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## The next *big* leap

Karvat Group regains complete ownership of India travel ancillary business. **Launches ASEGO to expand business reach.**

*Exclusive Cover Story - TRAVTALK* interviews Mr. Dev Karvat on pg.5



# Hoover Dam



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## Tourism, an economic driver

**Arvind Singh**, Secretary, Ministry of Tourism, believes that the sector will be a major economic driver post COVID, and that revival of domestic travel aided by the commendable handling of the crisis would also help.

Nisha Verma

**A**rvind Singh has said that the top leadership of the country considers the tourism sector to be one of the major drivers of economy post COVID. "After joining MOT, the feedback I received was that the top leadership of the country is looking at the tourism sector to be one of the major drivers in the post-COVID world. If jobs have to grow, incomes have to grow and the economy has to bounce back along with public investment in infrastructure," he said in his address at the inauguration of India Tourism Mart (ITM) in New Delhi. Singh added that ITM's recommendations on policies and initiatives of various tourism segments, including culture tourism, adventure tourism, eco-tourism, MICE, medical and cruise tourism, will be useful for both government and industry.



**Arvind Singh**  
Secretary, Ministry of Tourism

that domestic tourism in India is reviving and that the country is also ready to re-open inbound travel, marking the beginning of the end of bad days. But, what will aid the endeavour to open borders is the success of India's approach in handling the COVID-19 pandemic. "This must be told to the world that despite the constraints on our health infrastructure, the country has successfully managed the pandemic. While controlling the pandemic at home, India has also helped other nations in the neighbourhood and

elsewhere with vaccines to help them in controlling the pandemic. We have now emerged as one of the leaders in the global efforts towards vaccination post COVID.

In the post COVID scenario, we can focus on India's wisdom on wellness, Yoga and alternative medicine

Over nine million persons have already been vaccinated in the country till date, and the world is looking up to India for showing the light towards the future of the vaccination programme," he highlighted.

Contd on page 18 ▶

## Intervention at the right time

**Amitabh Kant**, Chief Executive Officer, NITI Aayog, says that the government is aware of the hardships faced by the industry due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but will intervene when the time is right.

Nisha Verma

**A**mitabh Kant has said that the government is in cognisance of the industry's plight and that several decisions have already been taken before the pandemic. "We had taken several decisions prior to COVID. We'd reduced the visa fee, reduced the GST on rooms under various categories of hotels and created a new class of visa valid for a month. All these were measures that will pay rich dividends to the industry. However, I can assure you that the government is fully aware of the challenges being faced. As we see growth in domestic tourism and as international travel opens, all issues will be considered favourably and we'll take positive measures to give a massive impetus to travel and tourism in the days to come. It is important to understand that government intervention is necessary, but it should come at the right time and therefore, all of us will work with



**Amitabh Kant**  
CEO, NITI Aayog

the travel and tourism industry," added Kant, speaking at the inaugural ceremony of India Tourism Mart (ITM) 2021.

In an optimistic address to delegates and industry partners, he said, "I have been a long-term believer in the huge multiplier impact of travel and tourism. The sector accounts for almost 9.5-10 per cent of India's GDP, contributes about 8.1 per cent to India's employment, and has a huge impact across several sectors of the economy. While

the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted several sectors, it has detrimentally impacted travel and tourism the most not only in India but globally. Also, I have no doubt that tourism will bounce back with vengeance and that tourism will drive India's recovery both in terms of employment and in terms of growth, and to my mind,

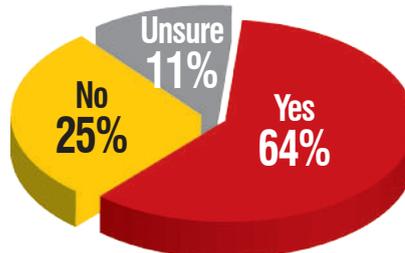
The focus on revival of infrastructure will be a catalyst to the growth of travel and tourism

the best of tourism will be seen in the next decade as it will grow and expand in a manner we can never envisage."

Contd on page 22 ▶

## 2021 recovery for M!CE within India?

**TRAVTALK** conducted a poll to find out what experts in the tourism sector thought about M!CE travel restarting from India. More than half (64%) of respondents said M!CE will begin to recover this year, while 25% believe it will take some more time for travel budgets of corporates to return. Our in-depth coverage on page 13 reveals the inside story.

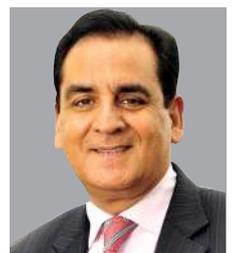


## Infrastructure status is paramount

**KB Kachru**, VP, Hotel Association of India, shares why it is important to uplift the hospitality sector by giving it an infrastructure status.

Nisha Verma

**K**B Kachru says that an 'infrastructure' status is crucial for the hospitality sector. "The PM called it one of the five pillars of progress, hence, infrastructure status should be given. The moment that is done, there will be so many possibilities for investment in this sector, sustenance



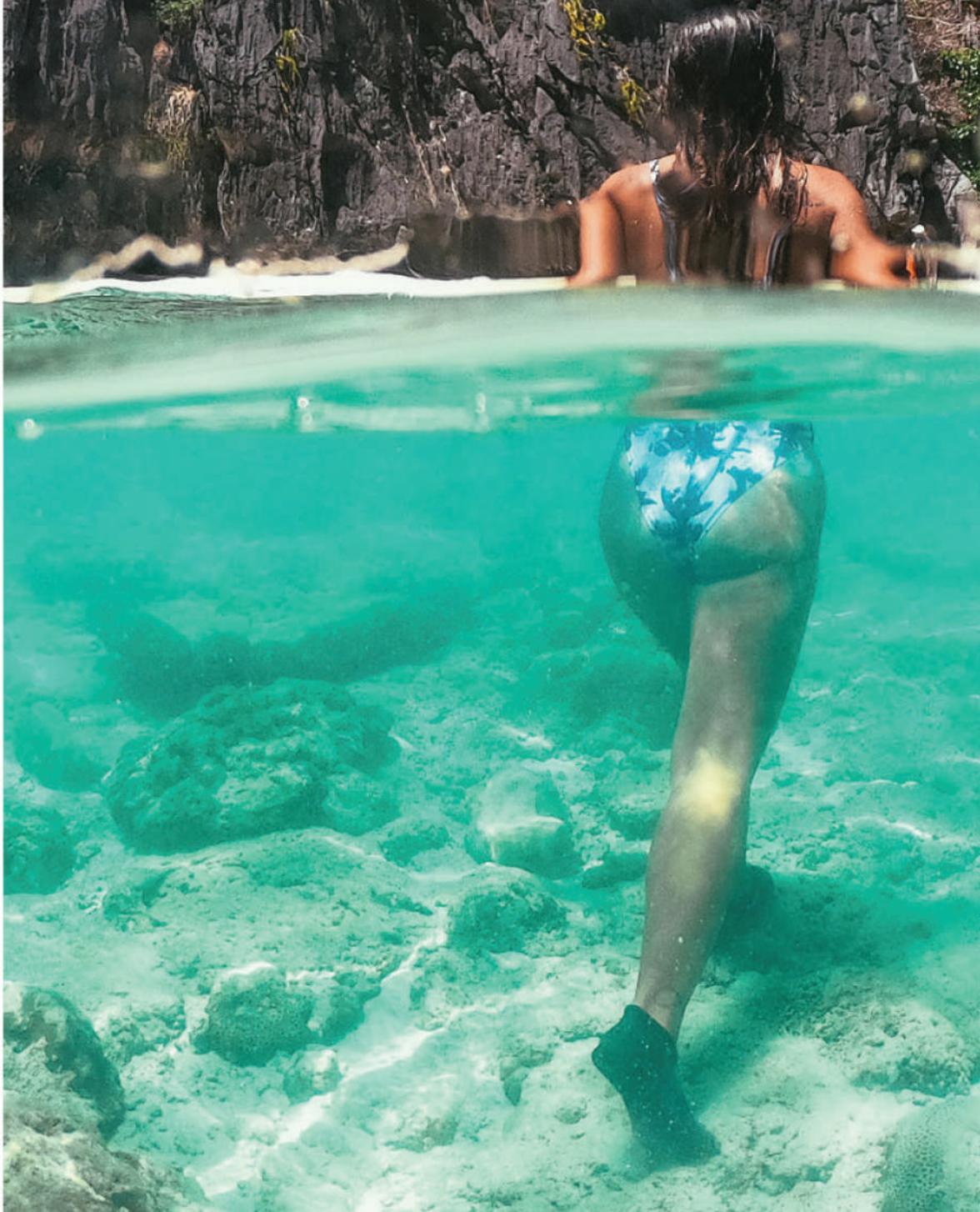
**KB Kachru**  
VP, HAI & Chairman Emeritus & Principal Advisor, South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group

Contd on page 24 ▶



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## Spreading its wings with Asego

While travel assistance and insurance have always been at the core of Karvat Group's business, it will also adopt a new business model with the launch of its new venture – Asego, says **Dev Karvat**, Chief Executive Officer, Karvat Group.



### What are the latest developments in your organisation?

With the beginning of this New Year, I personally feel energised as we are looking forward to several new developments on the business front. I am happy to share that in a strategic move, Karvat Group took command of the travel ancillary business in India.

### What is your next course of action?

During our 22 years' journey of becoming one of India's leading travel ancillary service providers, we accumulated immense knowledge and experience in the domain. Travel assistance and insurance has always been at the core of our business and we will continue to focus on it, while improving our service capabilities. At the same time, we are also spreading our wings wider by adopting a new business model with the launch of our new venture – Asego – that will offer a plethora of opportunities



**Dev Karvat**  
CEO, Karvat Group

for our stakeholders to expand their business horizon.

### Can you please tell us more about Asego?

Asego is the next-in-class operating model in travel ancillary services and general insurance, through a fully integrated digital platform. As the newest member of the Karvat Group, with a differentiated identity, Asego will open doors to a lot of exciting business opportunities for our clients.

We will shortly share all the details in the upcoming months. Most importantly, Asego will continue to live our core values of integrity, genuine care,

personalised support and, most importantly, excellence in client servicing.

### What was the thought behind the creation of your new venture 'Asego'?

I come from a family that has been in the insurance domain over 60 years now. I have built one of India's leading travel assistance brands, while also supporting my father in his insurance advisory business. This exposure has helped me to identify the gaps and disparities in the Indian insurance market and my determination to resolve these underlying problems of the insurance industry sowed the seeds of Asego.

### With travel at the core of your business, can you elaborate on your plans for the segment?

We aspire to continue leading product innovations and technology upgrades in the travel assistance and insurance domain. We will empower our travel agent partners with dynamic product offerings - a combination of unique travel protection products and packages relevant to today's times, enabling our clients to serve their customers more effectively. In a move to strengthen our global assistance capabilities, we have collaborated with leading international assistance providers to help us to complement our services in emergency, medical, travel and personal assistance categories.

Our commitment towards identifying the customer's requirements and delivering best-in-class products and services will always be our top-most priority, and Asego will provide us the required impetus in shaping our portfolio for today's times.

Asego will offer opportunities for stakeholders to expand their business



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# TRAVELTALK

## VIEWPOINT

### A stitch in time...

The government and industry have repeatedly gone back and forth in terms of the latter's demands and the former's solutions. And, the sentiment in the industry does not lean towards one side either. While some feel the government has done enough already and it's time the industry took it upon itself to utilise these opportunities to the best of its capabilities, some still feel that what has been offered doesn't hit the bull's eye and a half-hearted resolution cannot help the travel and tourism sector's recovery.

Opinions may be many, and rightfully so, but the government does believe that it has done what it can and will give a helping hand as and when the need arises. For now, the government aims to put its energies to creation of infrastructure for tourism, including airports and roadways, giving a boost to both employment and the country's potential to attract international visitors when the time comes. After all, if India is to make a comeback as a world-class tourist destination in the post-COVID world, shouldn't we invest in world-class infrastructure first?

### More power to M!CE

Of the several learnings from the pandemic, some harsh and others positively eye-opening, is how a sector that depended on the physical presence of crowds has suddenly turned a new leaf. The M!CE industry, globally, was left struggling when the pandemic hit, and while travel still had the advantage of resuming steadily, there seemed no light at the end of the tunnel for M!CE. Industry stakeholders repeatedly collaborated to discuss how the sector could be saved from an utter disappearance, and their hard work did pay off!

Virtual events began small, but soon surged in frequency and capacity. Though they may still be no match to physical events, they do enjoy the benefit of giving people a chance to attend from the comfort of their home, also resulting in savings of cost and time, while negating the need for implementation of safety protocols. Now, virtual events, too, have gradually progressed to being hybrid, and as countries re-open borders, completely physical events are bound to make a vigorous comeback.

# 3 Indian LCCs in APAC's top 5

Three low-cost Indian carriers – IndiGo, SpiceJet and GoAir – feature in the top five list on the January 2021 Leaderboard for Safe Travel Score among Asia Pacific Airlines. Air India features in the top 10 full-service airlines.



Even as countries inoculate their population with COVID-19 vaccines, resumption of air travel services, particularly international, is still expected to be gradual in 2021. Over the last year, airlines have implemented various initiatives to safeguard passengers and crew in the 'new normal'. The widespread and varied nature of these initiatives called for industry benchmarking to boost traveller confidence and jumpstart industry recovery.



Virendra Jain  
Co-founder and CEO  
Safe Travel Barometer

health and safety protocols of more than 2,000 suppliers across 10 industry categories. Specifically, Safe Travel Barometer tracks 32



86 airlines in Asia Pacific (APAC) were assessed in January 2021. China's Air China and China Southern Airlines achieved the highest Safe Travel Score of 4.1 each among full-service airlines. Malaysia-based AirAsia led the baton among APAC LCCs with a

Compared to other regions, APAC has the highest share (8 per cent) of airlines with a Safe Travel Score of 4.0 and above. Full-service airlines which also feature on the APAC leaderboard include China Southern Airlines with a Safe Travel Score of 4.1. Airlines which followed suit at 4.0

#### Safe Travel Score, Full-service Carriers, January 2021

Full-Service Carriers	Country	Safe Travel Score* (January 2021)
Air China	China	4.1
China Southern Airlines	China	4.1
All Nippon Airways	Japan	4.0
Qantas Airways	Australia	4.0
Vistara	India	4.0
Cathay Pacific	Hong Kong	4.0
Korean Air	South Korea	3.9
Japan Airlines	Japan	3.9
Singapore Airlines	Singapore	3.9
Air India	India	3.8

#### Safe Travel Score, Low-cost Carriers, January 2021

Low-Cost Carriers	Country	Safe Travel Score* (January 2021)
AirAsia	Malaysia	4.0
IndiGo	India	3.9
SpiceJet	India	3.9
JEJU air	South Korea	3.7
GoAir	India	3.7
Scoot	Singapore	3.7
Indonesia AirAsia	Indonesia	3.6
Thai AirAsia	Thailand	3.6
Citilink	Indonesia	3.5
Jetstar Japan	Japan	3.5

Launched during the pandemic, Safe Travel Barometer is a travel technology solution provider whose tool enables the industry to monitor and benchmark traveller experience and COVID-19 initiatives across 268 airlines – both full-service and low-cost carriers (LCCs). Based upon the publicly announced initiatives, airlines are benchmarked on the basis of a Safe Travel Score. Initiatives of



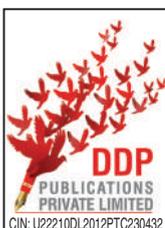
Safe Travel Score of 4.0 in January 2021. A pioneer in the region, AirAsia excels across multiple initiatives attributed to COVID-19 Traveler Safety and Traveler Convenience subcategories.

include All Nippon Airways, Qantas Airways, Vistara and Cathay Pacific. The APAC LCC leaderboard is equally competitive. Seven airlines are at the heels of AirAsia – IndiGo and SpiceJet – with a Safe Travel Score of 3.9 in January 2021.

Asian carriers continue to introduce measures in conjunction with airports and destinations for air corridors

Virendra Jain, Co-founder and CEO, Safe Travel Barometer, states, "Despite the regional diversity, Asian carriers continue to introduce a slew of measures in conjunction with airports and destinations to enact air corridors. These are trying times for the airline industry, where regulations and compliance pertaining to travellers' health play a central role. We believe that health will emerge as the fourth standard of travel, much like passports, visas and security. This will fundamentally alter how airlines and travellers comply with destination regulations."

*In a unanimous vote, Las Vegas McCarran International Airport in Nevada, USA, is soon expected to be renamed Las Vegas Harry Reid International Airport after the former US Senator Harry Reid.*



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**Design:** Nityanand Misra  
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**Tourism**  
**Breaking News**

- Virtually Yours Travel Show to kick-off on 15 March
- AI trying to move towards a more web-sale oriented approach: Bansal
- Goa grew to be the RevPAR leader in absolute terms in Q4 2020: JLL
- Cordelia Cruises to start sailing from Mumbai starting 7<sup>th</sup> May
- Andhra government issues ₹198 cr Restart Package to support tourism
- Karnataka to accord Industry status to classified hotels
- JTB India invites trade to participate in 1<sup>st</sup> virtual MICE show on 28<sup>th</sup> April
- Odisha doubles tourism budget, gets all time high allocation

# Medical visas issued, eTV soon

**Dr. Harsh Vardhan**, Minister of Health and Family Welfare, has said that with India emerging as an important destination for medical tourism, the medical visa is already being issued and that the e-Tourist Visa as well as scheduled international flights are also set to commence soon.

 Nisha Verma

**C**alling India a popular tourist destination, **Dr Harsh Vardhan** says that over the last few years, it has also emerged as a leading destination in the world for the purpose of medical tourism.



**Dr Harsh Vardhan**  
Union Minister of Health and Family Welfare

“Advancements in our vast healthcare industry have made it comparable to the best in the world. Our education system, which has been producing world-class doctors, nurses and paramedical staff, is well-recognised across the globe. Often called the ‘pharmacy of the world’, India is one of the largest manufacturers of pharmaceuticals and supplies a large portion of vaccines

used across the globe. All these strengths and capabilities have contributed to India emerging as a crucial medical tourism destination,” he shares, adding that to encourage it further, they have started issuing medical visas. “We have already started issuing medical visas and are planning to soon restart e-Tourist Visas as

well as scheduled international flights,” he says.

Speaking at the inauguration of Virtual India Tourism Mart (ITM), Dr Vardhan also said that ITM is being organised at a time when

My ministry is committed to supporting the efforts made by the industry in reviving int'l tourism



the world is emerging from the dark clouds of the pandemic.

other countries seeking our help,” he said.

“Countries across the world are contemplating to open for travel, albeit with all health and security precautions in place. It is also the time when India has embarked on the world’s largest immunisation programme against COVID-19. We have not only vaccinated over 8.5 million people in India, but have also sent millions of doses to

Dr Vardhan also said that at ITM, the deliberations held by the industry will provide ideas and practices for tourism, going forward. He also requested stakeholders to share insights and said reassuringly, “My ministry is fully committed to supporting the efforts made by the tourism industry in reviving international tourism.”

*World Travel & Tourism Council (WTC) will host its 20<sup>th</sup> Global Summit in April this year. Being organised in partnership with the Government of Quintana Roo in Mexico, the Summit will be held in Cancun, Mexico, from April 25-27.*

# HK’s campaign to bring M&I back

The Hong Kong Tourism Board has leveraged on this time to strengthen its partner relationships, educating and engaging them to keep the destination top-of-mind, says **Puneet Kumar**, Director, South Asia & Middle East, Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB).

 Hazel Jain

**Is HK looking to promote itself as a MICE destination for the Indian market?**

To me, a great destination for incentive travel from India should offer great connectivity, top standard in hygiene, and be full of unique experiences and great cuisine options, and Hong Kong simply checks all boxes.

All through the lockdown, we remained connected with our corporate and travel trade stakeholders. We have leveraged on this window to sustain our partner relationships, educating and engaging them to keep the destination top-of-mind when outbound travel is on ‘pause’ mode. Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB) has launched 360 Hong Kong Moments, a series of Virtual Reality (VR) adventures.

**What are some of the new incentive ideas HKTB has curated for MICE recovery?**

The team has been developing new themed itineraries that cater to the emerging



**Puneet Kumar**  
Director, South Asia & ME, HKTB

trend of experiential, wellness and interest-based travel. Many new inspirational ideas and refreshed experiences are curated to enrich corporate Meetings & Incentive (M&I) groups’ itineraries, and to encourage them to rediscover Hong Kong with a new lens.

**Do you have a tactical campaign for M&I?**

The Meetings & Exhibitions Hong Kong (MEHK), the MICE division of HKTB, is committed to welcome back Indian M&I groups to Hong Kong. Along with our Hong Kong industry partners, we will be curating exclusive offers and incentives under the MeetON@HongKong campaign to make it a rewarding experience for the visiting corporate delegates. The programme

We will curate exclusive offers and incentives for a rewarding experience



will further be enhanced with additional offers from hotels, free tickets from airlines, attractions and more.

**What about trade partnerships?**

We will be collaborating with our travel trade partners in India who are focused on the MICE segment. MEHK will be working with their teams to create compelling offers for their corporate customers, supporting their outreach initiatives for lead genera-

tion and assisting them during their planning process. Moreover, representatives from trade associations, universities and chambers of commerce were invited to become Hong Kong Convention Ambassadors under the new programme to promote Hong Kong as a destination for conventions.

**What do your interactions with Indian corporates reveal?**

Majority of corporates are planning to roll-out their incentive schemes starting from the first half of 2021. Corporates plan to gradually resume incentive travel in Q3-Q4 of 2021. The virtual (or hybrid) event formats, and domestic destinations are only a short-term measure. They cannot substitute the aspiration associated with an international travel experience, especially for incentive travel.

**How do you think MICE travel will change now?**

Most Indian corporates now

# RETAINING SINGAPORE'S POSITION AS A LEADING MICE HUB



Singapore's MICE sector has adapted quickly in response to the repercussions brought about by Covid-19 pandemic. The industry has rallied together with close private-public collaboration to innovate and put in place several initiatives and frameworks to guide the recovery of the MICE sector. We take a look at some of the key milestones and progress that Singapore has made since the onset of Covid-19.

Jun 2020



**International Dental Exhibition & Meeting** – A fully virtual event involving close to 4,000 participants and more than 300 exhibiting brands from more than 50 countries.

22 Jul 2020

**Safe Business Event Risk Management Framework** developed for business events of up to **50 attendees**.

Aug/Sep 2020



**APACMed**, a hybrid event successfully piloted under the Safe Business Event Risk Management Framework.

Aug 2020

Singapore won the rights to host the following events:



- **110<sup>th</sup> Lions Club International Conventions** in 2028. The event is expected to attract around 20,000 foreign delegates.
- **Worldchefs Congress & Expo** in 2024. The event is expected to attract around 700 foreign delegates.

1 Oct 2020

Singapore Tourism Board started to accept applications for organisers to pilot MICE events of up to **250 attendees** from 1 Oct 2020.

8 Oct 2020

Singapore Association of Convention & Exhibition Organisers & Suppliers launched the **Event Industry Resilience Roadmap** with the support of Singapore Tourism Board and Enterprise Singapore which will focus on:

- establishing best-in-class standards for new event safety measures.
- creating agile business models with a focus on digital capabilities and
- developing pathways for professional development in the post-Covid-19 world.

26-30 Oct 2020



The 13<sup>th</sup> **Singapore International Energy Week** was successfully piloted in a hybrid format and saw up to 250 participants onsite, attracting more than 30 Ministers and 300 speakers globally, and over 20,000 online viewers from over 80 countries.

18 Nov 2020

**Inbound Travel Insurance** coverage for Covid-19 related costs incurred in Singapore were made available by 3 insurance companies: AIG Asia Pacific Insurance Pte Ltd., Chubb Insurance Singapore Limited and HL Assurance Pte Ltd.

25-26 Nov 2020



**TravelRevive** was Asia Pacific's first international travel trade show to take place physically during Covid-19 involving 1,000 attendees with 65 foreign delegates from more than 14 countries.

15 Dec 2020

**Connect@Singapore** initiative was announced. A **Segregated Travel Lane** will facilitate business travelers from all countries on short-term stays (up to 14 days) to conduct business within dedicated facilities and subject to prevailing safe management measures and routine medical checks.

28 Dec 2020

**Phase 3 of safe re-opening of "A Safe Nation"** commenced on 28 December 2020.

11-15 Jan 2021



**PCMA** partnered with the Singapore Tourism Board to create a Global Broadcast Center for Convening Leaders located at the Marina Bay Sands in Singapore.

3-4 Mar 2021



A 2-day **Singapore MICE Virtual Tradeshow** to connect with up to 40 leading suppliers including convention centres, hotels, unique meeting venues, destination management companies and tour operators in Singapore.



# Women: Enterprising & motivating

For **Rupinder Brar**, Additional Director General, Ministry of Tourism, the effort put in by women in the tourism industry somehow doesn't get the credit it deserves. She believes that bringing women in the limelight and encouraging them to not be shy of recognition will really help boost their participation in the industry.

 Nisha Verma

**A** voice of authority and responsibility in the Ministry of Tourism, **Rupinder Brar** believes that while there are a lot of women who are part of the industry, most play roles that hardly ever get the limelight. "That definitely needs to change," she asserts, adding, "We need to increase their participation and showcase it more. For this, MOT hopes to do more workshops soon. We did a workshop in Darjeeling with 700-plus homestay owners, a significant number out of those being women. We want to showcase that these women, who have been enterprising, also give encouragement to other women. I must share that during our recent visit to Kevadia and Statue of Unity for ADTOI, it was so heartening to see women golf cart drivers. There were also young girls



**Rupinder Brar**  
Additional Director General  
Ministry of Tourism

who were showcasing that all the museums and cafeterias were being run by women who were part of self-help groups from local villages, trained in running these cafeterias. They have learnt the skills of micro-financing and how to manage an enterprise. I think, we are taking baby steps to bringing women into the more organised segment of tourism and hospitality."

**Women in leadership**  
Brar says that there is a need

to showcase all the work that women are already doing. "There is a debate on whether we should even be saying that there is a need to empower women. I think women are powerful, but we need to bring forth the efforts that women are putting in. The government, through its various initiatives, supports women in a big way, but let me also say that through tourism, we

Through tourism, we will create some more direct initiatives that women can benefit from

## The recovery of tourism

Claiming that infrastructure drives tourism, Brar says that connectivity as part of infrastructure is crucial. "The other thing is social infrastructure. In current times, building health infrastructure and making sure that there are enough people that are vaccinated or have testing facilities is crucial. Also, it's important to make sure that hospitality units and all other segments of tourism are well provided for to take care of COVID-19. Hence, both hard infrastructure and soft infrastructure have tremendous value to drive tourism forward," she believes.

Brar also claims that it is important to organise events to encourage tourists to travel, albeit while following necessary safety norms. "One major learning from the ADTOI Convention and the hybrid ITM is that we need to do far more physical events. We had started this with boutique roadshows across India in November. There is going to be more focus on the Northeast. TAAI is hosting another event with MOT and Gujarat Tourism in Kevadia from March 9-12. Such events need to take place frequently to compensate for everything we could not do in terms of physical travel in the last 11 months. It will also give a sense of confidence to prospective travellers that since industry, government and stakeholders themselves are travelling and creating a message that one needs to wear masks, maintain social distancing, sanitise and be safe, we are getting there," she shares.

will be creating some more direct initiatives that women can benefit from. This year we are also working on what we call the 'Nirbhaya Fund'. There was a keen understanding that the government would need to spend more on security and safety for women. Hence, MOT, this year, is supporting and fi-

ancing a project in Madhya Pradesh. We are also working with the Bureau of Police Research and Development in making sure that travel becomes safe. Everything must happen together. Thus, doing workshops, engaging women in those workshops, making them believe what they really

can do and allowing them to come forward is an important part of learning. And, it is not just women who have to think about themselves, it's also the men who need to start thinking about bringing women forward because they are already making tremendous contributions everywhere," she says.

# Every woman is inspirational

**Usha Padhee**, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA), talks about the importance of women in the economy as Women's Day 2021 approaches. She also shares details on both domestic and international civil aviation operations, and by when she sees recovery for each of them.

 Nisha Verma

**E**very woman is inspirational, believes **Usha Padhee**, adding that they possess the unique character of a caregiver while participating in the economy and in public life. "Women have the capability and capacity to take on any leadership role, whether

in civil aviation or any other sector for that matter. I believe that every day is women's day. This Women's Day, we will again celebrate whatever has been achieved so far and what can be achieved. Air India may have an all-women flight, and one of the UDAN flights will also be inaugurated as an all-women flight," she shares.

## The aviation sector

Shifting her focus to the civil aviation sector, Padhee says that losses arising from the pandemic are expected to deepen further.

"Internationally, there is already 60 per cent squeezing of demand, which is like being in 2003. That said,



**Usha Padhee**  
Joint Secretary  
Ministry of Civil Aviation

has emerged as a safe mode of transportation. We hope that during the coming summer schedule, we can reach some semblance of normalcy for domestic operations. Inter-

come to India because people from some countries like South Africa and South America can take different routes, as we have a lot of connectivity from Europe and the Middle East," Padhee adds.

Women have the capability and capacity to take on any leadership role

there is some good news as well - the SOPs and guidelines for opening of borders are gradually taking shape through air bubbles," she says.

MoCA's measures and initiatives, as well as the collaboration between airlines, airport operators and all stakeholders involved in this sector, have made them go beyond the point of 70 per cent domestic passengers. "Aviation

national operations are much more complex since every country has different rules, constraints and screening. We have already established air bubbles with almost 25 countries, which has given access to around 100 countries to

She says that on February 17, new guidelines that were more comprehensive and based on risk analysis were issued.

"Instead of stopping everyone, there would be differential treatment for high-risk countries, so that we can allow people to come to India and at the same time, we'll also contain the transmission from high-risk countries. We may not be able to recover all the losses, but at least we will have resilience and recovery," she believes. Padhee also hopes that 2021 would be good for domestic aviation operations.

## UDAN soars higher

Padhee says that MoCA has already launched the fourth phase of UDAN operations. "We have allocated or awarded around 700-plus routes. Moreover, during the pandemic itself, we wanted to encourage airlines to plan and move ahead. Hence, UDAN's fourth phase was announced in this period and around 78 routes in priority areas that had not been served till date or were not fully operational, were explored. This includes Northeastern states, the islands and water aerodrome operations. At present, about 317 routes have been operationalised. For instance, there may be about 150 new city pairs, including Amritsar to Patna Sahib and Mumbai to Nanded, which are pilgrimage sites. Even Kishangarh will be connected with Ajmer and Pushkar," she says.

The Joint Secretary adds that some time back, around 40 routes were also identified by Ministry of Tourism that requested that they be put under UDAN. "As many as 23 of these routes have already been operationalised and there is also a plan to connect most of the 'iconic' tourist places in India that will help boost both international and domestic tourism," she says.

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# An effort to restart domestic tourism

The three-day annual convention organised by Association of Domestic Tour Operators of India (ADTOI) at Kevadia in Gujarat, was intended to re-ignite the industry's faith in tourism and restart domestic travel. And so, the convention was aptly themed 'Domestic Tourism – Hope for the revival – Dekho Apna Desh'.

 Neha Rawat

The 10<sup>th</sup> annual convention-cum-exhibition of ADTOI was held in a hybrid manner with the physical event taking place at the Statue of Unity (SoU), Tent City 2 in Kevadia. With the theme 'Domestic Tourism – Hope for the revival – Dekho Apna Desh', the event was jointly organised by the



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

Ministry of Tourism and ADTOI with support from Gujarat Tourism. The event saw attendance from more than 400 delegates comprising ADTOI members, hoteliers, airlines representatives and senior government officials among other stakeholders of the tourism industry.



Our country should reach the top position from the current 34<sup>th</sup> spot in tourism soon

– Prahlad Singh Patel

**Prahlad Singh Patel**, Minister of State (I/C) for Tourism & Culture, who inaugurated the event via video conferencing, said, "Our country should reach the top position from the current 34<sup>th</sup> spot in tourism soon. India believes in 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbkam' and has provided medicines to 140 countries and vaccine to 16 countries till now. This, I believe, will have a positive impact on tourism."

**Kevadia: A great package**  
Sharing his views on how



**Arvind Singh**  
Secretary - Tourism  
Government of India

Kevadia is the perfect example of how tourism can touch the lives of people at every level, **Arvind Singh**, Secretary, Tourism, Government of India, said that the destination has transformed into a complete family destination with many amenities. "It has direct rail connectivity with major cities in



An encouraging news is that the vaccines have boosted hopes for quick recovery

– Arvind Singh

the country. The Ahmedabad-Kevadia Jan Shatabdi also has the Vistadome Coach which provides visitors a unique experience," he said. Singh also added that the restrictions on travellers have been eased and interstate travel has restarted in the country. "Another encouraging news is that the vaccines have further boosted hopes for quick recovery," the Tourism Secretary said.

He also informed that the Ministry, under its Swadesh Darshan and PRASHAD schemes, has sanctioned 132 projects for ₹7,103.12 crore at various tourism and pilgrimage destinations in the country. He appealed to all stakeholders, including governments and the private sector, to join hands and spread the message that it is time to travel again and 'Dekho Apna Desh'.

**Rupinder Brar**, ADG, MOT, praised Gujarat and said,

"Places like the Rann of Kutch in Gujarat have transformed after the earthquake. PM Narendra Modi, who was then the CM of the state, has been an



**Rupinder Brar**  
Additional Director General  
Ministry of Tourism

important part of the transformation that you can see – not only in the physical landscape but also in the livelihoods of the people who are making their own way of life from their indigenous way of living. One can see the same kind of transformation at Kevadia and it has made a huge difference to the ecosystem. Kevadia City has come up as a great example of tourism which shall break records in terms of number of people that come to visit this destination."



Kevadia City has come up as a great example of tourism which shall break records

– Rupinder Brar

**Pro-agent policies**

Addressing the delegates, **PP Khanna**, President of ADTOI, said that the 'Dekho Apna Desh' initiative has to be encouraged even more to enhance tourist footfalls across the country. "We all should go for Vocal for Local and make strong efforts to promote domestic tourism. Gujarat Tourism has developed Kevadia which is one of the best upcoming MICE facilities in the country. The city has everything, all the amenities with various modes of transportation. I believe we are ready to



**PP Khanna**  
President, ADTOI

restart tourism again. It is time that destinations open, provided we give them the right packages. We have learnt a lot from going virtual, but tourism has to be physical," he shared.



We have learnt a lot from going virtual, but tourism has to be physical

– PP Khanna

Khanna also addressed some of the issues of the industry and requested MOT delegates to consider giving tour operators and travel companies access to easy credit and relook taxation.

Also present at the event were **Chetan Gupta**, Convention Chairman and Hon. General Secretary, ADTOI; and **Ashok Dhoot**, Chairman, ADTOI - Gujarat Chapter. Sharing the idea behind this convention, Gupta said, "This is an initial step by ADTOI to restart and reinvent tourism. This is our small effort to restart domestic tourism in India. We were successful in holding this convention safely keeping all necessary guidelines for COVID in mind. In fact, more than 400 members attended the convention."

**Gujarat Tourism goes aggressive**  
Underlining key highlights of the state's new tourism policy, **Jenu Devan**, Managing Director, Gujarat Tourism, said, "Earlier we had a complaint from travel agents that they have been neglected in state government policies and only

the hospitality sector is getting benefits. But, our new tourism policy has much to offer. For instance, if someone is developing a high-priority tourist centre, they can avail 20 per cent capital subsidy. If someone is coming up with a theme park, they can avail a subsidy



**Jenu Devan**  
MD, Gujarat Tourism

of 15 per cent if the capital is above ₹50 crore. For wellness resorts, a capital subsidy of 15 per cent will be given and for promoting sustainable tourism, if an e-vehicle is purchased, a capital subsidy of 15 per cent up to 2L will be given by the government. For availing the

If someone is developing a high-priority tourist centre, they can avail 20 per cent capital subsidy

– Jenu Devan

facility of government-recognised sustainable certificates, they can apply a reimbursement of 50 per cent of certification fee."

Adding to Devan's sentiments, **Mamta Verma**, Principal Secretary, Tourism, Government of Gujarat, said, "Kevadia is a sustainable tourist destination and has changed the entire socio economic function of the state. The Tent City allows guests the space to maintain social distancing. There are almost 33 locations in Kevadia City. The seaplane service and rail connectivity have started from the destination and Gujarat Tour-



**Chetan Gupta**  
Hon. General Secretary, ADTOI

We were successful in holding this convention safely keeping guidelines for COVID in mind

– Chetan Gupta

ism is making a lot of efforts to make it one of the prime tourism locations in India. We are also complementing the UDAN scheme by



**Mamta Verma**  
Principal Secretary - Tourism  
Government of Gujarat

Kevadia, a sustainable tourist destination, has changed the socio economic function of the state

– Mamta Verma

adding services in and out of the destination. Other spots such as Shivrajpuri Beach in Dwarka Somnath are also being developed for tourism."

Shivrajpuri Beach is a blue flag beach which will open soon.

# 'We have amazing prizes for winners'

The VisitBritain Cricket Carnival not only builds on the shared passion for cricket between India and Britain, but also encourages the trade to form their 'Dream teams' on the Dream11 mobile application, says **Vishal Bhatia**, Country Manager – India, VisitBritain.

 Hazel Jain

## What was the idea behind the fantasy cricket league campaign?

A top focus for VisitBritain is to continue to work closely with our trade partners in India to keep Britain front of mind as the destination of choice when we can travel once more. The shared passion for cricket between the two countries is a very strong connection. The on-going India-England bilateral series provides an opportune moment to drive engagement with our trade partners.

## The Amazing Grand Prize!

The grand prize for one winner that will be chosen at the end of the season is **two match tickets at the Century Lounge** at Lancashire County Cricket Club (LCCC) in Manchester on Day 3 of the Test match, along with two hospitality tickets for Ind v/s Eng test match in Manchester in September.

## What would be VisitBritain's key message for the Indian trade in today's scenario?

We have been working on a strong and resilient recovery programme to inspire overseas visitors to travel to Great Britain and enjoy our amazing tourism offer as well as to help you build your travel programmes as soon as the time is right.

By necessity, it needs to be flexible to respond as travel recovers in stages globally, and as advisories and restrictions can be lifted. In the meantime, we continue to keep Britain



**Vishal Bhatia**  
Country Manager – India  
VisitBritain

front of mind for Indian travellers through our online channels, including @VisitBritainIN @lovegreatbritain and VisitBritain.com to inspire future trips. We've also developed guidelines to support our valued trade partners with information and tools, building consumer confidence, and to inspire travellers to choose Britain as their next international holiday destination, when we're able to welcome them to our shores again.

## Tell us about ExploreGB 2021.

Our flagship annual travel trade event ExploreGB, which is running as a virtual event from March 1-5, will see international buyers connect online with travel trade suppliers from across the UK to do business and inspire future travel. The five-day event is free to attend and will feature pre-scheduled



1-2-1 virtual appointments and virtual exhibition 'booths'.

## Which UK cities would you like Indians to connect with?

Whether strolling the medieval Shambles in York or soaking up the Roman heritage of Bath, visitors will experience history at every turn. Fans of modern attractions can choose from the musical legacy of Liverpool to London's vibrant culture and Glasgow's urban allure.

**How important is cricket tourism for VisitBritain?** Sport tourism will continue

to play a hugely important role in driving future tourism to Britain once we can travel again. It offers a fantastic and valuable opportunity to promote associated destinations and tourism activities, and the experiences that travellers can only have in Britain.

In previous years, VisitBritain has encouraged overseas visitors to plan their visits around these events and experience their favourite sports while getting out and exploring the diversity of our visitor attractions and experiences. Our research has found that the tourists who come for watching cricket in the United Kingdom are among the most beneficial to the economy because they traditionally stay for longer and have a propensity to travel around the country. 

 The on-going India-England bilateral series provides an opportune moment to drive engagement 

# Mission M!CE is on the move

The signs of revival are visible now and the industry seems to be ready to overcome the hurdles with full force to host events and level-up the game when it comes to M!CE. And as the year gradually progresses, M!CE travel is set to grow, predicted to completely bounce back by the fourth quarter of 2021 or early 2022.



**Henna Adl Karim**  
Product Development Head  
Flycreative Online

“The revival for MICE travel within India looks bleak and may continue to underperform till the end of this year. The dynamics of meetings has changed this year and growth of online-based meeting platforms has made it very comfortable and cost effective for corporates to conduct small to large-scale meetings without travelling. But, the sooner COVID vaccination starts giving positive results, there may be scope for MICE to resume. Meanwhile, we have been catering to small wedding groups with 50-100 guests.”

“I feel MICE will recover only in the last quarter of 2021 once destinations open up. We are purely an outbound operator, thus very little movement has begun as yet. We have done a few to Maldives. My opinion is that 2022 is when we can see a complete revival or bounceback for MICE. As we are purely B2B wholesalers, all our bookings are through retail partners. We will have to wait for some more time and the last quarter of this year is when business will show more promise.”



**Kishan Biyani**  
Managing Director  
Ark Travels



**Bhavesh Oza**  
VP, International Market  
Blue Star Air Travel Services

“While I am optimistic about MICE, it definitely won't be anything like last year. Major industries in India like pharma, IT, FMCG, etc., did not see any slump in business, which means that their spending capacity is still high. Also, introduction of new products like Cordelia Cruises, which is about to start, have added to the MICE offerings. India as a MICE destination also has huge potential with more infrastructure being built and new hotels being opened, and better air connectivity to tier-II cities.”

“There is still a lot of uncertainty in the market with regard to outbound MICE. MICE will open up last quarter of this year, that too only for few short-haul destinations. Our report shows there is a steady enquiry generated for MICE for Greece, Turkey, Malaysia, Singapore, Macau and Mauritius, but all for the third quarter. Dubai and Maldives have shown tremendous recovery. Surprisingly, there are good MICE calls for Maldives. Year 2021 will be a bounce back year for MICE.”



**BA Rahim**  
Founder & Consultant  
One Above



**SD Nandakumar**  
President & Country Head, B2B & Foreign Exchange, SOTC Travel

“SOTC has successfully delivered an international MICE group of 750 delegates to Dubai in January 2021, and has been receiving interest from corporates for MICE tours to international destinations such as Dubai. Till now, SOTC MICE has witnessed an encouraging response for domestic destinations for a group of anywhere from 40-250 delegates. These domestic destinations include Delhi, Mumbai, Goa, Ooty, Bengaluru, Jodhpur, Jaipur, Kashmir and Hyderabad among others.”

“We can already see signs of revival as travel restrictions have been eased and domestic business travel has been slowly and steadily picking up since the New Year. We expect that with business travellers, occupancies should increase March-April 2021 onwards, as companies gradually lift their travel embargoes. Our hotel has started hosting functions and conducting MICE events like AGMs, sales offsite meetings, product launches, etc.”



**Rohit Bajpai**  
General Manager  
Sheraton Grand Palace Indore

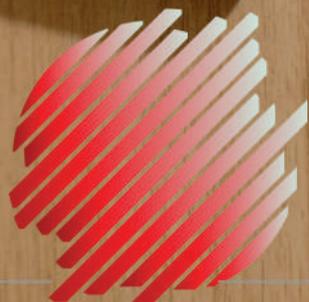
Inputs by Hazel Jain



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# Saudi Tourism's 'Journeys in Arabia'

Saudi Tourism Authority (STA) brought its travel trade partners in India together for the first time for an exclusively-curated webinar to explore and discover Saudi's exciting new tourism offering. Titled 'Journeys in Arabia', the virtual engagement series had experts discussing the opportunities and growing demand for Saudi tourism.

TT Bureau

As the landscape evolves, it is now more important than ever to continue to inspire, engage and educate the travel trade for when the world safely re-opens. Saudi Arabia is a relatively new destination on the global stage. As the authentic home of Arabia, Saudi offers unique, diverse and unparalleled experiences, a land of natural assets, rich culture and heritage and adventure.

To bring to light the Saudi offering, Saudi Tourism Authority (STA) has launched 'Journeys in Arabia', an exclusive online event curated especially for travel trade partners around the globe. The virtual engagement series, taking place across six

markets around the world, is a first-of-its-kind initiative for Saudi Tourism Authority, a source of inspiration and excitement, designed to inform partners about the diverse products and experiences that Arabia offers.

The India 'Journeys in Arabia' webinar brought together local travel trade partners for an opportunity to hear from thought leaders in the tourism industry. The line-up of speakers were:

- ❖ Welcome address by **Fahd Hamidaddin**, CEO, Saudi Tourism Authority
- ❖ Keynote conversation 'Journeys Make People' between **Abdullah Al Dakhil**, International Communication Manager, Saudi Tourism Authority and celebrated Indian Journalist **Vir Sanghvi**.

Expert panel discussion with:

- ❖ **Haitham Mattar**, CCO, Saudi Tourism Authority
- ❖ **Benazir Nazar**, CEO, Akbar Travels
- ❖ **Deep Kalra**, Founder & Group Executive Chairman, MakeMyTrip
- ❖ **Madhavan Menon**, Chairman & Managing Director, Thomas Cook Group
- ❖ **Rakshit Desai**, Managing Director – India, FCM
- ❖ **Sheema Vohra**, Managing Director, Sartha Global Marketing

The session provided insights into the current state of travel, and the opportunities and challenges in addressing the growing demand and interest in Saudi as a new destination. Some of the key highlights and market insights of the discussion were as given ahead.

- ❖ India has been identified as one of the key source markets, and STA's tourism strategy focuses on promoting experiences related to culture, heritage, nature and adventure in Saudi
- ❖ Indians, especially online consumers and millennials, are late planners and constantly seek new destinations within close proximity to India for last-minute holiday planning. Shorter-duration packages, direct flights and ease in visa (preferably e-visas) procurement will be game-changers for a

- ❖ new destination like Saudi
- ❖ Saudi offers exceptional experiences for diving, adventure sports and sustainable tourism. The country will also host the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix in 2021. These developments reflect the new travel motivations that Indian leisure travellers actively seek today
- ❖ Two key considerations among the corporate/leisure market are awareness and attractiveness. While the former can be achieved through communication and information dissemination, via

visual and video content on Saudi, attractiveness will come from exquisite on-ground experiences that visitors have while at the destination

- ❖ The high-end Umrah market from India is a major captive audience, combining pilgrimage with leisure through post-Umrah leisure packages
- ❖ Promoting unique destinations like AlUla for wedding tourism will be a huge draw for Saudi
- ❖ Lastly, consumer behaviour has seen a drastic shift in a post-COVID world with both MICE and leisure travel experiencing a heightened ecological sensitivity. Travellers are seeking clear information and assurance related to hygiene and safety. ↴

## Virtual roadshow in March

Following up on the success of the 'Journeys in Arabia' webinar, STA will also be hosting an immersive virtual roadshow for India on March 2-3, 2021, to showcase the best of what the Kingdom has to offer.

# 5 unforgettable journeys in Arabia

Saudi is a country of extraordinary natural beauty and rich cultural heritage. Still largely unexplored by international visitors, the country offers a dizzying array of experiences for the curious traveller. This list of Saudi's five must-visit destinations offers visitors a journey they've never imagined.

TT Bureau

Explore the sights, scents and sounds of authentic souks. Bask in the crystal clear waters of the Red Sea, surrounded by a myriad of corals. Walk in the footsteps of ancient civilizations. And, wherever you go, experience the unparalleled hospitality of the Saudi people.

## Diriyah

On the outskirts of Riyadh is the UNESCO World Heritage site of Diriyah, the ancestral

seat of the ruling Al Saud family. Wander through the narrow alleyways between the mud-brick houses and uncover a way of life that goes back for generations. Explore the museums of Saudi culture and history, including the Salwa Palace, the most massive standing structure in the citadel. Then stroll around the local eateries and coffee shops to sample traditional Najdi delicacies.

## AlUla

AlUla is a stunning destination embracing 200,000 years

of human history, breathtaking natural rock formations, iconic modern architecture and Hegra, one of the most recognisable images of Saudi. Explore more than 100 monolithic rock-cut tombs carved by the Nabataean civilisation. Read the history of the region recorded in ancient inscriptions on the surrounding cliffs. And marvel at the mirror-clad Maraya Concert Hall – one of the world's most Instagrammable buildings. Explore a world like no other.

## Al Balad

The ancient centre of Jeddah, the Bride of the Red Sea, was built in the 7<sup>th</sup> century as a gateway for pilgrims making their way to Makkah. The refurbished Makkah Gate today serves as the entrance to an intriguing and cosmopolitan blend of ancient and modern. Browse through the colourful Souq Al Alawi, Saudi's largest souk, which fills

the narrow alleyways with the scent of exotic spices and a kaleidoscope of colourful wares. Visit the heritage houses, galleries and museums among the intricately designed 500-year-old buildings, built using coral from the Red Sea. And, finish

## The City of Roses

Journey to the cool northern mountains to experience Taif, the City of Roses. In the spring, the clear mountain air is infused with the scent from more than 90 rose farms which give the city its name. Taif produces

ent in Taif's cuisine. The renovated city centre houses the Taif Central Market where you can browse traditional goods such as jewellery, *oud* and healing herbs.

## The Red Sea

The Saudi Red Sea is a natural treasure house of thriving coral reefs and abundant marine life including dolphins, dugongs and sea turtles. Extending 1,700 km from the Gulf of Aqaba in the north to the Farasan Islands in the south, the eastern reaches of the Red Sea are a stunning destination for divers, snorkelers and ocean enthusiasts. Whether you want to enjoy a scintillating sunset by the beach, explore the pristine reefs or dive on one of the coast's enigmatic shipwrecks, the Red Sea is a destination like no other in the world. Immerse yourself in unforgettable natural beauty. ↴



your day with a sumptuous meal of fresh seafood as you look out over the waters of the Red Sea. An experience to delight all the senses.

some of the world's most expensive rose oil which is an ingredient in luxurious perfumes from around the world. Local rose water is also an ingredi-

# A much-needed do for the trade

Experience-based hotel company Amritara Hotels & Resorts recently organised a get-together for some inbound tour operators, thanking them for standing by and supporting them all the way. The event received a positive response, and was the first time some of the attendees were invited for a get-together in these difficult times.



# As colourful as it gets

ADTOI's 10<sup>th</sup> annual convention-cum-exhibition in the colourful city of Kevadia, Gujarat, was a hybrid event that received more than 400 delegates. The physical event was held at Statue of Unity, Tent City 2, and had the who's who of both government and industry gracing the occasion with their presence, masks and sanitisers in tow.



## Akbar Travels and Sabre cement 20-year relationship

Akbar Travels and Sabre Corporation have announced a new long-term, strategic partnership agreement. Under the extended and expanded agreement, Sabre will continue to be Akbar's preferred GDS partner in India, ensuring that the firm, which is the largest travel company in India



through the appointment of software company Benzy Infotech, a 100% subsidiary of the Akbar Group, as Sabre's partner for 15 states in India to promote and develop Sabre's business in these markets and strengthen its presence across the Indian subcontinent.

This new announcement from Sabre and Akbar follows an earlier deal enhancement last year when Akbar selected Sabre's Content Services for Lodging (CSL) APIs to enable its agents to more easily shop, compare and book more than a million lodging options for clients.

For many years, Akbar has utilised a broad portfolio of Sabre technology and solutions to leverage growth, streamline operations and expand its geographic reach. The new agreement with Akbar is testament to their confidence in Sabre's technological solutions.



**Akbar Group**

in terms of IATA-approved branches, staff numbers and business turnover, can continue to access real-time, rich content from hundreds of thousands of airlines, hoteliers and other travel providers through Sabre's intuitive Sabre Red 360 interface.

Akbar and Sabre will also be working more closely together

# Technology will be crucial

► Contd from page 3

### Domestic tourism

Driven by encouraging reports of a spurt in domestic tourism in Goa, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and J&K due to a large number of Indians who were earlier travelling abroad but are now visiting various destinations within India, Singh says that a focus on domestic tourism's potential and encouraging fellow countrymen to explore their own country by taking a much-needed break within their own borders will be a winning strategy for the country and the sector. "The Dekho Apna Desh campaign of MOT is aimed at promoting domestic tourism

through webinars and various other events and activities. MOT is providing impetus to domestic tourism and has also been successful in promoting lesser-known destinations of the country," the Secretary added.

### Calibrated opening of inbound tourism

"We can allow those on tourist visas to come to India. However, most of our source markets are in the developed world, which is US, Europe and UK, and currently, these places have a major concern about the disease and its spread, with new variants being found. So, when opening international tourism, we

will have to also factor in health concerns. Hence, we will take a calibrated approach and perhaps open tourist visas for countries where COVID-19 has almost been eliminated, and introduce standard health protocols. Once we do that for such countries, then we can think of opening

restrictions on the tourist visa. We, at the government and industry levels, have to jointly work to bring about the recovery of inbound tourism and take it to pre-COVID levels," he shared.

In fact, when asked how MOT would help the industry sail ahead, Singh said that most industry associations and the parliamentary committee have raised their issues before MOT, and these will be taken up with the concerned ministries.

### Digital promotions

Singh said that the pandemic has also brought about the unprecedented use of technology in the lives of people.

"We will have to, in this new normal, leverage digital technology for creating awareness and providing services to tourists. We will strengthen the Incredible India portal, leveraging Virtual Reality and other technological means to further popularise Indian destinations. In the post-COVID scenario, we can focus on India's ancient knowledge and wisdom on wellness, Yoga and alternative medicine," he suggested.

We will open tourist visas for countries where COVID-19 has almost been eliminated, and introduce standard protocols

### Singh's experience from AAI

Coming from Airports Authority of India, Singh was closely associated with the UDAN scheme. Sharing how his previous experience can come in handy in the tourism ministry, he said, "The role of infrastructure creation, be it airports, roads or railways, is very important for promotion of tourism. I was closely associated with the process of infrastructure creation in the airports sector for over a year, and that has definitely given me exposure and experience or will help me perform my role here better. Another thing I saw at AAI was that once domestic flying was closed for two months, the process of revival began and we restarted domestic flying on May 25. It is now almost at 80 per cent of its pre-COVID level. So, that experience will come in handy when we are looking at revival in the tourism sector."

for other countries where it is still prevalent. We, at MOT, will work with the Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Health and Ministry of External Affairs to plan a calibrated opening up of inbound tourism and relaxation

# 'Very hopeful for MICE'

Thomas Cook India is cautiously optimistic about this segment's recovery. And though travel to foreign countries has begun to resume, one mustn't forget the diversity that India offers.

Hazel Jain

"I have always been very hopeful of the MICE segment in India," says **Madhavan Menon**, Chairman and MD, Thomas Cook India, adding, "Year 2019 for Thomas Cook was a record year for MICE. But, the disruption took us from there to zero. And now we are seeing a bounce back. Our sister concern SOTC took 750 people from Chennai to Dubai on an incentive trip in January 2021, which was probably the first incentive out of the country and the first into Dubai. I know of companies that are clients of ours who have already done trips and some are already planning MICE trips this year. Within India I can see corporates wanting to go back to normal."

However, Menon adds, "I would caution everybody: please don't jump from being zero to saying we're going to travel abroad. I think this needs to be done in



Madhavan Menon  
Chairman and MD  
Thomas Cook India

stages. India, ironical as it may sound from a healthcare point of view, is among the safest places in the world at the moment. And we have so much diversity in the country, we must use that opportunity. There are enough properties in India that can host MICE events safely." Thomas Cook India had recently conducted a roadshow dedicated to MICE for its corporate clients, at the Renaissance Mumbai Convention Centre Hotel.

"We have reached an inflection point where we are able to

move from fear to caution," explains Menon, adding that in the months ahead, they will move from caution to a degree of flexibility and willingness to take trips. "This hypothesis stems

Don't jump from being zero to saying we're going to travel abroad; this needs to be done in stages

from interacting with corporate clients. Within India, I can see corporates wanting to go back to normalcy." Underlining the need for creating opportunities during these times, he says, "The reality is, if we don't do something about it, somebody else will."

# 'It boils down to engagement'

The Wanderers was agile enough to quickly move from real to virtual during the pandemic, conducting virtual employee engagement activities and reducing workplace loneliness for corporates and their employees.

Hazel Jain

When employee engagement started to take a whole new meaning altogether during the pandemic, The Wanderers, a big player in the MICE segment, quickly made the move from real to virtual. **Abhik Dutta**, Director, The Wanderers and Colour Purple Event, says, "The first thing that we did in April-May 2020 when we realised it was going to be a long road to recovery, was to figure what is it that event companies do for clients and how we can offer that virtually. It all boils down to employee engagement. This means that your content is very important. What we do within that conference or the incentive is very important because every single activity is towards building an engagement."

With this understanding, Dutta and his team completely pivoted and came up with their



Abhik Dutta  
Director, The Wanderers and  
Colour Purple Event

own 10-12 virtual activities for corporates. These include team-building activities such as treasure hunts to assimilating new joiners into the company culture. "We have done it for more than 20 companies so far, including Unilever's global Dove team, JP Morgan Chase, and Asus. Many of them have come back to us again and again," Dutta adds.

These activities, about two hours each, also helped employees living away from families who were getting lonely dur-

ing the lockdown. "They are all intelligent activities that involve the management trainee as well as the country managers and CXOs," he says.

They are all intelligent activities that involve the management trainee as well as country managers and CXOs

Another advantage of going virtual, Dutta explains, is that earlier, his team couldn't approach countries out of India as it didn't make sense. "But, we realised it was possible to do that in the virtual space," Dutta adds.

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# Whither are we bound?

This is a question on everybody's mind today, one year after COVID hit like a bolt from the blue, says **Rajnish Kaistha**, Director, Paradise Holidays India. And though everyone is still at a loss as to when normalcy will return, the pandemic's brutal effects have been a great leveller.

COVID-19 gave us an opportunity to spend quality time with family and pursue new hobbies. I spoke to many industry colleagues and most of them have learned new ways of earning and surviving. In the times to come, this experience shall help the operators positively. Moreover, a forced lockdown gave some much-needed breathing space to Mother Nature and reduced the carbon footprint. But, it is about time we got back to normal tourism activities, however, we don't need to push.

Let the world get vaccinated, let the fear of COVID diminish in the next few months. Then, slowly and steadily, we should open up by August or September. This will enable us to be ready for the 2021-22 season. We don't wish to have the Dubai scenario repeated in India.

Businesses across the world have been hit and the worst hit industries have been tourism, hospitality and civil aviation. While the latter two have begun to recover, leisure inbound tourism has yet to begin. Due to the government's apathy, nothing has come to save tourism.

Overseas marketing and adequate resources are the need of the hour

So, what's the way forward? I have realised that it's not Ministry of Tourism but various other ministries like finance, revenue, home affairs, etc., that are equally responsible for the welfare of our industry. We



need to reach out to the people in various ministries and argue our case convincingly. Where there is a will there is a way! Like the timely vaccination of the masses around the world in a short time, a similar aggressive effort and will can bring tourism back.

Effective overseas marketing with efficient public and private cooperation, and adequate resources are the need

of the hour. For tour operators engaged in leisure inbound business, an effective MDA, right policy support, desired importance to tourism as high foreign exchange earner and to be treated on a par with export industry is required. Incentives like SEIS, RoDTEP should be availed through ministry of commerce. We need to convince the government to put tourism on its Concurrent List. Smaller countries in our neigh-

bourhood get more foreign tourist arrivals. So, we need to achieve 100 per cent growth in the next five to six years once international tourism opens up. This shall not only help the country but also give higher dividends to tour operators and increase the size of our industry. It will uplift the economy of the country manifold due to the multiplier effect on jobs, and kick-start every sector, from infrastructure to handicrafts to agriculture and F&B. If done correctly, post-pandemic recovery can be much faster and can actually help realise government expectations from the sector proposed in the new draft national tourism policy.

We also need to explain to the government about tour pricing. The entire world's economy has taken a hit and disposable income is low. We have to emphasise on lowering taxes and for tourism exports to be

treated on a par with other exports and services. Such transactions may be zero-rated for GST without stopping the flow of input credits.

Tourism services provided to foreign tourists in India on receipt of foreign exchange should be treated as deemed export and exemption of GDY should be made available through SEIS and other means. IATO's 'Team Moving Forward' also hopes to see these demands through.



**Rajnish Kaistha**  
Director, Paradise Holidays India  
(Views expressed are the author's own.  
The publication may or may not subscribe to them.)

## Ayodhya – A dream takes shape

Deprived of infrastructure development and an image as a tourist destination for decades, the present generation can boast of being fortunate to witness the reincarnation of this holy city – Ayodhya. **Sunil Satyawakta**, former Chapter Chairman (UP & Uttarakhand), TAAI and Director of Lucknow-based Civica Travels, shares his thoughts on the subject.

Ayodhya, an ancient city also known as Saket, was once the capital of the Kosala dynasty. Lord Sri Ram, the seventh incarnation of Vishnu, was born in Ayodhya, situated on the banks of River Sarayu. The temple town of Ayodhya has more than 500 temples of all sizes scattered all over the city, and *artis* (prayers) are performed daily in most of them. Though being a round-the-year destination, Ayodhya attracts a large inflow

of pilgrims. To watch them pray and perform rituals, tourists from other parts of India and foreign countries also flock the city to experience certain festivals, especially connected to bathing dates. As they say, no Kumbh Snan (bath) is complete without a dip in holy Sarayu at Ayodhya.

Some of the prominent must-visit places are Ram Janambhumi, Hanuman Garhi, Kanak

Bhawan, Nageshwarnath Temple, Gulab Bari, Treta ke Thankur, Chhoti Chawni, Sita ki Rasoi and various ghats of River Sarayu, namely Guptar Ghat, Raj Ghat, Ram Ghat, Lakshman Ghat, Janki Ghat and Naya Ghat.

With the grand temple of Sri Ram being constructed on 108 acres of land in phases, the honourable Chief Minister of

The state government has approached AAI to expedite the development of the airport within the next 3 months



Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, proposes to develop Ayodhya into a Vedic city. Connectivity of Sri Ram temple to the airport, railway station and bus station by ropeways is an innovative and tourist-friendly decision. Furthermore, the government has plans to connect the holy city with other major cities and towns by six-lane highways and expressways.

### Rail connectivity

In line with international standards for developing Ayodhya

as a big tourist destination, Indian Railways is re-designing the city's railway station to cater to one lakh passengers per day. The station will be housed in a double-storey building with a *mela* (fair) shed, circulating area, two foot-over bridges, dormitory, air-conditioned retiring rooms, medical rooms and wards, escalators, elevators and food court. LED billboards, furnished quarters for railway staff and other facilities are also planned. The state government has also approached Airports

Authority of India to expedite the development of the airport within the next three months and make it operational for ATR aircraft in its first phase. The present government deserves a big applaud for the ambitious plans and initiatives to provide world-class facilities to this ancient holy city, a symbol of faith for Hindus, and a destination for religious and spiritual tourism.



**Sunil Satyawakta**  
Chapter Chairman  
(UP & Uttarakhand), TAAI and Director,  
Civica Travels  
(Views expressed are the author's own.  
The publication may or may not subscribe to them.)

### Action plan prepared for developing tourism sites in Ayodhya

Uttar Pradesh CM Yogi Adityanath will soon be visiting Ayodhya to review the progress of the developmental works that are being carried out to provide world-class facilities to tourists. He will visit spots and oversee the progress of projects which include expansion of Bhajan Sandhya Sthal, Queen Ho Memorial Park, Ram Katha Park, and beautification of Ram Katha Gallery, Ram Ki Paidi. Development works include widening of city roads, construction of multilevel parking sites, and revamp of bus and railway station.

# Amritara steers ahead with zeal

**Ruchi Uberai**, Director, Amritara Hotels & Resorts, discusses the hotel company's plans for this year including adding new properties at new leisure destinations, and increasing its number of keys. And while the pandemic posed a challenge for many, for Uberai, it was a blessing in disguise.



Nisha Verma

Amritara Hotels & Resorts recently brought a few inbound tour operators together for a soiree to thank their associate partners for standing by them and assuring them of their complete support when business restarts. **Ruchi Uberai**, Director, Amritara Hotels & Resorts, said the response was positive. "Everybody who attended told me that we were the first ones to invite them for a get-together in these difficult times. We didn't discuss business, but only chit-chatted and got to know each other better. We hadn't been in touch with them since March 2020 so this event was to reconnect with them," she adds.

Sharing details about how they are faring, Uberai says, "Amritara is a leisure-based hotel chain, with 13 operational properties across India. Cur-

rently, all our properties which are located in the north to west are running well. Some of the hotels in South India, which opened a little late owing to the pandemic, are still struggling to cope up. However, we assume that by another month or so, we will be back on track with our revenues and ARR's."

## Experiences

Amritara Hotels & Resorts is an experience-based hotel company. "This means that every property offers a different experience. Even when we are looking at properties, we make sure that there is a unique experience that it can offer. Right from a wellness experience at our wellness properties which offer a detox package or weight management package, to properties which offer beautiful views of the valley in the north of India where people come for relaxation, to Rajasthan where we have a property in Jawai, which



**Ruchi Uberai**  
Director, Amritara Hotels & Resorts

offers jungle safaris – all hotels offer unique experiences," she explains. She also said that they have old forts and palaces, which have been converted into hotels and offer a heritage feel.

## Pandemic, a blessing

While the pandemic posed a challenge for many, for Uberai it was a blessing in disguise. "The pandemic gave us an opportunity to work on many grey areas. When everything was at a standstill, it gave us an opportunity to rethink and rework everything. Since we

are an inbound-based company, it made us rethink how we want to market ourselves. We needed to strategise in terms of operations. It gave us an opportunity to rework, rethink and re-enter the industry once again," she claims.

The pandemic also made the company realise the value of their employees, Uberai shares, "While we didn't let go

of anybody, it made us question if we can hire more people, who are more professional or fill in the gaps that we were waiting to fill in for a very long time, especially at this point of time with so many people not having jobs. It made us realise the kind of opportunities that we can give to people. Hence, we wanted to be a helping hand, while making sure that we fill in all our gaps."

## Plans ahead

She insists that expanding further is a key goal. "There has been a pause since a year because of the pandemic. We have a lot of hotels in the pipeline that we are working on. Some of the destinations that we were looking at were Goa, Shimla and Chahal. We are reworking on them, and it's the right opportunity for us to look at many new properties, new leisure destinations, where we can bring in guests and offer specific USPs.

We are looking at increasing the number of keys that we have as well," shares Uberai.

After getting feedback from inbound agents, she said, "From what I have heard from everybody, November 2021 onwards, some footfall of inbound is going to start. However, I think people are still going to be a little hesitant to travel, despite the vaccination drive in many countries. I am not sure how this year is going to pan out but we are keeping our fingers crossed."

We assume that by another month or so, we will be back on track with our revenues and ARR's

*Marriott International has announced the appointment of Anthony Capuano as the new CEO and Stephanie Linnartz as President.*

## It is all bliss at Accor's ibis

With COVID restrictions slowly easing and domestic travel picking pace, hotels in metros and popular tourist spots are abuzz with queries. General Managers of prominent ibis properties in Bengaluru, Goa, New Delhi and Mumbai share trends in their cities.



**Irfan Khatri**  
GM, ibis Bengaluru City Center & ibis Bengaluru Hosur Road

"The hospitality industry took a steep turn, but for a better future. Staycations have become increasingly popular in Bengaluru combined with minimal travel, a shorter holiday planning time, cost and a lower carbon footprint. Staycations are perfect for travellers of all generations. ibis hotels are heading to a gradual and steady recovery. After the shaky period, all our ibis and ibis Styles hotels are open for business and we are happy that we are seeing steady growth in key markets."

"With reduced travel restriction across our state borders, Goa has responded well by reinstating faith in travel and adventure. The year-end witnessed healthy demand pushing occupancies with branded hotels, and safety still remains a priority for our patrons. With new trends emerging and change in source markets, it is imperative that we remain agile and innovative to adapt. Our 'ALLSafe' label assures patrons that their wellbeing is our priority."



**Kedar Dighe**  
General Manager  
ibis Styles Goa Calangute



**Anant Leekha**  
General Manager  
ibis New Delhi Aerocity

"Owing to the pandemic, there is major shift in the way we do business. Recovery is mostly dependent on staycation offerings that target domestic travellers, and SMEs have also started to travel which is a healthy sign for the industry. F&B will also play a major part in this recovery stage. At ibis New Delhi Aerocity, we have focused largely on intimate weddings at our poolside location along with delivering Good Mood Food from our restaurant, Spice It, through food delivery aggregators."

"With the wide-spread effect of the pandemic on the hospitality sector, we have had to deal with uncharted challenges. Now, with light at the end of the tunnel, we can see a slow upward trajectory in occupancies across segments with ease in travel restrictions and an overall positive sentiment. The Mumbai market is a hub for business transient and leisure travellers. We are hopeful that the market's buoyancy return to its former glory towards the end of 2021."



**Gaurav Chavan**  
General Manager, ibis Mumbai Airport

Inputs by Manas Dwivedi

## Pride Group to launch 7<sup>th</sup> property in Gujarat

Pride Group of Hotels has signed up Pride Biznetel City Center in Rajkot, Gujarat, its seventh property in the state.

The group is already operating hotels in Ahmedabad, Rajkot, Vadodara, Anand and Surendranagar, and has recently signed a hotel in Bharuch as well. "Gujarat state hosts ample potential across industries and a hospitality partner is surely needed to ensure these industrial expansions are supported suitably alongside satisfied employees. We're glad to further expand our presence in Gujarat with the Pride Biznetel City Center, Rajkot. It's indeed a proud moment to be part of the growing state and economy in whatever little way possible," says **Atul Upadhyay**, VP Operations, Pride Group of Hotels.

With presence in 20 other locations across India, Pride



**Atul Upadhyay**  
VP Operations  
Pride Group of Hotels

Group of Hotels boasts of over 2500 rooms. Currently, Pride Hotels operates and manages a chain of hotels under the brand 'Pride Plaza Hotel' in Delhi, Ahmedabad and Kolkata, 'Pride Hotel' at Bengaluru, Chennai, Nagpur, Pune, Rajkot, Indore and Bharuch, and 'Pride Resorts' at Goa, Puri, Jaipur, Manali, Dharamshala, Bharatpur and Gangtok. It also operates mid-market hotels under 'Pride Biznetel' at Vadodara, Anand, Agra, Jabalpur, Bhavnagar and Surendranagar.

# OTOAI's day-long adventure

Camp Wild Dhauj hosted OTOAI's first physical Executive Committee meeting which was a hybrid event where few members were physically present and others joined in virtually. The new adventure activity - skycycle - was also launched on the occasion, and was enjoyed by all the members and their families. Other adventure activities like zipline and a low rope course were also there.



## Workation in the Middle East

Hotels throughout the Middle East are preparing to capitalise on the pent-up global demand for workations, driven by social restrictions imposed by governments across the world over the past months.

TT Bureau

Many travel experts are expecting a surge in workations in 2021 and beyond, a trend that was apparent in 2019, but one which now has such pent-up demand due to the coronavirus travel restrictions.

**Danielle Curtis**, Exhibition Director ME, Arabian Travel Market, which will take place live at the Dubai World Trade Centre (DWTC) from May 16-19, 2021, says, "The hotel industry in the Middle East has gradually started to recover, especially in places such as Dubai. Staycations created the initial demand after lockdown, the next step has been the continued growth of workations, which are also referred to as leisure stays, which tend to bring in more visitors from overseas." This year, ATM will be themed 'A new dawn for travel and tourism'.

With over 50 per cent of the world's working population do-



**Danielle Curtis**  
Exhibition Director ME  
Arabian Travel Market

ing so from home and the rise of entrepreneurial digital nomads who prefer to work remotely, the popularity of workations will only increase. "And, on that point, as an example, Dubai has introduced a remote visa programme that would entitle visitors to stay for up to 12 months, with access to co-working spaces and government support services," says Curtis.

To accommodate the needs of the 'new normal' smart working traveller even further, an increasing number of hotels in the MENA region are offering pop-up co-working spaces

with the aim of rethinking and making the most of the hotel space, which is no longer considered just as a place to stay, instead, it becomes a potential work environment.

Staycations created initial demand after lockdown, the next step has been the growth of workations

"Depending on the effectiveness of the vaccines being rolled out as well as travel and other social restrictions, this demand could broaden to include families. If children are being home-schooled it would make little difference if they were at home or on a workation with their parents," adds Curtis.

## Indians rediscover India

▶ Contd from page 3

Lauding the surge in domestic travel that India has recently witnessed amidst a pandemic, Kant said, "All Indians are rediscovering India. As COVID-19

am sure all of you will see very good times, and this will continue for a very long period. This is a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic that has impacted everyone, but you will see growth consecutively



subsidies and the vaccination is rolled out both in India and across the world, travel will restart. Because of India's huge vaccination capacity, it is the vaccine capital of the world. This will accelerate travel, both in India and abroad. I

for several years and you should prepare yourselves accordingly."

The NITI Aayog chief also underlined that tourism never works in isolation. "It is a function of several other sectors of the econ-

The best of tourism will be seen in the next decade as it will grow and expand in a manner we can never envisage

omy. The government is building a national infrastructure pipeline in terms of creation of highways and expressways. It is bringing in the private sector to play a part in airports, and doing asset monetisation and creating experiences across the country. The focus in the new Budget is on revival of infrastructure, which will be a catalyst to the growth of travel and tourism in the coming days," he concluded.

IATA has announced that its Chief Economist, Brian Pearce, will retire from the organisation in July 2021. A recruitment process has been launched to find a successor in time for a smooth transition.

# The future calls for hybrid events

**Anmol Zutshi**, General Manager of Ashok Events, a division of India Tourism Development Corporation (ITDC), shares his experience of organising Bharat Parv virtually, held from January 26-31, 2021, and why he thinks hybrid events will be the way forward for the MICE industry in India and across the world.



Nisha Verma

The 7<sup>th</sup> edition of the annual event Bharat Parv, which is usually held at Red Fort, was eventually held virtually from January 26-31, 2021 owing to COVID-19 protocols. The theme this year was Dekho Apna Desh, Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat (pairing of states) and Atmanirbhar Bharat. It was organised by Ashok Events, a division of India Tourism Development Corporation (ITDC) that conducts events for various government bodies, ministries and PSUs. Sharing details of this event, **Anmol Zutshi** says, "Despite being on the virtual platform, we had pavilions for states and Ministry of Tourism, where people could enter and view the videos of various states showcasing their tourism products, handicrafts, cuisines, cultural



**Anmol Zutshi**  
General Manager, Ashok Events

performances, etc. The MOT had three stalls, including Dekho Apna Desh, Statue of Unity, and Incredible India. We also did a successful physical inauguration at The Ashok Hotel on January 26 in the presence of our honourable Tourism Minister and other senior MOT officials."

Ashok Events provides logistic support in terms of branding, audio-visual as well as photography and other collaterals. It is

also the executing agency for events, with an MoU with MOT, which is its administrative ministry. Under that purview, it has been handling and executing mega events like Bharat Parv or Paryatan Parv.

### Embracing technology

When asked about handling the technological aspect of a virtual event, Zutshi explains, "We



Hybrid events offer newer opportunities. There will be a happy mix of virtual and physical events

have been doing hybrid events since a long time. We have our own empanelled agencies for delivering things like branding, audio-visual photography, conducting conferences as well as events and manpower requirement at registration desks. While there is an advantage of going digital – it is very fast – one needs to be very careful about internet connectivity. We have learnt how much bandwidth we require

and other technical aspects. When we do events outside Delhi, the local administration comes into play."

### Hybrid is the way to go

Zutshi believes that while it's comfortable to attend a virtual event, face-to-face is important for human beings. "It becomes slightly impersonal on a virtual platform. But people have gotten used to it and it's not a challenge

anymore. Moreover, physical events mean more revenue for us. Virtual events reduce that scope of earning revenue. We always look forward to having physical events, since we are hospitality professionals. Fortunately, hybrid events offer newer opportunities and such events will only increase going forward. With new restrictions, we believe there will be a happy mix of virtual and physical events," he adds.

## Portal for domestic journeys

TravelSpell.com, powered by Travel Spirit International (TSI), has already partnered with Taj Hotels, Oberoi Group, ITC and RARE India, and more agreements will be announced soon.



Manas Dwivedi

Travel Spirit International (TSI) has launched a new travel portal www.TravelSpell.com that is solely focused on promoting domestic tourism by providing the Indian tourist with a variety of curated experiential journeys across the country. The platform, powered by TSI, a trusted name in the industry for more than 33 years, has already partnered with top brands like Taj Hotels, Oberoi Group, ITC, and RARE India, and agreements with more partners to bring their packages on to this platform will be announced soon.

Sharing more information, **Jatinder Singh Taneja**, Managing Director, Travel Spirit International, says, "While most online platforms today focus on eliminating human interaction during the entire process of searching and booking journeys, the TravelSpell team still believes that travel experts are integral to achieving the highest level of traveller satisfaction and person-



**Jatinder Singh Taneja**  
Managing Director  
Travel Spirit International

alisation. In addition, the vast network of TravelSpell's local experts ensures that travellers have unforgettable experiences in every destination they visit."

"The portal is easy to navigate, and allows seamless operation on all types of devices such as mobile phones, tablets, desktops, etc. On the platform, you can dive right into the detailed day-wise itineraries that are equipped with a large photo gallery showcasing unique destinations and hotel, along with key travel information, best time to visit, weather detail, etc. Once they narrow down the journeys, the portal connects users to

travelspell.com

travel experts that help them customise their journey. Whether it is an exclusive yoga session at the Taj Mahal or a special rendezvous with a Maharaja or

TravelSpell's vast network of local experts ensures travellers have unforgettable experiences

any other authentic local experiences in India, you will find it on TravelSpell.com," he adds. Talking about future plans, Taneja says, "In phase two, we plan to give our hotel partners access to the back-end so they can manage their inventory."

## The Leela Palace in Jaipur



The Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts has unveiled The Leela Palace Jaipur that offers over 50,000 sqft of events space; 200 well-appointed rooms, suites and villas; as well as a pillar-less Grand Ballroom and verdant lawns. A reflection of modern palatial grandeur, the property introduces The Leela Palace Programming and signature Palace Service.

## A 'beautiful' event



Four Points by Sheraton Navi Mumbai is prepared to welcome back guests with stringent protocols. It is also set to host Season 10 of Miss Nav Mumbai pageant where 16 beautiful contestants will compete with each other. **Rahul Bansode**, Director of Sales, Four Points Navi Mumbai, recently announced the partnership during an event at the hotel.

# EVENT TALK

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2-3	Saudi Tourism Authority Virtual roadshow	08:00 am
1-5	Kerala Travel Mart (KTM) Virtual	11:00 am
03	TOFTigers Webinar- Create your own forest	03:30 pm
3-4	Singapore Reimagine MICE Virtual Show	07:30 am
4-6	TTF	Ahmedabad
5-6	Travel India 2021	10:00 am
06	IATO Elections	Delhi
9-12	ITB	Berlin
10	TOFTigers Webinar- Sustainability Awareness	03:30 pm
10	CAPA Live	08:30 am
15	Spain Tourism Webinar	03:00 pm
16-18	MITT	Moscow
18	Spain Tourism Webinar	03:00 pm
19-21	OTM	Mumbai
24	TOFTigers Webinar-Destination Northeast	03:30 pm
23-26	PATA Annual Summit 2021	RAK
23	Tourism New Zealand Webinar	11:00 am
24-26	SATTE	Greater Noida
25	Spain Tourism Webinar	03:00 pm

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

# TAFI national elections in limbo

The Travel Agents Federation of India's (TAFI) national elections that had been planned for January have now been indefinitely postponed due to an unprecedented glitch in one of its chapter elections.

 Hazel Jain

As per the association rules, the Travel Agents Federation of India was to hold its national elections after completing the same for all its 11 chapters. However, its Madhya Pradesh Chapter is yet to conduct its



elections, leaving the national elections for TAFI in limbo. Sharing more details on this is Pradip Lulla, Acting President and Vice President, TAFI, who says, "We have completed 10 chapter elections so far in January 2021. The last one, which is the Madhya Pradesh chapter election, has been delayed. It was to be held on February 3, 2021 because of a technical problem of the chairman not



Pradip Lulla  
Acting President and VP, TAFI

being available. However, now the matter is sub judice (under a judge). The person who was disqualified has gone to court. So now, whatever the court decides, that is what the chapter will have to do."

The last term's chapter chairman was TK Jose and the secretary was Hariom Jhunjhunwala. When the nominations for the chapter were filed on January 25, 2021, there were three names for the post of chairman – TK Jose, Shailandre Khare and Nitendra Khare. On

investigating, the forms of both Shailandre Khare and Nitendra Khare were disqualified.

Lulla explains, "Basically, the Returning Officer disqualified two candidates because the

tried to pacify them and asked them to come to a settlement amicably. But, they are saying it is sub judice and the court must decide. So we can have the national elections only once this has been settled, or if the person who has gone to court withdraws his case. For TAFI, there is no court jurisdiction, it is under the Registrar. The person who went to court should have actually approached the national committee for a solution."

Lulla added that the national committee will announce the nominees and the national election date soon.

 The last one, which is the Madhya Pradesh chapter election, has been delayed 

### Chapter alert!

The court hearing for the Madhya Pradesh chapter election case was scheduled for February 25, 2021 in Indore at the time of going to press.

procedure was wrong and they had proposed each other in their forms for the same positions. So then, one of them went to court with this. The court has now asked them to sort it out amongst themselves. We have

## Policies must be pragmatic

► Contd from page 3

would be better and it would be a good industry to provide jobs," he believes. Kachru says that HAI has already made specific recommendations in different states, but key demands remain the same. He says, "In India, certain things are handled by the Central government and certain

Maharashtra that have executed it in a short time. More investments will go there. Hoteliers can operate to survive initially, and they will build on it. States like UP, Odisha and MP are going all out to convert tourism to an industry, but the proof of the pudding is in the eating. We don't expect everything to happen overnight, but we are optimistic that governments do want to help the industry to survive and thrive."

The HAI VP also believes that revival depends on the industry and not only on the government. "Market dynamics have changed. We need to change ourselves and even the government must be a little pragmatic about its policies. What worked two years back will not work now. We are asking the government for things to be done comparatively faster, with more ease and without any immediate financial burden," he points out, adding that in countries like Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, UK, Germany and Switzerland, the government has stood by the industry and provided relief that's keeping them alive. 

 We are optimistic that governments do want to help the industry to survive and thrive 

by state governments. We are working with the federal government and simultaneously with state governments. Already, six to seven states have declared tourism as an industry, but the relevant benefits are slow to come because bureaucracy and policymaking is taking time. I must complement states like

## Virtual ITM 2021 wins big!

The three-day India Tourism Mart (ITM) 2021, inaugurated on February 18, saw participation of 241 international buyers from 74 countries and 248 domestic buyers apart from an equal number of buyers walking in for meetings.

 Manas Dwivedi

The Federation of Associations in Indian Tourism & Hospitality (FAITH) successfully organised the third edition of the India Tourism Mart (ITM), the first in a virtual format.

The three-day travel trade event, with Dr Harsh Vardhan, Union Minister for Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, as Chief Guest, kick-started with a physical inaugural ceremony in New Delhi where various dignitaries shared messages for the successful restart of B2B travel and tourism



Subhash Goyal  
Chairman – ITM 2021 and  
Hon. Secretary, FAITH

in India. This was followed by buyer-seller meetings and 13 content-rich knowledge sessions. Speaking at the event, Subhash Goyal, Chairman – ITM 2021 and Honorary Secretary, FAITH, said that the organisers were amazed

with the response received. "When we were thinking of a virtual event, we were all worried, but were amazed at the response received from all over the world, which was phenomenal. I think that people who did not exhibit lost a great opportunity. The Health Minister mentioned that after starting medical visas,

cial year, it will be the greatest achievement of ITM 2021. With the world's largest vaccination programme going on in India and already more than 10 million people having been vaccinated, it is time that e-visas were also reinstated," he said.

Talking numbers, Goyal added that as far as international buyers were concerned, the event received more than 240 from 74 countries. And, as far as domestic registered buyers were concerned, there were 248. "Apart from this, we also had 247 buyers who came as walk-ins during the meetings. Each session was attended by 500-700 people. I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who participated in ITM this year, to all exhibitors, sponsors and also the Ministry of Tourism. Everyone played an integral part in organising India Tourism Mart 2021 and making it a great success," he shared. 

 Everyone played an integral part in organising ITM and making it a great success 

### ITM 2022

Next year, ITM may be a physical event, but the knowledge sessions will still be virtual so that they can reach more people. Goyal says that he has been talking to the organising committee, FAITH Chairman and the Board of Directors to decide if the next ITM can be completely physical, and those unable to attend it physically in India could join virtually through buyer-seller meetings and knowledge sessions.

the government is considering starting e-Tourist Visa and scheduled international flights at least from countries that India has an air travel bubble agreement with. If this is implemented before the end of the finan-



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## KERALA TOURISM Thiruvananthapuram

VR Krishna Teja Mylavarapu will be the new Director, Department of Tourism, Government of Kerala. He will replace P Bala Kiran, who has been posted as Director of Census Operations/ Director of Citizen Registrations of Andhra Pradesh by the Union Government under the Central Staffing Scheme. Teja will also continue as Managing Director, Kerala Tourism Development Corporation (KTDC). An IAS officer of 2015 batch, Teja has helmed projects to renovate and effectively market the properties of KTDC, and improve the quality of its hospitality services.



## SHERATON GRAND RESORT & SPA Chennai

Sheraton Grand Chennai Resort & Spa has appointed Shiv Bose as the General Manager of the property. He is a passionate and driven professional with almost two decades of illustrious experience in the hospitality industry. In his role, Bose will be spearheading the team and developing the hotel's operations to deliver stellar service standards. He will also lend his expertise to a holistic stay experience for guests and be the torchbearer of the first Sheraton resort in the country. Prior to this, Bose was the GM at Courtyard by Marriott Bengaluru Hebbal.



## RENAISSANCE RACE COURSE HOTEL Bengaluru

Renaissance Bengaluru Race Course Hotel has Tejus Jose as its newly-appointed General Manager. He specialises in upscale and luxury hotels, and has a rich experience spanning over two decades. Jose is a highly motivated and dynamic professional who is recognised in the industry for his unique leadership skills. As the new General Manager at the hotel, he will lead operations and guest experience, and help position Renaissance Bengaluru Race Course Hotel brand as a true 'Lifestyle Hotel' brand of Marriott International, in Bengaluru.



## RAMADA Kasauli

The 58-room Ramada Kasauli in Himachal Pradesh has appointed Deepak Gupta as General Manager. In the new role, Gupta, a 2002 graduate of Hotel Management from Bangalore University, will be responsible for overseeing the hotel's staff, operations, sales and marketing, among a host of other responsibilities. His experience will play a key role in ensuring that Ramada Kasauli continues providing guests with the same high-quality service and exceptional value that it has become known for. Prior to this, Gupta served as GM at Best Western Hotel Maryland in Zirakpur.



## RAMADA AND RAMADA PLAZA Lucknow

Ramada by Wyndham Lucknow Hotel & Convention Center and Ramada Plaza by Wyndham Lucknow have appointed Gaurrav K Magoo as General Manager. In the new role, Magoo will be responsible for overseeing the hotel's positioning, staff, operations, sales and marketing, among other key responsibilities. Prior to this, he served as General Manager at The Raintree St. Mary's Road, a 5-star luxury hotel in Chennai, responsible for overall operations of the hotel to achieve customer satisfaction and quality service while meeting or exceeding financial goals. Magoo is a graduate of IHM Goa.



## THE RAMADA BY WYNDHAM RESORT & SPA Udaipur

The 72-room Ramada by Wyndham Udaipur Resort & Spa has appointed Vivek Kumar as General Manager. In the new role, Kumar will be responsible for overseeing the hotel's staff and operations, sales and marketing, etc. Previously, he served as Hotel Manager for Radisson Hotel Group based in Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh, responsible for all aspects of property management, including maximisation of financial performance, guest satisfaction and staff development. A talented and experienced hospitality professional, Kumar is a 2002 graduate from IHM Trivandrum.



# Pocket-friendly connections

Travadda Connect, an innovation of travadda.com, is an AI-driven lead generation and distribution platform to simplify and scale up B2B travel and tourism business globally. The cost-efficient platform generates authentic leads or enquiries in the B2B travel business, swiftly creating liaison between buyers and suppliers.



Travadda Connect is not a marketplace where the user can display, buy or sell any travel products, but a purely B2B enquiry distribution channel to boost the B2B travel business in an economical way. Here, registered buyers initiate or post an enquiry related to travel that is auto-forwarded to multiple registered suppliers directly, in their mailbox. Every enquiry gets auto-filtered and unified with supplier business category, location, services, product and source market through unbiased automation and distribution. The enquiry manage-

ment system is well-equipped with real-time updates and in-site features like View, Action, Rating, Remark, Reminder, Reports, which help both users to track every enquiry and its result. Buyers and suppliers can send or receive unlimited enquiries without any additional cost or transactional fee.

### Benefits

It is proven that suppliers spend four times more on sales and marketing to build a B2B network and achieve business leads or enquiries. Similarly, buyers spend four times more in manual research searching for appropriate suppliers, and often end up selecting the wrong suppliers. Both buyers and suppliers find it difficult to reach each other due to a lack of information or budget strains. Many a time, buyers are unaware of the existence of potential and active suppliers, therefore many suppliers fail



to receive authentic business leads or communicate with buyers, losing the opportunity to quote against enquiries, compete and convert leads to business.

Travadda Connect helps travel trade buyers minimise research time in finding accurate supplier category and avail competitive quotations from multiple suppliers simultaneously. It also helps B2B suppliers maximise high-quality business leads and minimise sales and marketing costs, all the while saving on marketing and sales spends. This time-saving automation accelerates B2B outreach against a reasonably-priced

membership plan for users. This state-of-the-art technology also helps B2B buyers with an automated pre-defined inquiry form that captures detailed inputs specifying the exact requirements, supplier category, service and product, etc., at a global scale. All enquiries get auto-forwarded to registered suppliers as per the categories specified by buyers with the help of a robust automation process.

This unbiased setup distributes prospective leads or enquiries equally to all registered suppliers with absolute privacy. Travadda Connect does not interfere in any business conversion

### What users get in return

- ❖ Send & receive unlimited enquiries to/from multiple buyers or suppliers without any additional cost
- ❖ Save time, money and workforce connecting with buyers & suppliers to initiate or acquire every enquiry
- ❖ Strictly focus on business conversions and increase business reach in the B2B travel domain
- ❖ Earn reward credit from the referral programme & reward points on supplier ratings
- ❖ Cost-effective in-site display advertisement for suppliers with an attractive rate
- ❖ Free sub-login ID for buyers up to 10 users

nor charges any commission on the sale. Its highly insightful reporting system helps users with real-time updates and notifications. Built-in statistical data for every single enquiry can be extracted and mapped against their CRM with ease.

The core purpose of Travadda Connect is to turn an adversity into an opportunity. Travadda Connect offers a unique and

economical annual membership plan for users that helps suppliers save a lot on marketing and sales spends. Likewise, it helps buyers save a lot of time and effort spent on researching for a reliable and trustworthy supplier.

The portal helps users to connect, interact and convert numerous leads into businesses across the world. ↴

### How to associate

Register with Travadda Connect on <https://connect.travadda.com> and get started with an annual membership plan designed for your business.



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# Bidding adieu, not without hope

**Meenakshi Sharma**, outgoing Director General, Ministry of Tourism, joined the sector in 2016 as Additional Director General and spent almost five years in the industry. Sharing the highlights of her journey, she claims that there is hope and positivity awaiting tourism.



Nisha Verma

**For** **Meenakshi Sharma**, the last five years in Ministry of Tourism (MOT) have only been remarkable. "I have been very lucky to work with the industry all through. I have been here in two avatars— I was ADG and then became the DG. Hence, I have been able to see the whole canvas of activities, whether at the state or entry level," she says.

### The tourism industry

Looking back, Sharma says that there are three things at the core of tourism, the first being an industry of collaborations and providing service because it cannot exist on its own.

"There is a lot of requirement for infrastructure, safety, sanitation, etc. We have worked with other ministries, departments and state governments to bring about a common framework. Secondly, this sector is all about faith. Travel is something people do for leisure, and they will go where they have extreme faith. That's where tour operators, hotels and all service providers have

a big role to play. The third aspect is the kind of service provided. Promoting hospitality, warmth and experience as meant by 'Atithi Devo Bhava' is important. These

We have worked with other ministries and state governments to bring a common framework

are the things that, in the last five years, we have tried to bring forward and continue improving. We succeeded in some and didn't in many," she shares.

The DG also believes that COVID-19 may have shown the industry its bleakest period, but also its brightest spot. It has shown that everyone can work together, despite conflicts.

### Challenges

For Sharma, challenges were only in terms of aspirations for things that MOT wanted to do.

She adds, "I've always thought that the domestic traveller does not have the advantage of having the right information. Hence, we tried to do two things during this period— come up with the Incredible India website that is already available in three languages with five more to be available soon, and partner with states and others like ASI, Google Art & Culture, railways, etc."

Another important challenge, according to her, is that domestic travellers always finds it difficult to get a guide.

"Hence, we came up with Incredible India Tourist Facilitator Programme (IIT-FC). I am happy to say that the first exam happened on February 26, and 2600

youngsters have joined it, which is an astounding number. We hope that these people will be able to start entrepreneurship because nothing stops a person from being a guide and a homestay owner, or a guide and an expert on adventure tourism. I think this is something that will enhance employment generation, especially in the remotest corners of the country. It was the PM's vision and we have tried to work on it. In fact, we handled this online programme a year before the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) came up with an online training programme which, in my opinion, is more at a philosophical level. However, this one is absolutely at an employment-generation level," she asserts. ↴



Meenakshi Sharma  
Director General, Ministry of Tourism

### Why women should also lead

"In the first year of my joining the industry, I remember that at a forum, I was the only lady at the dais. However, this year at ITM, there were three ladies at the dais, including one from the industry. It's not just about men or women. It's just that women in leadership roles encourage a lot of other women to come forward and try. We need to have empowered women across all levels, however, what matters is how we make it convenient. Women are more creative, which in turn brings a fresh look to things. When you are looking to reboot tourism, women should come forward. Presence of women will also give a perception of safety, which India really needs. Hence, we have some programmes in place and are working with TAAI and FLO through an MoU with MOT," says Sharma, adding, "We also welcome all ladies' organisations to come forward."

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