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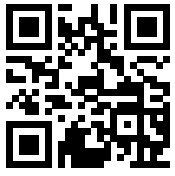
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Treading trending Lakshadweep

Lakshadweep has gained spotlight as a key domestic travel destination following Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to the archipelago. Experts feel the destination needs better infrastructural facilities to cash in on its potential.



Janice Alyosius & Hazel Jain

The mesmerizing island group of Lakshadweep in the Arabian Sea has recently found itself in the limelight owing to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's push for domestic tourism and the combined efforts of various industry stakeholders. The spotlight on this hidden gem has unveiled a burgeoning interest among travellers

and spurred a flurry of discussions centered on its untapped potential and the necessary enhancements required to transform it into a premier tourist destination.

Pradeep Shetty, President, Hotel and Restaurant Association (Western India) – HRAWI & Federation of Hotel and Restaurant Associations of India (FHRAI), highlighted the need for infrastruc-

tural upgrades at the destination. "At present, Lakshadweep operates only one or two flights weekly with limited seat capacity using ATRs. There is an urgent need to augment flight frequency and upgrade airport facilities, including larger runways. Simultaneously, augmenting room inventory is crucial. We strongly advocate for a comprehensive tourism development plan for Lakshadweep

encompassing increased flight frequencies, improved airport infrastructure and expanded accommodations. FHRAI emphasizes these upgrades as vital to elevate Lakshadweep's appeal, attracting global tourists while supporting sustainable tourism and local communities. Collaboration with authorities remains pivotal for realizing this vision and nurturing Lakshadweep into a premier des-



Pradeep Shetty
President, HRAWI & FHRAI



MP Bezbaruah
Secretary General, HAI

tion aligning with the industry's commitment to a thriving Indian tourism landscape," he said.

Contd. on page 9 ►

Oz hot favourite for Indians

The travel landscape in 2024 is expected to be dynamic with diverse preferences shaping global destinations. Wellness and adventure travel are the evolving trends, as industry experts name their top picks.



Mahendra Vakharia
Executive Committee Member, Immediate Past President - OTOAI & MD, Pathfinders Holidays

“For international destinations, we see demand for travel to New Zealand, Australia, Switzerland, the UK, Japan, Abu Dhabi, Bhutan, Russia, Greece, Georgia and Azerbaijan and the very popular Vietnam, not to mention Southeast Asian destinations like Thailand, Singapore, Bali and Sri Lanka.”

Top 5 selling destinations

- ❖ Australia
- ❖ Vietnam
- ❖ Abu Dhabi
- ❖ Switzerland
- ❖ Malaysia

Contd. on page 12 ►

STB: elevating family travel

Amid an era of transformation, Singapore Tourism Board is poised for a dynamic leap into 2024. The tourism board unveils an extensive blueprint to increase tourist numbers from India.



TT Bureau

In a pivotal move, which is set to redefine the Singapore Tourism Board's (STB) presence in India, **Markus Tan** assumes the role of Regional Director, unveiling ambitious plans for the first 100 days in office. Simultaneously, **Kean Bon LIM**, Area Director - India, South Asia and Africa International group, Singapore Tourism Board, highlights strategies for 2024, focusing on robust collaborations and innovative



Markus Tan
Regional Director - India, Middle East, South Asia, and Africa (IMESA), STB

campaigns to attract more Indian travellers to Singapore.

Tan is poised to make a significant impact on Singapore's tourism landscape in India. Through his comprehensive market understanding and strategic engagements, he envisions a period of intense learning and collaboration in his initial 100 days. Addressing the Indian consumer market, Tan aims to identify gaps in trade engagements, relationships, and

Contd. on page 22 ►

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‘Expect the unexpected this year’

Ajay Prakash, National President, Travel Agents Federation Of India (TAFI), is cautiously optimistic about how this year will pan out for travel agents. He urges them to give a serious thought to adopting technology for their business, and also requests the government to ease visa application process to increase inbound traffic.

Hazel Jain

All geo-political events affect travel movement; the pre-requisite for tourism is peace, says **Ajay Prakash**, National President, Travel Agents Federation of India (TAFI). “In the absence of peace, tourism suffers. An industry of this size needs to come together and make itself heard on how the affairs of the world are conducted. We have learnt to expect the unexpected. Travel, even in the best of times, is an uncertain proposition. When large scale events like a war take place, they disrupt travel. It is, therefore, important to have systems in place to ensure sustenance,” he says, adding that, “Going forward, we can all use technology to better prepare ourselves against such cataclysmic events.”

He says things have been challenging for TAFI as an organisation



Ajay Prakash
National President
TAFI

as well. “Even in terms of domestic travel, we saw high airfares, which we thought would affect travel, but surprisingly it didn’t. The flights are all full, so perhaps the Indian traveller is more resilient than we give him credit for,” he adds.

TAFI had recently organised a session on ChatGPT conducted by an expert for its members. He explained how the tool works

with a live demo showcasing how agents can use it to enhance their product offerings and making operations more efficient. “If agents know the right queries for ChatGPT, it can throw up a workable itinerary that can be edited by the agent, depending on what their clients require. “Upskilling in various fields is important today. It opens up the mind to various possibilities,” he adds.

Ease visa to increase inbound

Last year, many countries sought to capitalise on the growing outbound market from India and eased a lot of the visa problems that Indian travellers were facing. “The more people can move freely, the better it is for the industry. I wish the Indian government would take a leaf out of their books and look at creating a visa-on-arrival for as many nationalities as possible. Even waiving it for some, if we want to attract

inbound tourists. Inbound tourism to India has been slow in recovery; we are nowhere near our pre-COVID levels. Outbound has

I wish Indian govt would look at creating a visa-on-arrival for as many nationalities as possible. Even waiving it for some, if we want to attract inbound tourists

recovered well, but for inbound we are at best at 40 per cent. There is a need for us to look at how we can attract more travellers into India. We need to get up and grab our fair share of inbound traffic,” Prakash opines.



He says that India needs to make the visa application process as painless as possible. “I recently received a request from a Polish client to process her visa for India, after she finally gave up trying to do it by herself. The website kept hanging and troubled with other technical issues, she claimed,” Prakash says.

Need for capacity building

The airline capacity is not back to what it used to be, and this keeps fares high, Prakash says. This

is reflected in CAPA’s mid-year outlook. It states that around 200 aircraft of domestic carriers are expected to be grounded by the end of current financial year (31 March 2024). More than 90 of them will be that of the country’s largest carrier IndiGo. “We also need to look at dispersal of tourist traffic instead of concentrating it in major destinations, including India. The onus to do that lies on us agents to ensure that the traffic is well dispersed,” he says. He shares that the TAFI Convention is likely to be organised in the second quarter of this year. Many destinations have shown interest in hosting the convention, he informs.

TAFI National Joint Council meets in Oman

About 24 representatives from all 12 chapters of TAFI recently met in Oman for the National Joint Council meeting. This was the first meeting of the recently elected office-bearers. They discussed the year gone by and the challenges it posed, along with broad plans for the new year, with special focus on the core industry issues and value addition measures for its membership.

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Need for infra push

Lakshadweep is receiving new-found love from all corners of India. Its azure waters and eco-retreats are in the eyes of Indians, as they search for new quaint island destinations in the country. While Lakshadweep fits the bill for many, Andaman & Nicobar is not far behind, showcasing its tourism assets to attract visitors to its blue shores. Amid the wave of support for these destinations are also questions as to whether they are ready and have enough infrastructure for servicing the expected avalanche of tourists. However, IHCL is set to open two resorts (with water-villas) in the archipelago and CGH Earth has already established itself as the flagbearer of eco-tourism there. Would the eco-sensitive areas of these islands be able to handle the pressure? Shouldn't 'Travel for LIFE' come into picture at this juncture and the Union government first propose a thorough study on the sensitivity of the destination before new flight connections start and people start packing their bags?

Track the trend

As 2024 approached, the world was busy observing the new travel trends. While travel itself will always remain in vogue, there are many trends that will stay this year and others that will emerge in the New Year to take everyone by surprise. Travel for wellbeing is not going anywhere, but people will now look for places, therapies and experiences that will boost longevity. No matter how much we wait for summers, there will be those who will say no to peak season travel and will give a cold-shoulder to high-travel months. Instead, they would prefer the shoulder season to travel and take advantage of low crowds, low rates and easy visa. Of course, no-visa travel would still be on top of the list for Indians, and impromptu plan-free travel will be the in-thing for the more spontaneous. How to tap such customers is what one needs to think now.

Dive in Lakshadweep: a paradise of eco-tourism

After Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to Lakshadweep, the archipelago is the talk of the world. The picturesque islands, known for their sparkling beaches and coral reefs, have seen an incredible jump in global search interest, the biggest in the past 20 years.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's decision to share his recent snorkeling adventure and leisurely moments on the scenic beaches of Lakshadweep on social media show the Indian archipelago has huge potential to be promoted on the international map as an eco-tourism destination that provides a variety of adventure-based eco-friendly tourism activities.

Lakshadweep: an introduction

There are various ways to experience our Mother Nature. A few sites where you can appreciate Mother Nature's precious bounty include the Himalayan Region, Kerala, Northeast India, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and, of course, the Lakshadweep Islands. One of the smallest territories in India, Lakshadweep, meaning one hundred thousand islands, is a group of 36 coral islands covering an area of 32 sq.km. Located in the Arabian Sea, between 220 to 440 km off the Kerala coast, it has a population of 64,595 people living on 10 inhabited islands. The climate is tropical with temperatures ranging between 20 degree C to 32 degree C.

Eco tourism in Lakshadweep

Eco-tourism in Lakshadweep is a



growing trend that offers visitors the chance to explore the region's natural beauty while also promoting conservation and sustainable tourism practices. The islands are paradise for eco-tourists, especially for those who wish to satisfy their adventurous fascination through water sports. The sea sports activities, along with calm and beautiful islands, give eco-travellers a perfect noiseless vacation.

Various tour packages organised for domestic and international tourists enable them to enjoy a vacation full of difference and natural beauty, and several water activities such as swimming, boating, boat racing, water craft, sunbathing and beach volleyball. But the best

attraction among all activities, not to be missed by nature lovers, is definitely the scuba diving where you immerse yourself in the deep

Eco-tourism in Lakshadweep is growing and offers visitors the chance to explore the region's natural beauty while also promoting sustainable tourism

sea and the turquoise lagoon, soak up the colourful world and revitalize your mind and body.

Beautiful islands in Lakshadweep

Bangaram: Bangaram, one of the most beautiful islands of the world, is open for international tourists. Surrounded by a shallow lagoon, the island enthralls tourists.

Kavaratti: Headquarter of the Union Territory of Lakshadweep, Kavaratti is another pleasant place ideal for water sports. Marine aquarium here provides adventure enthusiasts an amazing opportunity to see the aquatic world.

Kalpeni: Enclosed by the huge shallow lagoon, this island has water sport crafts, which are avail-

able on hire for tourists willing to sail into the gorgeous water world.

Kadmat: The silver coloured long sandy beaches have plenty of water sports opportunities for tourists. There is one diving school cum centre at this island where one can have best possible water entertainment.

Minicoy: It is the second largest island of Lakshadweep. The inhabitant of this island are expert seamen. Tourists get finer opportunity to view the primitive village structure set in the beautiful island.

Agatti: Compared to other islands of Lakshadweep, Agatti is warmer. Coral growth is higher here, and fish of different colours are found in plenty. As the island is stopover for planes going to Bangaram, it has a few well-managed resorts, where tourists can stay and enjoy water sport facilities.



Mustahib Khan
The writer is Tourism Consultant, Public Policy, at Nangia & CO PPL
(Views expressed are the author's own. The publication may or may not subscribe to them.)



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Bigger M!CE groups in 2024

Hopeful of sustained demand, Thomas Cook (India) is keen to collaborate with M!CE convention centres at the central and state levels to bring business back into India, says Rahul Shinde, GM, M!CE & Exhibition, Thomas Cook (India).



Hazel Jain

Rahul Shinde, General Manager, M!CE & Exhibition, Thomas Cook (India), anticipates sustained demand from corporates in India with increased participation from tier II and III markets in 2024. He expects that the number of participants in trips organised by the corporates will also increase. "We are keen to collaborate with India's M!CE convention centres at the central and state levels to steer the powerful corporate M!CE business back to our own country. We also look forward to higher demand for adventure tourism, sporting events and luxury M!CE," he says.

G20 events a gamechanger
Shinde says that 2023 was a year of exceptional wins, especially for Thomas Cook (India). "We are honoured to have been a partner with the Government of India at milestone events. We managed to successfully deliver on big marquee initiatives like managing 41 events across 31 cities for India's G20 Summit, exclusively managing accommodation, ca-



Rahul Shinde
General Manager, M!CE & Exhibition,
Thomas Cook (India)

tering and transportation services for approx. 17,000 guests at the 37th National Games in Goa, and handled 20,500 customers for Khelo India 2023. We also witnessed unprecedented travel demand from India's corporates keen to incentivise their high performers – this includes key stakeholders, channel partners and employees," he says.

Over the last year, Thomas Cook (India) spent considerable time to innovate when planning group itineraries. In line with its Digital First strategy, it spent the past year to further strengthen robust

backend systems and conducted training exercises for teams to increase efficiency.

Tech streamlines operations
The M!CE business has witnessed a digital transformation in recent years. Automating time-consuming, manual processes, including sales, contracting, operations and visa processes have increased efficiency. Shinde says, "We launched dedicated platforms for international and domestic sales that helped minimize manual processes and eliminate duplication of tasks by automating detailed customer information and documentation, file management, visa quality control checks and process management, invoicing, etc. We also created a product repository with seamless access to M!CE teams. We launched a dedicated customer self-service app for uploading documents, visa co-ordination, handover of tickets, itinerary, insurance, visas, tour coordination and feedback."

Activity-based itineraries on cards
Going forward, Thomas Cook (India) plans to add experience and

activity-based itineraries. "We are also focusing on incorporating more interactive team-building sessions for corporate engagement. From a product point of view, we are expanding our portfolio of thematic locations, venues for R&R, conferences and gala dinners, moving away from the standard hotel ballrooms. We

Automating time-consuming, manual processes, including sales, contracting, operations and visa processes have helped M!CE business in India

are also collaborating with destinations through marketing campaigns, subsidies, visa waivers/eased processes, thus creating an extensive array of itineraries that can be offered across different segments," Shinde adds.

Lakshadweep needs better infra

► *Contd. from page 5*
emphasized on the need for sensitive and sustainable tourism planning. Highlighting the fragile ecosystem of Lakshadweep, he said, "Recent attention to the development of tourism in Lakshadweep is welcome. Lakshadweep

Rajeev Kale, President & Country Head - Holidays, M!CE, Visa, Thomas Cook (India), highlighted a substantial spike in search data, "We have witnessed an uptick in our searches for both domestic islands and beach destinations. Our search data for Lakshadweep



Rajeev Kale
President & Country Head - Holidays,
M!CE, Visa, Thomas Cook (India)

is a god's gift of pristine beauty, and this unique asset can make tourism an important input for the inclusive growth of the islands."



Daniel D'Souza
President & Country Head
Holidays, SOTC Travel

indicates a significant jump of over 950 per cent compared to December," he said. **Daniel D'Souza**, President & Country Head - Holi-



Jurgen Bailom
President and CEO of Waterways
Leisure Tourism, Cordelia Cruises

days, SOTC Travel, echoed similar sentiments, pointing out the surge in interest for Lakshadweep cruise sailings. "The Hon. PM's initiative to inspire Indians to explore our country's less explored/ hidden gem Lakshadweep and its pristine islands have successfully garnered significant attention and interest from the country. The island destination has become the most searched destination across the world today," he said. **Jurgen Bailom**, President and CEO, Waterways Leisure Tourism, Corde-



Jay Kantawala
Chairman, TAFI Western India Chapter
& Founding Partner, WIYO Travel

lia Cruises, said, "We are thrilled about the growing interest in Lakshadweep; we are committed to being an integral part of its growth story," he shared. **Jay Kantawala**, Chairman, TAFI Western India Chapter & Founding Partner, WIYO Travel, acknowledged the existing challenges regarding Lakshadweep's infrastructure. "We had approximately 9,500 tourists to Lakshadweep during last year. I feel that the current infrastructure is not ready to handle a drastic surge of tourists."



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- Indian hospitality market estimated to reach \$24.62 billion in 2024; further growth of \$31.01 billion expected by 2029
- Need to address high hotel tariffs & airfares as India becoming costly for visitors, urges Taneja
- 25,619 tourists visit Sri Lanka from 1-4 January, including 5,060 Russians & 3,333 Indians
- Government plans policy change to include subsidies for patients coming to India for treatment, says Shripad Yesso Naik
- EbizCash & Sheraton Travels launch experience centre; plan to open 30 such centres pan India
- Achieving the highest Global OTP Score, Oman Air named MENA's most punctual airline for 2023

MP leads in women's safety

In an exclusive interview with TRAVTALK, Sheo Shekhar Shukla, Principal Secretary, Department of Tourism & Culture, Government of Madhya Pradesh & Managing Director, Madhya Pradesh Tourism Board, unveils an aggressive international outreach for tourism.

TT Bureau

Madhya Pradesh is strategically focusing on an aggressive outreach to potential travellers in various source market countries. Utilizing international PR, media, participation in leading travel exhibitions, and various marketing channels, the state aims to profile its unique assets and experiences. The core mission is to provide international tourists with memorable and experiential tourism, relying on the powerful tool of word of mouth.

The three pillars of communication for Madhya Pradesh are brand, thought leadership, and profiling of its multiple and unique assets. The state plans to boost awareness not only about existing tourist attractions but also by curating new experiences and exploring uncharted destinations through channel partners in key source markets. Sharing insights into Madhya Pradesh's upcoming brand campaigns



Sheo Shekhar Shukla
Principal Secretary, Department of Tourism & Culture, Govt of MP & MD, MP Tourism Board

aimed at international tourists, Shukla highlights its festivals and attractions. "The Kuno Forest Festival, Jal Mahotsav, and Khajuraho Dance Festival are among the curated events to be actively promoted to increase inbound international tourism footfalls," he says. Maintaining an active database of travel agents and tour operators abroad is a priority for Madhya Pradesh. These partners, regarded as passion-



ate brand ambassadors, receive regular engagement through webinars, training sessions, and curated itineraries. "The core source markets currently include the US, Europe, Middle East, South East Asia, Australia, with emerging markets in Spain, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Latin American countries like Mexico and Brazil," adds Shukla.

Addressing the impact of the pandemic, Shukla mentions a growing trend of "revenge travel", with international tourists seeking new, unexplored destinations. Madhya Pradesh's focus on responsible tourism, community development, and specially curated rural and tribal tourism experiences has garnered an excellent response, with interna-

tional tourist inflow surpassing the pre-pandemic levels. The state is recognized as a safe destination for travellers, with its initiatives taken for women travellers in collaboration with UN Women and the Government of India. The increasing number of women travellers attests to the success of these efforts.

Upping the insurance game

Asego is determined to continue bringing innovation to the insurance segment, whether it is by creating new offerings that are better suited for Gen Z and Millennials, or by creating experience-specific covers like for cruising. Dev Karvat, Founder & Chief Executive Officer, Asego, shares his plans for the new year.

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What is Asego's outlook for 2024? We believe that every business has the potential to undergo a digital transformation. Asego is determined to lead this change, ushering in the next wave of digital transformation through our upcoming proprietary software. This innovative tool will empower our partners with improved business intelligence and enhanced operational efficiency.

What are the various kind of risks travellers are facing these days? Travel, by nature, is an adventure into the unknown, and while the thrill is undeniable, uncertainties can cast a shadow on the overall experience. One of the most common uncertainties being reported by travellers' these days is the unpredictability of weather. Winter travels, in particular, come with



Dev Karvat
Founder & CEO
Asego

the risk of flight delays or cancellations due to adverse weather conditions. Another significant uncertainty revolves around the unexpected disruptions caused by natural calamities. Whether it's a sudden snowstorm, heavy rains, or other unforeseen events, travellers may find their plans derailed. Furthermore, during the festive season, the influx of travellers can lead to crowded airports and transportation hubs, increas-

ing the likelihood of lost baggage or theft of gadgets and valuables. Last but not the least, travellers have also been fazed lately with a looming concern about political unrest in various countries.

How does Asego tackle crisis situations faced by travellers? Our offerings not only take care of medical emergencies and other travel-related inconveniences but also ensure that travellers are protected against risks such as emergency medical evacuation, loss and damage of gadgets, cyber security issues, identity theft, credit/debit card fraud, etc. Further, our carefully curated standalone products offer travellers an opportunity to customize their protection plans as per their needs, rather than opting for a plain vanilla travel insurance product.

How are you catering to Gen Z and the millennials? Yes, we have seen a drastic

jump in travellers seeking new experiences such as cruise trips, adventure sports, self-drive trips etc. to end or begin the new year with a bang. However, we should

There is a general misconception among the people that a regular travel insurance is sufficient to keep them (travellers) secured while cruising

be mindful about such activities, as it also comes with inherent risks that require proper preparation and protection. We have, therefore, curated some exclusive coverages for the Gen Z travellers such as adventure sports cover,

sports equipment covers, self-drive protection etc. These covers do not only safeguard high-risk activities and other adventurous pursuits by travellers but also take care of emergency medical expenses in case of personal accident and emergency evacuations.

Is a cruise specific travel insurance cover important and why? Certainly! A relevant cruise protection cover comes into the picture if an unforeseen emergency or mishap arises. There is a general misconception that a regular travel insurance should be sufficient to keep them secured while cruising. However, travel insurance does not cover passengers while on a cruise. For instance, if a mishap strikes before you even begin the journey, you may have to cancel your trip. The cruise line won't reimburse you, but a dedicated cruise trip protection can.

Further, if a passenger is affected by illness or any other medical emergency on board, the person will get confined and eventually miss the excursion. Cruises protection plans such as Asego's exclusive cruise cover does not only safeguard travellers from such losses but also covers emergency evacuation and subsequent medical care expenses in case of serious injuries.

Please elaborate on your core business - Travel Assistance? Asego's services extend beyond mere processing of claims. We offer comprehensive real-time assistance services, including 24X7 global medical support, roadside assistance, and family protection, along with insurance. Further, we provide medical service-related referrals to travellers seeking hospitals, clinics, chemists, and diagnostic centres, not only for themselves but also for their families back home.

Oman: an array of experiences

From diverse landscapes to rich cultural heritage and unique cuisine, Oman has everything for a traveller's delight. In the first visit itself, it opens doors to authentic charm of the Middle East, which is visible in anything one ventures out to do.

Jaspreet Kaur

Whether it's exploring historic sites, enjoying desert adventures, or savouring the local flavours, Oman provides a memorable journey that captures the essence of the region.

Unravelling Muscat

The first stop in Oman should be its capital Muscat, which is a melange of history and modernity in a unique way. The Walled City of Muscat allows one to see the majestic Al Alam Palace up close. An architectural marvel, it can be a lesson in design for many. Commonly referred to as the Sultan's Palace or Sultan Qaboos Palace, it is one of the six royal residences of Sultan Qaboos sit-



merchandise and one can indulge in buying perfumes, oriental spices, artefacts, imported fabrics and richly hand-crafted silver jewellery. A walk in the souk is not only a delight for a shopaholic

dress code to visit the mosque – Women wear customary attire covering their arms and legs and cover their head with scarf. Men wear loose-fitting clothes, long-sleeved tops and trousers.

natural terrain in Oman should ensure to have a day set for Jebel Akdhar, which is one of the Hajar Mountains in Ad Dakhiliyah Governorate of Oman. It is one of the highest points in Oman and eastern Arabia and is mostly limestone. Lying at the central section of the Hajar range, Jebel Akdhar is located around 150 km from Muscat and accessible only by four-wheel drive.

On the way, one can enjoy a scenic photo stop at Snake Canyon (Wadi Bani Awf) and visit Misfat Al Arbyeen. Also, one can delve deeper into the historical Bahla



uated in Muscat and is uniquely located between the two forts Mirani and Jalali.

but gives insights into the culture of the country.

Ticking the list

Another highlight and a must-visit for anyone travelling to Oman is the Grand Mosque, which is one of the largest in the world. Spend the day at this marvel of rich Arabian architecture. There is a

A jewel in Oman's crown is Royal Opera House, which was built on the royal orders of the sultan due to his passion for classical music and arts and officially opened in 2011. It displays contemporary Omani architecture and breathtaking interior design. The main hall and the theatre can accommodate up to 1,100 people and are open daily to the public.

To end the day, one can relish a sumptuous dinner at the serene Wakan Village Heritage Home. Sama Wakan Heritage Home, just a 2-hour drive from Muscat is a great place to stay. The resort offers a breathtaking panoramic view of the surrounding mountains. Enjoy the beauty of the agricultural terraces, take a stroll within the orchard, and witness the cultivation of various trees and fresh fruits like pomegranates, apricots, and grapes in the Wakan village plantation.

Scenic escapade

Those interested in exploring the

A visit to Muscat is incomplete without exploring one of its souks. The colourful Muttrah Souq is one of the most popular souqs in the Middle East

Fort and Jabrin Castle. The best way to discover the region is by a walking tour through three villages and immerse yourself in the local culture and natural beauty.

The next stop is Wahiba Sands, which is a desert region named after the Bani Wahiba tribe. The diverse natural surroundings are full of a variety of flora and fauna, some of which is exclusive to the region. On the way to Wahiba Sands, one can also explore Birkat Al Mouz, Nizwa Souq and Oman Across Ages Museum. Dinner and stay at enchanting Desert Nights Camp would be an experience of a lifetime.



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SE Asia continues to dominate

► Contd. from page 5



Rajeev Sabharwal (CA)
Chief Executive Officer
Gaurav Travels

“This year, our top destinations have been Australia, Vietnam, and Thailand, all performing exceptionally well. Singapore followed suit with positive numbers. Moving further, Eastern Europe experienced a surge in de-



Riaz Munshi
President, OTOAI & Managing
Director, N. Chirag Travels

“For us, the hot-selling destinations as per the current demand seem to be Australia, Scandinavia, AIUla - Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Azerbaijan, Italy, Czech Republic, Hungary & Kenya. The blend of short and long



Anshu Tejuja
Managing Director
Ashoka Dream Holidays

“This winter season witnessed a significant influx of travellers towards destinations that offer direct flights and visa-free access. We received the highest number of inquiries and confirmations for destinations such as Thai-

“While I sell the United Arab Emirates, Maldives, the Far East, and Europe extensively, the top outbound destination for my clients remains Thailand. Thailand's recent announcement of visa-free travel for Indian travellers has significantly increased travel to the country. Additionally, reasonably priced airfares, short-haul flights, affordable hotels and resorts, world-class spas, massage centres, and delicious street food make it an excellent holiday destination.”



Guldeep Singh Sahni
Managing Director
Weldon Tours & Travels

mand. Oman, Abu Dhabi, and Jordan are gaining popularity. While there is not a widespread trend, there is some emerging demand for Saudi Arabia. Europe has always been a consistent performer for us; this year too.”

“As for the summer season ahead, if the visa issues with European countries are resolved, I expect a good increase in number of tourists for Europe during that time. It seems Southeast Asia stands out, especially because European destinations tend to be quite cold. Additionally, during this period, most travellers explore the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Destinations like Thailand, Singapore, and Vietnam are performing exceptionally well.”



Reena Sachdev
Founder
Travel Arena

haul has become a norm with so many new direct flights coming into Asian sectors and some CIS countries, which is a highly encouraging factor for people to plan on a higher frequency than before.”

“In 2024, the travel landscape continues to evolve with diverse destinations captivating globetrotters. Japan enchants with its unique blend of tradition and modernity, while South Korea's vibrant culture and scenic landscapes allure travellers. Finland's pristine nature and the enchanting Northern Lights make it a sought-after destination. Eastern Europe's historical charm draws discerning travellers, while Scandinavia's picturesque vistas and progressive cities offer a holistic experience.”



Shravan Bhalla
Vice President, OTOAI &
Chief Executive Officer, High Flyer

land, Bali, Singapore, and Almaty. Moreover, several European countries were in high demand this season, with bookings made well in advance. Finland, Italy, and France were among key nations receiving enough visitors.”



Arshdeep Anand
Director, Holiday Moods Adventures &
Executive Committee Member, OTOAI

“Destination choices are becoming more diverse, driven by various trends. Whether it's the pursuit of hidden gems and unique experiences, leading travellers to offbeat places like Switzerland's Lauterbrun-



Gurdeep Singh Gujral
Treasurer, OTOAI & Director
Gujral Tours & Travels

“2024 will be a year where you can tick off many bucket list items. When it comes to the most trending, my first destination would be countries where you can view the Northern Lights. This year, between Janu-



Abdul Thingna
Vice President - Hotels &
Holidays, Tripjack

“Our data indicates that top choices for long journeys are Australia, New Zealand, France, Switzerland, Spain, Portugal, Hungary, and Finland. Shorter getaways find favour with bustling locations like Singapore, Malaysia,

“Currently, our top selling product is the Northern Lights. We are very busy selling the Finnish Lapland on the Pohjola route, Arctic Norway's Northern Lights Cruise-Havila, Northern Lights with Glacier Lagoon in Iceland, Swan Hellenic's Antarctic Peninsula Discovery Cruise. We are also seeing an uptick in the combination of Norway, Sweden & Finland tours, chasing the Northern Lights. Experiencing Northern Lights has been in the wishlist for many people.”



Daniel D'Souza
President & Country
Head - Holidays, SOTC Travel

nen Valley, a biking trail in Vietnam's Ha Giang or the picturesque town of Colmar in France's Alsace, the trend for unconventional travel is gaining popularity. Gastronomic destinations also find favour with the travellers.”

“We have been doing a lot of FITs and MICE movements, as companies and corporates are choosing the destinations with either visa-free entry or visa-on-arrival facilities. We have also seen a significant surge in inquiries for Malaysia. Malaysia had not been generating high numbers in the past two to three years. However, since they have announced the visa-free entry for Indian citizens till December 24, we have seen a substantial increase in queries for Malaysia.”



Neil Patil
Founder
CTO, COO, Veena World

ary and October, is when scientists expect to see the peak of solar activity, and hence, we will see the brightest Northern Lights in more than a decade. Then there is Australia, which has more direct flights from India now.”

“Going on a trip is not just about where you are headed; it's about making memories that stick with you. At Tripjack, we are excited about curating fantastic journeys. Destinations like Vietnam, Baku, and Turkiye are calling out to those who love a mix of culture and beautiful scenery. There are also the classics i.e. Dubai, Thailand, Maldives, and Bali, which we believe will continue to do well in 2024. The modern traveller is demanding, and also cost-conscious.”



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

the Maldives, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Thailand, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Ras Al Khaimah, Oman, Hong Kong, Vietnam, and Bhutan. South Korea, Japan, and Turkiye find favour with those looking for mid-way options.”

Compiled by TT Bureau

Ovolo all prepared for India market

Ovolo Hotels has eyes set on India market, as the nation emerges as one of the important markets in the world, says Joel Bartlett, General Manager, Mamaka by Ovolo.



Ovolo Hotels, operating its office from Hong Kong, has properties in Bali and Australia also. Mamaka by Ovolo is one such property owned by them in Bali. It is strategically located in the neighbourhood of Kuta and Legian regions of the island nation. Mamaka by Ovolo is one of the unique beach hotels, having a tropical oasis with luxury accommodation, and spacious suites. It boasts of several attractions in its vicinity such as Waterbom Park, Bali Sea Turtle, Kuta Theatre, Beachwalk Shopping Centre, Discovery Shopping Mall, and Hard Rock Café. Also, it has only 15-minute from Bali

are closely looking at the needs and wants of this market in order to accommodate and update according to their needs," he says. "The good thing is that we also work closely with the sales office in India, which keeps us updated on trends," he adds.

Focus on sustainability
Bartlett is enthusiastic about sustainable steps at Ovolo hotels. "I am passionate about the sustainability area of this business. And it is important to maintain the island for short-term and long-term future of people," he says.



Joel Bartlett
General Manager
Mamaka by Ovolo

Ngurah Rai International Airport, making it perfect for long-term or short-term stays.

Emphasizing on the importance of India market, **Joel Bartlett**, General Manager, Mamaka by Ovolo, says, "The Indian market is super important (for Ovolo Hotels) and we have Indians staying at all our properties. In order to attract loyal guests from India, we have some good tailor-made packages, including a variety of Indian cuisines prepared by Indian chefs."

He adds, "All our Ovolo properties provide 100 per cent vegetarian food, which is the biggest KPI for Ovolo Group. We have just finalized our Indian buffets for groups of 20 or more. There are dedicated Indian style buffets for breakfast, lunch, and dinner."

Agenda for 2024
Bartlett reveals the hotel's plans for 2024. "We are going to continue on the current trajectory and grow on India market. We

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Rate parity for trade is priority: Accor

Almost every segment of travel closed 2023 on a positive note, and the story is no different for Accor. Pratima Badhwar, Head of Commercial, India & South Asia, Accor, says that they have developed a growth mindset in all aspects of businesses, and going forward, sustainability, growth performance and bringing rate parity is high on their priority.



Nisha Verma

Pratima Badhwar, Head of Commercial - India & South Asia, Accor says that 2023 was a great year for the Indian market. "We have had a strong standing in this market and every year we try and deepen that standing. 2023 has been a testimony to that as well," she adds.

The year that was

In 2023, their focus was on driving performance for the hotels across the portfolio. "This has been the foremost parameter for our future growth plans to drive more investment or working with new owners. It was our best year. Majority chunk of our business is Indian, and we are continuing to reap every opportunity that comes with it, along with international business, which has started to come back. We are deepening our roots and going to various markets, whether it's

SMEs or sports or weddings or corporate. COVID has taught us a big lesson—you cannot ignore the Indian market. Thus, as an international hotel operating company we have changed gears in the last couple of years and made Indian market into our success story."

Future forward approach

Saying that they have developed a growth mindset in all aspects of their businesses, Badhwar highlights, "From signing or developing new hotels across the country, performance, talent management to sustainability measures, we are only looking forward into the future. We have 61 operating hotels and we opened six new hotels in 2023 across all segments. We have also signed 8 new deals for the year."

In addition, their focus is on the loyalty program called Accor Live Limitless-ALL, she shares.



Pratima Badhwar
Head of Commercial - India & South Asia, Accor

Global outlook

Badhwar says that they have 6,500 plus hotels across the globe. "Indian travel industry is growing, along with its MICE segment. Our travellers are willing to explore new locations and destinations. Our continuous effort will be into developing more brands, bringing in more brands into the country and signing more deals to get more hotels into our network," she adds.

B2B engagement

Claiming that their partnership with travel trade is getting stronger, she says, "Travel trade is an integral part of our business within the country, and even internationally. A lot of our business goes out of India into our global hotels, and we will continue to strengthen that relationship. For example, we have opened a Grand Mercure in Agra and a Novotel in Jodhpur and one Novotel in Jaipur. We already have a Fairmont in Jaipur and six hotels in Goa, which are some of the key travel trade driven locations."

Talking about rate parity, she adds, "We are partners for travel trade and want to drive rate parity across all our channels. For the travel trade exclusively, we run limited time program. For example, for series we can have special rates quoted out or if there are certain FIT groups, we can have special rates offered for inbound especially. For domestic business,

if there is a need for certain hotels, we curate offers accordingly. Else, we try and keep our discounting or structures consistent."

Sustainability at core

Insisting that sustainability is at the core of what they do, she explains,

With the kind of products that we have, one cannot get hotels in \$80-100 anywhere. I think a good takeaway of COVID is that we are getting the rates corrected in India

"Accor has been one of the early adopters and being a sustainable organisation. As of 2022, we have got rid of all single use plastic in

our hotels across the country. We have got water bottling plants in most of our hotels. We are now working on tools where we can reduce food wastage. Most of our corporate customers are now coming back to ensure that we are carbon neutral, or the meetings we do are carbon neutral. Even for new hotels being developed, especially Greenfield projects, various aspects of the buildings are being considered to meet green standards."

Increased ARRs a blessing

Post-COVID, the Average Room Rate (ARRs) have skyrocketed even for budget properties across the country. Badhwar laughs it off saying, "India was the most under-sold market. With the kind of products that we have, the service we deliver, one cannot get hotels in \$80-100 anywhere. I think a good takeaway of COVID is that we are getting the rates corrected for the country."

AIUla, a new paradigm of luxury

As AIUla in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia unveils its treasures, we provide a captivating journey through time and luxury. AIUla, with its rich history, diverse offerings, and sustainable initiatives, beckons travellers to explore the enchanting landscapes and cultural tapestry that define this extraordinary destination.



TT Bureau

Melanie de Souza, Executive Director - Destination Marketing, Royal Commission for AIUla, in an exclusive interview with **TRAVELTALK**, unveils the secrets of AIUla, a gem nestled in the northwest of Saudi Arabia. De Souza shares insights into the rich historical and cultural tapestry of AIUla, its unique attractions, and the sustainable initiatives that define this burgeoning luxury destination. From ancient civilizations to modern-day adventures, AIUla promises an enchanting experience that transcends time.

Unlocking AIUla's rich tapestry

De Souza paints a vivid picture of AIUla, a county the size of Belgium, boasting a history both young and ancient. A gateway to international tourists for last four and a half years, AIUla is steeped in history dating back to the 9th century BC. De Souza emphasizes the significance of sites like Heg-



Melanie de Souza
Executive Director - Destination Marketing, Royal Commission for AIUla

ra, a Nabataean civilization with 110 beautifully preserved tombs, the Dadan Kingdom, Jabal Ikhma open library with petroglyphs, and the Old Town, continuously occupied for 900 years. Hegra, Saudi Arabia's first UNESCO World Heritage site, embodies the nation's rich historical tapestry. This ancient Nabataean city, with its remarkable tombs and rock-cut facades, reflects the convergence of culture and architecture.

Heritage and tombs

The iconic tombs of AIUla, meticulously restored, reveal the advanced and resourceful nature of the Nabataean civilization. Melanie highlights the symbolism in the tombs, reflecting the civilization's preoccupation with the afterlife. Noteworthy artefacts like date necklace seeds and the recreation of Hinnaat, a Nabataean lady, showcase the dedication to preserving and sharing AIUla's historical legacy.

Nature, adventure, and culture

Beyond history, AIUla captivates with its stunning landscapes, contrasting sandstone outcrops, and lush green oases. The adventure hub offers activities ranging from zip-lining to hiking and star grazing and hot air ballooning, while the arts and culture agenda includes Madrasat Adira, an old girls' school fostering traditional crafts, and festivals like Desert X and Wadi Al-Fan featuring monumental art installations.



Unforgettable moments

AIUla presents a robust calendar of events and festivals, ensuring a thrilling experience throughout the entire year against its stunning backdrop. This vibrant tapestry seamlessly weaves together art, heritage, adventure and music, creating truly unique encounters. A standout attraction is the Maraya, a stunning piece of art nestled in the desert canyon of Ashar Valley, designed to harmonize with the

landscape and emerge like a mirage from the sand. Throughout the year, the Maraya hosts music performances, concerts, and festivals, contributing to AIUla's dynamic atmosphere.

Culinary experiences

AIUla's culinary scene surprises visitors with its variety. From Michelin-starred restaurants to casual settings, AIUla ensures a diverse and locally inspired dining experience. De Souza emphasizes

the concept of "oasis to table", where fresh, locally sourced ingredients play a crucial role.

Targeting the Indian market

With growing awareness and a strong brand affinity in India, AIUla aims to position itself as a luxury

AIUla presents a robust calendar of events and festivals, ensuring a thrilling experience throughout the entire year against its stunning backdrop

destination. De Souza expects India to be among top markets, emphasizing on its proximity, brand alignment, and encouraging signs in brand awareness studies.

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Changing skyline of Indian aviation

The aviation skyline has gone through a transformation, especially post-COVID. From airlines completely stopping operations to first opening domestic routes and then finally international operations, it has not been an easy journey. However, new airlines and strategies for doing business, show the dynamic character of the industry.



Collated by Subir Ahluwalia

Indian airlines have plans to expand international routes in 2024. Major carriers like IndiGo and Air India will be at the helm, and Akasa Air will be making its debut in the international territory soon. IndiGo, the current domestic market leader, flies to almost 30 international destinations. The airline is reportedly in talks to place a widebody order soon.

Air India, which was earlier unable to expand operations to the US owing to shortage of capacity, has many B-777s and more Airbus A350 coming in, along with its grounded widebody planes fixed. This could result in many international routes to North America and further connections. Even Vistara is planning to deploy a few of its new aircraft for international expansion. It is already serving medium-haul routes such as Mauritius and Hong Kong and

flying to Europe, including Paris and Frankfurt. Akasa Air will be targeting the Middle East market for initial operations as soon as it gets the necessary regulatory approvals for international operations. In fact, a big order seems to be on cards for the airline.

Stirring it up

While upcoming international routes look positive, there is a huge competition among domestic airlines. While IndiGo has been a leader for years, Air India is strengthening its operations on

trunk routes. Air India Express, on the other hand, has begun flying on routes like Bengaluru-Mengaluru, and Bengaluru-Trivandrum, which were exclusively serviced by IndiGo earlier. With Ayodhya emerging in the big picture, all low-cost airlines are vying for routes to get the first mover's advantage.

SpiceJet, on the other hand, has been a little unstable lately, with its financial reports coming under the scanner because of constant legal battles and negotiations



with lenders over delayed payments. Despite that it is adding capacity and planning to raise

over US \$250 million through issuance of equity and warrants. This money will be used to lease more airplanes and increase fleet strength.

Last word on GoFirst

Since May 2023, GoFirst has not had any flights and is searching for a saviour. The situation is similar for the 'still waiting to be revived' Jet Airways. While the future looks bleak for these airlines, the final word might come this year.

How airline planning pans out in 2024 is dependent on many factors, which include industry consolidation, the growing importance of LCC subsidiaries, major aircraft orders and fleet availability issues.

Air India merger

The Tata Group will consolidate its LCC airlines and full-service carriers. This merger will have major ramifications for the India market. The merger of Air India with Vistara was approved by Indian competition authorities. However, additional clearances are awaited from various agencies in India and outside. The company is also merging its LCC brands – AirAsia India and Air India Express. In numbers, Air India and Vistara together will account for 18.4 per cent of India's domestic capacity, and AirAsia India and Air India Express another 8 per cent. Combined, these four airlines would make more than 23 per cent of India's international capacity.

ABTO's int'l meet concludes in Kushinagar

The 6th International Convention of the Association of Buddhist Tour Operators (ABTO), organised recently in Kushinagar, was attended by senior delegates and government executives. PN Pathak, MLA, Kushinagar (UP) talked about the development of Buddhist Circuit, while Amit Gupta, Assistant Director, India Tourism, Varanasi Office, shared the Ministry of Tourism's vision for this segment.



DreamSetGo's Six at CWC

In the realm of luxury travel and hospitality, DreamSetGo emerged with some exciting experiences at this year's Cricket World Cup, transforming the experience for fans into a grand spectacle of opulence and exclusivity. As one of the official travel agents, DreamSetGo catered to over 5,000 travellers across 9 cities for more than a month-long extravaganza.



Diverse Array of Experiences

At the heart of DreamSetGo's success lay a host of different experiences curated for the discerning cricket aficionado. Official tickets, amazing seats, exclusive corporate packages & Luxury accommodation were just the tip of the iceberg. DreamSetGo managed to create a tapestry of events that included legend meet-and-greets, elevating the World Cup experience to surreal heights.



Amit Vyas
Head – MICE & Sports Travel
DreamSetGo

Luxury Accommodation Across 9 Cities

With over 5000 travellers traversing 9 cities, DreamSetGo set the stage for an unparalleled journey. The luxury accommodations, meticulously chosen for comfort and convenience, became a haven for cricket enthusiasts, providing a seamless blend of opulence and accessibility throughout the tournament including stays in the Team India hotel at multiple locations.

Official Travel Agent

Being one of the official travel agents for tickets & packages, DreamSetGo faced an overwhelming demand, selling out inventory quickly. Remarkably, the company not only met this incredible demand but also ensured a timely and smooth supply of tickets, making the dream of witnessing live cricket at the World Cup a reality for countless fans.

Before we dive into Corporate Experiences and the events curated specifically for this sector, **Amit Vyas**, Head – MICE & Sports Travel, DreamSetGo says,

"We have noticed that whether it's FITs or Corporates, they are leaning more towards experiential travel that includes sporting events across the globe. The Cricket World Cup in India was a great platform for us to showcase our prowess and capabilities to the fullest at the biggest sporting tournament in the country."

Exclusive Corporate Experiences

For over 3500 fortunate travellers, DreamSetGo curated exclusive corporate experiences that transcended the ordinary. From coordinating more than 1000 flights to arranging transfers and luxury accommodations in Team India hotels, the company left no stone unturned. The cherry on top was the opportunity to share exclusive time with cricket legends such as Sourav Ganguly and engage in pre-match meet-and-greets with icons like Sunil Gavaskar, Yuvraj Singh, Virender Sehwag, and many others. The pre-match buzz, complete with face painting and rhythmic dhols, seamlessly transitioned into



post-game celebrations, featuring midnight suppers to commemorate India's victories.

DreamSetGo's analysis showed families including FITs were now allocating special yearly travel budgets for major tournaments like the Cricket World Cup

Market Trends and Insights

Our recent market analysis unveiled a fascinating trend across and beyond the borders – families including FITs were now



allocating special yearly travel budgets for major sports tournaments like the Cricket World Cup. The analysis indicated a shifting

paradigm, with families increasingly considering sports-related travel as an integral part of their holiday plans. The resonance of this shift was reflected in the numbers, rivalling even the viewership figures of events like the Superbowl. DreamSetGo, by capturing the essence of this trend, not only met but exceeded the expectations associated with the Cricket World Cup, underscoring the company's commitment to turning sports holidays into an unforgettable luxury experience.

Corporates equating MICE travel with sporting events have set the stage for an era where the roar of the stadium and the luxury of travel merge seamlessly

In conclusion, DreamSetGo's success during the Cricket World Cup was not just a display of hospitality but a testament to the evolving landscape of travel preferences. Families, now equating family holidays with sports holidays, corporates equating MICE incentivised travel with sporting events have set the stage for a new era

where the roar of the stadium, tete-a-tete with Legends and the luxury of travel merge seamlessly. And DreamSetGo stands as the vanguard of this transformative journey. The Cricket World Cup was the target, and DreamSetGo undoubtedly knocked it out of the park with exclusively curated experiences both on and off the field.



Maha eyes inbound with trade help

After IATO Convention in Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar (Aurangabad), Maharashtra Tourism is gung-ho about working more closely with the travel trade – not just in the state but across India. Considering them as investment partners, it is now keener than ever to work in close conjunction with them to bring in more inbound tourists into the state.



Hazel Jain

Shraddha Joshi Sharma, Managing Director, Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC), says, "MTDC has resorts in various locations of Maharashtra, which showcases the strength of the state. This is being promoted with the help of local stakeholders like tour operators and travel agents from across India. We have beach resorts, wildlife resorts, heritage resorts in locations like Tadoba, near the Ajanta & Ellora caves, and other interesting tourist spots. Not only resorts, we have now launched tour packages also. So, not just stay options, but we offer a holistic package for tourists, including end to end pick-up and drop service, which we have just started under 'Dekho Apna Maharashtra' programme."

Maharashtra Tourism is also focusing on sustainability. "I be-



Shraddha Joshi Sharma
Managing Director, Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation

lieve it is a must for the tourism sector, and at MTDC we endorse this concept. Just last year we launched our Responsible Tourism programme. We also follow this at all our restaurants where we avoid use of artificial colours and encourage employment to local people. In short, we encourage a responsible traveller approach," she says. MTDC will also be launching a convention centre in Nashik soon

to be called Grape Park Resort Convention centre.

The magic of 10!

BN Patil, Director, Directorate of Tourism, Maharashtra, says that they consider travel trade as

MTDC has resorts in various locations of Maharashtra, which showcases the strength of the state. This is being promoted with the help of tour operators

an investment partner. "We are interested in increasing inbound tourism into the state. The tourism sector contributes about 9.5 per cent to the state's GDP and our



target is to increase inbound tourists, increase their stay and spend in the state. I believe in the magic of 10. What does this mean? If the tour operators create 10 tour packages for Maharashtra with 10 tourists, that leads to a tourism spend of about Rs 10,000 per tourist, that will create magic for the state," he explains.

The Directorate of Tourism Maharashtra now has fixed an annual calendar with 14 tourism events, which will showcase heritage, natural landscapes and sites, forts, beautiful coastline, and mountains.

"We want to shift the focus of the tourists towards the lesser-known

sides of the state of Maharashtra, like the national parks, Western Ghats, forts, ancient caves, and vibrant cultures. We are also gearing up for the Mumbai International festival in January 2024, where every corner of Mumbai will be involved. It is a festival by the Mumbai, and for the Mumbai," he says.

Investing in own products is key: TUI

From promoting multi-day tours to integrating digitalisation at the front-end of the business, and focusing on their own products, TUI has many plans and strategies for India, which is a crucial market for them. Jordi Cerdó, Chief Strategy Officer, TUI Musement, says that operating four charters weekly in Goa is a beginning, and they have more to come.



Nisha Verma

Jordi Cerdó, Chief Strategy Officer, TUI Musement, who was recently on a visit to India, shared that the country is perfect for what they want to do in TUI. Elaborating further, he said, "Earlier, we thought about India, Goa was the first thought, but now we want to go beyond the sun and the beach. TUI is going through a process of transformation. However, the heart of that transformation should be our own products, differentiated products. India is the perfect destination to develop these products ourselves, as we have been doing for many years."

India business

Sharing how India has grown in terms of business for them, he revealed, "If we look at in terms of the volumes that we currently have, this year we have a massive growth versus last year. We are about 80 per cent of 2019, which is similar to what the travel indus-



Jordi Cerdó
Chief Strategy Officer
TUI Musement

try in India has had. We need to keep in mind that in 2019 we had to stop some businesses. Hence, the comparison is not direct. While the growth in India has been slower after the pandemic, but it is picking up very fast."

Current focus

TUI took over Le Passage To India (LPTI) a few years back. Sharing what they are aiming for in the country currently, Cerdó said,

"Back in 2019, we were a DMC that was doing a lot of other things, but as a part of TUI and LPTI, our focus is on multi-day tours, which we think is the best way to visit or explore a country like India. We are working on own products, products that we can design ourselves with our partners and that we can specifically adapt to our clients. We are looking through a process of digitalisation to be more efficient, which summarises what we do here in India."

Integrating technology

Explaining how they are putting digitalisation in practice, he shared, "Until now digitalisation was used more from the back-office point of view. We always had a very robust system, but it was used by our colleagues to prepare itineraries and customized travel. Now digitalisation goes a step further and it also will be for the front-end. This means now we will be able to distribute through the system. That is the

big change. However, we need to be patient because while digitalisation is very fast in terms of airlines, hotels and experiences and one day tours, when it comes to multi-day tours, it's different. This is because the others are components and selecting that online is straightforward. One can load it and distribute it. For multi-day tours one needs to load multiple components and then create a tour, and that production process is not so straightforward. The good news is that we are in discussions with our clients and are all developing things together. This is the best way to do things when something is new. We want to do it in a way that our clients see the value behind it and we as an organisation continue to focus on our strengths, which is knowledge about the destination and the experience behind a service that we provide to our clients."

TUI Musement

Cerdó also summarised TUI

Musement as a product and how it's important for India. "TUI Musement sells three products—excursions, which is one-day tours, transfers, which is going from point A to point B, and multi-day

When you travel to India there is a lot to offer when it comes to one day tours and in terms of mobility. There is a lot to offer in terms of multi-day tours as well

tours. We sell them to three customer groups—TUI customers, B2B customers and in certain markets, we sell them to final customer. In the middle we have a digital platform. Thus, the way we interact with our B2B clients and

TUI customers is slowly in a digital way," he elucidated. Throwing light on the value proposition that they are drawing, he said, "Our differentiation needs to come to our own products and that is the most important thing. We do not want to be just pure intermediation. We want to create, produce, design, serve and operate our tours and our services. That is the essence of the TUI Musement strategy. Hence, when you travel to India there is a lot to offer when it comes to one day tours and in terms of mobility. There is a lot to offer in terms of multi-day tours as well."

Goa charters

TUI recently operated charters in Goa. Commenting on the same, Cerdó said, "Operating charters to Goa keeps our presence in India. It's a big thing to bring four charters weekly and have the TUI flights landing in Goa. We plan to grow that to six or even more. We want to turn Goa into a 12-month destination."



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Online tools for corporates, trade

Adapting to the changes in industry, Atlas Tours & Travels has partnered with The Advantage Global Network and added new products and technology to help travel trade and corporate clients. Leading this journey is second-generation business honcho Muhammad Patel, Director, Atlas Tours & Travels, who has more plans for expansion in the new year.



Hazel Jain

Atlas Tours & Travels recently celebrated 35 years of service, along with the 25th anniversary of its Bengaluru office. Speaking on the occasion, **Muhammad Patel**, Director, Atlas Tours & Travels, said, "We see requirements of our clients change; they now require a more holistic approach and more affordable travel solutions in terms of flights and hotels. To adapt to this change, we have gone global and partnered with The Advantage Global Network (a global network connecting corporate clients to travel management experts). As a result, we now have access to 80+ countries and 6,000+ cities and numerous hotels and airlines, which helps us get the best deals for our clients."

This helps Atlas Tours & Travels to connect with clients and improve inventory distribution.



Muhammad Patel
Director
Atlas Tours & Travels

"This strategy also helps to create a corporate profile, which took us to London to meet the leaders of The Advantage Global Network. Teaming up with them is like joining forces with a global team that has connections to over 300,000 hotels and works closely with all airlines. This partnership doesn't just make our reach wider around the world; it also means more

choices and really great services for our customers," he added.

In expansion mode

Patel's focus is to show his clientele that Atlas is now more connected and approachable with an experience of more than 35 years in all aspects of travel, including flights, holidays, visa and forex. "We also want to reach more cities in India. To achieve this goal, we are also planning to open offices in Dubai, Saudi Arabia, Hyderabad, Delhi and Kolkata by 2025 and also get into the tier II and tier III cities with our franchise partners. We are currently in partnership with 75+ franchise booking centres across India and we would like to grow this number to 200+ in the new year," he said.

Atlas is also teaming up with top banks to make its clients' travel experience even better. "Soon, you'll spot us on bank websites, at cool events, and more!" Patel added.

Online booking tools

Atlas also has an online booking tool available on its website and a B2B Umrah portal for its 200+ booking centres across India. "We are also developing a Corporate

corporate deals with our clientele. We want to encourage people in tier II and tier III cities to travel internationally without worrying about visa or flight," Patel shares.

The new corporate tool is designed to streamline and enhance the corporate travel experience, providing efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and tailored solutions for

Saudi Tourism Authority and the Singapore Consulate since early 2000 and we recently had signing of an MoU with Nusuk, Saudi Arabia," Patel says.

Expectations from 2024

As we look ahead in 2024, the world of travel beckons with the excitement of exploring new places, making discoveries, and experiencing different cultures. "People in India have a strong wish to travel, but only 40 per cent of Indians travel abroad

as statistics show. Our aim isn't just to recognise their dreams, but we want to make them come true. We imagine a big change in how people travel, especially in smaller towns and cities. Our goal has two parts: first, to increase the percentage of Indians who travel by 10 per cent, and second, to help smaller travel agents in towns and cities," Patel says.

We are also developing a Corporate Self Booking Tool to help corporate clients book their flights, hotels, visas, and holidays directly

Self Booking Tool to help our corporate clients book their flights, hotels, visas and holidays directly and check their travel account status on their dashboard. The portal will also help us communicate our



businesses. Simultaneously, the B2B Visa Tool aims to empower smaller travel agents, enabling them to facilitate seamless visa processes. What's more – Atlas is now developing a mobile app to help clients book flights, hotels, holidays, visas, forex and umrah. "This will help them get affordable travel solutions at their fingertips. We are currently tied up with the

ITA Airways moots Mumbai flight

ITA Airways commemorates its first year in India with remarkable growth, expanding from three flights per week to a daily service between Delhi and Rome. Keeping in view the evolving travel landscape in India, the Italian airline plans further expansion in the country, with Mumbai being the next destination on its radar.



Janice Alysius

ITA Airways has achieved a significant milestone in India. The Italian airline celebrated its first anniversary of operations in the country. The airline's journey in India began with a schedule of three flights per week from Delhi to Rome. After a successful year, ITA Airways has added four more flights and now flies between Delhi and Rome daily.

Vincenzo de Luca, Ambassador of Italy to India, is elated over the airline's success. "2023 marks a tremendous success for ITA in both India and Italy, signifying a flourishing relationship between the two countries. Our bilateral trade has doubled compared to 2020, showcasing the growth in our partnership," he said.

He emphasized on the increasing number of visas for Indians travelling to Italy, citing that the number could reach the pre-COVID levels

in 2024. He also stressed on the diverse experiences that Italy has to offer to the Indian travellers, ranging from cuisine, fashion, design, and heritage. He commended ITA Airways for offering an immersive introduction to Italy's richness, encapsulating the essence of the country even before arrival. "I'm confident that the number of flights and visitors will continue to increase, following the already rising trend in visa issuances," he said.

Benedetto Mencaroni Poiani, Regional Manager for Asia, the Middle East, and Africa (AMEA), ITA Airways, highlighted the airline's rapid growth within a year. "Looking ahead, we are poised for further growth, with plans to expand our fleet and destinations in 2024, focusing on the Middle East and Africa. We are also strengthening our presence in North and South America, emphasizing on our crucial connection to Italy through Rome's Fiumicino hub. This hub



Benedetto Mencaroni Poiani
Regional Manager for Asia, the Middle East, and Africa (AMEA)

Looking ahead, we are poised for further growth, with plans to expand our fleet and destinations in 2024, focusing on the Middle East and Africa



Fabio Bigotti
Country Manager for India and Japan, ITA Airways

We maintain a close working relationship with top travel agents, consolidators, OTAs, and TMCs, catering to both leisure and business segments

connects us to 23 domestic destinations in Italy and numerous European cities," Poiani said.

Fabio Bigotti, Country Manager for India and Japan, ITA Airways, recalled the airline's journey from three flights per week to a daily service in just a year. Bigotti expressed interest in further exploring the Indian market, saying that they have plans to operate from other Indian cities like Mumbai. He also emphasized on the shift in Indian travellers' booking behaviour. Increasingly Indians are booking their trip closer to the departure date, he revealed.

Bigotti also emphasized on ITA Airways' strong relationship with travel agencies, Online Travel Agents (OTAs), and Travel Management Companies (TMCs) in India. "We maintain a close working relationship with top travel agents, consolidators, OTAs, and TMCs in India, catering to both leisure and business segments.

Our business class has seen excellent results, and we are focused on increasing our presence in the corporate market and among business travellers," he said.

Speaking of expansion plans, Bigotti said, "Presently, our Airbus 330 accommodates 250 seats per aircraft: 20 in business class, 17 in premium economy, and 213 in economy class. We are interested in exploring more in the Indian market. While evaluating future aircraft availability, we are considering potential operations from other cities, with Mumbai being a significant consideration."

Talking about the post-COVID change in travellers' behaviour, Poiani said, "There have been notable changes in passenger behaviour and market dynamics. We have responded by adapting our strategies to accommodate the evolving needs of passengers, especially in markets like India, where late booking behaviour is prominent."

Emirates cricket tourney a success

The 5th edition of Emirates Travel Agents Cricket Tournament, organised recently in Mumbai, was a resounding success with all teams emerging as winners in spirit. This year saw 600+ entries for the tournament, out of which 18 teams were selected to participate. Emirates is planning to replicate the event in Hyderabad and Bengaluru also to engage the travel trade in the two cities.



1 IN CIRCULATION & READERSHIP SOUTH ASIA'S LEADING TRAVEL TRADE FORTNIGHTLY

EVENT TALK

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Travel

JANUARY 2024

Date	Event	Time
11	PATA India Tourism MasterClass	11:30 am
15-20	Outbound Travel Roadshow Delhi 2024	11:00 am
16	VisitBritain Training Workshop-Pune	10:00 am
18	VisitBritain Training Workshop-Ahmedabad	6:30 pm
19-21	SIHRA Convention	10:00 am
19-21	India International Travel Mart Cochin 2024	11:00 am
19-21	Tourism Fair Nagpur 2024	9:00 am
20-21	Travel MICE and Corporate Show	10:00 am
23-24	GPS-Hyderabad	10:00 am
24-28	FITUR 2024	10:00 am
25-28	Thai International Travel Fair 2024	9:00 am

FEBRUARY 2024

1-2	GPS-Nagpur	10:00 am
8-10	OTM-Mumbai	10:00 am
12	South Africa Roadshow-Jaipur	10:00 am
13	South Africa Roadshow-Delhi	10:00 am
14	South Africa Roadshow-Ahmedabad	10:00 am
14-15	GPS-Pune	10:00 am
15	South Africa Roadshow-Bengaluru	10:00 am
16	South Africa Roadshow-Mumbai	10:00 am

STB to intensify promo activities

Contd. from page 5

partnerships to enhance the experience for Indian travellers visiting Singapore.

Recognizing the groundwork laid by his predecessor GB Srihar, Tan affirms his role “in building a robust relationship between Singapore and India, leveraging the foundation, strengthening connections with trade partners, along with collaborating on campaigns that can effectively penetrate the market.”

Singapore is a vital and preferred destination for families, and we aim to intensify travel promotions and engage influencers

– Markus Tan

In a parallel development, Bon shares exciting plans for 2024. “Focused on intensifying efforts with travel trade partners, fostering partnerships, and

unveiling new attractions,” Bon expresses enthusiasm about “exploring the vibrant Indian consumer market.”

“The primary goal for the upcoming year is to strengthen relationships within the industry, collaborating with online travel agents, airlines, and trade partners,” he shares.

He adds, “The emphasis is on constantly refreshing itineraries for both first-time and repeat visitors. Singapore Tourism Board plans to keep the travel trade updated through product update sessions and information sessions, ensuring that the diverse offerings of Singapore are well communicated.”



Kean Bon LIM
Area Director - India, South Asia and Africa International Group, STB

Looking forward to 2024, Tan outlines a strategic shift towards the family segment, citing STB's brand health study. “Singapore is a vital and preferred destination for families, and we aim to

intensify travel promotions and engage influencers to further promote family travel,” he says.

Both Tan and Bon highlight the importance of collaborating with travel trade partners. Tan under-

Primary goal for the upcoming year is to strengthen relationships within the industry, collaborating with OTAs, airlines & trade

– Kean Bon LIM

scores the significance of tier II and tier III city penetration, encouraging increased visibility and engagement with travel trade partners and consumers in these regions.

As Tan takes charge, and Bon charts the course for 2024, the Singapore Tourism Board anticipates a dynamic period of growth, collaboration and innovation under their leadership.

UTEN rings in New Year with a bang!

UTEN team recently organised a business to business networking event and the New Year party for its members in Mumbai. It started with a table-top networking session with about 17 sellers, followed by presentations by important trade partners. The rest of the evening was dedicated to fun and merriment with a musical party and dinner.



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MOVEMENTS

FAITH

New Delhi



The Federation of Associations in Indian Tourism & Hospitality (FAITH) appoints **PUNEET CHHATWAL** as the Chairman. Announcement to this effect was made by Rajiv Mehra, Honorary Secretary, FAITH. Chhatwal, who also serves as Managing Director and CEO of IHCL, brings with him years of experience and a deep understanding of the Tourism and Hospitality industry. As the Chairman, he will ensure a smooth continuation of FAITH's initiatives and objectives.

AIR INDIA

New Delhi



Air India has appointed **P BALAJI** in as the Group Head, Governance, Regulatory, Compliance (GRC) and Corporate Affairs. He will report to Campbell Wilson, CEO & MD, Air India. In his new role, Balaji will oversee the Government Affairs, Legal, Ethics, Sustainability, and Corporate Communications functions. He has experience of over 30 years in Telecom & IT Sector.

ASPHL

New Delhi



Apeejay Surrendra Park Hotels Limited (ASPHL) has elevated **ROHIT ARORA** to the position of Vice President - North & Goa Operations and Head of Leisure Sales. He has been associated with the company since 1988 and previously held the position of Area General Manager at The Park New Delhi. As a visionary and market strategist, Arora has proven to be an integral asset for the company. He has spearheaded The Park New Delhi in becoming one of the most successful five-star hotels in Delhi.

HILTON BANGALORE EMBASSY GOLFLINKS

Bengaluru

Hilton Bangalore Embassy Golflinks has appointed **ABHIRAM MENON** as the General Manager. Previously overseeing operations for Hilton and Hilton Garden Inn Bengaluru Embassy Manyata Business Park, Menon served as the Hotel Manager and played a crucial role in the pre-opening leadership team. His impact was evident through the team's accomplishments, securing three quarterly APAC (Asia-Pacific region) awards, two for Hilton Garden Inn, and one for Hilton.



THE ASTOR GOA

Goa

The Astor Goa appoints **VAIBHAV GUPTA** as the General Manager. With more than 18 years of dedicated service in hotel operations, Gupta brings a wealth of experience and a comprehensive understanding of the industry to the role. He began his career at Oberoi Hotels & Resorts after graduating from the Institute of Hotel Management in Bhopal, India. His journey has taken him through some of the most prestigious hotel brands globally, including Accor Hotels, Radisson, Shangri-La, and The Oberoi.



DOUBLETREE BY HILTON GOA PANAJI

Goa

DoubleTree by Hilton Goa Panaji has appointed **HARSHAD NALAWADE** as the General Manager. With more than two decades of experience in the hospitality industry, Nalawade brings a wealth of experience and expertise to his new role. Having embarked on his hospitality journey in 2001 at the Taj Mahal Palace Mumbai. His formative years at the renowned establishment provided him with a profound understanding of the intricacies of the industry.



FOUR SEASONS HOTEL

Mumbai



Four Seasons Hotel Mumbai appoints **PRABIN C.B.** as the Director of Revenue. With a background in revenue optimization and a proven track record in the luxury hospitality industry, Prabin is set to bring his expertise to the luxury hotel. In his new role, he will guide the hotel's commercial team in determining strategic vision by setting up goals and implementing tactical efforts with the aim of promoting revenue growth, enhancing profitability among key customer segments.

VIVANTA NEW DELHI DWARKA

New Delhi



Vivanta New Delhi Dwarka has appointed **RAHUL JOSHI** as the General Manager and Cluster General Manager-Ginger Hotels NCR. With more than two decades of experience in the hospitality industry, Joshi brings with him exceptional leadership skills and in-depth market knowledge to further enhance the guest experience at the property. As the General Manager at Taj Hotel & Convention Centre, Agra, he played a pivotal role in steering the property through the challenging pandemic landscape.

SHERATON GRAND BANGALORE AT BRIGADE GATEWAY

Bengaluru



RICHARD LUNEL has been appointed as Rooms Division Manager of Sheraton Grand Bangalore Hotel at Brigade Gateway. With over a decade of expertise in operations, Lunel brings a unique skill set and a wealth of knowledge to the new role. He is a multi-faceted professional with extensive experience in the kitchen, food and beverage service, and the front office departments.

HYATT INDIA

India

PRASAD NARULKAR has assumed the role of Director – Digital for India and Southwest Asia at Hyatt India. He brings with him 16 years of versatile digital experience. His expertise encompasses accelerating the brand's digital marketing strategy, propelling it towards new heights in the ever-evolving digital landscape. He has previously worked with brands like Porsche, Jaguar Land Rover, Mahindra & Mahindra, Godrej, IDBI Bank, and Jio.



THE LEELA AMBIENCE GURUGRAM HOTEL & RESIDENCES

Gurugram

The Leela Ambience Gurugram Hotel & Residences appoints **MEENAKSHI PRABHAKAR** as the Human Resources Director. During her over three decades of experience, she has worked with various reputed brands, including ITC Welcome Group, The Oberoi New Delhi, Radisson Hotel Worldwide, the Grand Hyatt Delhi, Sita World Travel, and Kuoni.



AMI RAJESHWARI has been appointed as the Front Office Manager of Sheraton Grand Bangalore at Brigade Gateway. With over 15 years of experience in front office operations, guest relations, pre-opening operations, and guest service management, Rajeshwari brings a wealth of knowledge and expertise to the new role. Prior to this, she has worked with prestigious hospitality brands such as Taj Group of Hotels, the Lalit Suri Hospitality Group, and Accor Hotels.



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It's raining M!CE Down Under

Australia has emerged as one of the most sought after M!CE destinations, thanks to easy visa and increased air connectivity. Nishant Kashikar, Country Manager - India, Tourism Australia, shares reasons behind the success.



Nisha Verma

India has been one of the most coveted M!CE markets for destinations around the world, and Nishant Kashikar, Country Manager-India, Tourism Australia, couldn't agree more. "Today, India is considered one of the fastest growing major economies in the world, and as a result, the business travel and M!CE sector is on the rebound. According to a recent American Express survey, 41 per cent of Indian businesses travelled to attend, host or present at conferences and events in 2023," he says.

Advantages galore

Sharing details on how Tourism Australia is attracting Indian groups, he says, "In an effort to welcome more delegates to Australia from India, the Australia High

Commission in New Delhi provides a streamlined and personalised visa process for large corporate or incentive groups. Plus, there has been a significant boost in flight options between Australia and India, with Air India and Qantas tripling direct aviation capacity between the two countries. The introduction of three non-stop Mumbai to Melbourne flights per week by Air India will further enhance accessibility. Business Events Australia also has a Bid Fund Program, which is designed to increase the conversion of bids for new international business events for Australia through the offer of financial support at the critical bidding stage. Of the 26 incentive events won from around the world as a result of Bid Fund support, five are from India, worth \$26.2 million in total."

Dreamtime 2023

Dreamtime 2023, the signature incentive showcase of Tourism Australia, concluded in Adelaide recently. It saw Indian M!CE agents meet with representatives from Australian event industry. Speaking on the same, Kashikar says, "We know from previous Dreamtime events that the showcase delivers tangible results. The 2017 event, held in Brisbane, generated 200 business

leads, of which 73 converted into business worth \$50 million. And even with the disruption of the Australian bushfires and the pandemic, Dreamtime 2019 in Perth generated 36 business leads in just three months, worth \$97 million. It's clear that agents that can

Today, India is considered one of the fastest growing major economies in the world, and as a result, the business travel and M!CE sector is on the rebound

experience a destination firsthand understand the offering better, and therefore, can sell it better." The event, normally held every two years, will now be held annually.

India big for incentive

When it comes to Indian incentive groups, there are specific requirements for service, food and experiences. Kashikar stresses that Tourism Australia leaves no stone unturned to cater to the same. "We find that due to India's closer proximity to Australia compared with other key markets, business events groups from India often have a better understanding of Australia and

its offerings, and so groups often explore further. Cricket tests and tournaments can also influence destination and program selections, and timings. We have found groups from India often align their incentive program with sporting events such as cricket test series or T20 tournaments," he adds.

Promotional activities

Informing about the initiatives they take in India for boosting the M!CE numbers, he says, "My team in Mumbai remains in touch with key planners and decision makers – we organise seminars to help educate planners on the business event offerings in Australia, and regularly host planners on familiarisation trips to Australia, like the Business Events Australia megafamil earlier this year. Our incentive inspiration magazine Australia Next, available on the Business Events Australia website, shares ideas on new restaurants, hotels, experiences, destinations and suppliers across Australia to help planners arrange their next event."

Outlook 2024

Talking about the business outlook in 2024, Kashikar asserts, "Business Events Australia would like to maintain the strong momentum generated since Australia's borders reopened, and continue to cement Australia's attractiveness as the preferred long-haul M!CE destination among Indian corporates and business event planners." 📌

Dreamtime 2023 post-event survey results

- ❖ 100 per cent of buyers were satisfied with Dreamtime 2023
- ❖ 100 per cent of buyers were more likely to consider Australia having visited for Dreamtime 2023
- ❖ 100 per cent of buyers post this visit are more likely to send an incentive or corporate meeting to Australia

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