mentally, physically, spiritually and emotionally happy. The property offers crafted guest experiences to stimulate, energise and revitalise the human spirit, delivered by global experts from a wide range of backgrounds."

## Step ahead

"Each property is designed and constructed to enhance the landscape and assist the local

community. Six Senses properties are intimate, offering an emotionally intelligent approach to service that begins with empathy. We deliver the latest and most effective wellness programs and experiences in partnership with leading experts. It is committed to preserving the environment through sustainable operations, guided by overarching goals and values," he adds.

## Travel trade engagement

Choegyal believes that trade partners are at the helm of every sales & marketing initiative that they take.

While this is the first property of the brand in India, Choegyal says that they are open to take over properties which meet their brand ethos. "This property has certainly set the bar very high for our future properties in India. We are willing to take over

existing hotels that have a magical quality and are at great locations," he adds.

## Wellness options

Six Senses Spas are synonymous with wellness and Choegyal shares that the 30,000 square foot, Six Senses Spa and

system, meditation, and personalised wellness programs based on the principles of Eastern medicine and result-oriented Western influences," he adds.

## MICE-wise

For the MICE segment, the property offers a launch package, called Celebrate with Six Senses offer. "Here, we encourage a buy-out for end user should they book 30 suites minimum out of the 48 suites for two nights. This gives them the exclusivity for all the functions that they wish to hold within the range of venues that we have available without hindering the FIT experience. Also, we have venues for indoor & outdoor with authentic and unique offerings of backdrops of the 14th century fort ranging from the Stepwell, Zenana Mahal Lawns, The courtyard at the Cortile or The Viewing Gallery to enhance the celebration mood."

Each property is designed and constructed to enhance the landscape and assist the local community

fitness centre at Fort Barwara is located within the original women's palace and both temples. "The spa offers an extensive Ayurvedic 'whole body' healing



## MAYFAIR expands presence

MAYFAIR Spa Resort & Casino Gangtok is one of the best luxury resorts in India. With business slightly picking up, the brand plans to expand themselves in the year 2022



Janice Alyosius

**B**usiness has started to pick up over the past few months especially in the leisure destinations. While corporate and group movements have yet to get to normal levels, positive signs of a recovery have been experienced by the hospitality industry. Business queries has seen a proportionate increase and people are optimistic about business in the new year.

MAYFAIR Spa Resort & Casino Gangtok is one of the best luxury resorts in India. The property is spread across a stunning 48 acres of beautiful forested land that offers wonderful ambience, attentive service and world class amenities. Speaking of additions, **Bjorn Noel Deniese**, Advisor - Sales, Marketing & Business Development, MAYFAIR Hotels & Resorts, said, "Mayfair Tea Resort at Siliguri is the newest addition. It is at the



**Bjorn Noel Deniese**  
Advisor - Sales, Marketing & Business Development, MAYFAIR Hotels & Resorts

foothills of Darjeeling & Sikkim and is possibly one of the best Mayfair Hotels built yet. It encapsulates the entire MAYFAIR experience beautifully".

"MAYFAIR Spa Resort & Casino at Gangtok will also see an addition of rooms due to the steady demand the resort has witnessed over the years and we are expanding further into the Northeast with a new property coming up at Guwahati and Goa under the new management model", he added further.

Speaking of 2022, DeNiese said, "We have some exciting plans at MAYFAIR that will shortly be out. While the group has been considered an East-focused brand for a long time, we will be get-

Due to the steady demand the resort has witnessed over the years and we plan on expanding further

ting a lot closer to you through the new expansion model which is tapping into some great new markets for us". He further added, "We're targeting to open Goa early in the next financial year and Guwahati subsequently. We will also be focusing on ensuring our partners from the industry are better equipped to sell us with some interesting technological innovations keeping them in mind".

## Royal experience for tourists

Shahpura Hotels & Resorts after the successful launch of three hotels in 2021, plans on widening its spectrum pan India with hotels in Mumbai, Goa, Kerala and Dubai next year.



Janice Alyosius

**S**hahpura Hotels & Resorts operate 10 Hotels across Rajasthan. July 2021 onwards, business has picked up slightly, with domestic tourism booming, most of the hotels are booked with domestic travellers at present and hoping of inbound tourists in the coming year. Shahpura Hotels & Resorts in Kumbhalgarh and Udaipur were the first ones to experience the growth in business.

Speaking of the business, Digraj Singh Shahpura, Founder, Shahpura Hotels & Resorts, said, "We are now getting a fair number of queries and majority of our hotels are selling out. We have also started getting dates for 2022 and 2023 from inbound market, which is great news for us".

With the wedding season on the peak, Shahpura Hotels &



**Digraj Singh Shahpura**  
Founder  
Shahpura Hotels & Resorts

Resorts are overwhelmed with bookings for destination weddings revealed

Speaking of year 2022, Digraj Singh said that Shahpura Hotels & Resorts recently added three hotels in 2021 and now are planning to launch hotels in Mumbai, Goa, Kerala and Dubai by 2022. "The next year will be a good one for the industry; we are witnessing inbound travellers coming to India with some staying at our hotels. We are hoping that the business will grow not just

domestically but internationally too in 2022".

Shahpura Hotels is one of the finest heritage hotels in Rajasthan. It provides a royal experience for the visitors. It was built as a composite creation blending the traditional with the best in modern architecture

We have also started getting dates for 2022 and 2023 from inbound market, which is great news for us

ture to offer the guests a royal experience, Digraj Singh said. The rooms are luxurious and equipped with the best of the facilities. The period furniture is a visual delight. This heritage property offers visitors a traditional Rajput hospitality amid modern times."



## NEW CONCEPT TRAVEL

**Mumbai**  
**BIJAL THANAVALA** joins, New Concept Travel (Hong Kong) as an independent Marketing Partner, in India to further strengthen their presence in-market. With the vast array of destinations under the NCT brand, Thanavala will be responsible for parts of Europe and Africa, the Americas, Oceania and majority of Asia-Pacific nations, while their present partner Global Destinations will continue to promote the destinations under their current ambit. Thanavala has been working as a freelance travel Marketing and Sales professional with over 24 years of experience across varied tourism products of DMCs, Airlines, GDS and TA.



## RADISSON RED

**Chandigarh**  
**KSHITIJ JAWA** has been appointed as the General Manager of yet-to-be-launched Radisson RED of the Radisson Hotel Group. He will be introducing the RED brand and will lead a team of 300 associates at Radisson RED Chandigarh. He has the ability to elevate brand standards, create a bespoke guest experience, and craft an environment with the best employee work culture. With 15 years of experience, his strengths lie in pre-opening projects, hotel operations, marketing, food & beverage, team management. Kshitij also served as the General Manager at Radisson Noida.



## ITC GARDENIA

**Bengaluru**  
**GAURAV SONEJA** has been appointed as the General Manager of ITC Gardenia, Bengaluru. He started his career with The Leela Hotels in 2003, followed by stints as Restaurant Manager at Emirates Palace - Abu Dhabi and Ishtar Palace - Jordan. In 2009, he moved to ITC Gardenia, Bengaluru as Beverage Manager and played a role in setting up the hotel's beverage portfolio. His go-getter attitude brings out the best in those who work with him. Gaurav is an avid golfer and is an animal lover and has two dogs.



## LE MERIDIEN GOA

**Calangute**  
**BABITA KANWAR** has joined as the General Manager of Le Meridien Goa, Calangute- A unit of Models Leisure Venture. She has an experience of 20 years in hotel sales and operations. Having started her career in F&B Operations in Taj and Oberoi hotels in India. She went on to lead the Market Sales set up for the Marriott Hotels in Mumbai and moved on to Shanghai as Director of Sales and Marketing where she was pivotal in the success of the flagship Marriott City Centre Hotel. In her last role, Babita Kanwar led the team of Courtyard by the Marriott Mumbai International Airport as GM for a period of four years.



## THE WESTIN HYDERABAD MINDSPACE

**Hyderabad**  
**GIRISH SINGH CHAUHAN** has taken over as the Director of Engineering at The Westin Hyderabad Mindspace. He started with TATA Thermal Power Station, Trombay, and later entered JW Marriott Mumbai Juhu. With 20 years of experience, his initiatives were implemented across JW Marriott Hotels. He has been affiliated with the Hyatt Group of Hotels. His also worked with Marriott International spanned for nine years. He formerly served with the Grand Hyatt Muscat where he assisted in pre-opening of Alila Hinu Bay. His approach in introducing new initiatives and projects are among his strengths.



## THE WESTIN CHENNAI VELACHERY

**Chennai**  
**VENKAT BHUVANESWARAN** has been promoted as director sales and marketing on the Westin Chennai Velachery. With 20 years of experience, he started his career in food & beverage operations with the Park Group of hotels. It was in Bengaluru where he commenced his journey in 2001, and later moved to Chennai. He later shifted to Hyderabad in 2006. He later moved to Catering & Event sales at Hyderabad International Convention Centre in 2008. In 2011, he moved to Hilton Chennai. In 2014, Venkat joined The Westin Chennai Velachery in 2014.



## SAYAJI HOTELS LTD.

**Mumbai**  
**GIRISH MENON** has been appointed by Sayaji Hotels Ltd. as Associate Director -Development. An alumnus of Hospitality and Tourism Management from Edexcel United Kingdom. He is a passionate hospitality professional with over 15 years of work experience, and exposure in Guest relations, Marketing, Operations and Business Development. Prior to this, he was associated with Lords Hotels & Resort as Business Development Manager and is a former Business Head with Vignette Hospitality pvt. Ltd. He has also worked with reputed Hotel Group companies such as Kamat Group of Hotels and Great London Hospitality.



## AMRITARA HOTELS AND RESORTS

**New Delhi**  
**AKASH BHATIA** joins Amritara Hotels and Resorts as the Group General Manager. Bhatia will be focusing on chains commercial growth, brand reputation and devising initiatives to boost chain positioning. His experience includes Ramee Group of Hotels-Bahrain as Cluster GM and Lemon Tree Hotels as Regional GM in Gujarat Region, Vadodara, Begaluru, East Delhi and Corporate Office Delhi where worked in hospitality, business development and strategic management. Bhatia has also won Best general Manager by FHRAI and the National Tourism Award for his hotel in Delhi.



## SAROVAR HOTELS PVT. LTD.

**New Delhi**  
**HARPREET SINGH BABBAR** joins Sarovar Hotels Pvt. Ltd. as their new Regional Sales Manager for West. He will lead the sales development and implementation of business strategies for West Zone. He brings with him two decades of experience in Sales and Revenue growth for the brand. Before joining Sarovar Hotel, he was associated with Raheja Hotels, Carlson Hotels, Accor, Berggruen Hotels, and Lemon Tree Hotel. He will be responsible for development and implementation of business strategies for all the Hotels aligned with the brand's mission, vision and values.



## TALKing People

**SUMEET SURI**, General Manager of the JW Marriott Kolkata, relaxes by watching a movie or playing with his pet. He has managed to take up riding during the lockdowns, especially on empty roads and across great distances. Suri, who enjoys travelling, adds that his favourite holiday destinations in India and abroad are Ladakh and France, respectively. His next vacation, though, will be to the eastern part of India. His meditation gear, sport shoes, and phone with charger are the three items he must have with him when travelling.



**KUNAL PREM KUMAR GUJRAL** has taken over as the Hotel and Restaurant Association of Western India (HRAWI) Secretary General. He has more than 20 years of industry experience across F&B, sales and marketing. Prior to joining here he has served at the Riverside Resorts and Holiday Homes Pvt. Ltd. in Goa as its Vice President of Revenue & Sales. He has also worked in Bharat Hotels Limited, Shangri-La Hotels & Resorts, and Park Hotels. His current role entails liaising and facilitating the processes and functions of the office for management of the Association.



**SHAARIQ AKHTAR**, GM of ITC Kohenur in Hyderabad, likes to watch football and spending time with his family. Hunder Valley in Ladakh and Jaisalmer are his favourite vacation spots. "From a global perspective, Turkey is amazing, particularly Cappadocia." Edinburgh and Manchester are nice cities to visit. We haven't travelled outside of India in two years, so maybe our next vacation will be a hike up Japan's Mt Fuji, and and watch FIFA World CuCup," he says.





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# 'Welcome back to Singapore'

New Vaccinated Travel Lane that allows travellers from India and Sri Lanka access into quarantine-free Singapore. GB Srithar, Regional Director (India, Middle East & South Asia), STB, discusses new developments that will interest the travel trade.



Hazel Jain

## What was the idea behind initiating the WhatsApp business account for the trade?

STB India launched its pan-India WhatsApp Business Channel in August 2020 under our travel trade engagement solidarity call of #UnitedWeStand to actively engage with our travel trade partner-friends. It was part of our plans to expand trade communication efforts, beyond the virtual webinars and engagement sessions, e-mailer distribution of quarterly newsletters and regular interaction activities. Our intent is to strengthen our trade engagement relationships with the travel trade fraternity in India. As one of the first National Tourism Organisations to introduce a WhatsApp Business Account in India, we wanted to leverage this platform to disseminate information and updates on Destination Singapore in a direct and real-time manner.

## How has the response been for this?

Since the launch in August 2020, the response to our WhatsApp channel from our travel trade fraternity has been growing. There are currently 1,600 travel trade subscribers on our channel and we continue our outreach efforts to bring in more subscribers. As the channel provides timely information on destination Singapore, subscribers will find it useful to be well-equipped with content relevant for their clients. We invite our partner-friends to easily subscribe to the WhatsApp channel by clicking this link <http://bit.ly/stbindia> or scanning the QR code.

## What kind of conversations happen on these channels?

It is a push communications channel, direct from STB to our trade partner-friends, where we present real-time updates and useful information on destination Singapore, beneficial to them and their clients.

## Have some of the trade partners started getting inquiries for travel to Singapore?

Since the announcement of the India-Singapore VTL arrangement, many of our partners have shown interest in Singapore for year-end travel. As per one of our partners, Flight Centre Travel Group, inquiries for Singapore have increased by eight times, coinciding with the vacation and festive season. A recent survey by trade partners Thomas Cook

with our travel trade partner-friends to present Singapore as destination of choice to their clients. Recently, STB, Singapore Airline and Changi Airport Group jointly organised a trade update webinar to socialize the customer journey and VTL application with travel agents. The webinar saw an attendance of 1,000 agents from India, and we were heartened by the response. This indicated interest among Indian travel trade fraternity to promote Singapore as a top-of-mind destination among Indian travellers. We are monitoring the evolving situation due to Omicron variant and will adjust our plans, accordingly. Our rallying call and show of solidarity with the travel fraternity continues with our #UnitedWeStand messaging.

We are delighted that six daily VTL flights commenced on November 29, between India and Singapore

and SOTC indicated that Singapore continues to be a favored destination across their consumer segments with 65 per cent of respondents to a recent survey, indicating keen interest to visit the city once restrictions were eased.

## Tell us about some of the trade engagements STB has lined up for December 2021 and 2022?

With travel between India and Singapore now possible for short-stay visitors through the VTL arrangement, we will continue into 2022, our trade engagement theme of 'Charting our Pathways to Tourism Recovery'. We seek to work

## Singapore welcomes back Indian visitors through VTL

Speaking at the second of a series of trade update webinars on December 7, titled 'Welcome Back to Singapore,' GB Srithar, Regional Director, India, Middle East and South Asia, STB, said, "We are delighted that six daily VTL flights commenced on November 29, between India and Singapore. This is a big step towards promoting tourism as we 'Chart Our Pathways to Tourism Recovery' together with our travel trade partner-friends and welcome back Indian visitors." The VTL enables fully vaccinated travellers from India to visit Singapore without the need

for quarantine, subject to applying for a Vaccinated Travel Pass (VTP) and complying with safe travel measures.

The two sessions of webinars on November 25 and December 7, jointly organised by the STB, Singapore Airlines and Changi Airport Group, were well attended by more than 2,000 travel agents from the travel fraternity across India. This showed the strong interest to promote Singapore as one of the top of mind destinations among the consumers in India.



GB Srithar  
Regional Director (India, Middle East & South Asia)  
Singapore Tourism Board



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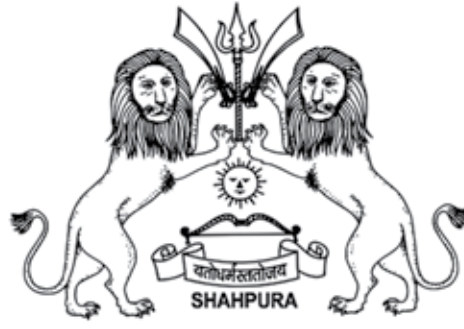
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