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Relief measures by FM vital

Officials of the Ministry of Tourism and trade association heads are all praises and grateful to Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman for the much-awaited relief declaring free e-Tourist visa till March 31, 2022 for the first 500,000 applicants.



Arvind Singh
Secretary, Ministry of Tourism

“We, at the Ministry of Tourism, welcome the relief measures and free-visa announcement that were recently made by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman. We have been in discussion with the Ministry of Finance on relief measures for the tourism and hospitality sectors, for a long time. We welcome the announcement, as it will help in the revival of the tourism sector and will promote inbound travel to India. This

is the kind of support that the tourism industry needed at a time like this. Tourism is one of the sectors that has been badly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic in India and across the world, and hence these measures are welcome by us. Since the relief measures have been announced for MOT-recognised tour operators only, we advise more stakeholders in the industry to get themselves registered.”



Rupinder Brar
ADG, Ministry of Tourism

“I would like to thank the Prime Minister, Finance Minister and Tourism Minister for announcement of relief measures for the tourism sector and taking up issues concerning the industry. We welcome the financial help for tourist guides and tour operators. It is also good that the recognised entities are being supported. The support that has come in terms of visa being announced free for the first 500,000 e-Tourist visas that will be applied for, will be a game changer. It sends a positive signal to the whole world that India is getting ready to open, the vaccination drive has picked up, number of cases are going down. Through this, we also want to send a message to the industry that please get recognised, so that you can be benefitted by any of the schemes of the government.”

Contd on page 6 ►

A hope in vaccines

Vaccinations are getting the popularity vote because they safeguard one's health and allow for travel. But will it work?



Benazir Nazar
CEO, Akbar Holidays

“We have been receiving a lot of enquiries for both international as well as domestic holidays from travellers who have got both their doses of vaccination. They are very keen to travel now. Everyone's missed their children's holidays and seems they would want to just take off after the prolonged periods of lockdown and travel restrictions between countries and within the country as well. But the reality of the flights not being operational, interstate restrictions, and the requirement of negative

RT-PCR tests remains. With the number of enquiries we have been getting, I am looking forward to a fruitful and busy year end, subject to easing of travel bans. That is yet to be seen and we hope for the best, safest solution. We also do weddings and have done a couple of them in different parts of the world and in India. But, yes, the number of inquiries that we would have ideally received have significantly gone down. Destinations include Phuket, Dubai, Istanbul, Bahrain, Alula, Bahamas, and Lake Como.”

Contd on page 11 ►

20,000+ rooms shut down



Hazel Jain

India's monthly occupancy reached a pandemic high in February (53.9%), which looked to be solid progress toward recovery as the monthly level was roughly 73% of 2019. By April, however, occupancy in the country fell to 31%, and more recently, just 21.5% for the week ending 30 May. During the week ending 30 May, Mumbai saw the country's highest occupancy level (43.2%) among STR defined markets, which was 60% of the comparable week in 2019. That said, sharing some data on the estimated number of hotels that have closed down since



Vidhi Godiawala
Business Development Manager
South and Central Asia, STR

COVID hit us, **Vidhi Godiawala**, STR's business development manager for South and Central Asia, says, “We cannot comment on the future possibilities and permanent closures. However, our data presently shows 270 properties (20,067 rooms) temporarily closed in India due to the pandemic.”

‘Yoga: Our greatest heritage’

The slew of activities organised by Ministry of Tourism to celebrate the seventh International Day of Yoga aimed to bring to light the importance of the Indian heritage in a COVID-riddled and post-pandemic world.



Nisha Verma

Ministry of Tourism (MOT) recently concluded a slew of activities that it had organised to commemorate the seventh International Day of Yoga, with celebrations at 75 heritage locations across India. The day-long programme commenced at Red Fort in Delhi, where a live telecast of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's address on International Day of Yoga was run, followed by **Prahlad Singh Patel**, Minister of State (I/C) for Tourism & Culture, performing yoga with Ministry officials including Ar-

vind Singh, Secretary - Tourism and Rupinder Brar, ADG - Tourism. Programmes similar to the event at Red Fort were also organised at each of the 75 cultural heritage locations with the active participation of all institutions/bodies of the Ministry to commemorate 75 years of Independence under the ‘Yoga, An Indian Heritage’ drive that forms part of the ‘Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav’ campaign.

Speaking on the occasion, Patel said, “Yoga is our greatest heritage. The Prime Minister has also announced that the world is getting the m-Yoga App,



Prahlad Singh Patel
Minister of State (I/C) for Tourism & Culture

which will provide many videos of yoga training based on common yoga protocol, in several languages. This App will help all the people of this world to live a healthy and happier life.”

Later that day, MOT organised a webinar titled ‘Yoga: The way of life’, which was graced by Patel along with Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. Patel said that yoga has helped during the pandemic and is contributing to the well-being of people across the globe.

He also appreciated the role played by Ministry of Culture and all its organisations in spreading awareness about the importance of Yoga and making this incredible initiative a great success. Speaking at the webinar, the Minister said that the

Contd on page 8 ►



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Digital marketing is key

Having conducted more than 100 virtual sessions with the trade across India so far, Indiatourism has not only been encouraging them to register with MOT but also advocating digital marketing as the means to promote Incredible India – with an MDA of ₹50,000.

 Hazel Jain

Indiatourism has been doing an ‘incredible’ job in reaching out to the travel trade since the pandemic hit us. The messaging has been consistent – register with the Ministry of Tourism and take advantage of its MDA scheme and promote India domestically as well as internationally. Not missing a single beat is **Venkatesan Dhattareyan**, Regional Director, Indiatourism Mumbai - Incredible India, Ministry of Tourism. Whether it is addressing the various travel trade association members over multiple webinars or conducting its own virtual sessions for one and all, he has been active consistently.

He says, “The main agenda is to inform all travel agents and tour operators of the revised guidelines of the MOT to make it simpler and easier for the service providers. Secondly, this is also linked to the online IITF certification programme for tour guides. This is especially beneficial for



Venkatesan Dhattareyan
Regional Director
Indiatourism Mumbai, MOT

those in rural areas. Thirdly, the Market Development Assistance (MDA) scheme has been expanded in a big way since December 2020. We have so far conducted more than 100 virtual sessions across India.”

₹50,000 MDA for digital marketing: MDA was expanded not only for attending trade shows but also conferences, conventions and roadshows. Another major thing which was revised is extending support for online marketing. This however does not include building websites but paid ads on social media since digital marketing is an effective mode of promotion

at ₹50,000 per year. Sharing some of the highlights of this programme’s benefits, Dhattareyan says, “This is a stamp of standard by the Government of India. It is a big marketing tool as well and lends credibility to the service provider. We have received many queries from foreign tour operators and

ism continues to be an important contributor to the tourism sector providing much needed resilience. Focusing on domestic tourism potential, encouraging fellow countrymen to explore their own country, taking a much-needed break within their own borders will be a winning strategy for India as the country eases lockdown.

The main agenda is to make it simpler and easier for service providers

Roping in outbound agents
More importantly, Indiatourism has also conducted a session with the Outbound Tour Operators Association of India (OTOAI) which Dhattareyan says is quite historic.

“They traditionally promote destinations outside of India. But they have now come forward to learn about India. They will need product-specific destination information from experts – so that they can also understand the potential of Chhattisgarh or Jharkhand. It gives even the outbound tour operators a chance to learn something new. This is another avenue that we are trying to explore – outbound operators,” he says.

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The day is here!

They say adversity is a blessing in disguise. While the COVID-19 pandemic did hurt the travel & tourism industry to an extent that its repercussions are still being felt today, it has opened some never-thought-of-before opportunities for the sector. In the past year and a half, though we did see many in the industry struggle, we also saw some taking the reins in their own hands and innovating to survive and then thrive. Hotels offered adaptive workation and staycation packages, travel agents helped each other out and learnt the lesson of keeping funds aside for a rainy day, and tourism stakeholders even got together to bear airline losses only to allow domestic traffic to trickle in and business to resume. Had the pandemic not hit the industry, many lessons may have been left unlearnt, many shortcomings in dealing with other stakeholders in the trade may have gone unchecked, and people may not have been able to fully utilise their potential and that of their respective businesses.

Now, the Ministry of Tourism has come out with draft national policies and strategic roadmaps for medical & wellness tourism, rural tourism, as well as the MICE sector. India, as a country, does possess the power of product, but lags behind in marketing, packaging and delivery. Our medical and wellness tourism products are world-renowned, and our rural sector remains significantly untapped even though it has more to offer than most other countries. MICE, too, is slowly gaining traction in the international arena, and the government does seem to be turning a keen eye to the sector by developing state-of-the-art infrastructure in key cities. Before proceeding to finalise the draft strategy document and to make the document more comprehensive, Ministry of Tourism has invited feedback, comments and suggestions. This may well be the golden opportunity that the industry was looking for, offering their inputs in policies that would shape the future of the industry. The pandemic, too, serves as an experience that stakeholders must inculcate in their suggestions to the government. After all, it strengthens the country's disaster management programme for tourists. With safety and hygiene being the norms of the new normal, the time is ripe to make the most of an opportunity that would make India's tourism policies and future roadmap a force to reckon with.

A safer, future-ready ecosystem

Vinay Malhotra, Regional Group COO – South Asia, Middle East & North Africa and Americas, VFS Global, says that in essence, the future of visa processing now rests with how the enablers are able to best integrate the dire need for safety to a new, disrupted journey.

Globalisation brought with it game-changing developments that set precedence for economic growth across geographies. One such development was the boost to cross-border travel for both recreational and business purposes that greatly influenced the economic growth of countries. The increase in demand for international travel led to the need for a streamlined visa application process that would ease the customer journey while applying for a visa and help the relevant embassies/consulates with the growing application load.

VFS Global, the world's largest visa outsourcing and technology services specialist, launched its services in 2001 to provide this very process. Over the years, VFS Global has expanded and launched new

and data prowess and operational excellence.

VFS Global has consistently invested in solutions that have been ahead of their time, and addressed every challenge meticulously, ensuring that every customer's first step into the journey is frictionless. As first-movers and creators of the space, VFS Global changed the face of visa services by revolutionising operations at the back of personalisation and customisation for both clients as well as customers.

Visa Application Centres were designed along the theme of customer-first, providing the necessary assistance and encouraging real-time resolution to feedback. Optional services were designed to help customers at every step, from filling their forms to end-to-end



Procurement process by providing travellers personalised services such as Visa At Your Doorstep (VAYD), Joint Visa Application Centres, self-up-load of documents, personal

rising demand, VFS Global launched a COVID-19 test appointment booking service in over 40 countries, in partnership with government accredited medical service providers, authorised to carry out tests as per local rules and regulations.

The strategy is to offer convenience at every step of the journey with safety at the core of it

assistance, eVisa solutions, IVR for helpline and chatbot help desks, all aimed at improving efficiency, turnaround time and reducing scope for error. As the company charts the road to bringing back the promise in travel, the strategy is to reimagine the customer journey and offer convenience at every step of the journey with safety at the core of it.

The future of visa application services

As borders reopen and travel restrictions ease gradually, a convenient and reliable pre-departure COVID-19 testing solution may become a catalyst in the recovery process of international travel. Testing all passengers for COVID-19 prior to departure at the country of origin would be a critical success factor. To meet this

More recently, VFS Global has entered a strategic partnership with Affinidi's Unifier and Accredify to address another aspect of safe border reopening. The partnership enables travellers to seamlessly book their mandatory pre-departure COVID-19 swab test and keep a copy of the swab's results online via VFS Global's network of accredited laboratories. With Accredify's tamper-proof HealthCert solution, the traveller's test results can be used for verification purposes by relevant authorities. Unifier then enables airlines and immigration authorities to digitally verify the authenticity of the test results using a simple QR code scan and matching the health credentials against the entry requirements of the destination country.



services at the back of innovative technology, building a digitised ecosystem for travel that boasts of the highest levels of safety and security.

The 20-year journey

The journey began with VFS Global in 2001 signing its first client government, the US Consulate in Mumbai, as an outsourcing partner supporting their administrative tasks around visa applications. Today, the organisation works with 63 governments globally, with operations spanning 144 countries managed via 3400+ Visa Application Centres; a success trajectory that can be attributed to VFS Global's tech

personalised assistance in exclusive premium lounges. These services saw demand grow over the years. While the pandemic pushed many sub-sectors within travel to instinctively invest in technology, not as an afterthought, for VFS Global it was at the heart of their business since inception. The company's depth of operations across geographies and the burgeoning number of travellers from across the globe enabled VFS Global to introduce innovations that were never thought possible in a consular, government-to-consumer setup. VFS Global cut through the supply chain lag and streamlined the Visa



Vinay Malhotra
Regional Group COO – South Asia, Middle East & North Africa and Americas, VFS Global

(Views expressed by the author are his own.
The publication may or may not subscribe to them.)

Being future ready is crucial

Rupinder Brar, Additional Director General, Ministry of Tourism (MOT), claims that MOT is pushing for the industry's demands to be heard, while creating a roadmap for promoting both inbound and domestic tourism. She says that the Ministry is aware of how lockdowns and restrictions significantly impact smaller businesses.



Nisha Verma

The second wave of the pandemic came as another major jolt to the travel business, agrees **Rupinder Brar**, adding that while it was a challenging time, the government is getting prepared on the vaccine front as well as making sure that travel restarts, albeit with protocols in place and being followed.

Reopening of monuments

From June 16, all centrally protected monuments, sites and museums under Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) were opened for tourists. Brar claims that the reports from visitors have been good. "We started getting reports of these monuments being already visited by a number of people from Day 1. However, at some places, including the Taj Mahal, there's a



Rupinder Brar
Additional Director General, MOT

restriction of no more than 650 people being permitted. This makes sense since we cannot forget COVID, and protocols need to

be respected. All opening will need caution, both from government as well as travellers. MOT is putting a lot of advisories and advocacy on social media handles that one must travel without ignoring the protocols. Many places, particularly in the hill states of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, will get many travellers as domestic tourism will open first, like last year," she points out.

Industry engagement

In light of the trickle-down effect on smaller businesses be-

cause of travel being stopped, Brar reveals that MOT, at all its levels, is talking to industry stakeholders and trying to find a way forward.

"The Honourable Minister of Tourism & Culture has met a lot of sections of tourism and hospitality in dealing with the pandemic and finding ways in terms of how to generate confidence in potential travellers, what needs to be done, what mechanisms we can give and what kind of outreach should India be creating not only for domestic but for inbound travellers as well. This kind of discussion, at the minister's level, as well as at the level of the officials, including the secretary and all of us, have seen a round of meetings planning the way forward in ensuring that India opens with great resolute strength and also remains

an incredible destination to be visited," she shares.

Promotional drive

Claiming that the MOT was all set to launch the global media plan but had to put it on hold

Our direct role continues to be putting a thrust on regeneration of demand

because of the onset of the pandemic, Brar says, "News started trickling in about the new variants of COVID-19. Hence,

we had to take stock of the situation unfolding globally as well as in India, factoring in when to get into a more aggressive mode of promotion. Currently, we are sticking to social media platforms of Incredible India as well as MOT's own handles to share information. However, looking at how things pan out globally as well as in India, we will need a lot of discussion with the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Home Affairs, so that better decisions are made in terms of right time for opening, and our campaign will be in sync with the same as far as inbound is concerned. Our direct role continues to be putting a thrust on regeneration of demand. If travellers are coming in and business can operate and open again, then automatically a lot of issues get addressed," she asserts.

'Please start planning'

Urging all corporates to start thinking ahead and planning all their MICE trips, **Madhavan Menon**, Managing Director, Thomas Cook (India), predicts that we are likely to witness an acute shortage of capacity initially due to sentiments of 'revenge' travel.



Hazel Jain

Speaking at the Thomas Cook India 'Mission Tomorrow' virtual event dedicated to MICE travel, the company's Managing Director, **Madhavan Menon**, urged the industry to plan for the future now. He said, "What is likely to happen in the next 12-18 months: I think there will be a huge amount of activity starting with IPL 2 in Dubai in September, Expo 2022 in Oc-



tober, and the T20 WC in Dubai in November. And I haven't even got to 2022 yet! My concern is that the last quarter of 2021 and the entire 2022 will see a rush – we

are going to witness constraints of travel at that time. I believe that we are going to enter that phase where flights are flying to capacity and seats are full. People are



Madhavan Menon
MD, Thomas Cook (India)

going to go into revenge mode since they couldn't travel for two years. I can see domestic and international travel bouncing back."

Menon added that Thomas Cook India is focused on inducing travel in the safest possible conditions.

"So how do we start planning for these trips? I would strongly recommend that you start planning your trips around some of these events. For instance, Dubai is wide open. It is leading the global

We are going to witness shortage of capacity. Travel is coming back

– Madhavan Menon



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

to be normal – normal in terms of availability of seats. We are going to witness shortage of capacity initially. Travel is coming back. And the most heartening news is all this speculation around health passports has been killed. They are now saying if you have a government-issued registration that you are vaccinated will be adequate," he said.

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

Visa, Thomas Cook (India), while launching the Thomas Cook India TravShield – Safe Travel Commitment, said, "To provide guidance to our MICE corporates and build confidence that it is safe to travel again, we have designed a three-pronged strategy that covers personal, financial and mental safety. Our TravShield is a comprehensive safe travel commitment designed with meticulous health and safety

TravShield is a safe travel commitment designed to safe guard customers

– Rajeev Kale

protocols to safe guard our MICE customers, and encompasses and enhances companies' existing Assured Insured Secured Travel Program." He reiterated, "We want Thomas Cook to be the 'Safest Travel Partner' when consumers start travelling again."

What is TravShield?

Thomas Cook India and SOTC Travel have announced a two-pronged strategy: TravShield and Holiday First & Pay When You Return. TravShield is designed with meticulous health and safety protocols to safeguard customers across Holidays, MICE and Business Travel and encompasses and enhances the companies' existing Assured Insured Secured Travel Program. The health and safety Assured Program, in partnership with Apollo Clinics, is inbuilt into TravShield. The Holiday First & Pay When You Return scheme provides customers the flexibility of paying once they return from their holiday.

Tourism Breaking News

- Arshdeep Anand to lead Women's Task Force of ATOAI
- Turnaround time for travel bookings quicker this time than 2020: Yatra.com
- AP tourist sites reopen, domestic roadshow planned
- Travelport and Amazon Web Services join hands to digitally transform travel retailing
- ITB Asia 2021 will be an all-virtual event, to be held on 25-29 Oct
- IRCTC cancels first 17 scheduled departures of Maharajas' Express from Oct 3 to Jan 23
- FHRAI urges extension to implement FSSAI license number
- Fairmont Jaipur re-opens from 27 June after months
- Switzerland lifts entry restrictions for vaccinated Indians under all visa categories

A strong, symbolic message

► Contd from page 1

“It's a welcome move by the Finance Minister to announce package or relief for the travel agents and the tourism people, especially the tourist guides, who are registered on the MOT website. However, I still feel that more should have come for the tourism sector, which is really suffering a huge cash flow crunch, seeing low business and are not even looking at any business coming and reviving quickly. I think more needs to be done; only 10% of stakeholders can benefit from this package as it includes only registered agents/ tour operators. The industry in general, has not been helped. But, it's a small light at the end of the tunnel.”



Jyoti Mayal
President, TAAI



Rajiv Mehra
President, IATO

“We are grateful for the relief to the tourism industry whenever visas are open, and we are grateful to the Hon'ble Tourism Minister for supporting us. I am hopeful e-Tourist visa will open soon and have appealed to the PM that visas for duration of 30 days be free for all those who apply for visa till 31st March 2023. I thank the government for considering loan to the tour operators and guides, but request that the government also consider giving one-time financial grant to all recognised tour operators which could be 50% of the wages paid by the tour operators in 2019-20 and ₹2.5 lakh to each tourist guide recognised by MOT/State Government as one time grant.”

“In my opinion, the most positive part in the recent announcement by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman is the five lakh tourist visas that will be given free to FTAs. The other highlight is the ten lakhs that will be given in form of loans to travel agents. But the underlining part is that it will only be given to agents who are registered with the MOT which is only 904 agents. This will obviously not cover the majority of the travel trade. TAFI is therefore writing to the FM to at least look at including all the IATA agents in this. The other part is that the interest, although it is a sovereign guarantee and banks should be able to give loans on that, should be low. This is definitely a positive step.”



Pradip Lulla
Acting President and VP, TAFI



MP Bezbaruah
Secretary-General, HAI

“The FM's announcement on free visas has a very strong symbolic message that we have the confidence to welcome visitors and that tourism and hospitality is a strong pillar of post-COVID economic recovery strategy. We sincerely hope that such measures will be logically followed by measures to make the industry recover and be ready to welcome tourists - measures like liquidity support and exemption from statutory taxes. HAI would like to compliment the FM on this initiative and look forward to some more pragmatic initiatives to create jobs and livelihoods through a rejuvenated tourism and hospitality industry. We will be there for a committed role to be played.”

“I must thank the Hon'ble Prime Minister and the Finance Minister for the relief measures. They say better late than never; I am happy to learn about the move to grant free visa to first five lakh tourists visiting India, which will greatly help in reviving tourism. If, somehow, we could not attract five lakh tourists by 31 March, 2022, the scheme should be extended to 2023. Secondly, the government should extend visas of the travellers who are already holding visa for India since the lockdown was imposed. Thirdly, the commencement of international scheduled flights should also be announced, so that the industry can prepare.”



Subhash Goyal
President, Confederation of Tourism Professionals of India

Inputs by TT Bureau

Phuket Sandbox: A test for travel

KD Singh, Founder & President, TravelBullz, in a message to travel trade partners, has said that the success of 'Phuket Sandbox' is part of a bigger effort to reopen Thailand for international tourists. The Phuket Sandbox initiative allows vaccinated foreign tourists to enter Phuket from July 1.



Manas Dwivedi

Although India and other high-risk countries are unlikely to be open soon for tourists, **KD Singh** emphasises on the importance of the Phuket Sandbox as an important step in the re-opening of Thailand to international tourists. “This is a constantly changing environment, and everyone we know in the Thailand tourism industry is doing everything they can to ensure that Phuket Sandbox is a success, paving the way for Thailand's reopening plan to continue on track.



KD Singh
Founder & President, TravelBullz

The good news is that properly vaccinated tourists will not need to go through quarantine and there would be no minimum night's stay restrictions if they do not plan to visit other cities in Thailand. Guests who wish to



without causing any major increase in COVID infections or cases, it will serve as the foundation for the rest of the plans to be implemented.

It will serve as the foundation for the rest of the plans to be implemented

The Phuket Government is working tirelessly to vaccinate at least 70 per cent of the Phuket community to create herd immunity, in partnership with local tourist organisations and bodies. Immunisation will be given to tourism and hospitality companies, guides, drivers, spas, salons, and everyone else connected with the tourism industry on top priority.

TAT has also created a higher spec for the SHA Certificate, called SHA PLUS. TravelBullz is an SHA-certified company and has started an awareness campaign regarding the re-opening of Thailand. “We have started a campaign on e-filers, Facebook, WhatsApp and other social media to be able to bring FAQs and updated information to all our stakeholders and all TravelBullz partners. I would request them to accept the link,” Singh informs.

Possible reopening strategy by Thai government

- July 1-Sept 30:** Phuket Sandbox – No Quarantine Required plan
- Oct 1-Dec 31:** 8 more provinces on No Quarantine Required plan, including Chon Buri (Pattaya), Samui, Chiang Mai
- Jan 1, 2022:** All of Thailand to welcome international tourists without quarantine

travel to other cities will be mandatorily required to first stay in Phuket for 14 to 15 days, after which they are free to travel to any place in Thailand as long as their RT-PCR test remains negative before departing Phuket. The success of Phuket's Sandbox is thought to be part of a bigger ef-

fort by the government to reopen Thailand as a tourist destination,” he elaborates.

Pinning his hopes on a successful reopening, Singh shares that there is eager anticipation for Phuket Sandbox to go well. “If everything goes well,

Over time, the tourism industry, THA (Thai Hotels Association), TAT (Tourism Authority of Thailand), Tourism Ministry, and other commercial and governmental stakeholders will collaborate to ensure Phuket sets the benchmark and succeeds,” he believes.



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Korea enthrals Indian buyers

The recently-concluded Korea Travel Expo saw buyers from across India having B2B meetings with over 15 suppliers from South Korea, including DMCs, RTOs and attractions. While many buyers appreciated the positive attitude of exhibitors from Korea, others are planning to travel to Korea as soon as borders open.

“The Korea Travel Expo experience was good, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I got a chance to meet many old and new partners. It was an informative and valuable two days. The platform was easy to use and beautifully designed. I loved the interactive map of South Korea, very interesting content, as well as the quiz. We had excellent meetings with all the partners, as they provided valuable and helpful information, which will help me incorporate in our travel programmes when borders open.”



Gaurish S Dharwadkar
CEO, Travel Shop

“The appointments were seamless. I enjoyed connecting with Korean suppliers with whom we can work once the COVID situation improves. Virtual platforms are here to stay. I am delighted that all my meetings were successful, and the suppliers sounded eager to work with Indian agents. Also, they were ready to share all required material and guide us on tourism aspects, and were happy to reply to some ‘silly’ questions. The supportive nature of Korean suppliers conveyed their eagerness for the Indian market.”



Pradnya Naik
Head - FIT Products & Contracting, Kesari Tours

“Korea is a key partner for us. The destination offers significant opportunity for Indian consumers when borders reopen. The Korea Travel Expo is hence an invaluable initiative that offers us a networking platform with access across key stakeholders of the Korean travel & tourism ecosystem – across destinations and provinces, tourism boards, attractions, transportation, hospitality, etc. This is a powerful exchange platform.”



Suzanne Pereira
SVP - Trade Relationships, Communications & Service Quality
Thomas Cook (India)



Manoj Nair
National Marketing Leader, FCM

“Korea Travel Expo was a great forum to meet partners from tourism boards to DMCs. I am happy I could attend this forum and catch up with key people who keep the wheels of tourism running in Korea. All my meetings were fruitful and it was great having those conversations with the partners based out of Korea, and it will materialise into something beneficial for the destination, us and the partners. Travel industry people are a very resilient lot and these meetings confirm that while we are down, we are not out.”

“My experience was overall fascinating as I have come to know about Korea in detail. The presentation, itinerary discussion, information about MICE and leisure groups is very helpful to organise events. In this pandemic, a virtual platform is the stage where people can interact more often. The interactions were fruitful. It will help to convert meetings into real business once tourism opens. We are looking forward to it.”



Abin Bhattacharjee
Senior Manager, MICE - International Operations, Zenith Hospitality



Sumit Churiwalla
Director, Nimbus Tours & Travels

“I really liked the virtual experience at Korea Travel Expo. It kept me engrossed for quite a while and I loved the games (eagerly waiting for the results) and other details it had to offer. It is one of the best platforms I have used for an expo of this level. We could experience everything by sitting in my office in Kolkata. Best part was we didn't have to log in to different Zoom links to talk to different exhibitors. It was all in one place.”

Inputs by Nisha Verma

A solution to stress

► Contd from page 1

‘Yoga for Wellness’ slogan given by the PM is being followed in all programmes throughout the nation. He further said that there is discussion around the world regarding post-COVID recovery. “The permanent solution for post-COVID issues is in India, in the form of Yoga, Ayurveda and Ayush,” he claimed.

According to Patel, there are three things that make India an incredible nation and have improved its perception across the world. “Firstly, it was the international recognition of Yoga and the UN declaring 21st June as International Yoga Day and everyone embracing it with full fervour. This took India's stature higher in the world. Secondly, when COVID-19 was causing mayhem across the world, it was India which distributed essential medicines for nations in need, right from US to Brazil. This was

despite India being a developing country. Domestic tourism in the country reached new heights as Indians explored places within the country. Even at the onset of



the pandemic, foreigners visiting India preferred to remain here instead of going back to their own country because they felt safer here and trusted the ancient ways of medicine in India,” he said.

Patel added that after the second wave, the situation remains grim and all the ancient practices in India are in the minds of people. Quoting the PM, he said the journey from insanity or mental issues to charity can be done through yoga. “UN believes that yoga CDs should be made available to bring people out of depression and this is a

big achievement for India, as the solution for all these problems is in India,” he shared.

Tourism Secretary Singh also shared the point of view of Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar on how to attract foreign tourists or promote India at an international level post the pandemic,

The permanent solution for post-COVID issues is in India, in the form of Yoga

by promoting India's heritage & culture and niche products with a special focus on the Northeast region. ↴

Budget hotels will benefit

Price is the most important factor to 47% of consumers when selecting accommodation, according to a poll by GlobalData. With less budget for travel but a strong desire to escape, many will turn to budget providers.



Gus Gardner, Associate Travel and Tourism Analyst at GlobalData, comments, “Budget hotel operators will be well positioned to benefit from an increase in bargain-hunting travellers looking for the cheapest accommodation possible. With many countries still only permitting outbound travel to a handful of countries and domestic holidays booming in the short term, accommodation prices have risen. Travellers will be looking for a bargain among a sea of inflated rates.”

GlobalData's consumer survey (Q1 2021) showed that travellers are more price sensitive than before the pandemic, which is unsurprising given that 87 per cent of global respondents expressed that they were concerned about their personal financial position during the pandemic.

Gardner continues, “The pandemic has placed a considerable strain on travellers' finances. Despite this, travel demand is still high, and many are looking to escape in desperate need for a change of scenery. Travellers are more likely to trade extras offered at mid to upper-scale hotels for a more basic ‘pay for what you need’

will likely push travellers to budget travel options, forgoing loyalty benefits in the process. To counteract the shift towards budget alternatives, mid to upper-scale hotels should focus their efforts on price promotions. Offering additional discounts for loyalty programme members, freebies, or free upgrades could entice those



service standard.” The same GlobalData poll showed that ‘prestige and loyalty offered’ was the least important factor when selecting a hotel. Many upscale hotels have invested in developing a loyal following. However, the pandemic has caused a shift in traveller sentiment that could impact this type of investment. Gardner adds, “The financial squeeze from the pandemic

looking to make their stay more comfortable despite a depleted travel budget. As travel begins to return, post-pandemic travellers are likely to have reduced funds, and budget hotels will benefit. Price promotions and incentives could be a crucial strategy for mid to upper-scale hotels to counteract this trend, however, travellers are more likely to be influenced by price in the initial recovery period.” ↴

Taj, renowned for its world-class customer service and standing at a brand value of US\$296 million, is now the world's strongest hotel brand, with a Brand Strength Index (BSI) score of 89.3 out of 100 and a corresponding AAA brand strength rating.

Goa needs image rebuilding

After a surge in infection rates that debilitated tourism in Goa, two state tourism association presidents are urging the authorities to carefully plan out and conduct an image rebuilding exercise for the state so that it can restart tourism on a fresh note. The plan must be comprehensive, entailing everything from A to Z.



Hazel Jain

A delegation from the Travel & Tourism Association of Goa (TTAG) met Chief Minister Pramod Sawant and Tourism Minister Manohar Aijaonkar recently. They had a two-pronged agenda: to request for relief for the state's tourism industry and to suggest an image-building exercise.

Sharing details of this meeting, **Nilesh Shah**, President, TTAG, says, "Our team met the CM along with the Tourism Minister, Chairman GTDC, Chief Secretary, Tourism Secretary, and Director Tourism of GTDC. We have requested them to conduct image-rebuilding exercise for Goa to undo the negative publicity received by the state during the last two to three months which has af-



Nilesh Shah
President, TTAG



Serafino Cota
President, Small & Medium Hotels Associations

The livelihoods of people dependent on tourism are at stake

Everything needs to be controlled, from entry points to hotels

fects the image of Goa as a safe and secure destination." The association has submitted a 10-point document with sug-

gestions for both demands.

The government has informed TTAG that the state's hospital-

ity sector will open fully only after the positivity rate falls under five per cent. The association has insisted that tourism has to be started at the earliest with all protocols in place, and that tourists who are vaccinated must be allowed entry into the state freely. "We told the government that the state should be projected as a safe destination. The key to opening is vaccination. We can't keep the industry closed. The livelihoods of lakhs of people dependent on tourism are at stake," Shah said.

Meanwhile, **Serafino Cota**, President, Small & Medium Hotels Associations, suggests

that Goa needs a change of image. "We need to make it a 'safe' destination at least by December 2021. After making it safe, we need to promote it as a 'Safe' destination, ask tourists to book only registered hotels so that every case can be tracked and traced, and ramp up our vaccination drive. Everything needs to be controlled – from entry points to hotels. That is the only way safe tourism can start," Cota adds.

Some of the points suggested by TTAG towards this include online and social media campaigns showcasing all measures undertaken

to keep citizens and tourists safe in Goa, ensuring all tourism-related businesses take only 50-75% of their actual capacity for at least six months, special quarantine centres for tourists, entry protocols into Goa till October, and no high-capacity events till March 2022.

The Goa CM has gone on record to say, "Most tourism activities are closed in the state. We can think of restarting it only after first dose of vaccine has been administered to everyone that means only after 30th July. Third wave is being spoken about. At present, we can't predict." 🐦

The total value of the world's top 50 most valuable hotel brands has declined by 33% (US\$22.8 billion) as the sector negotiates fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. Leisure & tourism brands have also taken a hit, and the cumulative brand value is down 40%.

Reforms that can save aviation

'We have run out of words to describe the state of Indian airlines,' states CAPA India in its airline outlook for the financial year 2022. The company believes that if India is to achieve the vision of affordable connectivity as a critical enabler of economic transformation, the viability of the airline sector must receive the highest level of attention.



TT Bureau

CAPA India has repeatedly emphasised that the industry is standing on the edge of a cliff. This is true even for airlines with access to

large pools of capital. Massive, perennial losses have created a debt trap which has resulted in most airlines having very limited means of recapitalisation. The Government of India is providing almost no direct support; lend-

ers have by and large closed their doors to airlines, even for restructuring purposes; and lessors will soon have no option but to start applying pressure on defaulting airlines, it believes. Simultaneously, the aviation sec-

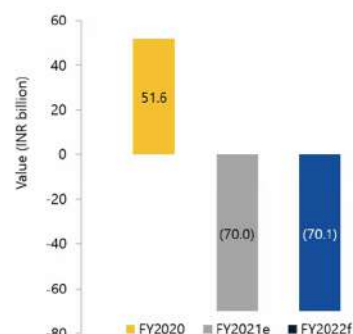
CAPA India recommends reforms

- ❖ Bring ATF under the GST framework with full input tax credit
- ❖ Reduce customs excise and duty on ATF
- ❖ Full refund of IGST on import of aircraft repairs
- ❖ Extend airport tariff control period in AERA Act from 5 years to 8 years
- ❖ Reduce regulatory costs
- ❖ Serious implementation of 'Flexible Use of Airspace'
- ❖ Hiving-off of ANS to ensure sufficient capital for investment in capacity
- ❖ Introduce financial fitness and solvency tests for AOP issuance and renewal
- ❖ Implement a refund protection scheme for consumers
- ❖ Remove all restrictions on commercial decisions
- ❖ Measures to reduce financial stress specifically for airports which have around 80% fixed costs, incurred huge losses in FY21 & FY22, and a capex commitment of USD 10.9 billion

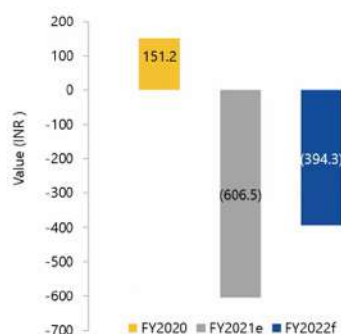
sudden impact of COVID have resulted in a high level of solvency risk for most airlines which could impact the entire industry, including airports. This cannot continue, says CAPA India. If we are to achieve the Prime Minister's vision of affordable connectivity as a critical enabler of economic transformation, the viability of the airline sector must receive the highest level of attention and support from the Ministry of Civil Aviation and the entire industry. Reforms are needed to mend the core of India's aviation sector, and CAPA India has some viable solutions up its sleeve. CAPA expects that Indian airlines will lose a consolidated USD 4.1 billion in FY2022, similar to that in FY2021. This will take total losses over two years to around \$8 bn as a result of the two COVID waves. FSCs are expected to contribute \$2.1 bn of losses while LCCs would account for USD 2 billion. 🐦

Indian airports are projected to lose INR394.3 (USD5.3) per passenger in FY2022.

Industry PBT, FY2020–FY2022f



Industry PBT per passenger, FY2020–FY2022f



- The interest burden increased during FY2019–FY2020 as airport operators borrowed to fund their capacity expansion plans. A significant portion of this debt was diverted to meet the operating expenditure, working capital and capex requirements in FY2021. Due to limited recovery in revenue in FY2022, airports will need to raise more debt in FY2022.
- The sector is forecast to report an EBITDA profit of just INR1.9 billion and a loss before tax of INR70.1 billion (USD942 million) in FY2022.

tor is heading into a higher cost environment, while staff morale is declining.

Lurching from crisis to crisis has become a familiar story since 2004 because the industry

has chosen to pursue profitless growth, resulting in chronic losses for many years. Two major airlines have failed in the last 10 years leaving a trail of USD 7 billion of liabilities. Yet, nothing has changed. The twin waves and

Aiding the trade is a priority

Anil Oraw, Regional Director, Indiatourism North, believes that in the last 1.5 years, the travel patterns across the world have changed, with almost no travellers from overseas. Hence, on Ministry of Tourism's advice, Indiatourism North has taken a few initiatives to facilitate better traffic.

Nisha Verma

Anil Oraw shared that they are trying to focus on domestic travellers, who have great potential. "They are economically sound and have disposable income, and we not only promote known destinations, but focus on lesser-known or unknown destinations, festivals and some adventure circuits as well through our webinars," he said. He added that it is possible for states to attract tourists by offering them incentives. Another step they have taken, especially during the pandemic, is to build the confidence of people. "This has been done following the protocols issued by MOT & MoHFW, and instructions from Disaster Management. We ensure that these protocols are maintained by the hotels and by tour operators. We also tried to connect the tour operators in various man-



Anil Oraw
Regional Director, Indiatourism North

ners, which resulted in increasing the tourist flow between the states," he adds.

Working with the trade

Claiming that one of the key focus areas for them was to start supporting the travel trade and any stakeholder approved by the MOT, or by the state governments, Oraw said, "We are supporting the tour operators through the Marketing Development Assistance (MDA) scheme, by reimbursing 90% of the cost

of their travel if they go on a sales call within India, twice a year. Under this, we will provide the airfare, accommodation, transportation expenditure, after submission of bills and papers on return by reimbursing the cost. This policy has been modified now, as it earlier covered agencies approved by MOT. However, now it is available to all tour operators or stakeholders approved by the state or UT, twice within India across all states. In case they are travelling to Northeast and Ladakh, they can avail the scheme thrice in a year."

Apart from that they also organised inter-state roadshows. "We invited tour operators from one region to other regions. Indiatourism Delhi had organised a roadshow by inviting tour operators from Bihar and UP to Shimla, where they did B2B meetings with tour operators of Himachal

Pradesh. Such exchange programmes were organised by other Indiatourism offices too. All costs of these programmes

We promote lesser-known or unknown destinations, festivals and adventure circuits

were borne by the MOT," he informed. They also organised exchange programmes for students. "Under the 'Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat' scheme, we targeted the students of Indian

Institute of Hotel Management and Catering Technology, which comes under the MOT. Under the programme, for example students from J&K went to Tamil Nadu and Telangana students came to Haryana. When Telangana students visited Haryana two roadshows were held in IHM Panipat, where students from both states displayed the cuisine, dressed in traditional costumes, performed different dances and cultural shows, so that they had a complete heritage exchange. People from nearby areas and parents of the students were also invited. Expenditure for these programmes was also borne by us. The vision behind it was that the students could motivate parents to go to Haryana or Telangana. Hence, it was indirect selling or promotion," he shared.

With respect to the tour operators, they had video meetings

with them, to ensure all protocols are maintained and a positive image is created for the tourists and instil confidence. "We have asked the tour operators to promote that our drivers and guides are vaccinated; the hotels they are going to stay has its staff vaccinated and the rooms are thoroughly sanitised; so that potential visitors know that they are with somebody safe. There also needs to be an assurance that there is 24 hr medical support during the tour. Such assurance is also given by the tour operators to the clients, who get 100% surety they and their families are safe," he added.

Also, he stressed that today people prefer booking after personal interaction with a physical tour operator instead of making online bookings. "This gives 100% assurance and ensures safety of the tourists and their families," he stressed.

Nip the counterfeit threat in the bud!

Vaccination passport security is the major new issue facing the travel industry, according to **Adam Schrader**, Director of Operations at travel risk intelligence company Riskline. Counterfeit vaccination passports and certificates will seriously undermine their role in reopening travel and events sectors unless the issue is addressed quickly.

COVID-19 Vaccine Set to Become the World's Most Powerful Passport in 2021.' This headline from SchengenVisaInfo.com captures extremely well the potential importance of vaccination documents now and in the year ahead. Throughout the travel, meetings and events industry worldwide, vaccinations passports and certificates are widely viewed by governments and airlines, as well as travel, meetings and leisure associations as the catalyst to restart their industries and kick-start economies. The implementation has started; Singapore Airlines is now testing the IATA Travel Pass on its Singapore-London route.

An immediate consequence of this development will be a major new issue which will seriously undermine their role unless it is

addressed – counterfeiting. If vaccination passports are to be the key to accessing so many aspects of life when they reopen, then there is a very strong motivation for millions of people to acquire a fake passport when they haven't yet had their jabs,

Standardisation of design, like there is for identity passports, is urgently needed

either by choice or lack of opportunity. A clear indication of this came in The Sun newspaper in the UK which reported in early



December – as soon as vaccination began in the country – that fake COVID vaccination cards were being sold for £5 on TikTok, while thousands of people are trying to obtain forgeries in Israel where their 'Green Pass' is already being used to access gyms and venues. A rapidly growing number of templates for fake documents are being offered on the dark web.

Strong driving forces

There are many different driving forces for different audiences around the world to acquire a counterfeit document. In the West, where many older people have already been vaccinated, millions of younger people will become frustrated by waiting to travel this summer. The possible requirement to have been vac-

inated to take up some jobs or to attend theatre or music events will also push more of them to seek out suppliers.

In countries where, due to 'vaccine inequality', the roll-out of vaccination may take several years, very few people will be eligible for legal vaccine documentation. In addition, every nation has a minority of anti-vaxxers and COVID-deniers who have decided not to be vaccinated because they are fearful or concerned about data sharing and privacy so don't want to be 'on the system'; but they still want to fly and take part in events.

With so many people wanting them, market forces will make many forgeries of good and bad quality readily available very soon. What will make this easier for the criminals and more confusing and difficult for everyone

who is responsible for verifying people's documents is that there are far too many proposed different certificates, many of them

A growing number of templates for fake documents are being offered on the dark web

paper or card, and no imminent signs of consolidation. Standardisation of design, like there is worldwide for identity passports, is urgently needed, along with the introduction of sophisticated anti-fraud measures in the design and manufacturing.

Moving away from paper documents would make counterfeiting more difficult.

Whatever happens, if or when they are introduced, all business travellers are set to experience considerable extra delays as there will be long queues when they are being checked; and even longer queues if there are different designs and fake documents in circulation.



Adam Schrader
Director of Operations, Riskline

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

'We need a universal solution'

Ideas such as health passports will be a foundation to ensure safe cross-border travel. But it's going to be a long time until governments decide on a universal solution, says **Virendra Jain**, Co-Founder and CEO, Safe Travel Barometer – a B2B solution that monitors and benchmarks traveller health and safety measures.



Hazel Jain

How are different destinations responding to fully vaccinated international travellers?

As countries reopen to travellers, most destinations want to maintain and safeguard health security within their borders. Accordingly they are striking a balance between the share of their own population inoculated before opening borders to international travellers. We've seen this play out in Israel and Seychelles, for example. We are also observing similar statements or sentiments made by Thai and Canadian governments, wherein they want to achieve a certain share of their population fully or partly vaccinated before reopening for tourism.

Concepts such as health passports will be a foundation to ensure safe cross-border travel. But it's going to be a long time

until governments decide on a singular, universal solution which strikes a balance between user privacy and verifying their health status, which now is a critical health security matter.

Give us a perspective on how airlines are faring and some of the things they are doing right that will serve them well in the next 1-2 years.

Safety initiatives will be incorporated in lifestyle aspects including, but not limited to, hospitality

Airlines have certainly matured in their incorporation of specific initiatives from a COVID-19 health and safety perspective. We strongly believe that aspects related to personal and health hygiene will become a norm. Bear in mind that only a fraction of the world is currently fully vaccinated and it's going to be a multi-year affair to hit a critical mass, notwithstanding the evolving mutations. Health safety initiatives will be incorporated in various lifestyle aspects including but not limited to restaurants, hospitality, airlines, tours, etc.

How will cruising restart going forward? Will 2021 see the early signs of revival for cruising?

We have already witnessed river cruises restart in a controlled environment within Europe, and the recent guidance by the US CDC is encouraging towards restarting cruises for the fully



Virendra Jain
Co-Founder and CEO
Safe Travel Barometer

vaccinated. Specific to the US, there is an ongoing tug of war between federal and various state governments regarding the use of vaccine passports & discriminating non-vaccinated travellers from cruising.

Why don't travel bubbles consistently work? Will they work better when travellers are fully vaccinated?

Once again it could potentially be narrowed down to every country thinking what's best to maintain

and safeguard health security within its own borders. You'll find countries across a range of preparedness per se, to handle an outbreak while balancing with its vaccination rollout. It's a dynamic tandem between lockdown versus preparedness. Countries which are reopening to others are primarily assessing COVID-19 infections trends, share of population vaccinated and ultimately if the vaccine is recognised by the destination. Historically, major source countries such as India, China, and others need to align themselves to the above in order to be reconsidered as a safe source country.

Your views on vaccination tourism? Is it a viable business proposition for tour operators?

Vaccine tourism may not be directly commercialised by governments or tourism departments for the obvious reasons

India, China, and others need to align themselves in order to be reconsidered safe source countries

of prioritising vaccination of its own citizens. However, travellers have given impetus to the concept of vaccine tourism, simply because they have travelled to another part of the country or the world to get their jabs. We are also seeing early glimpses of domestic vaccine tourism wherein people are travelling to nearby cities or crossing state borders to get their jabs.

Surge in travel demand soon

Contd from page 1



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

"In response to surveys conducted by us in June 2021, 81% of respondents indicated they have already been vaccinated and this is one of the key drivers of travel demand. While initial demand was restricted to our HNI/UHNI segment, what is noteworthy is that our teams are seeing interest from across segments and not merely from metros but also tier-II markets like Jaipur, Lucknow, Coimbatore, Mysuru, Chandigarh, Surat, Baroda, Nagpur, Patna, etc. Currently, the domestic favourites include Leh-Ladakh, Kashmir and Himachal with interest in international destinations like Dubai, Maldives, Bali, Thailand and Mauritius."

"The choices Indians have for holidaying internationally are limited at the moment with only Russia welcoming Indians. Personally, I have not been pushing clients to start travelling yet. I think, as responsible travel curators, we should wait a while for the wave to settle completely lest we break into 3.0. Once the borders do open, I will personally recommend that clients travel only after both the doses of the vaccine to be safe. I have been making bookings for clients who have made up their minds to travel. In fact, some of them are making bookings to Kashmir for November onwards."



Nagsri Prasad Sashidhar
Chief Happiness Officer
NAGSRI (Mumbai)



Jay Bhatia
Director, Tulsidas Khimji Holidays

"We are getting loads of queries from travellers who have completed both their vaccine doses. The challenge faced by us in India is that destinations where Indian visitors will be allowed do not have direct connections. Similarly, destinations to which airlines are carrying passengers, tourists are not permitted to enter. Holidays in India are also gaining momentum since mid-June this year. Kerala, Karnataka, Kashmir are on the top, other than local drivable destinations for weekend breaks. We are confident that with number of cases going down, a lot of international destinations are expected to open up for us. We expect an increase between mid-July to August 2021."

"It has been more than a year since the COVID-19 pandemic struck, and people are now overdone with quarantine and staying at home. They are just waiting to be able to step out and holiday. In fact, we have been getting queries from clients who are waiting to get out and willing to travel anywhere. Our clients are already travelling within India to whatever options are open and available. Once the borders open and India is off the red zone list, tourism will blossom. I truly hope even Covaxin gets approved by WHO for international travel since a lot of people have taken it; they were unaware of this and are now panicking."



Anshu Tejuja
Managing Director
Ashoka Dream Holidays



Hasan Patel
Director, Tripjack

"Global trends of leisure travel bouncing back after successful vaccination is very promising. As we look towards the west, travel consultants are seeing huge growth in booking requests as the nation's vaccination drives continue. We have started observing similar hotel bookings and international sector growth in our 30,000 travel agent network in India. Russia, Serbia, Uzbekistan, Mexico, USA are seeing good bookings. Last year, when destinations like Maldives and Dubai had eased travel for Indians, there was a huge surge in demand. This year with the vaccine around, the demand is likely to be even higher."

Inputs by Hazel Jain

Singapore to get three new attractions

Singapore is all set to have three new tourist attractions in a few months, reveals **GB Srithar**, Regional Director - India, Middle East & South Africa, Singapore Tourism Board (STB). "First is Mu-



GB Srithar
Regional Director - India, Middle East & South Africa, STB

seum of Ice Cream, for which Singapore will be the first-ever international location after US. It will open later this year. The second is Asia's tallest slingshot, which will be a new thrill-ride concept, and will be opening later this year in Clarke Quay area. Finally, the Sky Helix Sentosa, which is due to open in 2022," he said.

Hybrid weddings in the offing?

The pandemic has brought on some serious changes to the travel, tourism, events and hospitality world. As with everything else, the parameters of the wedding segment are also witnessing tremendous alterations. TRAVTALK speaks with six industry experts to find out what these changes are.

“Almost 80% of the weddings are now waiting to happen in July 2021. People aren't planning much in advance except for the super auspicious dates. But hotels are asking crazy amounts of money – ₹75,000 only for rooms. Clients want to spend but they are not getting the opportunity to do so because of the restrictions. Nevertheless, weddings and social events, unlike business events, are here to stay in India. The day things get normal, there will be revenge celebrations!”



Mahendra Vakharia
MD, Pathfinders Holidays

“There is good interest and demand for destination weddings starting November. The lead time for final confirmations is definitely getting down as clients are looking at making final confirmations and payments not too many months in advance. The popular destinations are evergreen Rajasthan, Mussoorie, Mahabalipuram, Goa, Sukhvilas at Chandigarh, and for intimate weddings with 50 pax approx. small boutique hotels like Indeco Hotels, few heritage properties in Gujarat and Rajasthan are getting very popular.”



Rajeev Jain
Director, Rashi Entertainment

“Guests are now using their budget to have an intimate hybrid wedding. The year 2021 had almost 50% of the year's auspicious dates in Q2 however due to the second wave we saw the entire quarter wiped out which postponed most of the weddings for later this year. Room rates for say days have gone up, and we are also vigilantly observing behavioural changes in guests and adapting accordingly.”



Rohit Chopra
Regional Director - Sales & Distribution, Accor India & South Asia



Jitendra Kejriwal
Chairman, Arika Tour & Travels

“Weddings have been happening right now albeit with only 25-30 people. So the total expenditure has gone down. But we are hoping that by July 15, 2021 – by which date most people would have taken the first dose of the vaccine – things will start to ease up. And by November-December, we can expect the wedding season to kick in. We are expecting this season to be very good. We expect last minute bookings for December as the situation is volatile. The booking time could be reduced to 20-25 days.”

“Intimate celebrations are being preferred by guests with the approximate group size of 50 guests. There is also a preference for residential weddings. The lead times have reduced with guests planning events within 10-15 days. Room rates remain dynamic as always and we try to work with the best possible rates. With a reduction in number of guests, families are exploring unique elements and lavish menus to make it memorable.”



Esha Ghosh
Director of Events
Hyatt Regency Pune



Ankur Sarawagi
India Country Head - The Knot Worldwide

“Couples started looking at intimate weddings and adopting tech innovations to plan their weddings. Our wedding technology platform, WeddingWire India, saw a 30% jump in queries in H1 2021 for vendor services vis-à-vis last year. This showcases increased interest in planning and scheduling weddings in the Sept-Dec 2021 period. The demand for destination weddings has gone up by 62% with Jaipur, Jodhpur, and Udaipur being the top choices.”

Inputs by Hazel Jain

ibis extends aid to community



ibis hotels has joined hands with The Robin Hood Army to extend its support to the community by providing meals to the less privileged. Through this initiative, ibis aims to deliver over 5,000 meals every month across Delhi, Gurugram, Jaipur, Nashik, Mumbai, Pune, Chennai, Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Kolkata, bringing smiles to the less privileged.

Relief camp in the Sunderbans



The Yaas relief and health check-up camp organised by ETAA Eastern India Chapter in association with CAS, NatureMates and The Rotary Club of Calcutta (South Central) was completed smoothly in June 2021 in Mousuni Islands, Sunderbans, despite the challenges of bad weather, flooded roads and unavailability of public transport.

Tour operators are crucial

Anand Singh, Director, Earthen Experiences, believes that government policies must not be designed only to support prime stakeholders like airlines and hotels, but also strengthen the tour operator community.

The Ministry has data of registered tour operators - the number of people employed with each can be verified from EPF, the IT department or from the amount of turnover and tax paid - and so should come up with a stimulus package accordingly. It could be in the form of a tourism recovery fund like the one in Austria, a working capital loan like in Brazil, a tax payment deferral like the one seen in Costa Rica, or a three-month tax suspension on sales. What is inevitable here is that these packages should quickly reach those going through unbearable financial suffering, people at the grass-roots of tourism, the true stakeholders.

As was earlier, the government's concern should not be confined to support only prime stakeholders such as airlines and star hotels. Airline and hotel owners are mostly investors who run multifaceted busi-

nesses supported by banks. They did some business during the COVID pandemic also. Airlines flew without leaving middle seats empty and hotels hosted marriages and staycations. They will recover fast and

It is the travel agent whose connections reach billions within the country as well as overseas

it has been seen that the moment the situation improves, there is an unrealistic price surge defying the demand and supply economics. This time, the government should focus more on tour operators as they have a wider base and reach.

They are the ones who, by now, have lost all their assets and are desperately looking to the government to bail them out of misery. It is the travel agent whose connections act as a broadband and reach billions within the country as well as overseas. It is that relentless work that brings business not only for airlines and hotels but also for transporters, guides and craftsmen. It is the tour operator that will bring a smile back to the rickshaw puller near Delhi's Jama Masjid or the boatman at Srinagar.



Anand Singh
Director, Earthen Experiences

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

Valley awaits resurgence

The Kashmir valley was one of the most frequented destinations after the first lockdown was lifted. However, the good days didn't last long and the second wave bereaved the destination of tourists. Now, the vaccination drive and the number of positive cases going down is seeing travel and hospitality stakeholders pinning hopes on domestic tourists once again.



Nisha Verma

When international travel halted because of COVID in 2020, it was the domestic destinations that picked up after the lockdown was lifted. Kashmir was the go-to destination for most domestic travellers. **Abdul Hamid Narwari**, Chapter Chairman, ADTOI - J&K Chapter, says, "We received good number of domestic tourists from Diwali 2020 onwards till March-end. Kashmir was almost sold-out till June 15, 2021, but unfortunately second wave came, and we started receiving cancellations starting March 15 onwards. By first week of April 21 almost all bookings were cancelled," he said.



Abdul Hamid Narwari
Chapter Chairman, ADTOI - J&K Chapter

Adventure tour operators, who have raised equipment, are on the verge of extinction

Post-COVID boom in business
Zahoor Qari, Chairman, TAAI-J&K Chapter, agrees, "Almost all hotels were sold out especially at Gulmarg and Pahalgam. These destinations had become overcrowded. Many Bollywood people had shown their presence in the valley. Also, organising winter games brought our valley in the limelight throughout the world."

The hotels still are gushing over the business that came their way at the time. **Basharat Rashid**, Director of Sales - Vivanta Dalview, Srinagar, says, "We saw green shoots of travel begin to revive, with domestic travel driving demand. An increasing number of



Zahoor Qari
Chairman, TAAI - J&K Chapter

We are of the hope that it will be a good season provided the third wave will not hit us

people were keen to escape the confines of home, leading to a growth of drive-cations. Further buoyed by the festive season, we saw an exponential increase in bookings, especially in winter, when Kashmir is akin to a magical fairyland."

Roop K Pandita, General Manager, Welcomhotel Pine-N-Peak Pahalgam, echoes the thought. "At Welcomhotel Pine N Peak, the bookings saw an uptick and almost reached pre-COVID levels. There was an influx of domestic bookings from stays to dine-ins," he says.

But the boom came with its fair share of issues. **Nasir Shah**, Chairman IATO, Jammu & Kashmir Chapter, reveals, "When the small portion of tourism started moving into J&K, RT-PCR test was not made mandatory by the UT Government as they firmly believed in doing Rapid Antigen Test at the entry points and at the airport. IATO, including other tourism stake holders voiced our concern with the government that RT-PCR Test must be made mandatory in the larger interest of the society. The government didn't pay much heed to our request, resulting in increase of COVID cases before the start of second wave."

Mayhem of second wave
Irshu Hazari, Director, Euphoria Travel Services, says that he was getting good business

before the second wave. "Unfortunately, I lost all bookings. The second wave was like a bad dream and dealt a serious blow to the tourism industry of Jammu and Kashmir. All the stakeholders, including hoteliers, houseboat owners, travel agents, shikara owners and others are worried in the valley due to 90% cancellation of bookings. The industry has suffered a loss of about ₹1500 crore during this period. However, the tourism businessmen have pinned their hopes high on the government and believe that the situation will improve soon in the Union Territory"

Whatever business that was happening, came to a grinding halt immediately from April 6, when most of the states including the UT of J&K announced lockdowns, says Shah. "The tourism arrivals dipped to near zero, but fortunately we bounced back and from June 15 onwards, good number of tourists are visiting valley. Although only high-end tourists are coming to Kashmir, owing to closure



Basharat Rashid
Director of Sales - Vivanta Dalview

The phase wise unlocking, especially in key cities, is now showing increase in bookings

of international destinations, as about 80-85% of budget hoteliers and houseboat owners suffer without business, primarily because not many trains are available to Jammu from most of the cities. Highway presently is still posing some problem, but good news is that new Banihal Tunnel of 8.5 kms will be thrown



Roop K Pandita
General Manager, Welcomhotel Pine-N-Peak Pahalgam

The penetration of the vaccination drive is helping bolster confidence in travel

open for public by first week of July," he adds.

Qari further shares that almost all hotels were empty with about 90% cancellations. "Tour operators are the main sufferers who just have started their businesses after a period of more than two years, which started since August 2019 after the abrogation of Article-370," he says. Pandita adds, "The operational performance slowed down. The second wave did leave an impact however, it sublimed owing to the pace of Indian economy bouncing back ahead of expectations and enabling factors being provided by the government."

Case of adventure tour operators
Highlighting the plight of adventure tour operators, Narwari adds, "Tour operators involved in the adventure activity have raised huge infrastructure and equipment for white water rafting, paragliding, snow skiing, mountaineering, trekking & camping equipment and equipment for other allied soft and hard adventure activities. They have procured this equipment by getting loans from banks and other financial institutions, the adventure tour operators are facing tremendous problems as for last 3 years they have not been able to pay any EMI to banks. Instead, to make both ends meet, they have started selling their assets. These operators are at

the verge of extinction. Under the situation they need a comprehensive bailout package so that they can pay their debts and raise the equipment afresh."

Green shoots

Owing to cases being reduced across the country, there is some hope rising again in the valley. Rashid shares that the interest is visible in bookings at the hotel. "The recent phase-wise unlocking and ease of travel restrictions, especially across key cities, is now seeing a steady and significant increase in bookings at the hotel," he shares. Even Shah says that most of the tour operators have started getting queries "as arrival since last week have picked up to nearly 600 tourists visiting Kashmir on daily basis."

Qari adds, "This time tour operators are also exploring other destinations and are trying that we should not confine our tourists to limited destinations (Gulmarg, Pahalgam and Sonmarg).



Nasir Shah
Chairman IATO, Jammu & Kashmir Chapter

The government didn't pay much heed to our request, resulting in increase of COVID cases

Hence, they are providing itineraries to tourist destinations and can have at least a week's comfortable stay of their choice."

All about leisure

However, the incoming queries are predominantly for leisure travel. "I believe whatever tourism we get here, 99% of that is only leisure tourists, as MICE has not yet started. Corporate

clients have started visiting valley too since last fortnight," shares Shah.

For Vivanta Dalview, Srinagar as well, "leisure travel is leading with revival of domestic travel, with many guests opting for long stays with remote working continuing to be a trend for many," adds Rashid.



Irshu Hazari
Director, Euphoria Travel Services

The second wave was like a bad dream and dealt a serious blow to the industry

Better days ahead

The industry believes that business would pick up now and things would certainly improve. "The penetration of the vaccination drive is helping bolster confidence in travel," says Pandita. "We all live on the hope that business in coming months should improve despite July and August being a lean period in Kashmir," opines Shah.

Narwari hopes that things get better now. "The people of Kashmir are facing almost three years of lockdown now and tourism is providing vital role in Jammu & Kashmir GDP," he points out. While business would certainly revive, says Qari, "We are of the hope that it will be a good season provided the third wave will not hit us again. Presently our focus is on domestic tourism and it will be satisfactory."

The same thought is expressed by hospitality players. "We have again begun to see an uptick in travel with the recent unlock across key metros and a gradual relaxation of travel restrictions in the state," informs Rashid.

The tide must turn!

Coming from a family of entrepreneurs, **Manoj Saraf, MD, Gainwell Travel**, has business in his blood and travel in his heart, and these two things have made him achieve many successes while making sure he lives life to the fullest.

The travel bug bit me early," says **Manoj Saraf** who is the third generation in a family of entrepreneurs with business spanning the automobile and construction material sectors. Schooling, for Saraf, happened in Darjeeling at St. Paul's, post which he graduated from St. Xavier's, Kolkata, followed by a Masters from the US.

As a student, Saraf had many passions, one of which was car rallies. "Not many people know that I enjoyed car racing and I even wanted to become a race car driver at one point. In my early 20s, I participated in some car rallies, mainly the MRF monsoon rally in eastern India and even the Himalayan Car Rally. However, at that point the rally scene in India wasn't professional and my family wasn't very keen on



Manoj Saraf, MD, Gainwell Travel, with his wife, Madhulika Saraf

me pursuing it. Hence, I had to stop," he reminisces. Today, though car rallies are out of the picture, he does still enjoy taking the car out on long drives. "I explore places while driving not only in India, but also internationally. I have driven all over Europe, America, Ma-

laysia and many other countries," he shares.

Another sport that Saraf enjoys is the ever-favourite cricket. He was even part of both his school and college teams. "Besides playing and watching cricket, I love travelling abroad to see

cricket matches in London, Abu Dhabi, Australia, etc," he adds.

The Gainwell journey

"When we started Gainwell nearly 30 years ago, it was actually a passion for travel and because my wife Madhulika wanted to do something on her own. It started with an all-ladies team, when my wife got together with some professionals. This gave us a headstart. In 1991, when we got our IATA accreditation, we threw a huge cheese and champagne party, where we invited almost all of Kolkata to the Oberoi Ballroom," he enthusiastically shares. And while Gainwell began as a means to utilise time and have some fun while at it, The company soon began picking up as a larger scale business and the entrepreneur in Saraf took over. "One must ultimately run a business like a business," he says.

Sports tourism is something Saraf has started with his son Manav, who joined Gainwell a few years ago. "Manav is a sports enthusiast and both of us love watching cricket and other sports together. Hence, seven years ago, we started Gainwell Sports and we became the offi-

hours, you need to party harder the other 16," he shares.

Achievements & accolades Professionally, one of the biggest achievements, according to Saraf, was when they accomplished handling a big group to Singapore on Star Cruises. "We had 1200 people on board, coming on 14-15 different flights. There were two truckloads of luggage (around 1500 pieces) to transfer at 10-12 different hotels and not a single piece was lost. It was a very satisfying experience to take 26-27 buses for sightseeing and to restaurants. They also went to Malaysia later. After that, groups of 500-600 people used to be a breeze for us. I believe that travel has a lot to teach and logistics is one of them," he shares.

One must ultimately run a business like a business

cial agent for the ICC World Cup in England and thereafter the World Cup in Australia, which got postponed. We even plan to do the football world cup and other big sporting events. The youth wants live stadium experiences," he exclaims.

So how does the ever-busy Saraf wind down? "I love watching movies, listening to music as well as singing. I even tried my hand at cooking during the lockdown. I also help my wife in gardening. My mantra is that if you are working hard for eight



Guldeep Singh Sahni
MD, Weldon Tours & Travels

(Guldeep Singh Sahni talks about the lives of travel professionals outside of work. Views expressed are his own; the publication may not subscribe to them.)

Tripjack conducts vaccination drive



In order to ensure safety for its employees, Tripjack recently conducted a vaccination drive for its staff at its Mumbai office and managed to vaccinate more than 250 members. **Hasan Patel**, Director, Tripjack, said, "We urge each and everyone to take this necessary step towards ending this pandemic."

Live blissfully in the Far East



Far East Village Hotel Yokohama, managed by Far East Hospitality, has opened doors to guests. This is the company's second property in Japan, and is located within a five-minute walk from Sakuragicho Station on JR Line and Yokohama Municipal Subway or Bashamichi Station on Minatomirai Line.

Redevelopment underway

A redevelopment project approved for the Emirates Old Trafford includes plans for a 1,025-seater stand, a heritage centre, and a new retail store. It also includes significant expansion of the Hilton Garden Inn Hotel.

TT Bureau

Lancashire Cricket has announced that the Club has received approval from Trafford Council for a new venue redevelopment project at Emirates Old Trafford. The new project includes plans for a 1,025-seater stand, a heritage centre, a guest services hub, and a new retail store facing directly on to Brian Statham Way. The new stand, which replaces the Red Rose Suite, will include enhanced pitch-viewing facilities for Lancashire's Members, comprising a dual-aspect suite located within the spectator viewing terrace.

Also included within the plans is a significant expansion of the Hilton Garden Inn Hotel, with a new extension situated within the existing stadium footprint. This includes provision of a further 100 bedrooms, taking the total hotel capacity to 250 on site, and increases the venue's



Daniel Gidney
CEO, Lancashire Cricket

events capacity by up to 200 additional guests for conferences and events.

The hotel expansion will provide new opportunities to host even more large-scale events. **Daniel Gidney**, Chief Executive at Lancashire Cricket, said, "The new stand and hotel extension complete the redevelopment of Emirates Old Trafford and will further enhance our reputation as a world-class venue for business, sport and leisure. The decade-long £60 million redevelopment of the ground was undertaken so that

the Club could continue to host major competitions, matches and events, as it has done throughout its storied history. This redevelopment will play a key role in the Club's long-term financial strategy. The revised plans provide greater

This will enhance our reputation as a world-class venue for business, sport and leisure

revenue generation opportunities in the short and long term and, crucially, enable us to upgrade Emirates Old Trafford's facilities, increase our overall capacity and improve the event-day experience."

Yoga: The ultimate balance

The 21st of June has been recognised as International Day of Yoga by the UN. This year, celebrations were emphasised by the growing importance of this ancient Indian practice in fighting the COVID menace and staying fit, and the tourism industry enthusiastically relayed the message 'health truly is wealth'. We share some glimpses...



Nitin Gadkari, Union Minister for Road Transport & Highways and MSME, performs yoga



Uttarakhand's tourism minister, Satpal Mahraj, meditates in the State capital



Tourism Minister PS Patel and Rupinder Brar, ADG, MOT, are all smiles at Delhi's Red Fort



Children showcase their talent at Chandrasekhar Azad Park in Uttar Pradesh



Some more yoga techniques showcased by enthusiastic children at Chandrasekhar Azad Park, UP



People stretch their muscles out at Sabarmati Ashram in Gujarat



A group of dancers in traditional attire at Karnataka's Hampi



Saree-clad students perform yoga on stage at Institute of Hotel Management, Chennai



'Reaching for the sky,' people perform yoga in Goa



A cultural music performance celebrating International Day of Yoga in Goa



Ravi Gossain, Managing Director, Erco Travels, performs the Surya Namaskar



Officials of Indiatourism Delhi perform Yoga on a lush green lawn



Acing that stretch, people perform yoga at Basavanna Lipakshi, Karnataka

Suggestions invited for Forts Scheme

Maharashtra Tourism has invited suggestions and objections from people and experts on its Forts Scheme till July 8, the document for which is available on its website. The state has also received a nod from the Urban Development Department to charge water tax and property tax from non-classified hotels registered with DoT as per industrial rates.



Maharashtra Tourism will provide basic tourist amenities at 337 non-classified forts, under the 'Maharashtra Forts Scheme'. These basic tourist amenities include approach road, drinking water, restaurant, toilet, electricity, solid waste management, signages, tourist information centre, guides, caravan camping, parking and beautification of the vicinity. The document is up on the Maharashtra Tourism website and will be open for suggestions and objections till 8 July, 2021. Suggestions and objections can be shared on diot@maharashtratourism.gov.in.

Maharashtra is home to over 400 forts, out of which approximately 350 forts are on records. Through this scheme, all the facilities to be provided in and around the forts,



Dr Dhananjay Sawalkar
Director, Directorate of Tourism
Government of Maharashtra

experiential tourism, implementing agencies of the scheme, promotion of fort tourism, functions of the agency selected for the promotion, availability of funds, committees for selection of the forts to implement the scheme, terms of reference of the committees, etc., have been made available on the website.

'Industry' status gets nod
On 21st June, the Urban Development Department issued



GR to all the Commissioners, Municipal Corporations and Director, Directorate of Municipal Administrations, to charge water tax and property tax from non-classified hotels registered with the Directorate of Tourism, as per the industrial rates.

Government of Maharashtra had awarded Industry status to the hospitality sector in April 1999, but that remained only on paper and wasn't implemented. Last year, the state government issued the GR, announcing the criteria for levying taxes and charges at the in-

dustrial rate for non-classified hotels. The concerned departments have to issue circular/resolutions/letters to the concerned authorities.

Similarly, on 14th June, the Joint Secretary, Revenue and Forest department, issued a letter to all the Divisional Commissioners and Collectors to apply non-agricultural tax as per the industrial rate to all the hotels/ green

hotels that fulfil the mandatory 'minimum basic standards' and are registered with the Directorate of Tourism.

Dr Dhananjay Sawalkar, Director, Directorate of Tourism, Maharashtra government, said, "Giving Industry status to hospitality sector will make electricity rates, electricity charges, water bill, property tax, development tax, additional floor space index

and non-agricultural tax available to the registered hotels as per industrial rates." Around 300

Giving Industry status will make charges and taxes available to registered hotels at industrial rates



non-classified hotels, from all over Maharashtra, have applied to avail the tax benefits with the Directorate of Tourism (DoT). After inspection, if these hotels fulfil all the said criteria, they will be eligible for the same.

Demand is re-emerging

Thomas Cook India and SOTC Travel surveyed over 4,000 customers across India's Tier I-III cities in a recent survey to identify emerging consumer behaviours and trends that will drive travel preferences in the COVID era. The survey reveals strong travel demand with 69% respondents keen to resume travel in 2021 and 31% in 2022.



The survey by Thomas Cook (India) and SOTC Travel covered consumers of India's top eight metros, mini metros like Pune and key Tier II & III markets of Jaipur, Indore,

Tiruchirappalli, Madurai, Nagpur, Surat, Baroda, Bhubaneswar, Lucknow, Chandigarh, Mysuru, Coimbatore, Visakhapatnam, Guwahati, Patna, etc.

The data analysis has revealed valuable insights on

travel behaviour and customer expectations:

❖ **Strong Travel Desire/ Intent:** A significant 69% respondents indicated keen interest to travel in 2021 post ease in restrictions - with 18% ready to travel immediately post unlock and 51% within 3-6 months

❖ **Financial Safety:** 81% respondents reiterated their need for refundable/zero cancellation products

❖ **Physical/Personal Safety:** 70% respondents rank Health & Safety as a key consideration

❖ **Re-sanitation of rooms:** This was selected by 52% respondents as a key requirement

❖ **Fully vaccinated hotel staff, drivers** was a need

highlighted by 48% and 34% respondents, respectively

❖ **Willingness to Increase Spends basis Health & Safety:** 66% are willing to increase spend to ensure better health & safety

❖ **Demand** for both Domestic (54%) as well as International (46%) destinations

❖ **India:** Kashmir, Leh-Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, the Andaman Islands, Goa, Kerala, etc.

❖ **International:** Dubai-Abu Dhabi, Maldives, Mauritius, Thailand, Europe, etc.

❖ **Duration of Stay:** 35% respondents chose holidays between 3-5 days; 52% for 6-12 days; 13% for a holiday of over 12 days

❖ **Travel Companions:** 62% respondents prefer to travel with family/friends; 20% as couples/solo; 18% in a vaccinated group

❖ **Need for Human Touch/ Expertise:** 77% respondents continued to express strong preference for interaction with an expert for guidance/reassurance - 27% opting to purchase holidays through retail outlets; 17% for home service; 33% preferred a contactless experience of a virtual store/video chat.



Offering the best of both worlds

Amidst the several hotels, resorts, serviced residences and homestays mushrooming across the country, Earthaa Escapes comes as a breath of fresh air. Founded by **Sehar Shamim** along with **Sanjay Wadhawan** and **US Jamwal**, Earthaa has already opened its first homestay, in Mashobra.



Nisha Verma

For **Sehar Shamim**, the Earthaa Escapes brand is an amalgamation of a luxury hotel and a private homestay. "Earthaa is a luxury homestay start-up creating curated experiences for the discerning traveller. The brand is being posi-

tioned to fill a gap in the market. Travellers had to earlier choose from a fully serviced hotel or a non-serviced homestay, wherein they had to buy groceries, cook food and clean after themselves, thereby taking away valuable family time during their breaks. Earthaa intends to fill this void by providing fully serviced home-

stays for the traveller who wants to sit back and enjoy their holiday. Earthaa provides the service of a luxury hotel with the privacy and space of a homestay," she says.

The company's flagship property, Aranya, at Mashobra, has seen great response within a couple of months of

its launch and is running at 100% occupancy. However, expansion is on cards. "We plan to bring 20 homes under our umbrella this financial year, and reach a milestone of 50 homes in two years. We will be focusing a lot on our operational excellence within each home. Currently, we are looking at many locations, including Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Goa to begin with," Shamim shares.

For sales, they are reaching the consumers through different channels and will also launch their own website enabled with a booking engine. "We are actively using the OTAs and offline agents who deal with the luxury segment. We are also launching our website in July complete with a booking engine and payment gateway integration. The website also has a separate section for homeowners for them to view the



bookings status in their respective homes," she informs. For promotions of Earthaa, they are aggressively marketing through their own network, social media, travel agents and OTAs. "Soon our website will be live, and we will be using that also for pushing our marketing and promotional strategies," adds Shamim.

She believes that experiences like Earthaa would change how travel is perceived in India. "Earthaa is poised to bring a steep change in the experiential holiday market through its curated experiences in luxury, fully serviced homestays. The discerning traveller is ready for this change," she says.



The invincible travel agents

While it was widely predicted that the internet was going to kill off travel agents when digital tools were placed at every traveller's disposal, that event hasn't occurred due to several reasons. Now more than ever, travellers need agents to not just secure bookings but also help them in times of emergencies.



Hazel Jain

Agent expertise

No one knows everything about travel, no matter how deeply they are involved in the industry. Some travellers cheat their way around by sticking to brands wherever they go. But in many tourist hotbeds, all the best hotels are the ones you have likely never heard of. This is where a travel agents' knowledge comes handy. And while even the best travel agent can't know everything either, the good agencies have experts and they all work together.

The best fit

The major search sites routinely leave out flights and even entire airlines in their results. A lot of the flights they do show are the ones travellers don't want, starting with 'basic economy' fares that come with tons of restrictions and fees, so the price you see isn't the one you end up paying,

along with connections way too short or way too long – ones that no responsible travel agent would let their clients book. Good travel agents do not just know what the best hotel is, they know what the best hotel is for you and your budget and can help you find the right fit.

During emergencies

Stuff happens and big weather events have become more widespread, and sooner or later Mother Nature is going to strike us when flying. But there are plenty of non-weather events disrupting flights, cruises, trains and destinations, from civil unrest to volcanic eruptions to disease outbreaks to massive wildfires, and even airlines that went bust and shut down suddenly. Anything that causes cancellations means hassles, but the people who get through this process the most smoothly and the ones who get rebooked first



are usually the ones who used a travel agent.

Cutting through clutter

There is an information overload right now with thousands of new hotels on the scene, all sorts of new cruise ships, passport and visa issues, weather, transit strikes, political unrest, natural disasters, travel insurance, travel providers going out of business,

etc. In such a situation, it's the travel agent who can help travellers navigate all of this and avoid the travel landmines that lay in front of them.

Safety net

Even the best advisors probably can't get it for less than you can buy it online, though you still have to deal with all the pitfalls of the online travel sites

edge of the carriers and actual aircraft, means they can advise on how to reach the destination at the best possible price and in the most comfortable configuration.

Special deals

Whether you are trying to book space at a coveted 8-villa safari lodge in Africa or get a room in a top Paris hotel during Fashion Week, most hoteliers keep emergency inventory and guess who gets it?

Their preferred travel partners they have known for years who give them a lot of business! Anytime there is scarcity, there is no substitute for personal connections, and the best agents have built these over years or decades. Plus we are living in the age of 'experiential travel' and good advisors create one of kind experiences most people would never have imagined in the first place.

EVENT TALK

Media Partners:



JULY 2021

Date	Event	Time
1	Spain Tourism Webinar	03:00 pm
6	Israel Tourism Webinar	03:00 pm
8	Spain Tourism Webinar	03:00 pm
9	Thomas Cook India webinar	TBA
13	Israel Tourism Webinar	03:00 pm
15	CAPA India webinar on Airport slots	04:00 pm
29	CAPA India webinar on Aircraft Financing	04:00 pm

AUGUST 2021

13-15	Holiday Expo	Vadodara
23-25	Global Youth Tourism Summit	Sorrento, Italy
26	CAPA India webinar on India-ME Aviation	04:00 pm

SEPTEMBER 2021

10-12	TTF	Kolkata
23-25	TTF	Ahmedabad
29-1 Oct	TTF	Mumbai

For more information, contact us at: talk@ddppl.com

Progressing on climate action

UNWTO is inviting public and private stakeholders from around the world to take part in a Global Survey of Climate Action in Tourism and help identify front-running initiatives and opportunities to accelerate said action.



Manas Dwivedi

The objective of this global survey is to better understand the ongoing climate action efforts in the tourism sector and identify front running initiatives and opportunities to accelerate climate action. It is addressed to tourism destinations (governments and organisations), businesses (accommodation providers, tour operators and transport providers), associations and networks. The deadline to reply is July 15.

On this, **Zurab Pololikashvili**, Secretary-General, UNWTO, said, "The pandemic and its impact on tourism, jobs and revenues, offers an unprecedented reminder of the need to rebalance our relationship with people, planet and prosperity. The green transformation of the sector is needed, not just for the planet, but also for tourism itself, boosting competitiveness and increasing resilience."



Zurab Pololikashvili
Secretary-General, UNWTO

In May, the Tourism Ministers of the G20 nations stressed the need to rethink tourism and shape a more resilient, sustainable and inclusive sector. They also committed to take action and to promote such a green transformation. The UNWTO Recommendations for the Transition to a Green Travel and Tourism Economy, welcomed by the



G20 Tourism Ministers, highlighted the need to transform tourism operations for climate action. Otherwise, emissions from global tourism could rise by at least 25% by 2030, as estimated in the latest research carried out by UNWTO and ITF. The survey is led by UNWTO in collaboration with UNFCCC and with support from the Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA), San Francisco State University and Tourism Declares a Climate Emergency. It is implemented within the framework of the Sustainable Tourism Programme of the One Planet

Network. The Survey is also part of the preparations for the UN Climate Change Conference COP26 and the results will be presented

The green transformation is needed not just for the planet, but also for tourism itself

in November in Glasgow. It has been developed within the framework of One Planet Sustainable Tourism Programme.

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has launched the Jobs Factory, powered by Hosco, the global hospitality network. This innovative platform is designed to connect talent with employers across the sector, being the perfect solution for hospitality recruitment.

Travelexic offers digitised MICE Ops

Travelexic has joined hands with Thomas Cook and SOTC to develop a custom solution for their MICE vertical. Their technology aims to replace the human-intensive MICE Ops. Travelexic also provides a mobile application for ease of engagement and management of the tour.



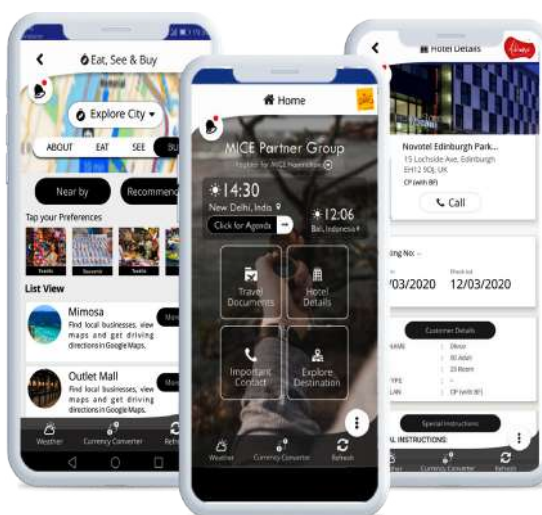
Nisha Verma

Travelexic is a SaaS-based business process automation solution for tour and MICE operators, co-founded by **Dhruv Chauhan**. "It helps create a bridge between fulfilment teams, the handler and ultimately the end traveller. Our solution brings value by helping teams cut cost, improve service delivery, and enhance traveller experience," he says.

Claiming that it simplifies the processes for companies that are handling big incentive groups, Chauhan adds, "Large groups require all the effort that goes into managing travel for

a family, many times over. In other words, there is repetition of work across multiple passengers, requiring large teams and redundant processes to minimise errors and meet deadlines. Moreover, since it is B2B, the scope of error is next to nil."

Chauhan says that Travelexic aims to replace the traditional human-intensive nature of MICE operations through technology. "Our approach combines automation with design thinking to achieve both efficiency and increased productivity. The document and information collection process is one such workflow, where we use a combination of Travelexic forms and bulk mailing to make the entire process seamless. The document tracker gives you a single view of all pendency, incoming documents, plus our



bulk reminder-cum-QC mails ensure the operators' productivity is maximised. Other such workflows include traveller registration and approval, bulk document sharing and rooming," he says. There are many other benefits for companies opting for Travelexic, he insists. "The

other big focus area has been the experience of the end traveller and the corporate in case of MICE. A global report by SITE back in 2019 had highlighted the growing importance of traveller experience and their feedback on the overall success of an incentive programme. Here again,

our fully White-labelled traveller App helps raise the overall experience by keeping the traveller informed of the entire process including his visa status, travel-related updates, tickets, etc. The traveller gets a paperless experience by having access to all his documents, itinerary, tickets, etc. In addition, our tools for on-ground engagement such as polling, chat and broadcast ensure traveller remains engaged and always connected. Lastly, we maximise collection of feedback through a trigger-driven custom feedback tool," Chauhan explains.

The highlight of Travelexic is the tour manager (TM) App. "Once the tour is on ground, the tour manager is the single most critical aspect of the tour. Our tour manager App helps augment his capabilities and provide him the necessary tools to manage

seamlessly and efficiently. Tools for engagement include broadcasting, polling, chat and so forth. Additionally, we offer tools for expense recording, inventory and attendance management. Moreover, we relieve him/her from the inconvenience of carrying hard copies by providing access to passenger details including meal plans, rooming, arrival/departure details through the TM App," he explains.

Speaking on the partnership with Thomas Cook and SOTC, he shares, "It has been a dream come true! Our system has benefited immensely from their inputs and allowed us to build a solution that will not only help them cut cost but significantly improve their customer experience." Chauhan also claims that the ability to work remotely, yet be productive, will now be showcased.

Access Travelexic

To learn more about Travelexic, log on to www.travelexic.com



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CATHAY PACIFIC AIRWAYS

Mumbai

Cathay Pacific has appointed **Abhijit Abhyankar** as the airline's new Regional Head of People. He will manage South Asia, Middle East and Africa (SAMEA) during his tenure at the company and will be stationed at Mumbai. He will be heading the people team and will be responsible for Human Resource strategy and execution, internal stakeholder management and collaboration, talent management and succession planning, employee engagement, people cost budgeting as well as business continuity.



QATAR NATIONAL TOURISM COUNCIL

Qatar

Qatar National Tourism Council (QNTC) has appointed **Deveekaa Nijhawan** to lead the International PR and Communications team, to assist in marketing the destination in key markets as part of the country's strategy to become a world-leading tourism destination. Nijhawan's remit covers key markets including India, United Kingdom, Germany, Australia and United Arab Emirates with a focus on engaging and penetrating travel trade and consumer media. Here, she will execute QNTC's tailored global communications campaigns.



VIVANTA DWARKA

New Delhi

Vivanta New Delhi - Dwarka has appointed **Dhananjai Singh** as its General Manager. Singh brings with him years of valued knowledge and experience gained from his association with leading international and domestic hospitality groups including being the Executive Vice President at a renowned chain in New Delhi. He has been instrumental in elevating the overall positioning of hotels by implementing several strategic initiatives and carefully leading the execution of key aspects of the business plan. Singh is a hotel management graduate from the Pusa Institute of Technology, Delhi.



THE LEELA PALACES, HOTELS AND RESORTS

Mumbai

The Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts has announced the appointment of **Natasha Mehta** as Vice President - Special Projects and Brand Experience. In her new role, Mehta will lead a critical function of Special Projects that will help the company further elevate the brand experience. She brings with her over 17 years of comprehensive expertise in the hospitality industry having worked with The Oberoi Hotels and Resorts at renowned hotels like The Oberoi New Delhi, The Oberoi Udaivilas, and The Trident Hyderabad. Prior to this, Mehta was the GM at The Oberoi Mumbai.



RAFFLES

Udaipur

Raffles Udaipur, the brand's first forthcoming hotel in India, has announced the appointment of **Abhishek Sharma** as General Manager. He is a well-recognised leader with over two decades of outstanding experience in luxury hospitality and has an exceptional network across the industry. In his new role, Sharma will lead the task of introducing the legendary Raffles brand to the country, and taking charge of operations for Raffles Udaipur. He joins the hotel with over nine years of leading teams in the role of GM, throughout luxury hotels and resorts.



RENAISSANCE CONVENTION CENTRE HOTEL

Mumbai

Prabdeep Singh Arora has been appointed as the Director of Rooms for Renaissance Mumbai Convention Centre Hotel & Lakeside Chalet - Mumbai, Marriott Executive Apartments. In his current leadership role, he will be responsible for handling the entire Rooms Division Operations for the complex and ensuring that the guest experience is raised to exceptional levels. Armed with a decade of experience in the field of hospitality, Arora has been associated with leading palace hotels like Umaid Bhawan Palace - Jodhpur and Rambagh Palace - Jaipur.



CROWNE PLAZA TODAY OKHLA

New Delhi

Crowne Plaza Today New Delhi Okhla has appointed **Shuvendu Banerjee** as the new General Manager. With an illustrious experience of more than two decades, Banerjee has held leadership positions and worked with renowned domestic and international hospitality brands across the country. In his new role, he will be responsible for the continued success of the hotel by combining cutting-edge hospitality with innovative experiences for the guests. A company veteran having spent over 14 years at IHG Group, Banerjee moves to this role from Crowne Plaza Cochin.



Raffles Udaipur has announced the appointment of **Rajan Malhotra** as Director of Sales and Marketing. He will be a part of the pre-opening leadership team at India's first outpost by the iconic brand Raffles. In his role, Malhotra will take charge of introducing the world-renowned Raffles brand experience in the country as well as planning and implementing strategies to support the hotel's unrivalled positioning. He will be leading the sales and marketing team, exploring business opportunities and will be responsible for the budgeting, etc.



With over two decades of relevant experience in Marketing & Communications across several hotels and other industries, **Aparna Banerjee Paul** has recently joined as the Marketing and Communications Manager at Renaissance Mumbai Convention Centre Hotel & Lakeside Chalet, Mumbai - Marriott Executive Apartments. She will be responsible for overall marketing activities including devising appropriate marketing strategies towards maximising hotel revenues. Prior to this, Paul was heading Marketing & Communications at The Oberoi Grand, Kolkata.



TALKing People

Sunil Kumar, General Manager, The Westin Goa, says, "It is imperative to spend time and indulge in activities that make you happy. I find solace in my two dogs.



Spending time with them brings so much joy and lights up my mood." His next holiday will be to the United Kingdom. "I have been there before, enjoyed the delightfully diverse offerings of the place right from the food - scones and cream being my all-time favourite, the pebble beaches; their enthusiasm for sports and music.

When travelling is permitted, my first destination would be the UK," he shares.

The biggest stress-buster for **Amandeep Kaur**, General Manager at WelcomHotel by ITC Hotels, Bengaluru, is her 7-year old son. She has also



restarted her yoga practice during the lockdown. She says, "I have started practising Asthanga yoga again and I also catch up on my reading which I have been wanting to for some time." Speaking about travel, Kaur shares, "My next holiday will be Himalayas."

The lockdown has given **Reuben Kataria**, GM, The Leela Bhartiya City Bengaluru, the time to experiment and hone skills in the kitchen. "I tried my hand at cooking European and Italian cuisine.

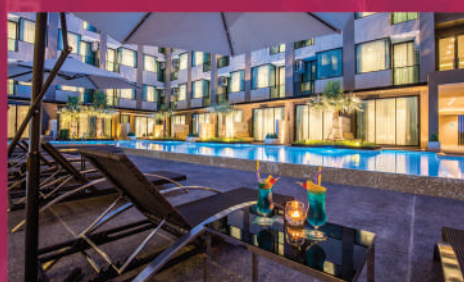
Also, once travel resumes, I definitely want to explore a place which is well-known for its art, gastronomic indulgences, opulence, and culture - all coinciding beautifully in one place. And I cannot think of a better place than Paris for that," he says.





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Kerala on fast-track revival

Kerala will complete its tourism projects in a time-bound manner by giving top priority to those under the government's 100-day programme, according to Tourism Minister of the state, **PA Mohamed Riyas**.

 Manas Dwivedi

After reviewing ongoing tourism projects in the states, the Tourism Minister said that the authorities will hold urgent meetings with the heads of various department and district administrations to achieve the aim. The announcements come after Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan announced a 100-day action plan to help the state tide over the economic slowdown triggered by the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Riyas also said discussions will be held soon with people's representatives and district administrations regarding the tourism development activities to be implemented in Wayanad district, Kozhikode city and Fort Kochi.



across the state on the lines of the one at Veli in Thiruvananthapuram, the first of which will come up in Kadalundi," the Minister further added.

Talking about other initiatives, he said the online booking system of the hotels of Kerala Tourism Development Corporation (KTDC) will be upgraded with the introduction of Channel Manager Software to make the booking of rooms from any part of the world quick and hassle-free. "The upgrading of the online booking system is the first major step to connect the prime properties of KTDC to global tourism networks. The system will connect KTDC hotels with major booking websites like Booking.com, Agoda and Indian booking engines like MakeMyTrip, Goibibo and IRCTC of the Indian Railways, giving them greater international visibility," Riyas said.

The Minister insisted that the ongoing projects will raise the comfort and quality of services of top hotels of KTDC to international standards. He informed, "The projects will be completed within the timeframe set for them. The quality and choice of dishes served in KTDC restaurants will also be improved, by including local delicacies in their menu, which will make the food served by them appealing to the local patrons as well as tourists. The ambience and service of all allied facilities at KTDC hotels will also be improved."

Mentioning about the state's revised budget for 2021-22, he said the move will give a big thrust to the revival of the pandemic-riddled tourism sector in Kerala. "The additional allocation of ₹50 crore proposed for mounting massive marketing campaigns will help Kerala

ment is working to provide COVID-19 vaccination to everyone in the tourism sector of the state.

"We are mulling to make famous tourist destinations in the state 100 per cent vaccinated zones by July 15 with the support of the health department.



Tourism attract visitors from niche markets and new segments. Similarly, new projects and circuits will ensure that all regions of the state would benefit from tourism development. The budget has also taken due care of the interests of the stakeholders of the key sector by proposing that sufficient working capital and other credit support of over ₹400 crore would be made available for the growth of industry through financial institutions like Kerala Finance Corporation (KFC). A provision of ₹30 crore as Government share has been made to work out a Rejuvenation Package for tourism enterprises," he said.

Additionally, all popular holiday destinations in the state of Kerala may also soon be declared as complete 'vaccinated zones' as the state govern-

The government has already started providing vaccines to those working in the industry after including them in the prioritised list considering them as frontline COVID-19 fighters," the minister said.



PA Mohamed Riyas
Minister of Tourism, Government of Kerala



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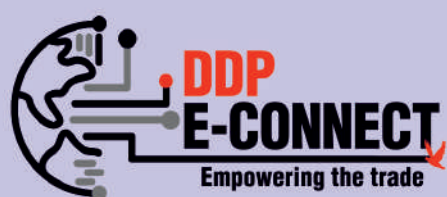


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KTDC hotel
chains will be
renovated under
the project
'Mission Facelift'

"The government would initiate ways to increase the arrival of tourists by appointing Keralites residing in Arab countries, Europe and the US as brand ambassadors of state's tourism," he added.

"KTDC hotel chains will be renovated under the project 'Mission Facelift' after classifying them on a priority basis," he revealed, announcing major projects under the tourism corporation. "Moreover, floating restaurants will be set up in select destinations

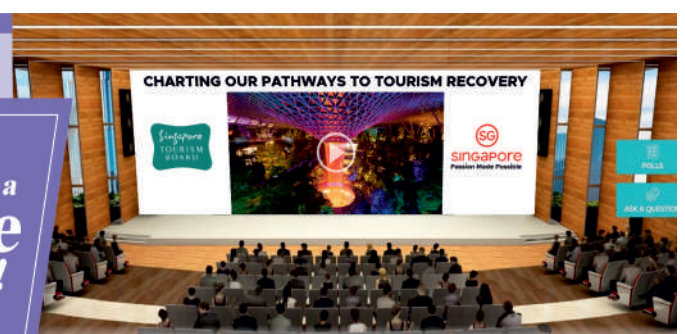


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