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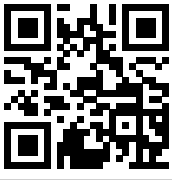
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Raising a toast to tourism

Keeping in view Omicron variant's scare, Ministry of Tourism had subdued celebration of National Tourism Day this year. Under Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav, MOT organised virtual event that lasted for two hours.



Nisha Verma

The theme for the National Tourism Day celebration was 'Rural and Community Centric Tourism'. The Chief Guest at the online event was **G Kishan Reddy**, Union Minister of Tourism, Culture, and DoNER, who gave the keynote speech, while other speakers included **Arvind Singh**, Secretary, Tourism; **Upendra Prasad Singh**, Secretary, Ministry of Textiles; **Govind Mohan**, Secretary, Ministry of Culture; **Leena Nandan**, Secretary, Ministry of Environment,

Forest, and Climate Change; **G. Ashok Kumar**, Director General, National Mission for Clean Ganga; **Anand Mahindra**, Chairman of Mahindra Group and **Col. Manoj Keshwar** from Atulya Ganga Parikrama.

In his address, Reddy claimed that the tourism sector is one of the highest employment generating sectors, and with the biggest vaccination drive in the world happening in India, the right confidence is being built for tourists. "According to statistics in 2019, 30 per cent of employment is generated through tourism," the minister said.



G Kishan Reddy
Union Minister of Tourism, Culture and DoNER

He shared that different ministries of the Government of India are working together to promote tourism in the country in one way or the other. "With the Ministry of

External Affairs, India is offering 5 lakh free visas for foreign tourists, and the UDAN scheme has extended e-visa to more than 170 nations. On the railways, 35,000 coaches have been allocated for tourism, with special trains for different tourism circuits. We are also working with the Ministry of Education, where we are working on starting tourism clubs in schools and colleges to create more awareness among our students and young people," he said.

He emphasised on the need to promote the North-Eastern

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Taking locals along

Arvind Singh, Secretary, MOT, said that tourism sustainability is about supporting local community and preserving the environment of a region.



Nisha Verma

Arvind Singh, Secretary, Ministry of Tourism (MOT), said that sustainable tourism is the tourism that leaves the local community at least in a position they are before the arrival of tourists in an area, if not better off.

"Essentially it is the tourism that takes care of the carrying capacity of the region that adds to the culture and heritage of the region that tourists are going to and adds to the economic and social wellbeing of the area," said Singh, one of the panelists at the 'World Majlis: Off the Beaten Path - Travel in the



Arvind Singh
Secretary, Ministry of Tourism

21st Century' session at the Expo2020 in Dubai.

Speaking about creating new destinations, Singh said, "Post the pandemic, the preferences of the

Contd on page 18 ▶

Hopes on domestic market

High-end Indian clients, who used to visit Thailand and South East Asian countries, are now splurging on local tourist destinations and paying better than foreign tourists, which is an advantage.



Nisha Verma

The domestic market has done exceedingly well, claims **JK Mohanty**, CMD of Swosti Group, who is also the Chairman of IATO Eastern Region and Hotel and Restaurant Association of Odisha (HRAO). "Our turnover in the hotels is much higher than in the pre-pandemic period," he shares.

However, does that guarantee enough revenue for hotels? Mohanty says, "High-end clients, especially those who were going and spending their money in countries like Thailand and South East Asian countries, are now discovering in-



JK Mohanty
CMD of Swosti Group and Chairman of the IATO Eastern Region & HRAO

teriors and tourist destinations in India. The high-end Indian customers are paying much better than what we used to get from foreign tourists. It's a great advantage and

an eye-opener for the market." However, he believes that inbound tourists will come eventually.

He shares that Swosti utilised the pandemic period to plan a new mega resort in Puri, on which the work is going on. "Hopefully in 2023 we would operate the first five-star hotel on the beach in Puri," he announces.

Mohanty is disappointed with the promotion of Odisha at a central level. "Odisha has been greatly excluded from their publicity campaign. We have spoken to Odisha Tourism to take it up with the ministry and we are hopeful that they will consider this," he says. ▶

Unease over pre-travel testing

MICE business hasn't been able to catch a break since COVID-19 broke all over world and the industry is worried if immediate corrective action it is not taken, it may not recover at all this year.



Hazel Jain

In a bid to adjust to the new normal, the UK has scrapped pre-departure travel tests for vaccinated passengers. The travel industry in the UK played a huge role in calling out the measures as ineffective now that Omicron was spreading widely.

In another development, the World Travel & Tourism Council welcomed the French government's decision to reopen borders for the UK travellers. "Once a variant is endemic, closing borders is pointless and only damages livelihoods, especially



Rajeev Jain
Managing Director
Rashi Entertainment

in travel and tourism," stated the global tourism body.

Closer to home, an open letter was sent by 35 prominent

doctors in India requesting the Indian government to stop the "unwarranted" practice of testing, medication and hospitalisation. Now, the question arises whether the Indian government will take note of the situation and act promptly in order to ensure that the events industry, which is struggling to revive itself, recovers in due course.

Rajeev Jain, Managing Director, Rashi Entertainment, who is also one of the significant voices in the events and wedding industry, says, "Restaurants and hotels are functioning at 50 per cent capacity, but no such provisions

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FHRAI sends an SOS to FM

The FHRAI has requested the FM for urgent measures to save the hospitality sector. It has asked for a moratorium on loans and a special resolution framework for the restructuring of loans, along with a minimum one-year moratorium extension for loans availed under ECLGS.



TT Bureau

The Federation of Hotel & Restaurant Associations of India (FHRAI), an association of hotels and restaurants, has submitted a representation to Union Finance Minister **Nirmala Sitharaman** requesting urgent special measures for the survival of the sector. It has asked for a moratorium on loans taken by the tourism and hospitality sectors and a special resolution framework for restructuring of the loans, along with a moratorium extension of at least one year for loans availed under the Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme (ECLGS).

Among other measures, FHRAI has requested working capital support with a guarantee from the Central Government to banks and NBFCs. It has asked that the ₹60,000 crore Loan Guarantee Scheme for the COVID-affected sector be notified with immediate effect, and lastly, it has demanded a direct benefit transfer of basic pay to employees of the hospitality sector.



Gurbaxish Singh Kohli
Vice President, FHRAI

FHRAI has also submitted a representation to Prime Minister Narendra Modi requesting urgent attention towards the deteriorating situation of the hospitality and tourism sectors. Gurbaxish Singh Kohli, Vice President, FHRAI, says, "We are presently in the midst of the third wave and the industry just will not be able to sustain another storm. In anticipation of the extent of losses and to merely be able to survive the repercussions of the third wave, we request the FM to immediately announce special measures for us. As the sector was inoperative due to restrictions, it is not in a position to repay loans already taken. Our foremost request is for a moratorium of minimum one year for repay-



ment of loans along with interest for the hospitality industry. In addition to this, we request that in view of the unparalleled situation of the tourism and hospitality sector, another round of resolution framework be announced for the sector for restructuring of its loans."

FHRAI has stated that the financial loss to the industry from the preceding two Covid waves caused around 30 per cent of hotels and restaurants to shut down permanently. The remaining establishments continue to run at losses even today. The industry has reported losses of ₹1.40 lakh crore and around 50 million jobs were lost due to the pandemic.

"With one more tourism and business season washed off, the sector has nothing to hope for. It is staring at a dark future in the midst of increasing debt burden, obligations and

statutory liabilities but with no means or ways to meet them," adds Kohli.

FHRAI has also requested that the working capital requirements of the hospitality sector be supported by the government with a long-term funding scheme with a low-interest rate and a guarantee from the Central Government to banks and NBFCs. It has once again requested to notify the

Before the guests check-in, their menus are sent to them, and they can choose what they want and when

₹60,000 crore Loan Guarantee Scheme with a 100 per cent government guarantee and long-term repayment options to address the colossal damage suffered by the tourism and hospitality sectors. "So far, the Ministry has not released any operational guidelines nor any other details about the scheme," adds Kohli.

Underlining M!CE prowess

At Expo2020 Dubai's 'Meet in India' session, Rakesh Verma, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Tourism, claimed that the government is working to position India as preferred destination for trade and social events.



Nisha Verma

Rakesh Verma claimed that the government is working with events industry to position India as a preferred destination for business and social events.

"M!CE (meeting, incentive travel, conferences and exhibitions) industry is an important contributor to national economy. It contributes to income generation and creates huge employment opportunities in related hospitality service providing sectors like accommodation, food and beverage convention services, transportation, tourism and entertainment," he emphasised.

Strong infrastructure

He highlighted India's "excellent convention and hospitality infrastructure, unparalleled cultural and natural attractions, and a rapidly growing economy".

"All this provides impetus to India's emergence as a hub of business and social events. The convention infrastructure at important cities and tourist destinations is being upgraded to provide world-class facilities. Delhi, Bengaluru, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Chennai and Goa are some of the leading destinations in the country. We are also focusing on Tier II and III destinations such as Varanasi, Cochin and Khajuraho, and these may work out to be more competitive and diversified offerings," he claimed.



Rakesh Verma
Additional Secretary
Ministry of Tourism

Connectivity is central

Verma said the government is giving a "massive" push to connectivity infrastructure with new airports, highways and railways. "This has significantly enhanced the accessibility of various destinations and their M!CE potential. Consistent improvement in the business environment, invest-

ment climate and India's emergence as a leader in technology and knowledge-related areas also contribute to India being an attractive destination for the events industry. "India is also a very attractive market for organising exhibitions, keeping in view the rapid economic growth and rising demand from consumers and industry," he said.

M!CE and wedding hub

Verma said that destination weddings are another important niche that is growing rapidly. "Many destinations in the country are emerging as wedding destinations, and the industry is getting more organised. MOT is working on a strategy to position India as a M!CE destination in the

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TRAVELTALK

VIEWPOINT

'May Maharaja fly high'

Union Minister for Civil Aviation Jyotiraditya Scindia, while handing over Air India to the Tata group last week, exuded confidence on the new owner of the Maharaja and said the group has all the required talent and strategic elements to make the airline a success.

But will this be the start of a world-class Indian carrier, or are we expecting too much from the Tata group? While we'll have to wait and see, I'm hoping they retain some of their old practices, especially the iconic Maharaja. The first thing that comes to my mind is the Maharaja mascot in red with his long moustache, waiting to greet us with a big smile and folded hands. I hope the new owners retain this!

The airline's extensive network and reach are also on my wish list. I hope the new owners do not rationalise this and continue to operate the network.

Finally, the last thing worth retaining would be the sweet and courteous staff that made you feel at home even when you were miles away.

High hopes from budget!

Each year, a month before the union budget, we go to the association leaders and ask them about their expectations and demands. Every year, the lists grow longer. This year too, the expectations are high. Each association has sent letters with a long list of demands. New associations have come into the picture and the number of letters has only increased.

What is the solution to this? Just bombarding the government with emails and letters can't be the only way forward. I know that a lot of representations were also made, but the top three demands by all associations stayed the same, and mostly the last few were different. Unfortunately, not too many of the letters highlight the strength and numbers that make up this industry. We undervalue ourselves and haven't been able to showcase our strengths.

Let's hope this year is different. Let's hope all our demands are met, or at least the industry is given enough hope to resurrect and compete. Else, let's hope that our associations and leaders have another plan to help the industry!



TT Bureau

The recovery in global air passenger capacity continued, according to the data provided by the International Air Transport Association (IATA) recently.

The global air transport body stated that industry-wide available seat-kilometres (ASKs) fell by 39.7 per cent compared in November 2020 compared to the same month in 2019. The drop followed 40.8 per cent decline in ASKs in October 2021, which was a positive sign.

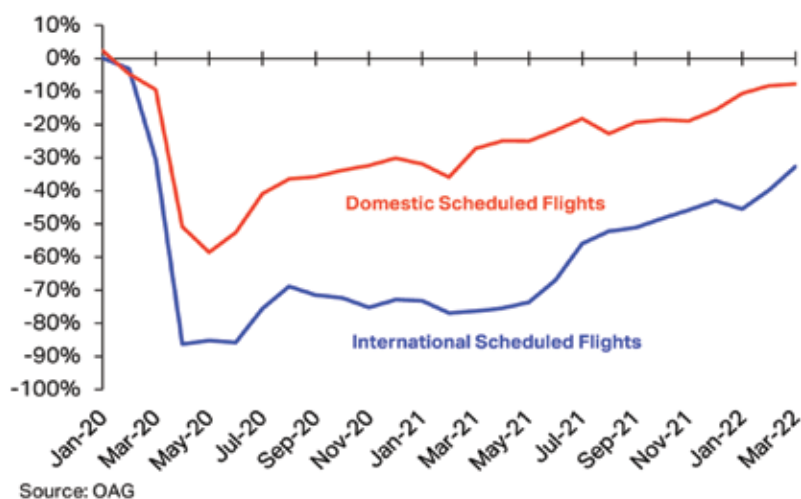
At the regional level, North America showed the smallest capacity decline from November 2019 (15.4 per cent). In contrast, Asia Pacific airlines reported the largest drop in ASKs, 58.9 per cent, due to lasting international travel restrictions.

There are indications that the air passenger capacity should improve further in the coming months despite the cancellations related to the Omicron variant. The number of scheduled flights is trending upwards across domestic and, in particular, international routes in Q1 2022.

Passenger load factors (PLF) also continued to recover in November – albeit slowly – as airlines improved their capacity management. Industry-wide PLF stood at 71.3 per cent in November, down 9.7 percentage points versus November 2019. However, the global picture masks some regional differences. While the PLFs of Latin American and North American airlines hovered close to the pre-pandemic levels, Asia Pacific carriers posted their lowest loads for any month of November since 1990.

Overall, the air travel recovery continued in November, but the traffic improvement was smaller than in the previous months. During November, the

Global airline flight schedules, percentage change versus 2019



industry-wide revenue passenger-kilometres (RPKs) fell by 47 per cent compared to the same month in 2019. In October, the contraction in RPKs was 48.9 per cent. Month-on-month the growth eased from 7.9 per cent to 1.7 per cent.

Global international air travel sustained its steady upward trend, as more markets reopened prior to the spread of Omicron. However, domestic traffic weakened, largely due to developments in China.

Domestic RPKs fell amid lockdowns in China

Domestic air travel deteriorated slightly in November after two consecutive monthly improvements. Global domestic RPKs fell by 24.9 per cent versus 2019 compared with a 21.3 per cent decline in October. This month's weakness was largely driven by China where the annual RPK contraction nearly doubled to 50.9 per cent after several cities, including the capital, introduced stricter travel restrictions to contain small COVID outbreaks. However, the bookings data indicate that the traffic should improve slightly in December since new infections were limited to fewer provinces during the month.

European airlines posted the most resilient international air travel outcome in the indus-

try in November, reporting a 43.7 per cent RPK drop from 2019. Among the key regional markets, Asia-Middle East had been the most resilient, though

enhanced travel restrictions around the world just at the time when countries had started to relax travel measures and international travel was gaining

Important indicators

- ❖ Global air travel recovery continued ahead of the Omicron outbreak, but was slower than in the previous months. Industry-wide revenue RPKs fell by 47.0% versus November 2019.
- ❖ International RPKs maintained their upward trend with improvements recorded across all regions. In contrast, domestic air travel deteriorated amidst new lockdowns in China.
- ❖ The emergence of the Omicron variant has led to a fall in international ticket sales in recent weeks, which increased uncertainty around further substantial RPKs improvement in early-2022

registering a drop of 67 per cent compared with 2019.

Challenges ahead

Although air travel volumes showed upward trend in November, uncertainties around further RPKs recovery through the northern hemisphere winter have increased. The outbreak of the new Omicron variant exacerbated an already deteriorating pandemic situation in Europe and has also led to the resurgence of the virus in North America and Africa.

The new strain resulted in

momentum. December traffic might remain resilient amid strong demand over holiday season as people still wanted to see their friends and relatives.

Let's wait and watch

The emergence of the Omicron variant in late November and the related travel restrictions have resulted in flight and trip cancellations, which negatively impacted RPKs on some routes at the end of the month. However, we will need to wait for December and January data to understand better the full impact of the new strain on air traffic. 📉



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India best for tourism investors

Amid challenges posed by COVID-19 worldwide, Rupinder Brar, Additional Director General, Ministry of Tourism, shares how India is preparing not only to welcome tourists whenever travel restarts, but also trying to be the best destination to attract investment in tourism sector.



Nisha Verma

While Omicron has brought travel to a halt across the world, **Rupinder Brar**, speaking at the session on 'Investment Opportunities in Travel, Tourism and Hospitality' at Expo2020 Dubai, said that the high vaccination rate in India has resulted in domestic travel to grow by leaps and bounds and this would instil confidence also among the foreign travellers. "As we gear up for the increased tourist footfalls, both domestic and international, we need to focus on the fact that the tourists that we will see in 2022-23 would be different from those that visited us in 2019. Post-COVID, they will look at alternate options to where they were travelling in 2019 and choose more open, green areas in 2022. Also, new-age tourists are more tech-savvy and are conscious about health and safety," she said.

The brighter side

Brar believes that India's strength lies in experiencing the layers of offerings in India. "We must focus on creating rich tourist experiences that have minimal environmental impact and also involve the communities in bringing those boundless stories of incredible India to the entire world. This way, tourism would not just create memories, but also tremendous amount of employment," she claimed.

"Tourism has exponential possibilities to boost the Indian services sectors in the next decade to attract significant revenues. Improved customer experience in tourism is a key factor that would determine its future growth. One of the largest services industries in the country, tourism has high impact on employment, export earnings and regional development and is a key engine of our growth. The services sector ac-



Rupinder Brar
Additional Director General
Ministry of Tourism (MOT)

counts for 53.89 per cent of total India's gross value added, and in tourism we are keeping our two major strengths forward—the young population and the digital interventions, of which India is truly a master," she added.

Investment opportunities

She claimed that the domestic spend in the sector is growing to as much as 89 per cent of the total spend being done by the Indians within the country today. "Hence, one should look

at India as a destination with a great business opportunity and growth possibility," Brar suggested. "The MOT has a number of flagship initiatives. In the wake of the pandemic, MOT has adopted a robust digital strategy to promote tourism. We have been focusing a lot on building tourism infrastructure across the country, both in terms of the tangible infrastructure and human resource, which is a key driver of experiential tourism, of which India can truly be a leader in this century," she added.

She further stressed that there is a huge business opportunity for anyone looking to invest in India, in terms of the market size and the potential. "Under the government's huge focus on connectivity, UDAN is ensuring that every domestic traveller has the capacity to connect and travel to the remotest corners of

the country. MOT also spends its money with civil aviation to identify such routes. The Ministry of Railways has also been aggressive on bringing heritage trains

Our focus is on a strong post-COVID revival by ensuring a strong digital transformation across tourism services

billion in FY 2019. Tourism industry has also encouraged the development of multi-use infrastructure, including hotels, resorts and restaurants, transport infrastructure and health care facilities. Now, 100 per cent Foreign Direct Investment, under the automatic route and in facilities, is allowed by the GoI. A five-year tax holiday has also been offered for two, three and four-star hotels, located around UNESCO world heritage sites, except in Delhi and Mumbai."

Future ready

Brar believes that India can be a huge religious tourism destination. "As we look at data across the world, 27 per cent of global travel happens around spiritual and religious tourism and clearly India has an opportunity of being a hub for that. Hence, it is a high focus area for government," she said.

and special route trains to all Indians and foreign travellers," she re-emphasised.

Highlighting the revenue potential in the sector, Brar said, "We, despite the pandemic, saw an inflow of US\$2.93 billion in terms of investment in tourism as compared to a US\$1.07

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Exploring potential in adventure

A massive untapped tourism potential exists in India, and it is vital to utilise it to the fullest extent without harming the environment. The focus of the government and travel partners is on making and promoting policies centred on adventure tourism, so that the country becomes the number one destination for adventure tourism.

Janice Alyosius

India is home to numerous states that offer adventure tourism to travellers. Moreover, the diversity and abundance of wildlife in India has always piqued nature lovers' interests. The Himalayas, the coast and the vast deserts of India make it one of the best adventure and wildlife tourism regions in the world. The Government of India is emphasising on promoting various Indian destinations that offer exciting adventures and wildlife encounters.

The Government of India is working towards protecting and promoting adventure travel in India.

Speaking about the government policies at the India Pavilion at Expo2020 Dubai, **G Kamala Vardhana Rao**, Director General, Tourism, said, "In terms of the policies, it is very important for every government to protect its own environment and to protect its own wildlife, and we are doing that with all our actions. As far as coastal and wildlife protection is concerned, we have a law in place."

He spoke of India's 551 wildlife sanctuaries and 104 national parks, and expressed concern about the potential they hold that is not well-publicized to international tourists. The natural heri-

tage and the beauty that Indian adventure and wildlife destinations hold can easily compete with what international destinations have to offer. The government is assisting and supporting efforts to promote India both domestically and internationally.

He also spoke of the outreach programme in which the government visited Leh, Ladakh, and the Northeast and found that medical facilities were of the greatest concern. According to him, medical facilities are the only aspect that is viewed as a major challenge. The state governments and the central gov-

ernment are working together to address and resolve other issues raised by the stakeholders and to promote tourism flawlessly.

The youth have been actively involved in adventure activities. The same has been witnessed in Kashmir. Rao revealed that the younger generation of trekkers, through the formation of their adventure clubs, have come together to promote skiing in Kashmir. "We have a skiing institute established by the Ministry of Tourism in Gulmarg. The Alps, which used to be a famous skiing spot, have been swamped with tourists, which is why Gulmarg is now regarded as an alternative skiing destination after the Alps. We have more than 200 to 300 good slopes which are identified by the skiing institutes in Gulmarg".

Rao stressed the need for building proper infrastructure facilities. Indian infrastructure facilities are currently under scrutiny due to the kind of international infrastructure that exists in the Alps. India's infrastructure facilities are overshadowed by those found internationally, which is a cause for concern at present since the sort of infrastructure found in the Alps and other parts of the world should be made available in Gulmarg to promote tourism.

He expressed his enthusiasm and said, "If all goes well, we would like to host skiing competitions and international tourna-



G Kamala Vardhana Rao
Director General, Tourism

We would like to host skiing competitions and international tournaments in the coming year or next year



Vaibhav Kala
Vice President, ATOAI

Our nation is the first to submit a progress report on a bond challenge pledge to restore 21 million hectares of forests by 2030



Ajeet Bajaj
Executive Committee Member, ATOAI

In India, I believe we have world-class adventure outfitters who are ready to provide a once-in-a-lifetime adventure experience



Akansha Garg
Committee Member, ATOAI

As the local community benefits from the tourism activities, they are becoming forest preservationists and protectors



sports are covered under the guidelines, which are being implemented across the country. He revealed that the guides in adventure travel have been trained in not just technical skills but also related skills such as first aid and CPR, communication skills, FNB, guest handling, soft skills, and most importantly, search and rescue. "In terms of equipment, we use gear at international standards in India, and I think we have world-class adventure outfitters ready to offer an adventure experience of a lifetime in the incredible Indian outdoors," said Bajaj.

Speaking of the diversity that India has to offer, **Akansha Garg**, Committee member, ATOAI Women's Collective, said, "As a whole, India is very unique in terms of culture, season, and terrain, including the Himalayan mountains, the Kanyakumari Sea coast, the thar desert of Rajasthan, and the humid forests

of which 9.8 million hectares have already been restored. We are ranked sixth in the world for our natural resources," he said. "In order to achieve this, we are striving to offer products that follow good practices, while keeping in mind the lessons learned from the first and sec-

The majority of travellers want to enjoy the natural environment and indulge in adventure touristic activities like skiing, trekking, skydiving, hill climbing, scuba diving etc. Though adventure tourism is exciting, it comes with certain risks and dangers as well.

Vaibhav Kala, Vice President, ATOAI, said, "With adventure tourism expected to be a US\$1.6 trillion industry by 2026, global travelers are seeking more adventurous and fun outdoor experiences. According to the 2018 travel trends report, travelers are predominantly looking for things like relaxing in nature, experiencing thrills in a beautiful setting, and traveling sustainably. India has incredible potential to offer all of these and more." He further revealed that as per the World Economic forum's travel and tourism competitiveness rankings India is among the top ten in the world for natural heritage. "Our nation is the first to submit a progress report on a bond challenge pledge to restore 21 million hectares of forests by 2030, out



and wave of stopovers. It's our belief that this is the only way to keep operations alive and sustainable. We are seeing a revival in travel trends that have been almost as high as they were pre-pandemic," he added.

Ajeet Bajaj, Executive Committee member, ATOAI, discussed the three Gs for risk management in adventure tourism, which are guidelines, guides, and gear. The Indian Ministry of Tourism has adopted the Indian adventure tourism guidelines of the Adventure Tour Operators Association of India (ATOAI) in 2018. 31 different adventure

of the Northeast. We have a rich cultural and natural heritage, and we are one of the world's megabiodiverse countries."

Talking about stays, Garg said, "In India we offer accommodation of all sorts. We are even encouraging homestays to be set up in the wildlife sanctuaries so that travellers can see how the local people live. In national parks, there are a lot of resorts, but what's really unique about them is that they flood the locals. We can see that as the local community benefits from tourism, they become forest preservationists and protectors." 🐾





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TourismNews

The WHO calls travel bans futile; recommends nations to lift or relax COVID-19 travel restrictions

Thailand to resume quarantine free travel for fully vaccinated travellers from February 1

Lufthansa resumes three weekly flights from Munich to Delhi

Global tourism grows by 4% in 2021, but remains below the pre-pandemic levels: UNWTO

Travel services market may increase by \$11.11 bn from 2020 to 2025: Technavio

Kerala launches 'Fam 2 Malabar 500' initiative to mark Malabar on the global tourism map

Dharamsala-McLeodganj ropeway to take 5 minutes instead of 25 minutes by car

The MOT mulls tourism clubs in schools for adventure activities: G Kamala Vardhana Rao

Strategy to face challenges

Pandemic has hit global economy hard, especially tourism industry. There were challenges at every step, but what is more important is to address challenges and develop improved strategies for dealing with challenges.



Janice Alysius

It has been a challenging couple of years for the travel and tourism industries as the third wave has again strained the industry. However, being aware of the challenges can enable industry participants to develop adaptive strategies more rapidly and be more proactive. In conversation with delegates from the tourism and travel industries, some of the challenges that need to be addressed were stated.

Speaking to **Debjit Dutta**, Director & CEO, Impression Tourism Services, he highlighted how the tourism sector is an unorganised sector of the country that has been massively affected by COVID. "We have faced many challenges over the last two years, including managing operations, surviving without business, maintaining resources, and not having or running out of reserves." The industry is going



Debjit Dutta
Director & CEO
Impression Tourism Services

through a transformation, and it is imperative that we recognise and adapt to those changes. "The business has seen a dip in numbers again. Reservations have been cancelled or postponed, but by February, hopefully things will be normal," he said.

Another challenge faced by the industry is pricing. Due to a drop in business, the hospitality and travel industries lowered their prices, which did not help enhance business at all. Hotel sales will be a challenge if hotels continue with their cheap pricing strategy. "The



Pankaj Gupta
General Manager
Crowne Plaza New Delhi

focus should be to look beyond 2020 and 2021, figure out what has gone wrong and work on it. In order to bring the business back to pre-pandemic levels or to improve it, the hotels should start selling at an optimum price. Keeping a low price because corporate wants a low price is not a solution. We have to get over those issues in 2022, said **Pankaj Gupta**, General Manager, Crowne Plaza, New Delhi.

The industry is about congregating together and exchanging ideas. However, in a situation

like COVID, it has become quite a challenge. The third wave has given time to the people involved in the industry to rethink the products they are offering and improve upon them. "We need to be realistic and, therefore, as we move forward, perhaps the events we organise, need to be more organized, and in terms of

which is definitely different from what it used to be in pre-COVID times," said **Raymond Lim**, Area Director, Singapore Tourism

Getting the trust of the people involved is another challenge. "The most challenging aspect of today's business is building trust. Every hotel, every segment, and



Raymond Lim
Area Director
Singapore Tourism

content, we need to be more creative and ensure that the content delivered to the end customer is something that they are really looking for. I think it is very important for the industry to have the push to deliver greater value,



Gaurav Narula
Global Category Manager
Schneider Electric

every travel partner should be able to build trust with their customers. People are losing their trust, so it is very important that we make them trust again," said **Gaurav Narula**, Global Category Manager, Schneider Electric.

Bullish on domestic market

Sanjay Kumar, Chief Strategy and Revenue Officer, IndiGo, shares how the market had revived to pre-COVID levels for them domestically before Omicron hit, and why it is in the interest of both the consumers and the airlines to restart international flights as soon as possible.



Nisha Verma

While the last two years have been extremely bad for the aviation industry as a whole, but **Sanjay Kumar**, Chief Strategy and Revenue Officer, IndiGo, claims that in the last six months, post the second wave, they have seen a reasonable recovery. "In fact, in October-November, 2021, we have seen traffic growing up to almost at the pre-COVID level. Thus, our capacity deployed crossed pre-COVID level in the first week of November and overall capacity is operating at 100 per cent pre-COVID capacity level. Hence, we are bullish as after the second wave, we've seen very strong recovery, much faster than what we would have expected. We hope that corporates return to flying. We will see more people taking to air travel," he adds.



Sanjay Kumar
Chief Strategy and Revenue Officer
IndiGo

However, he says, the only dampener has been the last few weeks with the new virus threat. "This has put negative sentiments in the marketplace and has affected the business adversely. However, we hope that it will be behind us very soon," he adds.

Recovery Strategy

The first wave resulted in losses for the aviation industry. Sharing their recovery strategy, Kumar claims, "We believe in the long-term opportunity in the Indian

domestic market and also the international marketplace. Hence, all our actions and growth plans are based on those opportunities. We believe that India will become the second-largest domestic travel market in the world. Our entire growth plan is based on that. With the pandemic, we have seen an adverse impact on both our financials and our operating metrics, but I think we will continue to focus in terms of building our business as per our original plan, i.e., growing our business 20-25 per cent year-on-year and expanding our fleet and network accordingly."

Price dynamics

With international scheduled flights still not starting, the prices are on the higher side. Kumar explains, "This is primarily because of the capacity constraints, which have been in place for the last few months, due to the bubble agreement

between two governments and constrained capacity. As we open up more capacity in the market and as we get to pre-

We, as an industry, should be looked at as an enabler of economic activities across the network and markets rather than as a travel luxury

COVID level when more capacity is deployed, prices will also cool down on the international side.

"As far as domestic is concerned, I don't think there is any impact on the pricing. In fact, if anything has to happen on the domestic side of the prices, it has to move up be-



cause we personally feel that the cost of operations has moved up significantly post-pandemic. From fuel prices to the dollar becoming extremely expensive against the INR, we had to move the prices."

Government support

Kumar claims that the Indian aviation industry pays the highest taxes compared to other parts of the world. "I think there have been many efforts being pursued through the Ministry of Civil Aviation. Under the leadership of **Jyotiraditya Scindia**, we

are seeing some impact through VAT rationalisation by a few state governments. I think if only one or two things are addressed accordingly to bring down the taxes on ATF and other direct taxes, it will help the industry in a big way."

International flights

Giving the airline perspective on restarting international scheduled operations, Kumar says, "Just like the trade, we also think that it's better that the capacity should be opened to the pre-COVID level."

Focus on domestic market:



It recently conducted an exclusive session with India Tourism on benefits that travel agents can gain access to by registering with Union Ministry of Tourism. Ajay Prakash, President, TAFI says travel and tourism sector kept going due to lucrative domestic market, which is huge segment.



Hazel Jain

The main focus of the year-end chapter meeting that Travel Agents Federation of India (TAFI), Western India, organised in Mumbai recently was domestic tourism, in which the federation had specially invited India Tourism to talk about the various schemes under the Ministry of Tourism.

Addressing the meeting, **Ajay Prakash**, President, TAFI, said, "India's domestic market is huge. If we do not use this

opportunity now, we will be wasting it. If you remember, during the 2007-08 economic meltdown, it was just domestic tourism that kept us going. The same has been the case during this pandemic. And while this is new for many of our members, it's a huge segment and we would be foolish not to capitalise on it. The 'Dekho Apna Desh' has been a phenomenal success and we must try and leverage it."

Adding to his views, **Jitul Mehta**, Chairman – Western India, TAFI, said, "We have decided to focus

more on domestic tourism. We are working closely with India Tourism to ensure members get the benefit. This Mumbai event has been specifically focused on this, and we have invited all six domestic airlines to interact with our members, along with key hotel brands."

Representatives from Air India, Vistara, Air Asia India, Go First, Indigo and Spicejet, along with top hotels like Taj Hotels, ITC Hotels, Marriott Hotels and Oberoi, were also present.

"We will keep urging members to register with the MoT, as there are many schemes that will be made available to them once they do so," Mehta said.

Venktesan Dhattareyan, Regional Director (West & Central Region), India Tourism, Mumbai, Ministry of Tourism, gave a presentation on 'Recognition of Tourism Ser-



Ajay Prakash
President
TAFI



Jitul Mehta
Chairman – Western India
TAFI



Venktesan Dhattareyan
Regional Director (West & Central Region),
India Tourism, Mumbai, Ministry of Tourism

India's domestic market is huge. If we do not use this opportunity now, we will be wasting it

We have decided to focus more on domestic tourism and are working closely with India Tourism

At this point, when travel is severely restricted, we should explore and support our own industry

Non-refundable fares

TAFI will also take up the issue of non-refundable fares charged by some airlines with the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA). Many members of the federation have expressed their irritation with airlines, which have made a lot of fares, including Business Class fares, totally non-refundable – disregarding even the claims of persons affected by COVID. Prakash said that TAFI would take up the issue strongly with the airlines and the DGCA.

vice Providers by the Ministry of Tourism' (revised guidelines w.e.f. 28.11.2020). He urged all present to apply for recognition and outlined the benefits. "India is such a vast country. Throughout my

career, I have always said that India is not a country, it's a continent. We don't have to go to another country for anything. At this point, when travel is severely restricted, we should explore

and support our own industry," he said.

"We are waiting for the virus threat to abate, so we can do more physical events with the travel trade," he said.

Domestic boost to Jungle Lodges

Manoj Kumar, Managing Director of Jungle Lodges & Resorts, which is jointly owned by the forest department and tourism departments of Karnataka, shares how they are getting business from domestic tourists during the pandemic and promoting far-off eco-tourism destinations, along with prime destinations in the state.



Nisha Verma

Manoj Kumar says that Jungle Lodges & Resorts is a company jointly owned by the forest department and tourism departments of Karnataka and has almost 26 properties across the state.

"We have properties across Karnataka and we cater to eco-tourism and adventure tourism. Most of the properties are located inside or close to the sanctuaries, national parks and tiger reserves. Earlier, the department could not manage these nature camps and other things professionally because they had their own responsibilities. Hence, we thought Jungle Lodges & Resorts, as a company that is into the hospitality industry, could take over all these properties with an MoU," he says.

Amid nature

He revealed that they have three kinds of segments. "One is high-end, on par with any seven-star facility but still catering to eco-tourism. We also have the nature camps, which are for the middle and lower middle segments. They are like trails. Every camp is linked with an activity like trekking. We have butterfly camp, mystery trails, or timber trails. These are theme-based trails. We also offer beach tourism, where we have adventure sports like dolphin watching or other water sports activities. Deobagh is primarily for beaches," he says.

Promotion strategy

Kumar informs that they have a very close association with IATO and their Karnataka chapter. "We have frequent interactions with the people and we also participate in roadshows abroad. We have promotional videos and



Manoj Kumar
Managing Director
Jungle Lodges & Resorts

theme-based videos, which also shown on internet and digital medium. Nowadays, we are concentrating on digital marketing, and we are present on Twitter, Instagram and other social media channels, where we have huge following," he shares.

Post-COVID scenario

"Unfortunately, when COVID struck, we were in a bad position," says Kumar. "However, now as revenge tourism, people

have started to love nature more than ever. Hence, fortunately, Jungle Lodges & Resorts are running full. This could also be because Indians are not able to travel abroad owing to restrictions. Another reason could be that they now want to be closer to nature and spend some time in natural surroundings with their families. We are getting a lot of domestic travellers visiting major camps," he adds.

While they are concentrated mostly in certain parts like the Mysore belt, they have properties in some other places too, which they want to promote. "We also have destinations in north Karnataka that are not that popular, but they are also equally beautiful and good. Now our strategy next year is to ensure that the tourists who are not able to get the properties in popular destinations, which could be called

prime properties, they can go to the other properties. Hence, we are designing such a package that if you spend one day at one day at one property, you get two

Our strategy next year is to provide options for tourists with alternative destinations

days at the other property. We are curating such packages for the travellers, so that the other properties also get equal share," he further adds.

State initiatives

Kumar said, "Karnataka is a progressive state. The state has come up with its own tourism policy for

2020–26. We were one of the first states to consider tour operators and guides as frontline workers and put them on priority for vaccination. The state gave industry status to four to five-star classified hotels. Financial support was given to taxi and auto drivers. Relief measures include a 50 per cent reduction in property tax and the waiver of fixed charges on electricity bills for April to June and 50 per cent of the excise licence fee.

"Also, we have a one-time ₹ 5,000 grant to recover tourist guides. We participated in WTM London and went to Birmingham and Manchester for in-person roadshows in November. We will participate in future events in Dubai and Madrid. With the Karnataka Tourism Society, we are trying to build the confidence of the industry. We have started heli-tourism and are working on coastal tourism."

Confidence building need of hour

When it comes to welcoming international tourists in contemporary world affected by the pandemic, all sectors, including government, hotels, transport and tour operators, have to work in tandem to make sure a loud and clear message went out all over world about Incredible India from all channels.



Nisha Verma

A session titled 'Preparedness under the New Normal' at the recent IATO Annual Convention **SanJeet**, Director, DDP Publications, moderated the session, and the panellists were **Rupinder Brar**, Additional Director General, Ministry of Tourism; **Parveen Chander Kumar**, Senior Vice President-S&M, IHCL and **Harish Mathur**, Executive Committee Member, IATO.

Planning for preparedness

Starting the discussion, SanJeet said that due to COVID-19, a lot has changed in the tourism industry, including business models. Brar said that the government was taking "many steps" for the tourists

There must be strategies in place for promotion, a particular media, a B2B show, or even a roadshow

—SanJeet

keeping in view the pandemic. Kumar added he was planning on collaborating with all three partners — government, hotels and IATO — and other sectors of the tourism industry to instil trust among the tourists.

Giving the perspective of tour operators, Mathur said that after



(L-R): Sanjay Razdan, SanJeet, Parveen Chander Kumar, Rupinder Brar and Harish Mathur

COVID-19, they went through a tsunami of emotions. "It started with denial, which led to depression for many. However, MOT has done its best in trying to revive us. There was ample opportunity to relook at all our strategies. 'Dekho Apna Desh' was a learning process. We need to regroup, re-strategise and relook."

Building confidence

Speaking about international travel, SanJeet asked Brar regarding confidence-building measures by MOT. Brar said, "We know travel is going to restart, and we are trying to develop a campaign. We discussed the messaging with some stakeholders. The content is ready and it has been previewed by some stakeholders."

She revealed that the messaging was going to be both direct and indirect. "Through discussions, we decided that the campaign should not only be safety-based but also theme-based. Our content will come subtly. We will inform the travellers that Indians have been vaccinated. The other message will be that our hotels,

cabs, airports and tour operators are ready to welcome tourists."

She said the campaign was ready and the discussions with the channels were done. "We are only waiting to decide the right day for the launch," she added.

The future is bright and lies in three things — product, process and promotion

—Rupinder Brar

The campaign was to be launched on January 1, 2022, but now it has been delayed. Brar said there is a need for a large B2B event.

Get ready hotels

When asked about the steps being taken to get the tourists back, Kumar shared that the first step was to create the right infrastructure. "We made sure all the safety protocols were in place, including all the backend work. Right from the vaccination of our employees

to the safety protocol and contactless technology, everything was done in the first year. The second step is to communicate with your target audience that you are ready and safe. For this, we have curated some campaigns for the market. First, we came up with a homecoming offer in November for the Indian diaspora, who may bring in others. The next step was to make an itinerary-based offer, which will probably begin by March," he said.

However, Kumar felt that India has its own niche. "Our team is in touch with all our key operators in international markets. However, post-COVID, we need to reconnect with people. We are planning to launch our campaign, and we have had outreach programmes going on for the last six months. We also had bookings from March to April. Unfortunately, there were cancellations owing to Omicron. However, things are not that bad," he said.

Readiness to welcome

How ready are tour operators to welcome international travellers, and are they also working towards confidence-building? In reply, Mathur said, "We have survived and have been forced to look and relook at our markets. Those looking at Germany, the US or France earlier are now looking at the Middle East, Japan, Russia and Ukraine. In fact, all the big, middle and small tour operators are in the same boat and need to relook at the business from a new starting point. Also, IATO is helping them by generating activity reports in terms of news and filtering relevant news. We need support by MOT, airlines and hoteliers," he said. Mathur claimed that all tour operators were ready and knew what they needed to do. "I can guarantee that they have their planned marketing campaign ready."

Strategy ahead

SanJeet claimed that to attract tourists apart from NRIs, there

must be strategies in place. Brar said, "Apart from social media, a dialogue between all three segments — the government, hotels and tour operators — is crucial. We are also planning roadshows, and we hope that in the first quarter, a good roadshow will be coming up. We will need to work with tour operators more closely to create roadshows and go back to all the travel marts in an aggressive manner."

Synergy is needed

SanJeet said that when government is taking so many initiatives and spending money, then the private sector and tour operators

We are re-strategizing ourselves and looking at new ideas, new markets, new developments, and new themes

— Harish Mathur

can join hands in promotions with a call to action and contacts mentioned in every communication.

Although IHCL is already working with the MOT on this, Kumar said, "All the partners, including airlines, can work together and unleash the potential. In fact, we used 'Dekho Apna Desh' as a campaign and generated huge traction, leading to conversion. When tourism begins, some factors will attract international tourists: value-driven tourism; key themes like nature, history, yoga and health; and young people who are fearless in their travels."

Brar said that the government is working with private players and putting a lot of private content on the site. "We are also working with the heritage association. We would be happy to work with

the trade. I am nothing without trade, and tourism is all about it," she claimed.

When asked about what the tour operators are looking at, Mathur said, "We are holding hands with the government. Also, we are re-strategising ourselves and looking at new ideas, markets, developments, and themes."

Brar added, "We must use this opportunity to come out of our comfort zones and stop selling and reselling the same few things, since we have invested a lot in large infrastructure. Many other destinations have opened up in terms of air travel and highways, among others."

For his part, Kumar suggested, "The MOT website can help to host all the experiences and, towards the end, give a list of hotels, travel tour operators and airlines for people to choose. It will be a game changer," he said.

A collaborative future

Kumar, on working together with the tour operators Kumar talked about the special promo code they announced for IATO members. "This shows that this is a long-term relationship that needs to be nurtured. Regarding cancellation policies and other things, the way we have been doing work in the past will be changed. We will have to look at different policies for groups and individuals."

Mathur said that with everyone working together, the future looks

We used 'Dekho Apna Desh' as a campaign and generated huge traction, which also led to conversion

— Parveen Chander Kumar

bright. Kumar added, "We should continue working together and keep reinventing ourselves."

Brar said the future is bright and lies in three things: Product, process and promotion. "Hence, join hands and make sure that Incredible India is more incredible."



PM opens Circuit House in Somnath

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, while unveiling the new Circuit House at Somnath in Gujarat, recently stressed on the importance of tourism and said it can be boosted by four factors, that is, cleanliness, convenience, time and thinking. He also advised people to learn from 'our past, places of culture and faith like Somnath'.



Nisha Verma

At the unveiling of the new Circuit House in Somnath, Gujarat, through video conferencing, Prime Minister **Narendra Modi** said, "Today, when in the Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav, we wish to learn from our past, places of culture and faith like Somnath are at the centre of that."



Narendra Modi
Prime Minister of India

Gujarat CM **Bhupendrabhai Patel** also took part in the inauguration ceremony, along with state ministers, MPs, Temple Trust members and many others.

PM Modi said that tourism plays a pivotal role in the economies of many countries in the world. "We have infinite possibilities like this in every state and in every field," he said. He also narrated a virtual Bharat Darshan and said,

"These places represent our national unity and the spirit of Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat. Today, the country also sees them as a strong source of prosperity. Through their development, we can catalyse the development of a large area."

He highlighted that in the last seven years, India has left no stone unturned to realise the potential of tourism. "Today, the development of tourist centres is not just a part of government schemes, but a

campaign of public participation. The country's heritage sites and the development of our cultural heritage are great examples of this."

He also shed light on measures like 15 theme-based tourist circuits, including Ramayana Circuit and Buddha Circuit, which even have special trains. The PM said that a special train is being started from Delhi for the Divya Kashi Yatra as well.

PM Modi also stressed that the country is looking at tourism in a holistic way. "In today's time, four things are necessary to develop tourism — the 4S — Swachhta (cleanliness), Suvidha (convenience), Samay (time) and Soch (thinking). First is cleanliness. Earlier, our tourist places and holy pilgrimage places were also unhygienic. Today, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan has changed this picture. The second factor in promoting

tourism is convenience. However, the scope of facilities should not be limited to tourist places only. The facilities of transport, internet, correct information and medical arrangements should be

The development of tourist centres is not just a part of government schemes, but a campaign of public participation



needs to be innovative and modern. At the same time, how proud we are of our ancient heritage matters a lot," he elaborated.

He said that after independence, the development was only for a few, but now the country is building new places of pride and giving them grandeur. "Babasaheb Memorial has been built in Delhi and the APJ Abdul Kalam Memorial is in Rameshwaram. Similarly, the places

associated with Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and Shyamji Krishna Varma have been given due stature," he informed.

Citing the example of Statue of Unity, the PM highlighted the potential of recently created tourist destinations. "Despite the pandemic, 75 lakh people have come to see the Statue of Unity. Such places will take our identity, along with tourism, to new heights," he said.

MP: A potpourri of experiences

Shilpa Gupta, Additional Managing Director, Madhya Pradesh Tourism Board, shares the latest initiatives and policies for tourism promotion in the state, along with involvement of tour operators. She highlights fully vaccinated sector and better road connectivity as the USP of the state.



Nisha Verma

Shilpa Gupta, speaking at the recent IATO convention, claimed that people involved in both direct and allied services in the tourism sector in MP are fully vaccinated, and keeping in line with the tourists' preference to use their own vehicle, the state has excellent road conditions and connectivity. "Work has been done on infrastructure, with wayside amenities going from 80 to 96. Mass tourism has changed and people want to go to less crowded areas, for which MP is perfect. MP Tourism is developing new and unexplored destinations for the same. One example of the same is Parsili, next to Bandhavgarh, where barefoot walking experience on the sandbanks can be done by extending one night when visiting Bandhavgarh. We are developing every destination

with lots of activities to meet the needs of experiential-based tourism. Today, tourism is not about 'What to see', but 'What to do?', and this is what we have been working on. Today, there are three pillars of tourism — innovation, safety and sustainability — and MP is working on all the three. Today, MP is next to Kerala in rural and responsible tourism," she said. "Ladpura near Orchha, is one of the three villages nominated in India for rural tourism by UNWTO," she added.

Trade first

She also mentioned that tour operators are their biggest stakeholders, and they are constantly working with associations, transporters and guides. "Today, we need to make our packages activity-filled and move towards digitalisation as tourists want to experience the destination even before going there. We should



Shilpa Gupta
Additional Managing Director
Madhya Pradesh Tourism Board

be innovative and reinvent ourselves," she said.

Word-of-mouth publicity

Gupta shared that while traditional methods of marketing are being adopted by them as well, she isn't happy with it and wants the visitors to be the ambassadors of the destination. "As for the private sector, since the tour operators are direct stakeholders, they can come up with better ideas to promote tourism, and we are accessible to help through re-

quirements by the government, at policy level or for incentives. We share responsibilities and help move forward," she said.

Of culture and spirituality

Speaking at the 'Connecting with Culture, Heritage and Spirituality' session at the Expo 2020, Dubai, she said that culture, heritage and spirituality are inherent strengths of MP. "MP is doing very well in everything, and these aspects create a great opportunity," she said.

"We have adopted new practices, like looking for different circuits. For example, Dubai is very well connected to Delhi. Coming from Delhi, a traveller can visit Gwalior, where they can experience music, heritage, culture and cuisine. From there, one can go to Orchha, which has heritage palaces and has the heritage of Raja Ram as its king. From

Orchha, one can go to Chanderi, which is popular for textiles (Chanderi silk) and heritage. Many films have been shot there as well. Then one can come to

Mass tourism has changed and people want to go to less crowded areas, for which MP is perfect

Indore and have a spiritual experience at the Mahakal Temple in Ujjain, Omkareshwar Temple, Maheshwar, Sailani Island, and Mandu for historical palaces. There are direct flights to Dubai from Indore," she added.

Convergence is key

Secondly, she said that they are working in convergence

with three departments — archaeology, culture and tourism. "We are lucky that our PSU is also holding all three charges. I find it very useful as we can involve all departments for events and promotion of one event," she said.

She added, "In February, from the culture department, we have Khajuraho Mahotsav, but the tourism department is also connected with it. We are also having Rang Mahotsav and Bhopal Utsav. We are ensuring that tourists get an experience of the culture, lifestyle of the locals and their language."

Skilling

She said that the MP Tourism Board has a skill vertical for upgrading the skills of stakeholders and ensuring that our tourists get good experience.

Many shades of Gujarat

Hareet Shukla, Principal Secretary Tourism, Devasthanam Management, Civil Aviation & Pilgrimage, Government of Gujarat, shares how Gujarat has a panoply of offerings for tourists. Right from sites featuring earliest civilisations, to various heritage sites, to seaplane services and heliports being developed, it has something for everyone.



Nisha Verma

Acknowledging that the last two years have been difficult for the tourism sector, **Hareet Shukla**, Principal Secretary Tourism, Devasthanam Management, Civil Aviation & Pilgrimage, Government of Gujarat, says that there is a lot of hope with rapid vaccination, especially in Gujarat. "Hence, we are very well poised for recovery."

Myriad offerings

Shukla discusses how the state is introducing products to boost tourism. "Gujarat offers a wide range of tourist attractions, including heritage history, cuisines, attire, fair festivals, and celebrations. It boasts a 660-kilometre coastline along which we are developing new places, concepts, themes, and festivals. Gujarat is also well-connected, with 19

airports, three of which are run by the state government, and we are looking for private sector partners to help us build projects. In addition, there are 42 ports and over 1.63 kilometres of motorable road. With over 6 crore tourist footfall, Gujarat's tourism boom has outpaced the national average," he adds.

A success story

"When Rann Utsav was initially organised in 2006, it was a grand show," he says, citing the Kutchh Festival as an example. "It has evolved far beyond our imagination. Every year, more than five lakh people come to Kutch for the Rann Utsav," he adds.

"The majority of visitors travel to Gujarat for business or spiritual reasons. Hotel occupancy has also increased, and we now have over 4,000 verified units and over 100 star-category hotels.



Hareet Shukla
Principal Secretary Tourism, Devasthanam Management, Civil Aviation & Pilgrimage, Government of Gujarat

In addition, we have the world's tallest statue — Statue of Unity; the world's only home for Asiatic lions — Gir Forest; Asia's longest ropeway — Girnar Ropeway; India's first UNESCO World Heritage City — Ahmedabad City; and the world's earliest known dock and India's first port city — Lothal, where a world-class Maritime Museum is being built. It is home to one of India's exemplary city planning models of Indus

Valley Civilisation — Dholavira. We are trying to connect those going for Rann Utsav to Dholavira, allowing them to stay and experience the UNESCO World Heritage Site. Master Plan is being developed to make it a world standard site. It is home to one of the blue flag certified beaches — Shivrampur Beach, which we are developing to be a major tourist attraction in the next 2-3 years," he further adds.

Policy-driven state

Gujarat, he asserted, is a policy-driven state. "Whether it's industry or tourism, Gujarat has one of the best law and order situations, best possible infrastructure, best connections, and it's quite friendly," he shares.

New projects & destinations

Sharing details of some projects in development, Shukla reveals, "The first route on which Guja-

rat government started seaplane services was between Sabarmati and Statue of Unity. There are plans to cover Shetrunji River and Dharoi Dam. Other locations are also being explored."

Gujarat has one of the best law and order situations and best possible infrastructure

Secondly, they are also trying to promote a lot of heliports.

Shukla elaborated, "First helipad services will start from Ahmedabad. There could be joy ride concepts. In the next step, we'd develop six major heliports. Recently, we approved routes connecting major

destinations—Surat-Bhavnagar, Surat-Amreli, Surat-Rajkot. Also, we are starting Ahmedabad-Bhuj connection soon."

There is also a new concept of border tourism, for which Nadabet is being developed as a destination, similar to the Wagah Border.

PPP collaborations

Talking about the state and sector promotion plan, Shukla says, "Collaboration with the private sector is critical. Gujarat was the first state to implement a PPP policy, and we are now working hard to attract additional private investors to manage our properties and develop new projects. The new policy has a unique aspect in that if someone comes forward with a project worth more than 500 crores, the state will not only lease land to them, but will also provide them with a custom-made package."

Goa upbeat in anticipation

Goa was witnessing unprecedented rush of tourists and there was a ray of hope in the travel and hospitality community of the state before the third wave of COVID put a spanner in the progress. However, the travel and hospitality industry of the state is still optimistic and preparing to bounce back.



Janice Alyosius

Goa emerged as one of the favorite tourist destinations of 2021. The state experienced an unprecedented surge in tourists and became an escape spot for people in all seasons. As the number of tourists grows, so does the concern about the spread of Omicron. The most important factor remains the adherence to SOPs.

Usually, the travel and hospitality industries are the first to be affected by such a surge, and this has been no different.

Speaking with hospitality professionals about their experiences during the surge, **Shiv Bose**, General Manager, DoubleTree by Hilton Goa — Panaji, mentioned that the occupancy has dropped in comparison to previous months, yet the hotel is optimistic that recovery is within

reach. The hotel has developed the 'Hilton Clean Stays' programme, which utilises a robust hygiene and sanitization methodology to navigate the current economic climate.

Ranju Singh, Complex General Manager, Novotel Goa Resort & Spa and Novotel Goa Candolim, expressed his gaiety over the hotel's business. He revealed that all rooms at the hotel were sold out during the New Year celebration.

Expressing concerns about the industry, Bose said that currently the industry is in a lot of limbo and getting headway is getting increasingly difficult. State governments are imposing new restrictions, and each serves as a death knell for the hospitality business.

Stating a comparison of business pre-Covid and present,



Shiv Bose
General Manager, DoubleTree by Hilton Goa — Panaji

The average selling rate has been adversely impacted by a spate of cancellations and postponements

Bose said, "In the last quarter of 2021, we achieved pre-pandemic occupancy and revenue numbers. With an average oc-



Ranju Singh
Complex General Manager, Novotel Goa Resort & Spa and Novotel Goa Candolim

We expect, based on past experiences, that business demands will rapidly increase as restrictions are loosened

cupancy rate of over 80%, we were confident that Q1-2022 would mirror the recovery. In the hope of getting things back

on track soon and in preparation for the months to come, hotels continue to improve and develop themselves. Hilton Goa is focusing on incorporating technology to provide a more seamless experience for guests.

Nowadays, wellness tourism has been gaining popularity. Travellers are seeking experience associated with maintaining or enhancing their personal wellbeing. When hotels were asked what they offer to meet their client's expectations, Bose revealed, "I concur to the idea that wellness travel is growing and has great potential. We are preparing to launch Elle Spa and Salon in the first quarter of this year. Our resort activity brochure is also undergoing a change and will have a host of wellness programs for our guests."

Remarking the hotel's strategy for 2022, Bose said, "As part

of our strategy, we will continue to offer value-based offerings, such as "Dream Stays" and "Great Small Breaks," which give a variety of benefits to guests. We will continue to maintain this strategy and work on the details to make every guest's stay memorable. Providing value for money is the way forward. There will be a quicker recovery this time, and demand will increase from Q2 onwards. However, we must not lose sight of the larger picture and wait for the recovery to begin. In the present period, we are looking inwards and re-organising ourselves in order to give our guests the best experience possible.

Singh said, "We have been looking at offerings like the floating meals at the pool and a lot of cultural trails and adventures. When the restrictions across Goa are loosened, we remain optimistic that the market will rebound."

Call for coexistence, camaraderie

Despite an initial lull, hotels across India managed to sail through the pandemic owing to domestic demand. Going ahead, the industry honchos say, tour operators and hoteliers have to work hand-in-hand for mutual benefit. They were also of the view that there is a shift towards wellness from all quarters.



Nisha Verma

At the session titled 'Hotels in the New Normal' during the IATO Annual Convention, the witty **Homa Mistry**, CEO of Trail Blazer Tours, was the moderator, while the panellists included honchos of the hospitality industry, including **Nakul Anand**, Executive Director, ITC Hotels & Chairman FAITH; **Puneet Chhatwal**, MD & CEO, The Indian Hotels Company Limited; **Anuraag Bhatnagar**, COO, The Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts and **Ajay Bakaya**, Managing Director, Sarovar Hotels and Resorts.

Kicking off the discussion with how hotels have thrived during COVID, Mistry asked the panellists about their crisis management.

While Bhatnagar spoke about taking the crisis as an opportunity, he shared, "We took the 18 months to reset and opened three hotels, including the Leela Gandhinagar. While we added 900 keys, we were able to ensure that we brought in the required technology. We also brought in efficiencies to ensure we could manage our fixed costs more efficiently."

Chhatwal also shared that in 2018 they announced a strategy called Aspiration 2022, and when COVID struck in February-March



Homa Mistry
CEO
Trail Blazer Tours

Instead of individual tour operators, think of the 400-500 IATO members as alternate sales force and think of the business you can generate

penses and fixed costs. This one year gave us the learning for the next 10-20 years," he claimed.

Health and wellness, according to Anand, took centre stage during the pandemic. "Everything started being driven by health and sustainability and wellness came to the forefront. As a business, we had to examine every possible touch point, so that without losing warmth we could make it as touchless as possible. Apart from adding hotels, we created two brands — Storii and Mementos — catering to

made a few mistakes. "We had to let go almost 50 per cent of our workforce to cut the cost. However, since the last 3-4 months, when business picked up and we wanted them back, many of them are not available. Another wrong thing we did was to drive down the cost to such an extent that the basic machinery and upkeep suffered. That's the lesson that we have learnt. On the bright side, we converted one of our hotels in Gurgaon into a full-fledged hospital for two months, and we saved a few lives," he said.

Different perspectives

Asking the hotels to look at tour operators in a different way, Mistry said, "Instead of individual tour operators, think of the 400-500 IATO members as an alternate sales force and think of the business you can generate."

Reacting to the same, Chhatwal said, "The first thing is that we have to be united since this sector is very fragmented. Everyone, from tour operators, OTAs, direct businesses, and our own websites, cannot be replaced by each other. We must learn to co-exist and help each other, as we have always done. We need to continue this journey of collaboration and not blame each other or be judgemental."

Bhatnagar added, "It is important to now analyse how and when



Puneet Chhatwal
MD & CEO, The Indian Hotels
Company Limited

We have access through the IATO members to such a large potential base of room nights, and it's a small ask to give a rate

India to become the wellness capital of the world. We need to actively discover new source markets, and to see how to monetise marketing as well as to get more deliberate about digital."

Bakaya also claimed that technology and digital were the way forward. "The OTAs beat our loyalty programmes 100 to 1. The new generation want instant gratification and want a deal when they are booking, and that too on their smart phones. If IATO can come up with an app, the hotels will jump at the chance to work together," he claimed.

ments are changing, based on the data available. "We need to use AI and data to collectively take a decision. We can form a taskforce, hire an agency to analyse the data, and based on that, we can prepare a marketing plan. Digitalisation is the only way forward as we need targeted and separate marketing for every location," he added.

Claiming that the industry needs to do what it hasn't done before, Bakaya suggested, "We can agree on 2-3 points that are key to us and collectively go to the government, as we cannot do marketing across the globe without India being part of it."

Year-round destination

Mistry agreed and said that a change is required, and since the government has sanctioned crores of rupees for marketing, by getting together the industry can at least influence them to channelise it to the right place.



Anuraag Bhatnagar
COO, The Leela Palaces,
Hotels and Resorts

Owing to the growing demand, there is a latent opportunity for India to become the wellness capital of the world

"India should be promoted as an all-season destination and we can start doing that by selling different parts of summer, wherein hotels can offer special rates and wonderful packages along with tour operators," he said.

Anand agreed that in the Gulf and Dubai, occupancy doesn't go down in the summer despite having temperatures higher than in India. "They have created activities and demand, which has been done by their government. The



Ajay Bakaya
Managing Director
Sarovar Hotels & Resorts

If IATO can come up with an app, the hotels will jump at the chance to work together

Indian government must realise what an important role we play in the GDP of the country. Also, we must look at other segments that are immune to weather, one of which is wellness and medical tourism. Another major segment that is weatherproof is the business segment, which is endangered today. We can effectively target that segment and can get them to India by speaking in one language about how to make India safe," he claimed.

Bhatnagar also said that there is a shift towards wellness from all quarters. "We have seen the pivot happen towards wellness, large spaces and independent villas with plunge pools. The length of the stay has also increased and consumer mindsets have shifted. Driven by domestic tourism, our resorts are at 120-140 per cent of pre-COVID 2019 levels," he said.

Going hand-in-hand

Mistry claimed that tour operators need static rates, as they need to quote six months in advance and asked the hotels for a promo code from IATO.

The idea was instantly approved by Chhatwal, who said, "We will work on a promo code for IATO for our portfolio that gives members access to 230 hotels currently and hopefully to more than 300 hotels in the next few years. We have access through the IATO members to such a large potential base of room nights, and it's a small ask to give a rate."



2020, they were able to immediately adapt and go towards a "reset 2020".

"This made us realise that fixed costs could also be semi-variable. We also realised that there is a need for other businesses to make sure you can bear your ex-

boutique properties and experiences. Also, we launched the WeAssure programme, wherein we had to bring in safety and clinical cleanliness and instil trust in the consumer," he shared.

On his part, Bakaya said that while they did what others did, they also

we are marketing India. Despite the Incredible India campaign, how and what we are messaging is important. However, the narrative is not often very positive, and hence we need to focus on Ayurveda, wellness, yoga, and everything that started in India. There is a latent opportunity for

Taking the intermediate leap

When Mistry put forward the subject of hotels going direct to customers, Anand claimed, "It has never been our intention to remove the intermediary. However, prudent business practise in revenue would always expect us to create our own website, and by not doing that, we wouldn't be doing justice to our shareholders. However, my advice for tour operators is to offer value-added services and curate the experience for a tourist, which is not available on the internet."

Marketing India together

Mistry said that instead of marketing India together, the stakeholders are doing it separately.

Speaking on the issue, Anand said that to market India collectively, there is a need to sit together and see how the seg-

North East shines bright

The three-day North East Festival 2022 recently came to a glittering end in Guwahati with the audience witnessing live performances, cultural dances and fashion shows. The event also included a travel roadshow, business sessions that addressed the issues that North East as a region faced, as well as a Brahmaputra River Conclave.



Defining luxurious tourism

India has a lot to offer as tourism destination with its rich heritage, culture and tradition. The country has also evolved into a luxury travel destination that is globally recognised.



Janice Alyosius

In the past decade, India has evolved as a tourism destination and the transformation continues in the form of luxury travel. Historical palaces, forts and boutique hotels in the country are full of stories and offer unique experience for guests, and adding to this is the luxury travel.



Prateek Hira
President and CEO, Tornos
and Director, River Rhapsody

Speaking at the India Pavilion at Expo2020 Dubai about luxury tourism in India, **Prateek Hira**, President and CEO, Tornos, and Director, River Rhapsody, said, "In the past, luxury travel was understood to mean opulence, ultra-comfort and high-end services, but the definition has evolved. Authenticity and meaningful journeys are now at the heart of luxury travel."

He added, "There was a time when there was a scarcity in India and in many other places, but not

so now. Getting a deeper understanding of and immersion into local cultures are the main benefits of luxury travel. People like to travel, participate and learn, and that's what luxury travel has become. Due to the increase in purchasing power and evolving lifestyles of consumers, what was considered a luxury yesterday has become a necessity today for most of us, a necessity for travel, and is available in abundance in this market."

India has some of the best luxury properties for experienc-

ing opulence and luxury stays. Homegrown brands such as Taj, Oberoi and Lalit have established themselves in the luxury conscious market. Globally, the market has fairly realised the potential India has in luxury. "In-

What was considered a luxury yesterday has become a necessity today for most of us

dia is a country where every 50 miles the history, the language, the culture, the cuisine and the crafts change, and each of them offers something unique. Today, luxury travel is about understanding the destination and being able to access places that are not as touristy or not readily available to mass tourists," Hira said. ➔

NE gets down to business

The North East Festival 2022 in Guwahati not only highlighted region's culture, but also managed to put spotlight on its travel trade with a B2B roadshow and panel discussions.



Hazel Jain

The ninth edition of the North East Festival came to a glittering end, igniting the spirits of entrepreneurs and investors from the region. The three-day event, which is traditionally organised in Delhi every year, was eventually held on a small scale in Guwahati from January 7-9, 2022. It was also digitally streamed. Apart from cultural performances like live music, fashion shows and dance performances in the open air, the event also saw serious discussions on business, economic and socio-political issues in the region. The festival is aimed at integrating marketing the entire North East to attract tourists and investments.

The biggest festival in the region, the North East Festival also provides a platform for entrepreneurs and investors to connect. Over the course of three days, the event featured a series of

tourism, Development of the North Eastern Region (DoNER) and river conclaves, along with roundtable discussions, and offered a platform for industry players to share their experiences, all

be portrayed to the world as the ideal destination post-COVID-19. This was moderated by **Nirmalya Choudhury**, Chairman, IATO North East States Chapter and Executive Director of Jungle



in a bid to showcase North-East India as a viable investment hub.

Creating a climate for investment It was attended by **G. Kishan Reddy**, Minister of Tourism, Culture, & DoNER, who chaired the Make-in-North East DoNER Dialogue. It featured investors who talked about their experiences and investments in the region. A B2B session on North East tourism saw discussions on how the region could

Travels (India), and was attended by **Rituparna Baruah**, Chairman, Assam Tourism Development Council and **Arijit Purkayastha**, MD, Koyeli Tours & Travels. The Brahmaputra River Conclave that followed was chaired by **Sarbananda Sonoi**, Minister, Waterways and Shipping, along with **A Selvakumar**, Director, Inland Waterways Authority of India, Ministry of Ports, Shipping & Waterways. ➔

Reviving tourism and hospitality

The domestic tourism has started to recover, but international travel should be gradually reopened to ensure a better recovery, suggest experts, adding that the success will depend on a collaborative effort from all key stakeholders, including public and private participants.



Janice Alysius

One of the worst-hit sectors due to the pandemic is the tourism and hospitality sector. The sector, which has immense potential to lure investments, offer employment opportunities and become one of the key economy drivers, has been on the chopping block in recent years.

At the CII Northern Region Summit on Tourism & Hospitality 2022, **Zubin Saxena**, Co-Chair, CII Northern Regional Committee on Tourism & Hospitality and Managing Director & VP, Radisson Hotel Group, said, "India needs to stimulate its domestic demand by ways of promoting domestic tourist destinations through proper outreach by way of advertising and leveraging social media and providing safe and hygienic options that will ensure a greater tourist footfalls."

He also spoke about promoting India's rich and diverse destinations as it will contribute to the revival of the sector. "Because international tourists are not likely to return for quite some time (likely until 2024), the focus must be on boosting domestic travel demand," he said.

According to Saxena, more emphasis should be given to the revival of domestic demand in tourism. Domestic tourism policy must be shaped by collaboration between all stakeholders, including the government of India's state boards and various ministries for at least the next two to three years in order to build confidence and encourage the best of smart and digital technologies while maintaining hygiene and safety standards.

In an interview with **Jaideep Dang**, Managing Director, Hotels and Hospitality Group,



Rakesh Kumar Verma
Additional Secretary
Ministry of Tourism

In order to build confidence, we must ensure public safety and a sense of confidence about the protocols being followed

South Asia, JLL, emphasised that steps like carefully planning policies, fiscal and liquidity measures, focusing on health



Zubin Saxena
Managing Director & VP
Radisson Hotel Group

India needs to stimulate its domestic demand by ways of promoting domestic tourist destinations in the country

protocols, and investing in innovation and digitalisation are all needed to support the sector, which will be essential in aiding



Jaideep Dang
Managing Director, Hotels and Hospitality
Group, South Asia, JLL

Covid-19 has proved to be an unexpected catalyst for digitalisation and integration of new technologies

the nation's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The ministry of tourism is working on a variety of initiatives to revive the

sector, which include fiscal and regulatory relief measures, confidence building measures for travellers, and reviving domestic tourism, said **Rakesh Kumar Verma**, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Tourism.

The government had taken a number of fiscal and regulatory measures in the aftermath of first wave of COVID such as a moratorium on repayment of loans, support for PF contribution and relaxation in compliance under various laws. Moreover, the government has announced the Atmanirbhar Bharat package and the Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme (ECLGS) to support the sector, the officer said.

"Since the tourism sector has been largely informal and fragmented, so few of them have been formally registered as MSMEs," he added.

Trans Bhutan Trail to reopen

Community tourism pioneer, G Adventures, has been selected by the Bhutan Canada Foundation, which led the restoration of the trail as the first group adventure operator when the trail launches.



TT Bureau

In March 2022, following two years of extensive restoration, the Kingdom of Bhutan will reopen the historic and sacred Trans Bhutan Trail for the first time in 60 years. The trail will be officially inaugurated by His Majesty the King of Bhutan.

Community tourism pioneer, G Adventures, has been selected by Bhutan Canada Foundation, the non-profit organisation that led the restoration of the trail, as the first group adventure operator when the trail launches to the public.

Two new active trekking itineraries are now available: An 11-day Camp - the Trans Bhutan Trail trip, which features camping and homestays; and a 12-day Highlights of the Trans Bhutan Trail itinerary with accommodation in homestays and locally-owned hotels.

The Trans Bhutan Trail has been a part of the old Silk Road for thousands of years. It also served as a pilgrimage path for Buddhists from the east, to visit sacred sites in western Bhutan and Tibet, and legend has it that legendary Garps, or trail runners, would travel the trail at



breakneck speed carrying mail and essential messages, often without food or drink.

The two tours, according to **Yves Marceau**, vice president of product at G Adventures, focus on trekking specially selected sections of the 403-kilometre (250-mile) trail and

connecting with local people to learn about Bhutanese life and culture, thus combining active travel and cultural immersion with the benefits of community tourism. The trail's restoration is a community-based project aimed to preserve an old cultural icon and create a sustain-

able experience for visitors, as well as giving financial opportunities for local people. It is expected that Bhutan's borders will reopen to tourism ahead of the Trans Bhutan Trail's official opening ceremony in March 2022. The two new G Adventures trips on the Trans Bhutan Trail depart May 1, 2022.

Spotlight on agritourism

The Directorate of Tourism, Government of Maharashtra, held a physical event in Mumbai focusing on rural and community-based tourism, which has started to gain popularity in last couple of years.



TT Bureau

At a physical event held in Mumbai, the Directorate of Tourism (DoT) of Maharashtra government put a spotlight on agritourism, caravan tourism and adventure tourism. The programme was also streamed live via its Facebook page and Zoom. The theme of the event was rural and community-based tourism, which has started to gain popularity in the last couple of years.

The event was attended by Minister of Tourism, **Aaditya Thackeray**, who distributed provisional registration certificates under the Adventure Tourism policy to operators of adventure tourism centres such as High Places Management, Pugmarks Eco Tours, High Fly Paragliding, MTDC, IISDA and Pushkaraj Apte. The first registration certificate was given to Motohom Caravan under the

state's Caravan Tourism policy. The Tourism Minister also inaugurated tour brochures on 'Landmarks of Freedom Movement' on the occasion.

These showcase detailed information about various landmarks and places that played



an important role during the freedom movement in Mumbai, Pune, and Nagpur, along with the details of tour operators that conduct these tours.

To encourage stakeholders in the field of tourism, the State Tourism Awards Scheme will consist of 39 categories.

Awards will be declared on May 1, 2022. The new Motohom Caravan was also flagged off by the Tourism Minister.

Also part of the event were Minister of State for Tourism, **Aditi Tatkare**, Principal Secretary of Tourism, **Valsa Nair**

Singh (virtually), Director of the Directorate of Tourism (DoT), **Milind Borikar**, and Joint Director of DoT, **Dr Dhananjay Sawalkar**. Tatkare highlighted the importance of Konkani tourism and added that Maharashtra will attract more tourists once the Konkani coastal highway work is completed.

Delving deeper into wedding plans

The Westin Hyderabad Mindspace recently played host to Shaadi by Marriott, the signature wedding event of the Marriott group, which saw in attendance K Chandrasekhar Rao, Minister of Prohibition & Excise, Sports & Youth Services, Tourism & Culture, and Archaeology of Telangana state, along with the who's who of Hyderabad.



Nisha Verma

Deepak Verma, Director of Sales & Marketing, The Westin Hyderabad Mindspace, shares details of what the event, Shaadi by Marriott, entailed and how it would benefit not just the hotel and the brand, but also the --wedding industry at large.

Great response

Sharing details of various activities planned for the event, Verma says, "The euphoria of activities that were comprised during the overall wedding expo exhibited wedding offerings, showcasing Shaadi by Marriott and how it caters to curating bespoke wedding experiences for our guests. The day observed a blend of traditional and contemporary wedding elements. In addition to the wedding showcase, there were wedding masterclasses scheduled in the afternoon that

allowed guests to learn from the experts in the wedding industry. An evening wedding soiree was also curated to enchant our elite guests and delegates from Marriott International."

He claims that the overall response throughout the day was exceptional. "Both the masterclass and the evening event saw the crème de la crème crowd of Hyderabad. There were also numerous wedding clients who witnessed the overall showcase," he adds.



Deepak Verma
Director of Sales & Marketing
The Westin Hyderabad Mindspace

A number of wedding planners and event organisers were part of the event. "The event saw a mélange of wedding experience zones set up to showcase the essentials of a wedding. For event management, we had Rachnoustav Events, Theme It Up, Mighty Events & Weddings by Sunny Khandelwal, and P3 Weddings that had intricately designed wedding setups. We had wedding planners from across the country that flew down to experience all that we had in store. The entire menu curation for the events throughout the day was catered by the internal culinary team at the Westin Hyderabad. Themed breaks and lavish meal curations by our culinary magicians allowed for interactions and discussions among the delegates," he shares. Verma claims that the wedding soiree was curated to enchant the elite guests of Marriott International. "A grand fashion showcase by

internationally acclaimed designer and couturier **Gaurav Gupta** was the highlight of the evening, for which the showstopper was Bollywood actress, Tara Sutaria," he informs.

Opportunities ahead

Verma said that the overall reach and brand recognition that they acquired post the massive and



Sachin Mylavaram, Nitin Marriya, Shibani Malhotra, Gaurav Singh, Parag Sawhney, Abhishek Rajagolkar

state. "With the national, local and regional coverage that we garnered through the success of this event, we have already started to collate a list of possible wedding leads for the upcoming months. It is true that the pandemic has created abundant uncertainty across the globe, but business as well as the market have been picking up gradually. With the safety standards in place and an eye for detailing extended through our impeccable service, we have been able to garner trust and loyalty from our guests. They are now ready to take the leap of faith and orga-

nise future weddings and other events with us," he says.

Talking about how Telangana tourism has seen a gradual growth post opening up its borders, he adds, "With the initial scare reduced and the vaccine's success dominating the media spectrum, business has seen immense growth. While weddings have taken a more intimate turn, there is a further increase in the offerings that we are presenting them with. Additionally, with Tier II cities picking up pace, there are ample growth opportunities in Hyderabad." 🐦

With the initial scare reduced and the vaccine's success dominating the media spectrum, business has seen immense growth

successful feat of Shaadi by Marriott is bound to bring them numerous leads from across the

UNWTO welcomes WHO's call

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has welcomed the call of World Health Organization (WHO) for restrictions on travel to be lifted or eased.

Citing the varied global responses to the emergence of the Omicron variant of COVID-19, WHO has reiterated that restrictions on travel are not effective in suppressing the international spread.

In line with UNWTO's recurring warning against the use of blanket restrictions, the 10th meeting of the WHO's International Health Regulations Emergency Committee (Geneva, January 19) expressed concern that such measures can cause economic and social harm.

The committee said that measures applied to international travellers such as testing and isolation should be based on "risk assessments".

Tourism is about support to locals

► Contd from page 1

consumer have changed. They are looking for different experiences and in India there is an increased usage of digital media to access and plan trips and travel. Different kinds of destinations far away from the crowds and cities with open spaces are becoming popular."

He underlined that the local authorities have a role to play in this because they have to look at the carrying capacity of these destinations. "We have examples in our country where some local authorities and local bodies are placing restrictions on the number of visitors who can come there because typically some destinations attract people in certain seasons or on certain days in the week/ month/ weekends/ during holidays. At times such places, because of the crowd, become unsustainable. Hence, the local administration has a very important role to play in terms of regulating the tourists. The role of the state or national authority would be to

incentivise sustainable practices by the local stakeholders and also to popularise responsibility and talk about responsible travel. We are working in collaboration with the Responsible Tourism Society of India (RTSOI) and



Arvind Singh
Secretary, Ministry of Tourism

the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) by launching the responsible traveller programme under which the traveller takes responsible actions during the journey. While efforts are required on behalf of the local community as well as the stakeholders at the destination level and the local community there, I think government can pitch in by encouraging responsible travel."

Creating employment

On how government helps towards creating jobs, Singh emphasised that the large size of the country and population works to our advantage by providing a lot of variety. "We have different experiences and different geographical conditions in different parts of the country. The role of the government here is to provide the regulations and incentives, so that all stakeholders, be it the private sector or the tourists or the local communities, are focused on sustainability as the end goal. After that the other collateral benefits like employment, income, etc. will kick in. For example, at Statue of Unity, the local people in the region, especially tribals, are working as guides, drivers and women self-help groups are running restaurants. This is an example where a large tourism infrastructure project impacts and provides economic and livelihood benefits to the local community," he shared.

He further shared another example on local lodging or homestays in India. "We've found that

homestays as a phenomenon was growing and gained a lot of traction. They've become very attractive staying options for many tourists, especially in the inaccessible parts of the country, like in the hilly states of

The role of the state or national authority would be to incentivise sustainable practices by the local stakeholders

Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim or in some parts of the Northeast. A lot of local resources are used by the local residents who build homestays when tourists—both domestic and international—stay with them. Our endeavour as the government would be to emulate, see and collect these best practices and come out with some standard guidelines, which will help encourage the growth of more homestays

in the in different regions of the country. This was an example where we encourage the locals to provide employment and incomes to the local community," he informed.

Local support

Lastly, Singh gave example of Nagaland and shared that the Hornbill Festival in the North-eastern state along the border of Myanmar is an amalgamation of local culture and traditions, which have been preserved and are showcased to foreign tourists. "It attracts tourists from abroad. Despite being situated far away from the centre of the country, I saw a lot of diplomats from different countries, visiting the state just because this local festival brings out the local flavour, involves the local community, gives them a sense of pride in their culture, and encourages tourism in that area," he claimed. He said that they will be encouraging more projects and activities in the future to provide local jobs. "For this we need to skill them and do training for them," he concluded. 🐦

Flying in the red

The aviation industry continues to nurture rules that take no cognisance of the fact that airlines are suffering due to the pandemic. Can we not temporarily do away with orthodox regulations until such time normality returns?



Hazel Jain

Just recently, the Lufthansa Group confirmed that it had flown 18,000 empty flights just to keep their slots at major airports – a requirement of the European Union rules. While the minimum has been reduced from 80 per cent of their scheduled take-off and landing slots to 50 per cent

since the pandemic, airlines are still struggling to meet the target.

How do airlines that have currently pivoted towards survival mode cope with stringent and sometimes irrelevant rules in the current scenario? The answer is, they aren't. Indian airlines continue to fly towards historic losses, with a potential loss of ₹20,000 crore for the whole fi-

nancial year, according to a Crisil study, as they deal with the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and rising fuel prices. According to Crisil, the airlines are likely to post their largest-ever net loss of over ₹ 20,000 crore this fiscal, up 44 per cent from the ₹ 13,853 crore they lost the previous year. The research, based on three main listed airlines — Indigo, Spicejet, and Air India — which

together control 75 per cent of domestic travel, cautioned that this would postpone the industry's recovery beyond 2023.

What about the idle fleet?

By mid-April 2020, the inactive fleet went up to almost 14,400 – over two-thirds of the 22,000 mainline passenger airliners – leaving 7,635 in operation, predominantly in Europe, where less than 15 per cent are operating, than in North America (45 per cent) or Asia (49 per cent). Consequently, demand for aircraft storage increased to the point where runways and taxiways in normally busy airports such as Frankfurt Airport and Atlanta Airport were closed to make room for them.

The A380 saga was even more tragic as photos of aircraft of carriers such as Cathay Pacific and Singapore Airlines were seen parked in Alice Springs



airport, Australia for more than a year. Qantas stored part of its fleet at Victorville Airport in

The Indian civil aviation industry expects financial aid from the government and a reduction in levies and taxes

on capital gains and exemptions on payment of aircraft lease rentals and royalties paid to foreign lessors, in order to promote an Indian aircraft leasing and financing industry in India's first IFSC centre, established at the GIFT City, Gujarat.

As far as the 2022 Union Budget is concerned, rating agency ICRA has reported that the Indian civil aviation industry expects financial aid from the government and a reduction in levies and taxes in the immediate near term to revitalise operations. These include lowering taxes on ATF and reducing airport charges. Budget recommendations also include suspension of the minimum alternate tax for at least two years, or a reduction in MAT from about 18 per cent to 5 percent.

California's Mojave desert. As a result of the downturn, analysts expect airlines to reduce the size of their fleets.

It's the same story in India

The landscape in India wasn't too different either. But last year's Union Budget introduced a slew of reforms, such as the announcement of a tax holiday



Industry seeks relief for MICE trade

Contd from page 1

have been made for the wedding industry. Moreover, all other states like Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab and Maharashtra are allowing a higher capacity of guests. Therefore, key stakeholders from the events and wedding industry in New Delhi went to meet Health Minister Satyendar Jain and requested some relaxations."

Pre-travel testing has to go

Having conducted a few corporate events during the pandemic, Abhik Dutta, Director & Co-founder at The Wanderers, Outdoor Wilderness Learnings (OWL), and Colour Purple Events & Air Bookings LLP, makes his point very clear. "By now, I think we can all agree that these tests have become impractical, irrelevant and futile with most people not submitting to tests anymore... So, why continue with pre-travel testing that clearly harass passengers?" he opines. **Roshan Abbas**, President, Event and Entertainment Management Association



Roshan Abbas
President, Event and Entertainment Management Association

Every time the restrictions come into place, the first and the foremost step taken is towards the closure of events or limiting crowds

Association (EEMA), echoes similar sentiments. "Every time the restrictions come into place, the first and foremost step taken is towards the closure of events or limiting crowds. We have always believed in and adhered to the guidelines shared by the government. But in do-



Abhik Dutta
Director & Co-founder, The Wanderers, Outdoor Wilderness Learnings

We need to reconsider the complicated and restrictive measures that hamper travel between States and countries

ing so, the people in this industry have suffered a lot. A rally is held during the day and a curfew is imposed at night," says Abbas.

A phygital world

Birju Gariba, Founder and CEO of Iskra Events & Celebrations,



Birju Gariba
Founder and CEO
Iskra Events & Celebrations

Instead of putting a cap on the weddings or events the governments should try to make pre event testing, vaccination policies more stringent

feels that events and celebrations have never stopped existing; they have only gone through a temporary metamorphosis. "The corporate side has gone hybrid or phygital and the social side has gone intimate. However, the scale of events on the corporate side has shrunk drasti-



Meera Charnalia
Senior Vice President & Head
MICE, Thomas Cook India

With the reduction in infections, a review of the restrictions and curfews would be helpful for revival of MICE business

cally due to the constant threat of a pandemic. Socials, however, have adopted the intimate model quite well," he adds.

Defer, not cancel

Meanwhile, Thomas Cook India has been witnessing strong demand from MICE groups and

this is reflected in the fact that most corporates are opting to defer rather than cancel their plans. "With corporates keen on utilising their unspent budgets before the financial year ends, this continues to be a significant opportunity for the MICE sector," says Meera Charnalia, Senior Vice President & Head, MICE, Thomas Cook India.

She feels that the domestic MICE business has been a boon over the last 20-odd months. "We welcome the government's support through the inclusion of corporate MICE under IGST to help companies avail GST input credit. Suitable incentives, tax exemptions and budgetary allocation for the setting up of MICE infrastructure; identifying and incentivising MICE zones for the setting up of exhibition centres in high-potential regions of the country will help inspire demand," Charnalia says. "Of course, uniformity of health and safety protocols across state borders would be a considerable relief," she adds.

Homestays with a difference

Sanjay Wadhawan, Co-founder, The Eartha Escapes, and Sehar Shamim, Director, Sales & Marketing, The Eartha Escapes, share what makes their fully-serviced homestay facilities unique and provide an experience that is 'a must for travellers looking for privacy and comfort'.

Nisha Verma

After running hotels and luxury trains for years, **Sanjay Wadhawan**, Co-founder, The Eartha Escapes, got into running homestays recently. "We had our own five-bedroom home in Mashobra and we started with it as an experiment and launched the brand Eartha," he shares.

In the homestays, Eartha offers curated service. "Instead of guests being worried about cooking and grocery shopping, our properties are fully-serviced homestays as many people in our team come from a hotel background. Right from housekeeping to F&B, we take care of everything. Before the guests check-in, their menus are sent to them, and they can choose what they want and when. Everything is curated and personalised," he adds.

After a successful beginning, Wadhawan kept on adding more properties. "From trails and picnics, to treks and food walks in Shimla...we ventured into it fully and took another place in Kanatal, which is near Mussoorie—a three-bedroom place, and also a place on the lake at Naukuchia-tal, which is an old five-bedroom hunting lodge. There is also a property in Delhi at Geetanjali. Now, we are moving to Goa and some more places in Uttarakhand," he further adds.

Sehar Shamim, Director, Sales & Marketing, The Eartha Escapes, asserts that they call themselves "fully-serviced homestays". "By the end of the year, we want to have about 30 to 40 homestays. Apart from Goa, we are also coming up with an off-beat property at Shillaru, which is an apple orchard and almost 10 acres of land," she adds.



Sanjay Wadhawan
Co-founder
The Eartha Escapes

Before the guests check-in, their menus are sent to them, and they can choose what they want and when

Activities galore

Wadhawan claims that they offer different activities at different



Sehar Shamim
Director, Sales & Marketing,
The Eartha Escapes

We reached out to agents in Delhi, Punjab — Jalandhar, Amritsar, Chandigarh, and Ludhiana

destinations. "We are promoting golf in Naldhera and river rafting in Kanatal. In Naukuchia-tal, there

is fishing and trekking. In Goa, we have concierge service before the check-in, suggesting activities and places beyond nightclubs and parties like restaurants for breakfast and lunch, boat cruise on yacht, or a safari," he adds.

Targeted promotions

For promotions, they go for the usual social media vertical. However, Wadhawan adds, "We've got a lot of referral business, and apart from social media, we are very strong in travel trade. We have long associations with them, including domestic and inbound operators. They trust us for good service and delivering what we claim. We are even reaching out to clubs in Delhi-NCR and Punjab."

Privacy is a priority

Most of their properties can accommodate three families with kids or five families. Some people book the entire property. "Also,

during the last six months, safety has been a priority, and people have been avoiding hotels. Hence, they prefer homestays. Our USP is that we are fully serviced and the staff is fully vaccinated. Guests can sit together in the dining area, common drawing area, or lawn instead of being restricted to a single room," Wadhawan claims.

Agents first

Shamim says that their association with agents has been longstanding, including inbound, domestic, conference and MICE agents. "We reached out to agents in Delhi, Punjab—Jalandhar, Amritsar, Chandigarh, and Ludhiana."

Homestays for all

Wadhawan says the homestays are available for every price range. "Not all of our homestays are ultra-luxury, but we have different categories," he says.

Tourism Day celebrated

Contd from page 1

region and to tap its potential and natural offerings. He said that it is vital to increase India's share in the global tourism market. He even appealed to connect with the corporate sector under the Adopt a Heritage project under corporate social responsibility. Reddy launched a digital booklet on 75 incredible sites to visit in India and an Incredible India 2022 digital calendar by the Union Ministry of Tourism dedicated to tourism sites.

In his welcome speech, Arvind Singh said that the tourism sector has a huge multiplier effect, not only in terms of creating employment at the grassroots level, but also due to its socio-economic impact across communities. "These dynamics have turned tourism into a key driver of socio-economic progress. Tourism promotes national integration and makes citizens aware of the beauty and rich cultural heritage of our great nation. It also promotes international relationships and encourages cultural pursuits by providing support to local handicrafts," he said.

Explaining the theme of the tourism day, he said, "Pochampally has been awarded as one of the best villages for tourism by the UNWTO for the year 2021, and it has inspired us to celebrate National Tourism Day 2022, recognising rural and community-centric tourism. As we all know, rural communities are custodi-

It is important that rural communities and landscapes are leveraged to develop and promote sustainable tourism

ans of indigenous, natural, and cultural heritage, and they also have an inherent ability to coexist with natural ecosystems, it is important at this juncture that rural communities and landscapes are leveraged to develop and promote tourism development models."

He concluded by saying, "It is important that development through tourism is sustainable, respon-

sible, and inclusive, and I'm confident that if we all join hands, we can emerge stronger and more resilient to cope with the challenges that confront us."

Upendra Prasad Singh highlighted the importance of Indian handlooms and handicrafts. Govind Mohan spoke about the interconnection between culture and tourism. Leena Nandan, emphasised the importance of eco-tourism. She also shared her views on how we can tap into the potential and growth of tourism in the country in a responsible and sustainable manner. Ashok Kumar spoke about the project launched for the holistic rejuvenation, restoration, and conservation of the Ganga Basin.

Anand Mahindra shared his views on tourism in India. "India's rich diversity and heritage can cater to different segments of tourists, from modest budget travellers to unmatched luxury experiences," he said. **Col. Manoj Keshwar**, Atulya Ganga Parikrama shared his experience of Ganga Parikrama, an initiative to revive Indian rivers and their eco-systems.

Focus on MICE business

Contd from page 3

world and a hub of mega conferences and exhibitions. It is working towards creating enabling conditions and institutional frameworks at the central, state and city levels for the growth of the MICE industry. The short-term goal of the ministry is to increase India's share in the MICE business to two percent from the current share of approximately one percent," he added.

Apart from that, he claimed, India has a thriving private sector, professionally competent and passionate about its work.

Asian market

Saying that India has a clear competitive advantage in certain sectors along with cultural affinity, he shared, "For the Asian market, we have the Buddhist circuit as one of the important offerings in India. Hence, the cultural and spiritual offerings

in India, along with the domain strength we have in terms of the events industry, make us a

MOT is working on a strategy to position India as a MICE destination in the world and a hub of conferences

good location for short-haul and medium-haul destinations.

"We can encourage them to come here and organise events on a competitive basis."

Targeting the diaspora

"The Indian diaspora across the world is a big segment for us to tap," claimed Verma. "We need to properly design our marketing strategy focused on our diaspo-

ra and look at their requirements. There are no legal challenges, and even if there are issues, we can sort them out at the destination level or at the state government level since no major intervention is required. We need to package these attractions in terms of very specialised and focused marketing for the diaspora, which will do the trick," he added.

Culturally rich

In another session on culture and heritage, Verma highlighted the cultural and religious heritage of India and how it could attract tourists from the world over.

Talking about spiritual tourism, Verma said, "The presence of several sacred destinations of different faiths in the country makes these destinations among the most visited sites globally, offering an immersive experience."

In order to ensure the welfare of the travel and tourism fraternity, the IATA Agents Association of India has started a nationwide e-signature campaign towards the reinstatement of travel agency commissions. It requests trade associations to join hands.

'Classic' experience in Manipur

The Classic Hotel Imphal, part of Classic Group of Hotels, recently raised the bar on hospitality by modernising its 52-room property on a sprawling three-plus acres of land in Imphal with an aim to attract more tourists not just to the state of Manipur but the entire North East region.



TT Bureau

With improved air connectivity to the capital city of Imphal, Manipur is now a lot more accessible and hotel chains in the state are raising the bar on hospitality to attract more domestic and international visitors.

Classic Group of Hotels, one such hotel chains, which established The Classic Hotel Imphal as the first modern hotel in the state in 2009, currently owns two more hotels in Imphal. Of the two later additions, Sendra is an island on the famous Loktak Lake, while The Classic Grande became a member of Radisson Individuals in March 2021.

Radisson Individuals is Radisson Hotel Group's newest affiliation brand, which claims a certain standard of service and quality for customers.



Dr Th Dhabali
Managing Director
Babina Group

Talking of The Classic Grande's association with Radisson Individuals, **Dr Th Dhabali**, Managing Director, Babina Group, the parent organisation that owns and operates hospitality of the Classic Group, said, "I am sure this association will take Classic Group to a new height and that we will be able to imbibe the best international practices in all spheres of operations and guests' services."

The Group recently refurbished The Classic Hotel Imphal, a 52-

room property on a sprawling three-plus acres of land in the heart of the state capital. As part of the hotel's modernisation plan, state-of-the-art facilities were put in place at the hotel's three conference rooms, which are named after iconic flower and animal of the state. Siroy Hall, for instance, is inspired by the rare lily of the same name and it has a capacity to host 50 people. Sangai Hall derives its name from an endangered subspecies of Eld's deer found only in Manipur. The hall can accommodate over 200 people. Singare Hall, inspired by Coral Jasmine flower, which is a flower with folklores around it, can hold over 20 people.

The premise is dotted with a beautiful lawn at the front and back and the structure of the building provides plenty of light and open air. "We have been fortunate about hiring the right

people, who are receptive and proactive. They have become our brand ambassadors over a period of time. We are watching the current COVID wave and hope that when things settle,

I'm sure association (with Radisson Individuals) will take Classic Group to a new height and we will be able to imbibe best international practices



tourists come to Manipur," says **Naoba Thangjam**, Director, Classic Group of Hotels.

The Northeast has all the ingredients to become a niche tourist destination in the near

future. The eight states of the Northeast offer an experience of a different kind. The added bounty for them are the aesthetics and colourful festivals that take place around the year. The state of Manipur is once again in the limelight with the recent visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who doled out multiple developmental projects

for the state, including better connectivity with other states in the region.

Ezejourney Tourism keeps its group sizes between 15 and 20 people. Srivastava has not found that to be difficult. "But if we have fewer than the critical number required, tours will still be operated," he adds.

Get NDC Ready with Amadeus

The travel industry has been evolving, fuelled by digitalisation and personalisation, as the world continues to recover from the pandemic effects and surrounding uncertainties.



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Amadeus India organised two industry webinars, 'Get NDC (New Distribution Capability) Ready with Amadeus IT' in collaboration with two anchor associations of the travel industry - TAFI (Travel Agents Federation of India) and one more. These webinars were attended by over 600 travel partners.

NDC is a key strategic priority in the fast evolving world of travel technology. It is a critical, enabler in the larger vision of enhanced travel retailing. It offers innovative and scalable solutions for today and the future. Amadeus has constantly been developing solutions to cater to NDC so that travel agencies are able to adapt to the new industry standard with minimal investment required.

"We all know that travel broadens horizons, creates network-

ing opportunities and grows economies. Travel powers progress. And Amadeus powers travel. Technology and innovation will be powerful enablers for recovery of the industry. For over 27 years, Amadeus has led the travel technology market in India, collaborating



with partners to enable better, more rewarding journeys and defining a better future of travel. Around 97 percent of tourists feel technology has helped them gain confidence to travel. We've been working with our partners at Amadeus to reimagine travel and rekindle travel confidence," said

Rakesh Bansal, CEO, Amadeus Indian Subcontinent.

Addressing the webinar, **Ajay Prakash**, President, TAFI, said, "There is a need to comprehend the business potential presented by NDC. IATA and airlines have reignited their efforts

to have NDC implemented. It is the future that we must learn to accept."

Amadeus is committed to the global industrialisation of NDC. With airline partners like Singapore Airlines, American Airlines, KLM, Air France, Amadeus has made progress in APAC.

Qatar unveils luxuries



Qatar Tourism recently took part in ILTM Cannes 2021, a luxury travel trade show, held from December 6 to 9 in Cannes, France. During the show, Qatar showcased its luxury offerings raised in the past 20 months, including new five-star hotels, football stadiums and restaurants. The properties set to open in the country include Raffles Hotel, Fairmont Hotel and Resort, Place Vendome and Rosewood Doha.

UP-Gujarat connect



Travel agents from Lucknow and Kanpur met Kanubhai Desai, Minister of Finance, Energy & Petrochemicals, Gujarat and Mamta Verma, IAS, Principal Secretary, Department of Energy and Petrochemicals during the curtain raiser of Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit 2022 in Lucknow. The minister heard suggestions from agents for more flights between UP and Gujarat to promote tourism to Somnath, as well as Dwarka and Kutch and vice versa to Lucknow, Varanasi and Ayodhya.

EVENT TALK

Media Partners:



FEBRUARY 2022

Date	Event	Time
4-6	India International Travel Mart Ahmedabad	9:00 am
5-6	Chicago Travel & Adventure Show	9:30 am
9-12	East Mediterranean International Tourism and Travel Exhibition	11:00 am
11-13	India Travel Mart - New Delhi	9:00 am
17-19	India Travel Mart - Dehradun	10:00 am
25-27	India Travel Mart - Goa	10:00 am

MARCH 2022

4-6	Travel & Tourism Fair- Bengaluru	10:00 am
4-6	India International Travel Mart Kolkata	10:00 am
4-6	India Travel Mart - Jammu	10:00 am
8-10	ITB Berlin Convention	2:30 pm
11-13	India Travel Mart Amritsar	9:00 am
14-16	OTM Mumbai	10:00 am
31-2 April	Travel & Tourism Fair-Chennai	10:00 am
17	ITB Digital Business Day	11:30am

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

Will 2022 be year of revival?

New Year has prompted many countries to put in place a revival strategy for their tourism sector. We highlight seven destinations that have put deliberate plan in place to ensure another year does not get wasted.



TT Bureau

SPAIN

Spain is calling for COVID-19 to be treated as an endemic disease like the flu, becoming the first major European nation to explicitly suggest that people live with it. The idea has gradually been gaining traction and could prompt a re-evaluation of government strategies for dealing with the virus.

SRI LANKA

The Sri Lankan government is all set to declare 2022 as the 'Visit Sri Lanka Year' in line with the integrated five-year Global Communication Campaign, as it aims to attract 6 million tourists and \$10 billion in earnings by 2025 despite the current challenges. This targeted programme will not be altered even amid the pandemic challenges. Sri Lankan tourism has been recognised as a thrust sector to rebuild the economy.



ABU DHABI

Abu Dhabi's Department of Culture and Tourism has revised the fee structure for tourism business licences, limiting it to Dh1,000 annually to support and hasten the growth of the emirate's tourism industry. The fee cap – about 90% lower than earlier overall costs – will be effective this month.

THAILAND

Thailand is planning to collect a 300 baht (US \$9) fee from foreign tourists starting in April 2022 to develop attractions

and cover accident insurance for foreigners unable to pay for their own costs. Part of the fee will be used to take care of the visiting tourists.

SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia's Tourism Development Fund has signed an agreement with an investment solutions firm to establish a US \$26 million private close-ended equity fund. It will be the first fund in the Kingdom to participate in the capital of SMEs operating in the tourism sector. The fund will target promising

business opportunities in selective tourist areas.

PHILIPPINES

The Philippines is hopeful for the revival of its tourism sector in 2022, officials and key stakeholders have said, as they seek to encourage more domestic travellers and tap into the growing 'workation' market two years after nearly all recreational activity was halted by COVID-19 curbs.

THE UK

Several countries are considering a way to bolster tourism by reforming an existing tax break for tourists. The UK has ended the practice of refunding the VAT paid by tourists altogether for precisely this reason. Other countries are exploring a reform. This could be done if EU countries abolished the practice of allowing retailers to have exclusive contracts with VAT refund agents.

Group tours in COVID-19 times

Group fixed departures at the time of COVID-19 seem like an awkward move, but Ezejourney started off amid the pandemic, sailed through it, and is confident that there still exists an unexplored potential in the business. The company works with travel firms that have clients, who wish to travel only in groups.



Hazel Jain

Started in early 2020 in the thick of the pandemic, Ezejourney Tourism is a B2B fixed departure tour operator headed by **Sandiip Srivastava**. The company works with travel firms that have clients, who wish to enjoy travel only in groups.



Sandiip Srivastava
Head
Ezejourney Tourism

"Since a majority of travel agents are unable to operate their groups, they either direct their clients to other group tour operators (large B2C companies) and run the risk of losing their clients to them or decline this business. With Ezejourney products, they no longer have to lose their business. They can book one person up to ten people on any of our fixed departures. Ezejourney tours are inclusive and offer excellent TAC (travel agency commission) to travel agents," says Srivastava, explaining the business strategy.

Currently, all promotions of the company are done using social media.

Speaking about his business strategy, Srivastava says, "The foremost differentiating factor for us is that while other companies are B2C, we are pure B2B tour operators and therefore pose no threat to these travel agents, as their clients are never contacted for any future tours directly, nor do we accept any business from direct customers."

Expanding reach

Right now, the company is trying to reach out to as many travel agents as possible.

"We are not limiting ourselves to just India. We are trying to reach out to countries that have a reasonably large Indian diaspora" says Srivastava.

"All our tours are built around the minimum criterion of star hotels, meals at highly-rated Indian restaurants, government-approved transporters offering quality luxury transport, government-approved tour guides, and all key paid sightseeing tours with no optional tours," he adds.

"We offer white-labelled or unmarked promotion material to the agent, which they can use for promoting the product," Srivastava says. "We are trying hard to keep costs low without

compromising on product quality or delivery," he adds.

On how he is able to deliver world-class tours at lower costs, Srivastava says, "We want to offer new destinations that haven't been promoted in India yet, like South Korea, Fiji, Japan, Zimbabwe, Gabon, Greenland, Philippines, South America, The Cartesians, Iceland, Russia, Vietnam and Cambodia, and reach out to agents even from smaller B and C cities."

In India, Ezejourney has been promoting Kerala, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat along with the North Eastern states.

"We only work with DMCs (destination management companies) of repute. Many deliberations go into our tour planning to ensure we do not venture out into areas that are unsafe for tourists. Our clients

come from all over India, but the majority of them are from Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. We follow a client-friendly cancel-

We saw a gap that needed to be addressed – to provide a tour that is non-intrusive, unbranded and offers better commissions

lation and refund policy. In the event that the group is unable to travel due to a border lockdown as a result of COVID, we offer a 100 per cent unconditional refund. And yes, we offer insurance with COVID cover, including quarantine cover on all our tours," Srivastava adds.

But how does he plan to find his niche?

He explains, "Fixed departures have been around for a while; they have had their limitations. These departures have largely been to destinations that are common, so literally all tour operators sell similar products. They are less of a convenience and more of a threat to the smaller travel agent, who tends to lose out on business the moment his client decides to opt for a packaged group tour. We saw a gap here that needed to be addressed – to provide a tour that is non-intrusive, unbranded and offers better commissions."

Ezejourney Tourism keeps its group sizes between 15 and 20 people. Srivastava has not found that to be difficult. "But if we have fewer than the critical number required, tours will still be operated," he adds.

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AIR INDIA

New Delhi

Senior IAS officer **VIKRAM DEV DUTT** has been appointed as the new Chairman & Managing Director of national flight carrier Air India.

The appointment was a top level bureaucratic reshuffle in Government of India (GoI). Dutt is an IAS officer from the 1993 batch of the Arunachal Pradesh-Goa-Mizoram and Union Territory (AGMUT) cadre. He succeeds Rajiv Bansal at the helm of the national carrier, after the latter took over as the secretary at the Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA) last September. Dutt had earlier held several senior bureaucratic positions with the Delhi government.



SAROVAR HOTELS

New Delhi

SWARUP DATTA, an industry adept professional with 30+ years of experience in the hospitality sector takes over as the New Regional Director – North for Sarovar Hotels Pvt. Ltd.

Swarup has been part of Sarovar Hotels for the last 8 years. In his last role he was the Regional Director - South. He holds strong Hotel Operations and Management Skills. He is a certified hotel administrator from the American Hotel and Lodging Educational Institute. A graduate from the Oberoi School of Hotel Management, Swarup is also an alumnus of IHM, Mumbai.



THE WESTIN

Goa

DEVIKA JAMES joins The Westin Goa as Director of Sales and Marketing with 15 years of experience in the hospitality industry.

Devika in her new role will focus on developing and implementing sales and marketing strategies. She joins the hotel from Sheraton Grand Chennai Resort & Spa. Devika showcases proficient expertise and immense knowledge in Sales and Marketing, Hotel Operations, Customer Service and Business Development. She started as an Events Coordinator, at the Renaissance Hotel and Convention Centre, Mumbai, after which she joined JW Marriott Hotel, Pune as Assistant Sales Manager.



WESTIN

Hyderabad

GIRISH SINGH CHAUHAN is appointed as the Director of Engineering for The Westin Hyderabad Mindspace. A professional who started his career with TATA Thermal Power Station, Trombay, meandered to the hospitality industry beginning his journey with JW Marriott Mumbai Juhu. His previous stint with Marriott International spanned for almost a decade from 2001-2010. It included Courtyard by Marriott Chennai and JW Marriott Mumbai Juhu. Over the past decade, he has been affiliated with the Hyatt Group of Hotels. He was the Director of Engineering for Hyatt Regency Kolkata and Hyatt Regency Ahmedabad.



MARRIOTT HOTEL

Kochi

SOORAJ NAIR is appointed as the new Multi Property Director of Sales and Marketing of Kochi Marriott Hotel, Courtyard By Marriott Kochi Airport Hotel and Port Muziris, A Tribute Portfolio Hotel. A seasoned hospitality professional, Sooraj comes with 17 years of adept experience in the industry. In his new role, Sooraj's key focus areas include developing and implementing sales and marketing strategies for the 3 Marriott managed properties in Kochi. Prior to his current role, he was the Director of Sales and Marketing for Crowne Plaza Kochi. Sooraj began his journey with The Orchid-An Ecotel Hotel a management trainee.



THE WESTIN

Hyderabad

MONICA EDARA joins The Westin Hyderabad Mindspace as Associate Director of Marketing & Communications. An astute, seasoned and national award-winning professional with an overall marketing experience of two decades is set to take the reins of The Westin Hyderabad Mindspace as the Associate Director of Marketing. She began her career with Accor Hotels and has worked for over 14 years as a successful Marketing Communications Head with Hyderabad International Convention Centre (HICC), Novotel Hyderabad Convention Centre and Novotel Hyderabad Airport.



COLLIERS

Karnataka

An industry expert and trusted thought leader with more than 22 years of experience, **JAGADISH MAHENDRAN** joins Colliers from Faithful + Gould PMC Riyadh, as Executive Director, Project Management (Greenfield), Karnataka. Jagadish has strong technical expertise in commercial projects, mixed-use, residential, high-end fitouts, master planning, and infrastructure/public realm projects in GCC countries (UAE, KSA, Oman & Qatar) and India.



B MURALIDHARAN has also been appointed as Executive Director, Project Management (Greenfield), Karnataka. With nearly two decades of experience in project management and construction, Muralidharan is a well-recognised industry leader with a track record of delivering superior results. An enterprising professional, Muralidharan is well-versed in managing budgets with full P&L responsibility, negotiating high-level contracts, and building lasting relationships with vendors, clients and partners. Muralidharan earlier worked with Riviera Infraprojects as COO.



HAHN AIR

Germany

Hahn Air announced the appointment of **Kirsten Rehmann** as new CEO. Rehmann will direct Hahn Air's global business, all corporate affairs as well as operational and strategic planning. Rehmann joined Hahn Air in 2003, starting as a Sales and Marketing Executive, she quickly advanced within the company and became instrumental in driving the successful expansion of the Hahn Air ticketing business. Over the years, she held various roles in different departments of Hahn Air and acted first as Director of Airlines Business Group and later as Chief Commercial Officer.



TALKing People

SHILADITYA MUKHERJEE, Senior Area General Manager, Lords Hotels & Resorts, de-stresses by exercising. "During lockdown, I've had plenty of time to myself. Rather than spend all my time watching movies I decided to focus on myself and try out new hobbies. I tried painting and discovered a love for creativity. I also found a passion for cooking and trying new recipes. My favourite holiday destination in India is Udaipur. It has an abundance of natural beauty, including lakes, temples and architecture. My next holiday will be to Maldives," he says.



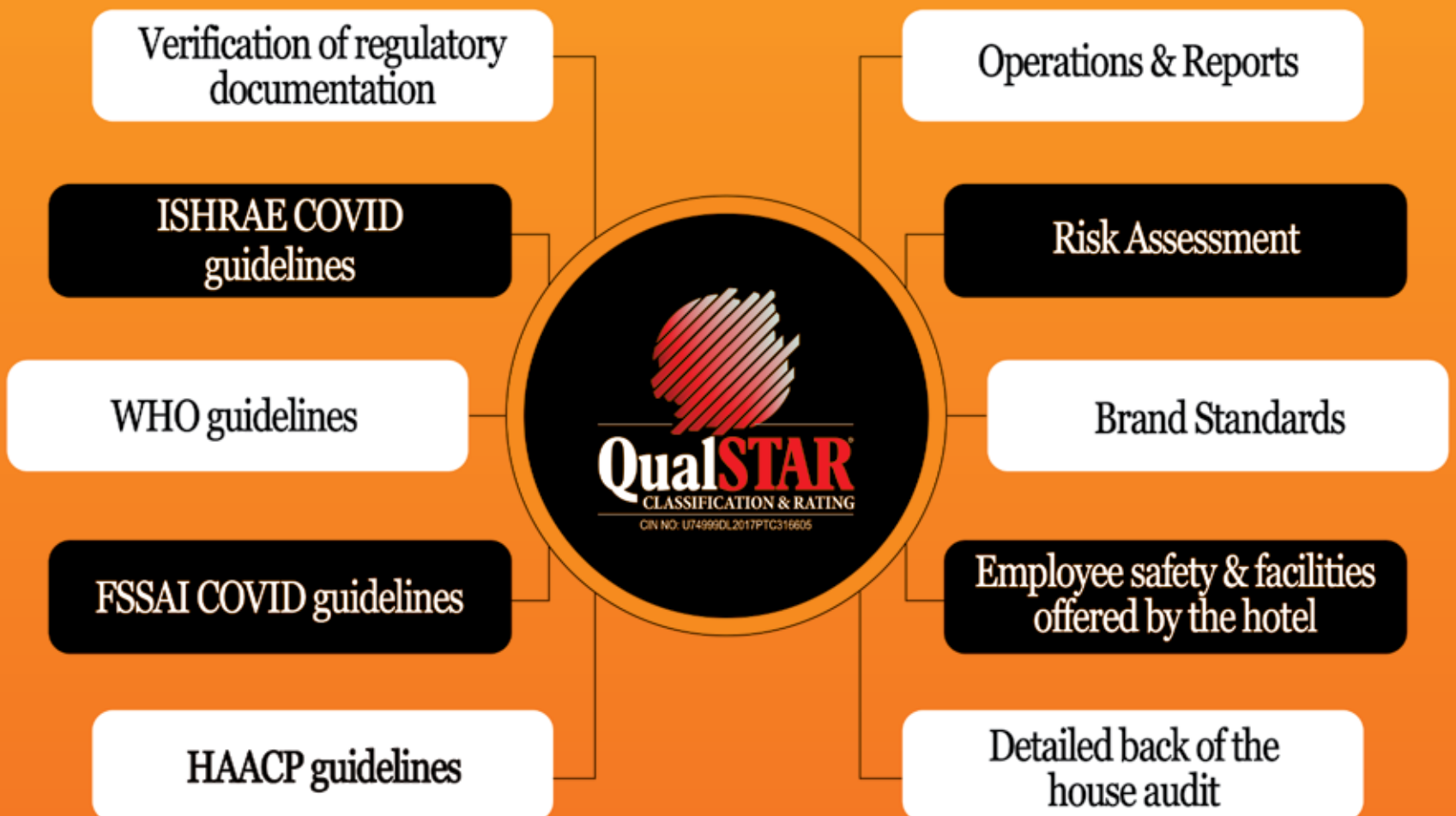
PARNIKA BHASIN PANDE, Head, Signum Hotel Academy, does meditation every morning to energise her for the day. "I also tend to listen to natural sounds while I am going to sleep, this helps me relax and have sound sleep. The lockdown made me realise how important it is to look after our mental health. I am good at listening and counselling to stay positive and motivated. During these stressful times I have been able to help a few people ride out the tough times. I enjoy travelling," she says.



Watching a good movie has helped **ANUJ CHAUDHRY**, General Manager, Grand Mercure Bangalore, de-stress. "I love watching animations with my seven-year-old son. I enjoy taking photographs; it is a hobby that I am trying to develop. When it comes to travel, I love any beach destination whether in India or internationally. However, a favourite is Shimla because we have a family home there, hence spent many years growing up," he says.



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Get ready for Birmingham

The GetReadyForBirmingham campaign in India by VisitBritain is aimed at promoting the myriad offerings of the West Midlands region of England, which will play host to the upcoming Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games (CWG).



Nisha Verma

Throwing light on the GetReadyForBirmingham campaign, **Tricia Warwick**, Regional Director-Asia Pacific for Middle East and Africa - Visit Britain, says that it is an awareness campaign in line with the global GREAT Britain strategy to shine an international spotlight on the West Midlands, England, leveraging the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games (CWG), to inspire visitors to book for travel during and post-Games.

A gem of a region

Tricia says that this time, the West Midlands have been in the spotlight for VisitBritain's campaign. "Awareness of the West Midlands as a holiday destination in India is lower than for other parts of Britain, even though it is the fourth most visited English region by Indian travellers. The opportunity is to put the West Midlands on the international visitor map, using CWG 2022 as a hook," she informs.

Beyond the campaign

Tricia says that apart from the GetReadyForBirmingham campaign, VisitBritain, in partnership with Reliance Jio (through their OTT Platforms Jio Studio and Jio Cinemas), is hosting an 18-month global integrated, agile marketing and communications campaign. "This is a part of the Business and Tourism Programme (BATP) and will involve content creation and distribution across India, including Tier II and Tier III markets," she adds.

Products on offer

She highlights that the key

priority this year is to engage with the trade to increase West Midlands products for sale. "The West Midlands isn't as well-known as other areas of Britain, so this provides a timely and valuable opportunity to build awareness and familiarity, e.g., the historic and culture-rich cities of Coventry and Stratford-upon-Avon, apart from Birmingham. We are working with our trade partners to increase the current offer by a couple of nights," she adds.

Ready for Indians

She shares how the region is ready to receive Indian tourists. "The County of West Midlands comprises seven local areas: Birmingham, Coventry, Dudley, Sandwell, Solihull, Walsall and

of our international COVID-19 consumer sentiment revealed a strong desire to travel, with nine in ten Indians planning to take a trip abroad in the next 12 months – with Britain ranking fourth in the consideration list among European destinations."

India focus

Tricia shares that India is a key source of growth and value for the UK. "Inbound visits and spending from India have more than doubled in the last 10 years to 2019. Also, the UK enjoys favourable perceptions in India. Indian visits to the UK are forecasted to reach 706,000 by 2025 (exceeding pre-COVID levels by 2 per cent), with spending to reach £793 million in the same year (5 per cent over pre-COVID levels)," she says.

Future ready

Sharing plans for the India market, Tricia says, "We will be launching our new Global GREAT Britain Tourism campaign in February 2022, showcasing 'Another Side of Britain' – showing that Britain is bursting with energy and reassuring international travellers that 'Britain is a safe place to travel' and 'is welcoming' – also bringing to life reasons to visit Britain in 2022 – from the CWG to HM The Queen's Platinum Jubilee and 'UN-BOXED: Creativity in the UK 2022'.

All timely opportunities to promote our culture, our welcome, creativity and innovation to the world and the UK's ability to host events of the highest calibre."

Claiming that sporting events provide a tourism boost, she highlighted that Britain is already highly regarded for its sporting excellence and its offer and ranks fourth out of 60 countries in the 2021 NBI. "Also, visitors who come to watch sports stay longer and spend more, making them great visitors to support in boosting recovery," concludes Tricia.



Tricia Warwick
Regional Director-Asia Pacific
for Middle East and Africa - Visit Britain

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