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Vol. 14 | Issue 2 | December 2023 | Pages 56 | ₹150

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Owned and published by: Ravi Sharma, Editor & Publisher, A-100, Upper Ground Floor, Nangal Dewat, New Delhi - 110070 and printed on his behalf at Modest Print Pack Pvt. Ltd., Okhla Industrial Area, New Delhi - 110020.



Dear Friends,

As we enter December, it is always a good opportunity to look back and ponder over the past year. The year 2023 certainly has not been an easy year by any means for the industry, but there was plenty of brightness if you knew where to look. Notably, the outbound travel sector in India has displayed remarkable growth, defying the constraints that defined the year. Thus, our December issue, in many of its pages, offers an analytical perspective on the past and current state of outbound travel in India.

In January 2024, TTJ will proudly release its highly anticipated 14th annual edition under the ever-compelling theme of 'Reflecting on 2023 and Envisioning the Path Ahead in 2024,' a tradition we have upheld since our inception. This special issue will offer a comprehensive retrospective of the year 2023 and give you a glimpse of what to expect in 2024.

I look forward to ushering in 2024 with optimism, and as we move on, it is also a great time to take the New Year's pledge and toast to new beginnings!

Happy Reading!

Ravi Sharma

Ravi Sharma
ravisharma@sampanmedia.com

Editor's Desk



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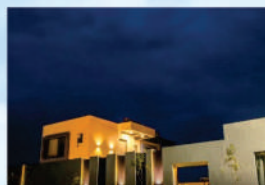
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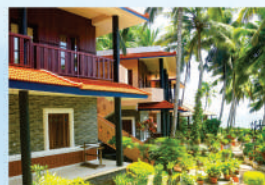
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Malaysia, Thailand, and Sri Lanka beckon Indians with visa-free visits

In the second half of 2023, several nations have unveiled visa waivers for Indian nationals. On November 26, 2023, Malaysia’s Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim announced visa-free entry for Indian tourists into Malaysia. This exemption would only be allowed for those who are on a 30-day tour in the country and will be applicable from December 1, 2023, until December 31, 2024.

Thailand too announced a similar scrapping of entry visas for Indian tourists, which is already effective as of November 10 and will remain valid until May 10, 2024. Indian nationals can enter and remain in Thailand for 30 days for tourism purposes only

Earlier in October, Sri Lanka also announced visa-free entry for Indian tourists and six other countries. The facility will culminate on March 31, 2024. The move was made in order to boost the country’s economy and ease travel rules for tourists from neighbouring countries.

Apart from these countries, Vietnam is also considering implementing similar facilities for Indian tourists. Luxury or budget, the world has realised the potential of the Indian market and is ready to capitalise on the growing aspiration of Indians to explore the world.

Miral announces major expansion to Yas Waterworld Yas Island, Abu Dhabi



Set for construction completion in 2025, the 16,900 sqm expansion will see the addition of 3.3 km of slide sections and is expected to grow guest capacity by 20 per cent through the addition of 18 new thrilling rides and attractions, taking the park total to more than 60 rides and experiences.

Introducing a new chapter to the story, Yas Waterworld will bring a new adventure called the ‘Lost City. This exhilarating ride promises an unparalleled adventure, with a 15-meter-high drop for up to 20 guests and water park enthusiasts, who can experience this adrenaline rush together. Guests will embark on an exciting journey to discover hidden treasures and secret passages, intertwined with fun attractions. The expansion seamlessly blends with the park’s existing architectural style, rockwork features, and iconic characters, transporting guests to a whole new world.

Features of the new expansion include a swim-up bar, a high-thrill boat ride, racing and tube slides, family raft rides, and a duelling master blaster. The expansion caters to mini thrill seekers as well by providing smaller scaled versions of Yas Waterworld’s most iconic rides.

Red Dot Representations facilitates streamlined Vietnam visa services for bulk bookings



Prabhakar Kamat, VP, Red Dot Representations

Red Dot Representations, a destination and hospitality representation company, has unveiled an innovative Vietnam visa service specially tailored to cater to the diverse needs of travel trade partners including B2B agents, event and wedding planners, and MICE professionals, etc., regarding bulk bookings. This groundbreaking service is set to simplify the process of helping them process bulk visa requests seamlessly with reduced turn-around time, cost-effectiveness, and high efficiency. This move helps Red Dot Representations’ travel trade partners to garner more MICE, BLEisure and Wedding-related inquiries to the aspirational destination Vietnam.

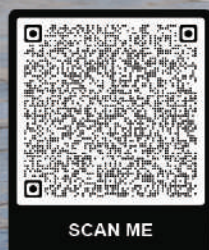
To avail of the streamlined visa service, the travel trade partners will only have to provide Red Dot Representations with the travellers’ passport-size photograph against a white background without glasses; and clear scanned copies of their passport’s front and back pages. Red Dot Representation will provide a hassle-free experience for bulk visa processing of their travel trade partners’ diverse clientele needs be it weddings or events in Vietnam. As part of the services, Red Dot Representations also provides the option of visa-on-arrival, which further adds flexibility and convenience to the package.

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Air Astana introduces the “Kids Go Free” offer

As the snowflakes start to dance in Almaty, Air Astana has introduced the “Kids Go Free” offer, valid from November 1, 2023, to March 31, 2024.

Children aged 2 to 11 can now experience the winter wonderland of Kazakhstan with a magnificent 99 percent discount on traveling with their parents in the same PNR. The offer, limited to a maximum of 2 children with one adult, provides an excellent opportunity for families to discover the magic of the New Year season in Almaty. Book now and embark on a journey to introduce your little explorers to the enchanting snowy wonders of the region.



Atmosphere Core launches Atmosphere Living in India



Sandeep Ahuja, MD, Atmosphere Living

Atmosphere Core, a globally renowned name in hospitality, has announced the launch of Atmosphere Living as part of its continued expansion in South Asia. Headquartered in India, this new company will offer branded ultra-luxury residences with customised end-to-end amenities and indulgences, including coffee lounges, wine cellars, private transport, and bespoke concierge services.

The global branded residences market has experienced a remarkable 150 per cent growth over the past decade, and projections indicate a surge in demand. With the real estate veteran Sandeep Ahuja at the helm as Managing Director, Atmosphere Living is strategically positioned to capitalise on this demand.

Atmosphere Living will focus on a conscious design philosophy. All properties will be built in harmony with the environment and will incorporate features such as smart recycling, efficient waste and water management, and green energy solutions.

Positioned in major metropolitan areas, established second-home destinations, and undiscovered scenic locales nationwide, these projects will also present lucrative investment opportunities. Elite homeowners will have the option to lease their residences back to Atmosphere Living, allowing them to be rented out for income generation.

Manta Air to commence direct flights between Bengaluru and Dhaalu Airport from January 2024



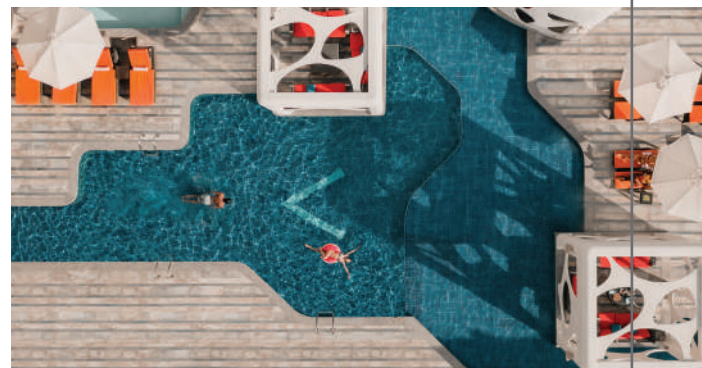
L-R: Deveen Colombage, Daniel Farra, Richa Khara, Ahmed Moumoon, and Neeraj Seth

Manta Air, a Maldivian airline, is all set to commence direct flights from India to the tropical paradise of Maldives. The momentous announcement took place at a prestigious event hosted at the chic Bang at The Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Bengaluru.

From January 2024, the airline will operate direct flights from Bengaluru’s Kempegowda International Airport to the Maldives’ Dhaalu Airport, allowing visitors to avoid the hassles and additional expenses of transiting through the main Velana International Airport at Male, and gaining direct access to many luxury resorts located in Dhaalu atoll, including Kandima Maldives, Niyama Private Islands, St. Regis Maldives, RIU, Baglioni, Angsana Velavaru, and Sun Siyam Iru Veli.

By flying directly to Dhaalu airport, customers going to resorts located in that Atoll can save on the usual transit time and additional transfer costs incurred when entering Maldives through the traditional Male’ airport route. Manta Air will provide easy immigration processes exclusively for its guests at Dhaalu Airport, enabling quick transfers.

Flight schedules have been designed to allow guests to maximise their stay duration in the Maldives, with all flights arriving in the Maldives in the mornings and departing late in the evenings for India.



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Destination DC lures global tourists with 'There's Only One DC' campaign

India has made a robust comeback, regaining its prominence as the fourth-largest overseas market for Washington, DC. Recognising India's status as the world's largest emerging economy, Elliott L. Ferguson II, President and CEO, Destination DC, acknowledges the market's significance and is committed to ongoing investments in this dynamic and expanding market.

Prashant Nayak



▲ Elliott L. Ferguson II

Washington, DC is the capital of free things to do, including dozens of museums, live cultural performances, and signature festivals. Washington, DC has the number one park system in the United States with vast green spaces, over 25 new rooftop restaurants where visitors can enjoy Michelin-rated cuisine with beautiful views of iconic landmarks, and over 25 free museums to explore everything from the Hope Diamond to Prince's guitar. The National Gallery of Art was recently named the most visited art museum in the United States, with nearly 80 theatres that deliver 350 plus productions annually, including Broadway shows. Washington, DC is a force to be reckoned with regarding arts and cultural offerings.

Star Attractions

In recent years, several attractions have gained prominence in Washington, DC, enhancing the city's allure for both residents and visitors. One notable addition is The REACH at the John F. Kennedy Centre for the Performing Arts, a vibrant expansion that includes outdoor spaces, rehearsal halls, and interactive

installations, offering a dynamic cultural experience. Additionally, the Wharf, situated along the Potomac River, is a bustling waterfront destination with trendy shops, diverse dining options, and a lively atmosphere. The International Spy Museum, relocated to a new state-of-the-art facility, continues to captivate audiences with its engaging exhibits on espionage. These developments, alongside the enduring appeal of iconic monuments and memorials along the National Mall and Washington, DC's 16 free-to-enter Smithsonian museums, contribute to the ever-evolving tapestry of attractions that make Washington, DC, a compelling and multifaceted destination.

There's Only One DC

Many potential visitors associate Washington, DC with politics, but the city has much more to offer. Destination DC was fortunate this year to receive an increase in funding due to the city passing a Tourism Recovery District, which essentially doubled its yearly budget. With this boost, Destination DC can now advertise globally.

On November 01, Destination DC launched a new marketing campaign - 'There's Only One DC'. The branding positions the destination as wholly unique. DC matches other world-class cities in dining, nightlife, arts, culture, sports, theatre, outdoor activities and green spaces. But no other destination in the country can compete with DC's monuments, museums, memorials and free things to do. The campaign also aligns with DDC's current efforts to market the city for meetings and conventions under its "Connected" platform, which focuses on assets for meeting planners found only in Washington, DC.

"The goal of the campaign is to define what separates Washington from other world-class cities. Where else can you sip a cocktail while overlooking the White House? Where else can you bring your family to see some of the world's most prized possessions without spending a

penny? Clearly, there is only one DC, and we are excited to bring this new campaign to the Indian market via marketing and potential activations in 2024," Ferguson points out.

India a Growing Market

Washington, DC saw a 279 per cent increase in international visitation in 2022 over 2021, and they expect to continue to see a rise in 2023, with India currently standing at Washington, DC's #4 inbound market for visitor arrivals through September 2023 (preliminary data). The inbound Indian traveller has historically been heavily VFR, and this preliminarily remains the case. Marketing to leisure, corporate, and VFR Indian travellers will continue to be a priority for Destination DC. They have worked with companies like TBO Holidays and MakeMyTrip for some leisure summer campaigns. Furthermore, Destination DC has worked on expanding products that attract Indian visitors for leisure groups.

Destination DC recognises the diverse potential of every city in India as part of its target market. While there was initially a predominant flow of visitors from major metro cities such as Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, Bengaluru, and Hyderabad, there has been a notable increase in travellers from tier II and tier cities as well. This broad range indicates their constant effort to come up with new and innovative ways to service trade partners and entice consumers.

"The Indian traveller's mindset has evolved drastically over the years, and they are now looking for that uniqueness in every holiday. We have witnessed several new trends, especially with luxury experiences. With the general Indian outbound traveller showing signs of more disposable income than ever before, we find them seeking Washington's 25 Michelin-starred restaurants, individually curated tours, and luxury properties with a focus on rest and wellness," remarks Ferguson.

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Utah Tourism solidifying its international presence with relevant market approach

Utah is one of the most alluring off-the-beaten-track destinations in the United States, with some of nature’s most incredible beauty, wide-open spaces, and jaw-dropping landscapes. Zach Fyne, Global Markets Specialist, Utah Office of Tourism, summarises the year 2023 as they continue building on their assets that increase their overall exposure to international visitors, including Indians.

Prashant Nayak

The state of Utah in the USA has its niche as an outdoor and adventure destination and benefits from its growing popularity, which attracts both young and well-travelled tourists looking for a unique experience. The Rocky Mountaineer train completed its third year of operations connecting Moab to Colorado, and Utah Tourism finds this to be an attractive experience for the MICE and retired traveller groups. Utah is leading the world in designated Dark Sky parks and is witnessing new tour operators and resorts opening new Dark Sky viewing tours across the state to take in their Astro tourism offerings. Both of these attractions have gained prominence for the destination in 2023.

Confronting the Biggest Challenge

Leading the way for Utah tourism, the major challenge in 2023 was visa interview openings across top markets such as India, China, and Mexico as the U.S. Consulate looks to restaff their organisations post-pandemic. Given the substantial importance of the Chinese market for their overall international visitor impact, the sluggish recovery in the market has noticeably affected the state’s tourism, particularly in destinations well-equipped for charter bus tours.

Navigating Hurdles

Utah Tourism has been hedging its Asia efforts by investing more marketing dollars into the Indian market as China slowly returns to its typical international travel patterns. Their office has worked closely with the U.S. Consulate to stay up-to-date on what's happening in the market and has been targeting consumers



▲ Zach Fyne

who already have a visa and have travelled to the US, looking to explore more destinations off-the-beaten-track.

Leveraging Influencer Content

After hosting rising star content creators Aakash Malhotra and Larissa D'Sa, Utah Tourism spent the early part of 2023 reutilising their content across a wide range of actions to show Indian travellers how best to explore the state, especially in the winter months. From social media campaigns to video presentations, one-sheeter fliers, and media pitching, they have been successful in repurposing this content across a variety of mediums to get more exposure for the destination.

Diversifying Into New Horizons

The office has expanded its efforts in the

Mexico market for the first time in 2023 and has doubled its marketing budget to be able to attend the Brand USA Sales Mission, collaborate on co-op marketing activities with tour operators, and host a FAM from this market for the first time. Given the abundance of direct flights from Mexico to their international airport, their close proximity to Las Vegas (a highly desired destination for many Mexicans), and a market study revealing substantial interest and investments from their western neighbours, 2023 presented an opportune time for increased involvement in the Mexico market.

Changing Visitor Dynamics

The tourism office has noticed that consumers are much more open to renting vehicles and exploring the US on their own versus a traditional bus tour through the state. More Gen Z and millennial leisure travellers are increasingly drawn to the autonomy of planning their vacations, fuelled by their comfort with social media and willingness to explore novel travel methods.

Optimistic About the Future

Utah Tourism has seen a positive recovery across each of its international markets. While total international spending still remained below pre-pandemic levels at \$586 million and overnight visits totalled 587,000 for 2023, they are projecting 34 per cent forecasted growth in spending and 16 per cent growth in total visits by 2026. They registered a 36 per cent growth for India in spending in 2022 compared to 2019, so despite less time in the market, they are witnessing positive signs and remain optimistic about the future.





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Spain offers a tapestry of delightful experiences for Indian travellers

With outbound travel witnessing a robust recovery, Turespaña is strategically enhancing its endeavours to capture the interest of Indian travellers. Elisa Robles Fraga, Director, Tourism Office of Spain (Turespaña) in India, sheds light on the unique characteristics of Spain, outlining challenges, opportunities, evolving travel trends, and dynamics of the Indian market.

Prashant Nayak

Spain positions itself as an all-year-round destination, promoting a myriad of experiences for every traveller. Whether the motivation is art, culture, museums, monuments, beaches, cities, fiestas, routes, cuisine, or natural spaces, Spain encompasses it all. Beyond being an ideal leisure destination, it provides excellent facilities for MICE, boasting state-of-the-art venues and amenities.

Diverse Offerings

Spain's appeal lies in its ability to offer a variety of tourism products and experiences in a single trip. From captivating museums, luxury shopping, and enthralling flamenco performances to unique small towns steeped in history and culture, delicious gastronomy, and vibrant festivals, Spain offers a unique proposition. Travellers have the opportunity to enjoy a diverse range of experiences without the need to travel to multiple countries. Spain is also an enticing option for cruise tourism, boasting major ports like Barcelona and Malaga, frequented by international cruises. Additionally, the country features stunning islands such as the Balearic Islands, the Canary Islands, and Ibiza, loved by travellers worldwide.

Challenges and Triumphs

A persistent challenge is managing the ever-growing demand for European destinations, a trend that Spain, as one of the preferred choices for Indian travellers also faces. Efforts are underway to provide



▲ Elisa Robles Fraga

comprehensive information about Spain's diverse offerings, raising awareness about lesser-known tourism activities and regions to alleviate overcrowding at popular destinations. The year 2023 has proven successful for Spanish tourism in India, marked by various digital and physical campaigns.

The recently concluded B2B roadshow, 'The Spanish Travel Experience,' held in New Delhi, Bengaluru, and Mumbai, was a resounding success, serving as a platform to strengthen business ties and introduce new Spanish tourism products while enhancing knowledge about multiple destinations.

Within the gastronomy segment, campaigns for World Tapas Day (June 2023) and World Paella Day (September 2023) have garnered positive feedback.

Notably, Chef Shipra Khanna became the first Indian participant to reach the final rounds of the World Paella Day Cup in Valencia, Spain, this year.

Beyond Projections

Tourism from India to Spain is experiencing a rapid recovery post-pandemic. Despite projections being subject to variable factors during the recovery, the overall interest and response from the Indian market have been tremendous. The latest updates indicate over 193,000 arrivals from India to Spain, with hopes of surpassing pre-pandemic numbers soon.

Turespaña observes a robust demand for travel in India. Despite the negative economic impact of the pandemic and global influences, travellers assign considerable importance to their travel budgets. This is driven by the desire for unforgettable and intangible experiences, surpassing the allure of material comforts. Preferences include exploring lesser-known destinations and displaying an interest in destinations practicing sustainable tourism, aligning with Spain's offerings.

Beyond Indian Boundaries

While India remains a major market due to its sheer size, Spain promotes itself as a tourism destination in nearby markets as well. Past promotional events have been organised in Sri Lanka and Nepal, and more recently, a successful B2B event in Bangladesh demonstrates efforts to diversify and tap into emerging markets.



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Tourism Fiji eyeing opportunities for continuous development

Sunil Menon, Country Manager, India, Tourism Fiji, reflects on the transformative journey of 2023. Be it the vibrant cultural experiences or the warm embrace of Fijian hospitality, Tourism Fiji remains dedicated to delivering exceptional travel experiences, and tourism in Fiji continues to evolve, ensuring that every traveller's encounter with the destination is memorable and transformative.

Prashant Nayak

Fiji's performance has been incredible, as tourist numbers have exceeded their projections on a global scale, surpassing 2019 figures by 2 per cent. In the Indian market, they have achieved 91 per cent of 2019 numbers, indicating a robust performance in this market segment where they see great potential. This outcome reflects positively on Tourism Fiji's strategic efforts.

At Tourism Fiji, they have seen increased demand for authentic cultural activities, including visits to handicraft shops and local markets and engaging cultural entertainment. The increasing trend of exploring traditional villages and vibrant fruit and vegetable markets reflects a growing interest in immersive cultural encounters. On land, self-guided touring, guided sightseeing, and walking tours and hikes have gained prominence, catering to preferences for exploration. Historic and heritage sites have experienced heightened visitation, providing enriching glimpses into the destination's past. For water enthusiasts, Fiji's pristine waters have become focal points for adventure. Snorkelling tours, boat excursions, and scuba diving adventures are garnering significant attention, showcasing the diverse experiences available for those seeking aquatic thrills.

Grappling Unprecedented Challenges

Being a small nation, Fiji encounters the ongoing challenge of limited resources while competing on a global stage. Navigating this delicate balance requires strategic planning and innovative solutions. One of the primary challenges has been staying attuned to evolving travel trends post-pandemic. This demands a keen awareness of shifting preferences and expectations, ensuring their offerings remain relevant and appealing to a global audience. The other most crucial focus areas have been changing the perception of Fiji from a 'flop and drop' destination to one that offers a dynamic and multifaceted experience. Fiji is poised to be showcased



▲ Sunil Menon

as a destination that not only provides relaxation but also engages visitors with cultural immersion, adventure, and a vibrant local connection.

Sustainability Counts

Sustainable growth being a cornerstone of vision, Fiji aims to accommodate increased demand by adding 3000–4000 rooms in the next five years. Securing the right kind of investment to achieve this growth is paramount. Thus, they are actively working to attract investments that align with their commitment to sustainable tourism, balancing economic development with environmental and cultural conservation and community well-being. Collaborating closely with Investment Fiji, they are actively working to attract sustainable investments that align with their vision for responsible growth.

Noteworthy Campaigns and Initiatives

The launch of Tourism Fiji's new brand, 'Where Happiness Comes Naturally', stands as a significant milestone in their strategy, with the impact being witnessed on the ground in their strong visitor arrival numbers. For the first time, Fiji hosted the Tourism Investment Convention, and this initiative

aimed to attract responsible investments and successfully generated multiple new leads for investment. The Fijian Tourism Expo and Industry Day played pivotal roles in showcasing Fiji's diverse offerings and fostering collaborations within the industry. Collaborations with Ripcurl and Mastercard have significantly enhanced their global visibility. Hosting the Spartan race and bringing back the World Surf League Fiji Pro have been key initiatives in attracting sports enthusiasts and surfers worldwide. Also, the Rugby World Cup campaign in Australia and the shooting of their brand added to their successful marketing endeavours, reinforcing Fiji's position as an attractive and diverse destination.

Shifts in Travel Patterns

In 2023, Tourism Fiji witnessed notable shifts in travel patterns compared to previous years. Several key trends emerged, shaping the composition of travellers to Fiji, like increased female travellers, shorter booking periods, and greater reliance on technology. These shifts in travel patterns provide valuable insights into the evolving preferences and behaviours of their visitors, helping them adapt and tailor their offerings to meet the ever-changing needs of visitors.

Building Success Together

In 2023, Tourism Fiji's strategic expansion into new markets, including Japan and Canada, was complemented by a noteworthy development in its partnership with Fiji Airways. Notably, Fiji Airways has commenced direct flights to Japan and Vancouver, further enhancing the accessibility and appeal of this market. Also, with a 50 per cent increase in arrivals since 2019 from Japan, this presented a significant opportunity for them, and the direct flights provide added convenience for travellers, strengthening their position in this growing market. They are also exploring India as a potential market.

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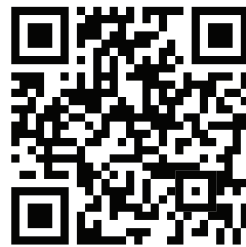
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Ras Al Khaimah's tourism vision continues to gain momentum

Ras Al Khaimah has rapidly become the preferred destination for family holidays and a rising star in the MICE sector within the Emirates. Iyad Rasbey, Vice President - Destination Tourism Development, Ras Al Khaimah Tourism Development Authority (RAKTDA), highlights the diverse range of initiatives in 2023, contributing to the emirate's status as the fastest-growing tourism destination in the region.

Prashant Nayak

Ras Al Khaimah has a lot to offer travellers who value diverse experiences. From cultural sites and adrenaline-fuelled adventures to luxury retreats and all-inclusive family beach resorts, the emirate appeals to a wide range of interests. Rich in history and culture dating back 7000 years, Ras Al Khaimah boasts ancient forts and UNESCO-recognised archaeological sites, enhancing its appeal to international visitors. The emirate also offers unique cultural experiences, such as Suwaidi Pearls, providing a glimpse into the traditional art of pearling at the UAE's sole cultured pearl farm.

Rising Tourist Numbers

In 2023, Ras Al Khaimah experienced a remarkable year-on-year growth of 12.5 per cent in visitor numbers as of September, surpassing their initial projections. Visitor numbers from India also increased by 34 per cent between January and September 2023, compared to the same period in 2022. This positive outcome can be attributed to several factors. The relentless marketing efforts in key global markets, including India, were strategic and well-timed. Moreover, Ras Al Khaimah's commitment to ensuring visitor safety, coupled with agile responses to changing travel conditions, contributed to the destination's appeal during uncertain times.

Tourism Infrastructure Evolution

In recent years, Ras Al Khaimah has strategically expanded its tourism offerings, introducing new hotels, resorts, and captivating attractions. Key highlights include the Jebel Jais Flight, the world's longest zipline, and the Jais Sledder, the region's longest toboggan. These additions have elevated Ras Al Khaimah's status as a premier adventure tourism destination. Capitalising on its diverse topography, the emirate showcases



▲ Iyad Rasbey

natural wonders like Jebel Jais, the UAE's highest mountain, and the Al Wadi Nature Reserve, attracting adventurers and eco-tourists.

Overcoming Challenges

2023 brought various challenges, including geopolitical uncertainties and inflation, which promoted various shifts in travel preferences. RAKTDA's approach to overcoming these challenges was multifaceted. They introduced incentive programmes for our travel partners, enhanced connectivity with charter flights from key markets to reduce the cost of travel, and utilised collaborative initiatives with hotels such as upgrades from half board to all-inclusive to boost travel in off-peak periods. They also intensified their marketing efforts, highlighting Ras Al Khaimah's unique offerings. Also, they focused on sustainability to align with evolving traveller expectations.

Campaigns and Initiatives

The summer "Get More" campaign had surpassed expectations, becoming the most successful one to date. It enticed a substantial influx of new tourists to experience the diverse adventures at

discounted rates, ranging from mountain treks to mangrove excursions and thrilling Bear Grylls survival camp adventures. Between June 15 and September 30, the campaign generated an impressive 285,000 room nights, marking a significant achievement in attracting visitors to the emirate. More recently, they collaborated with Beautiful Destinations, a multi-award-winning content studio, to create visual itineraries that emphasise Ras Al Khaimah's natural beauty. Their latest campaign, "All About You", features a feline character that captures a customer-centric experience, and the cat character Leo is becoming a much-loved social media icon.

Big Focus on MICE

While Ras Al Khaimah is predominately a leisure destination, thanks to their strong strategies in place, they have already successfully positioned the Emirate as one of the fastest-growing MICE and wedding destinations in the region, with a year-on-year growth of 45 per cent as of September 2023 in MICE room nights driven by international incentive groups. Building on its robust history of hosting major events, Ras Al Khaimah has successfully welcomed prestigious sporting competitions such as the RAK Half Marathon, the DP World Tour Golf Championship, and the WMF Mini Football World Cup. Additionally, the emirate has been a focal point for high-profile conferences, like the three consecutive editions of the Arab Aviation Summit and the acclaimed annual Global Citizen Forum.

Insights

Amid escalating travel costs, RAKTDA notes an extended average length of stay, now at four nights, and a growing preference for all-inclusive packages. In 2023, there's a heightened demand for personalised experiences, with more travellers opting for tour operators. Key factors influencing decisions include digital connectivity, sustainability, and safety across diverse markets.



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Japan offers a blend of both summer and winter experiences

In this exclusive interview with Ryo Bunno, Executive Director, Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), Delhi, we delve into the objectives of the organisation in the Indian market while exploring the unique experiences that await international tourists in Japan.

Prashant Nayak

As global travel continues to rise, JNTO is actively reinvigorating projects and generating innovative content to attract international travellers. While the recovery is in progress, JNTO is specifically concentrating its efforts on the Indian market, where there are promising signs of growth, although a full recovery has not yet been achieved.

“Unfortunately, the Indian market hasn’t completely recovered, currently trailing 2–3 per cent behind pre-pandemic levels. Our goal is to revive the market and contribute to its growth, especially considering its significant size. Now, our focus is on steadily increasing the number of visitors in Japan, just as we did before the pandemic,” mentions Ryo.

Japan is renowned for its unique blend of tradition and innovation. Cities like Tokyo and Kyoto showcase modernity alongside historic temples and gardens. Okinawa has emerged as one of Japan’s most remarkable travel spots, offering visitors unique and captivating beach and island experiences. However, the country’s cherry blossoms, cuisine, and cultural festivals are major draws. The blooming of cherry blossoms in spring is a highly anticipated and celebrated event in Japan. While cherry blossoms are a central symbol, it’s important to recognise that Japan’s tourism richness and potential extend far beyond this iconic image.

“Japan’s advantage lies in its diverse content, from cherry blossoms to snow-covered landscapes. In November, the autumn foliage, with leaves turning various shades of red, blankets Japan from north to south, shifting from northern Hokkaido in November to Tokyo and beyond in December, offering vibrant hues. One can then witness beautiful landscapes, savour tasty food, and enjoy pleasant temperatures, making exploration easier. Japan’s winter season also offers a unique and exceptional experience, drawing travellers from Australia, Europe, and the United



▲ Ryo Bunno

States, particularly for its high-quality powder snow that is ideal for winter sports. Hokkaido in winter is famous for its snow festivals, snow palaces, and ski-playing grounds. We aim to promote all this variety, appealing to both traditional families and younger audiences with confidence. We want tourists to consider exploring Japan during these seasons,” explains Ryo.

“While Japan’s incentive market is well-developed, the Indian mindset towards the MICE market is still evolving. We’re keen on promoting Japan as an ideal incentive travel destination

Japan has a well-developed MICE and incentive travel market. The country’s well-developed transportation and infrastructure make it convenient for organising incentive trips. Efficient public transportation, modern hotels, and state-of-the-art conference facilities contribute to the appeal. Japan’s rich cultural heritage, historic sites, and traditional

arts provide a unique and attractive backdrop for incentive programmes. Ryo mentions, “While Japan’s incentive market is well-developed, the Indian mindset towards the MICE market is still evolving. We are keen on promoting Japan as an ideal incentive travel destination. Osaka, Kyoto, and Nagoya, close to Toyota’s headquarters, are becoming popular for MICE events. When it comes to educational travel, Japan is a destination that offers not only top-notch education but also a holistic and enriching experience for students on visits. We are also keen to engage students interested in educational travel.”

For travelling to Japan, there are many direct flights from India and connecting options via Singapore or Hong Kong. A Japanese visa can be obtained with proper documents within a month. While in Japan, in major urban centres like Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto, one can find a significant number of Indian restaurants catering to locals and expatriates where one can easily avail of their favourite Indian dishes.

On the marketing front, Ryo says that engaging with Indian travel agents involves tailoring information based on the specific market. The needs of the Mumbai market can be different from those of Bengaluru. While the top agents may need less basic information, they focus on distributing more detailed and specific content about various tourist regions and attractions in Japan to potential agents.

On a concluding note, when asked about the expectations from the Indian market in 2024, Ryo says, “While China has a larger market for us, the Indian market shows promise, and the increasing connectivity between India and Japan is encouraging. Future projections are optimistic, though exact tourist targets for 2024 are yet to be finalised for the next fiscal year.”

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Tourism Australia reclaiming the Indian tourism market

Following the border reopening, Tourism Australia has experienced a marked upswing in Indian visitations. The initial return, largely steered by the Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) segment, evolves into a gradual recovery across the holiday and MICE segments. Nishant Kashikar, Country Manager, India and Gulf, Tourism Australia, shares more insights into how they navigated 2023 and the organisation's performance in the Indian market.

Prashant Nayak

India has consistently been the fastest-growing source market for Australia, which is evidence enough to showcase the increasing travel appetite for international destinations amongst the holiday segments. India is presently the fifth largest source market for Australia in terms of visitor arrivals, a jump from the seventh largest source market pre-COVID in 2019. For the year ended September 2023, Indian visitors to Australia were 386,000, representing a 100 per cent recovery to pre-COVID levels. Total trip spends of Indian tourists for the year ending June 2023 reached A\$ 2.2 billion (approximately Rs 12,000 crore), showing a significant increase of 24 per cent compared to the year ending June 2019. As of September 2023, holiday and the VFR segment contributed to 14 per cent and 60 per cent of total visitation, respectively, whereas business, employment, and education contributed to 9, 7, and 6 per cent respectively.

Diverse Delights

Based on anecdotal feedback from their key distribution partners, airlines, and Premier Aussie Specialists, Australia continues to enjoy the position of being a key long-haul destination for Indians with an appetite for longer stays and increased spends. While visitation from India continues to be concentrated along the east coast of Australia to the states of Victoria, New South Wales, and Queensland, they have also seen increased traction to destinations such as Perth, Adelaide, Kangaroo Island, Canberra, Uluru, and Tasmania. High-yield travellers of the Indian market consider Australia to be the most favourable country for natural beauty, good food and wine, and aquatic and coastal experiences. Among the most well-liked and popular experiences amongst Indians are climbing the Sydney Harbour Bridge or the roof of the



▲ Nishant Kashikar

Adelaide Oval, visiting the Sydney Opera House or the iconic Melbourne Cricket Ground and the Sydney Cricket Ground, admiring the native Australian wildlife, viz. kangaroos and koalas, swimming with whale sharks in the Ningaloo Reef, hot air ballooning over Canberra's wine region, and scuba diving or snorkelling in the Great Barrier Reef.

Charting the Course

One of Tourism Australia's strategic priorities since the reopening of Australian borders was to facilitate access by restoring the aviation capacity back to pre-COVID levels as well as expediting the visa processing timeline. Currently, there has been a tripling of direct aviation capacity between India and Australia, with both Air India and Qantas commencing non-stop flights between the two countries. The introduction of three non-stop Mumbai to Melbourne flights per week by Air India starting December 15 will further enhance accessibility. The tourism board has worked closely with their airline partners and Australian airports to drive direct connectivity and build frequency on the route. Initiatives such

as the Virtual Travel Fair, which brought together eight airlines under one roof, have also helped them restore aviation access to Australia.

Tourism Australia has also worked collaboratively with the Australian High Commission in New Delhi to streamline the visitor visa process for tourists and business travellers, ensuring hassle-free entry for Indian travellers with a 100 per cent online process, eliminating the need for biometrics, personal interviews, or physical submission of any documents.

Stimulating the Demand

'Come and Say G'day' stands out as one of their highly successful campaigns, serving as a global effort to aid the rebuilding of the Australian tourism industry. Launched in October 2022, the campaign spanned 15 crucial international markets to contribute to the recovery of the tourism sector by generating interest in travel to Australia. The country's attractions and experiences have also resonated well with Indian travellers across regions. The top eight cities of India—Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, Chennai, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Pune, and Ahmedabad contributed to over 70 percent of visitation to Australia.

Emergence of New Tourism Trends

Over the previous year, Tourism Australia witnessed a notable increase in tourism, driven by a desire among travellers to reconnect with friends and extended family. Additionally, there has been a growing interest in exploring new destinations and revisiting familiar ones. Noteworthy consumer behaviours observed during this period encompass slow tourism, adopting an eco-conscious mindset while travelling, a preference for wildlife and nature-centric experiences, and a heightened emphasis on immersive local experiences.



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British Tourism drives growth beyond London

VisitBritain's first trade mission to India in three years, titled 'Destination Britain – India,' aimed to increase visits across the various regions and seasons of Great Britain. Louise Bryce, Partnerships Director, VisitBritain, and Vishal Bhatia, Country Manager India, VisitBritain, outline the global resurgence of British Inbound tourism and India's significance in Britain's growth metrics.

Prativa V Bhalla

UK inbound tourism, a key part of the British economy, is experiencing a strong recovery in value. The July 2023 forecast projects a £ 30.9 billion (INR 3.16 billion) value, up 9 per cent from 2019. Anticipated visits stand at 37.5 million, representing 92 per cent of 2019 levels. Louise stated, "The US, as our main market, is displaying a robust recovery trajectory with a £6 billion market, while France and Germany are key short-haul markets for us. India holds immense importance due to its pace of recovery, rapid growth, widespread regional appeal, and visitations across seasons. India is presently ranked 11th globally but is rapidly ascending."

The flagship event, which took place from November 19 to November 21, 2023, at Grand Hyatt Gurgaon, saw 26 British trade industry suppliers from across the nations and regions of the UK meet with 100 plus top buyers from India to engage in a series of pre-scheduled free-flow meetings. The suppliers included hotels, retailers, visitor attractions, tour operators, transport providers, and local destinations from across Britain. Vishal stated, "This event marks a



▲ Louise Bryce and Vishal Bhatia

significant comeback since our previous gathering, just before COVID-19. We have successfully assembled travel agents and tour operators from all over India to connect and interact with the UK trade."

The trade meet began with the electrifying India-Australia Cricket World Cup match, which sparked an incredible camaraderie among the participants. Each Australian wicket falling was met with cheers, uniting India and Britain in their emotionally charged support for Team India, visible in a sea of blue jerseys. Despite India's defeat, as the

Britons comforted their Indian friends, the bonds formed during the match continued through the following days, setting a heartwarming tone of solidarity.

Mission Objective

Destination Britain programmes in key markets consistently foster business opportunities and spark renewed interest in the UK. The objective is to encourage high-value FIT, group arrivals, and business travellers to extend their stay in the UK, exploring regions beyond London. This trend resonates with the global shift toward experiential travel as travellers seek authentic and immersive experiences.

For India, the primary focus is to drive growth beyond London via regional gateways, leveraging increased airline connectivity and improved access to British regional cities. The aim is to promote travel to Britain throughout the year. VisitBritain emphasises its 'See Things Differently' campaign, promoting unique experiences in Great Britain to inspire visitors to explore diverse destinations across different seasons.



Leading Recovery from the India Market

With approximately 1.5 million members of the Indian diaspora living and working in the UK, there exists a robust people-to-people connection, which fuels the growing business exchange. Per visit, Indian visitors spent £1,480 in 2022, a notable increase from £848 in 2019. Business visitors contributed £241 million to the UK's total spend from India, comprising 32 per cent of the overall expenditure. Indian visitors spent a record £764 million in the UK, surpassing 2019 levels by 2 per cent. This growth trend has continued into 2023, with India projected to become a £1 billion inbound visitor market by 2024, marking it as one of the UK's fastest-growing tourism markets. Airline seat capacity from India to the UK also shows strong recovery and growth, with September 2023 witnessing a 53 per cent increase compared to the same month in 2019.

Notably in 2022, Indian visitors to the UK extended their stays, explored regional areas, and notably boosted their spending. They spent more than half of their trip outside London, which is triple the usual duration, averaging an eight-day stay.

Gateway Cities to Exploring Great Britain

The target cities for product development involving collaboration between the UK industry and India are London, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, and Edinburgh, along with their surrounding countryside. The aim is to encourage increased travel by Indian tourists to regions beyond London. This emerging trend indicates a growing inclination towards immersing and experiential travel. The 'England Expert' trade e-learning platform developed by VisitBritain in partnership with trade media promotes gateway cities.

Target Segment

Vishal stated, "The segment we are targeting comprises approximately one-third split among VFR, leisure, and business travellers from India. Both leisure and business travellers are integral parts of our focus because of their significant impact. When individuals visit the UK for business purposes, they often extend their stay for leisure activities. These individuals, who typically spend more and may bring their families along, are our primary focus. We aim to attract high-value individuals interested in exploring regions, engaging in sports, experiencing diverse culinary delights, and immersing themselves in various cultural experiences."

VisitBritain is expanding its focus to 'Tier 2' Indian cities by conducting trade training sessions, facilitating educational trips, promoting new products, and designing customised itineraries to enhance engagement in these regions and additionally, facilitate connections between MICE operators and incentive groups to ensure the smooth processing of visas for corporates travelling to Britain.

Factors Contributing To Growth Trajectory

Enhanced flight options have notably increased visitor attraction. In September 2023, flight levels surged by 53 per cent compared to 2019, offering approximately 38,000 nonstop direct flight seats. Added to that, Indian visitors commonly choose Middle Eastern or European carriers, indicating substantial travel opportunities.

Visa processing times have notably improved, with turnaround times ranging between two to three weeks within the set schedule, which has significantly contributed to the upsurge in Britain's inbound tourism numbers.

While London has historically been a favoured destination for Indians, efforts since 2018 have aimed to broaden itineraries beyond London, focusing on the north of England and Scotland. Leveraging events like the 2019 Cricket World Cup hosted by England and Wales helped showcase attractions in these regions. Additionally, events like the Birmingham Commonwealth Games in 2022 boosted destinations like Birmingham in the West Midlands on the Indian travel map. With a renewed focus on gateway cities, regional tourism is being marketed to showcase the stunning travel opportunities outside London.

Green Innovations

Sustainability is a top priority with initiatives like the Lumo, offering 100 per cent electric train service between Edinburgh and London for affordable, low-carbon travel. In gastronomy, Britain hosts 31 Michelin Green Star restaurants, blending culinary excellence with clean practices. Eco-friendly luxury accommodations include 'The Londoner' in Leicester Square, setting the perfect example of energy and water conservation, while the Emerald is recognised as UK's first 'Zero Carbon accommodation' in the Cornish countryside. Additionally, the recently opened '1 Hotel' in London overlooking Green Park marks the brand's debut in the UK as a sustainable sanctuary.

Louise concluded, "The UK's appeal lies in its diverse offerings within a compact space, encompassing varied landscapes, histories, and cultural richness. The strong ties in history, language, trade, and economic prosperity in India contribute to further growth potential between the two nations."

INDIANS IN PURSUIT OF GLOBAL EXPERIENCES

Glacier Lagoon and Ice Cave Exploration in Iceland

In the realm of travel, India has emerged as a dynamic hub for luxury seekers and a growing community of discerning travellers. As we step into 2024, the landscape of luxury travellers from India continues to evolve, driven by shifting preferences, technological advancements, and a renewed focus on personalised experiences.

Ruchi Kohli

In the upcoming 10 years, there will be an influx of Indian tourists around the world. In the forthcoming decades, India's vast and rapidly expanding youth population, consistent economic growth, and rising wealth levels will play a major role in shaping the country's luxury landscape on the local and global fronts.

India's economy is rising quickly and seeing increasing prosperity, making it a significant worldwide source market for luxury travel. With a population of over 1.4 billion, India has surpassed China to become the world's most populous country and currently boasts the fifth-largest economy. Furthermore, the median age of the population is 27.6, which is more than 10 years younger than that of the majority of major economies. By 2030, it is predicted that demand for products and services—including leisure and travel—will have doubled.

Travelling is quickly evolving into a genuine means of escape from dull everyday life. We will continue to see an increasing number of discriminating travellers opting to travel off-grid. Being in genuine lodgings and experiencing the indigenous ways of life is a simple and enjoyable diversion from the mundane.

Redefining Luxury in Travel

Luxury is an often misunderstood and more often distorted word. Luxury is subjective, because for some it may be the butler at a large resort, for another, it may be sipping local coffee in a small fishing town in Peru.

For affluent Indians, the definition of luxury in travel has evolved beyond simply material grandeur. Indian luxury travellers in 2024 are looking for immersive and authentic experiences that align with their unique interests and



About the Author

Ruchi Kohli is the Chief of the Experience of Away&Co, a part of the Creative Travel family of brands. Away&Co has become one of India's most experiential luxury tourism companies, which specialises in legendary destinations, and for whom it's never a trip, it's a journey and it's never just a destination, it's an experience. Ruchi has lived overseas and widely travelled on six continents, and leads a team of experienced travel designers who create intriguing journeys for many of India's affluent families.



Mezcaleria in Oaxaca

values. This has resulted in an increase in demand for tailored experiences that provide a deeper connection to the area. This trend indicates a desire for meaningful interaction rather than the typical luxurious trappings of large-size hotel-based vacations.

Personalisation Enabled by Technology

Technology continues to play an important role in transforming the landscape of luxury travel. In 2024, Indian travellers will be able to modify their experiences because of technological improvements. From virtual reality previews of destinations to more personalised and seamless travel journeys, technology is supporting more personalised and seamless travel journeys.

Changing Tides

The aftermath of major global events and uncertainty has affected luxury travellers' choices. Indian travellers, in particular, have shown a preference for exclusive and legendary destinations that provide a fully immersive experience. Affluent travellers are increasingly pivoting towards private villas, small luxury hotels in smaller towns rather than focusing on big cities, and personalised yacht and charter services. What is now here to stay is the insatiable appetite of Indians seeking out life-changing experiences that bring them

closer to their loved ones and allow them to create stories for a lifetime.

Influencing Decisions

The power of social media on travel cannot be overstated. Social media channels such as Instagram, YouTube, and travel blogs have a huge impact on location and experience selection. Today, influencers and content creators play a major and important role in shaping impressions and motivating travel decisions. Content is unquestionably king.

Embracing Responsible Travel

A growing awareness of sustainability and ethical travel has had a huge impact on the choices of luxury travellers in India. Indians are becoming more interested in environmentally friendly accommodations and experiences that benefit local communities. The environmental impact of long-distance travel is becoming more well recognised. Travellers are working harder than ever to be more conscious of their travel effect at every stage of their journey.

2024 and Beyond

As we navigate the changing world of luxury travel in India, it's clear that Indian luxury traveller's desires and preferences have outgrown previous norms. The year 2024 and beyond will see a shift towards

highly immersive, sustainable, and customised experiences. These trends reflect a deeper need for meaningful connections, cultural immersion, and responsible exploration, as well as the rising culture of luxury travel among Indian aficionados.

Beyond Conventional Extravagance

As Away&Co has seen over the past years, the journey of luxury travel in India continues to evolve, while promising an exciting era of exploration and discovery for those seeking unparalleled experiences beyond the realms of conventional extravagance. Away&Co focuses all its trips on its four core 'Away Absolutes' – Away to Authentic Stays; Away to Immerse; Away to local dining and Away to be Responsible. Away&Co specialises in what we like to call 'Legendary Destinations', which offer the luxury Indian traveller not only the most unique experiences, but were only considered bucket list destinations up to recently. Some of the unique experiences are a Private visit to a craft Mezcaleria in Oaxaca, Glacier Lagoon and Ice Cave Exploration in Iceland with a local expeditioner, a Stargazing experience in the Dark Sky Reserves in Kazakhstan, Expert wine blending masterclass in Argentina, and Space-inspired Sky Pod glamping in Antarctica among others.



Cruising through Switzerland with BLS Interlaken

Switzerland, renowned for its postcard-perfect landscapes, has no dearth of picturesque sights and experiences. But when you add a serene boat cruise across its pristine lakes to the mix, the experience is nothing short of magical. In an interview with Niklaus Hotz, Sales Manager, BLS Interlaken Lake Cruise, we had an in-depth look into what sets this cruise line apart.

Vartik Sethi

Setting Sail with Distinction

BLS Interlaken Lake Cruise operates a fleet of 12 boats — 8 on Lake Thun and 4 on Lake Brienz. "BLS Interlaken Lake Cruises is a subsidiary of the BLS Railway Company, which is the largest private train operator in Switzerland. Our fleet of 12 boats offers services on Lake Thun and Lake Brienz, making us stand out from our competitors on these lakes," shared Niklaus Hotz, Sales Manager, BLS Interlaken Lake Cruise.

A Daily Dose of Natural Beauty

With up to five daily departures on Lake Brienz during the summer season (from April to October), and Lake Thun boasting hourly departures, tourists have a plethora of options. The beauty of these cruises? The strategic location of their piers. Situated mere footsteps from railway stations and coach parks, the transition from train or bus to boat is seamless. A trip from Thun to Interlaken West takes just 2 hours and 10 minutes. This journey presents an unparalleled opportunity to soak in the natural beauty, from the vivid turquoise hue of Lake Brienz — thanks to the glacial particles — to local attractions like the Giessbach Falls and the idyllic village of Iseltwald. "The hopping on and off principle lets guests enjoy multiple sites in one day, complementing the big mountain excursions available in the area," Hotz pointed out.

Every cruise comes equipped with an onboard restaurant, allowing passengers to indulge in delectable meals as they take in the breathtaking views. For those spontaneous souls, reservations are possible but not mandatory for individuals. However, for larger groups (10 or more), prior booking is essential.

Lake Thun and Lake Brienz combine to offer a dual-lake experience in the core of Bernese Oberland.



▲ Niklaus Hotz

Beyond the Cruise

The cruise isn't just about floating on water; it's a gateway to several other excursions. The Niederhorn Mountain, St Beatus caves, and majestic castles like Oberhofen and Spiez can be seamlessly integrated into the itinerary. For those seeking a slice of Swiss culture, the paddle steamers in the fleet offer a supervised play cabin for children, allowing adults to relax on deck.

Speaking of what's new in 2023, Hotz gleamed, "We have our completely refurbished flagship on lake Brienz, the MS Brienz."

Tailoring to Taste

For events, birthdays, or even weddings, private charters are available, catering to personalised requirements, be it food, music, or ambiance. Niklaus emphasised their awareness of varying culinary preferences. While European vegetarian options are aplenty on scheduled cruises, those yearning for authentic Indian cuisine can avail it through private charters. According to Hotz, food, undoubtedly, plays a

crucial role in enhancing the travel experience. Addressing the diverse culinary preferences, especially of the Indian travellers, Hotz assured, "We have fixed vegetarian options and for private charters, the possibility of an Indian buffet."

Speaking on Charter Cruises Hotz expanded, "We offer customised cruises for both corporate and private events. Our boats vary in capacity, accommodating from 32 to 376 guests in banquet settings. Moreover, the catering is à la carte, ensuring a personalised experience."

A unique highlight of their service is the vintage steamboats, which have a delightful surprise. Hotz shared, "Our steamboats come with supervised play-cabins, specially designed for children, allowing families to enjoy their journey with utmost peace and delight."

Swisstainable Voyage

In line with global sustainability trends, BLS Interlaken shines through its actions having achieved the Sustainable Label Level 2 under Switzerland Tourism's sustainability programme called Swisstainable. Not stopping at accolades, they've equipped MS Jungfrau which has an electric hybrid engine, reducing fuel consumption and the carbon footprint.

Targeting the Indian Traveller

With an Indian sales agency and strategic digital marketing initiatives, including a user-friendly website, BLS aims to tap into the burgeoning Indian tourist market. With brochures, tailor-made charter options, and an emphasis on unique Swiss experiences, BLS Interlaken Lake Cruise is all set to be a preferred choice for those seeking a tranquil Swiss escape.

In a nutshell, a journey with BLS Interlaken Lake Cruise is more than just sightseeing; it's about experiencing Switzerland in its true, untouched glory. Whether you're a solo traveller or with a group, make sure to set sail with them on your next Swiss sojourn!

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Crystal Symphony: A Luxe Affair at Sea

A voyage that exceeded all expectations

Crystal Symphony, now owned by A&K Travel Group, embarked on its maiden journey on September 1, 2023. Recently docked in Mumbai, an exclusive two-day showcase invitation was extended to head honchos from travel, trade, and media by Palomino Hospitality, the sole PSA for Crystal Cruise in India. Embarking on the newly renovated Crystal Symphony was an experience that exceeded all my expectations.

Nehali Jain

Originally built in 1995, Crystal Symphony has undergone a remarkable renovation and now symbolises luxury and timeless elegance at sea. Ajay Vinayak, CEO, and Vandana Vinayak, Director, Palomino Hospitality, were perfect hosts, eager to showcase Crystal’s offerings as an ideal choice for Indians seeking luxury cruise travel. Ajay emphasised group bookings and MICE, highlighting the ships’ blend of classic charm, modern amenities, outstanding entertainment, elegant suites, six-star hospitality, and unparalleled destination immersion.

Starting on Deck 5, the timeless Crystal Plaza atrium welcomed guests with its concierge and shore excursion area. Adjacent to the Central Plaza, the Crystal Cove bar and lounge offered a variety of artisanal cocktails, wines, and delicious snacks to nibble. A true introduction to the ship’s all-inclusive nature, featuring live music and entertainment. The ship’s main dining room, Waterside Restaurant, presented a culinary extravaganza with meals on par with the best specialty restaurants on other cruise lines.

On Deck 6, the Apropos & Facets shopping arcade retained charm, offering stylish apparel, designer watches, and high-end jewellery. The Luxe Nightclub and Hollywood Theatre provided unmatched entertainment, while the ship’s library was a Mecca for book lovers. Computer University@sea offered complementary courses for all skill levels. The Connoisseur Club, a favourite spot, transported me to a vintage lounge with an expansive collection of cigars and global Cognac. It’s an 18-seater, wooden, warm, elegant space for intimate conversations.

On Deck 10, I stayed in one of 85 Sapphire Veranda Suites, newly renovated with separate dining and living areas. The modern earth-tone decor featured an art display above the couch. The living area included a small table with two chairs, a desk, a coffee table, a sitting chair, and a walk-in closet. The suite had a bedroom and bathroom with a marble double vanity, ample storage, a shower, Sicilian Ortigia bath amenities famous for their scents, soaps, creams, and bath products, a specially designed pillow menu to choose from, and a private veranda with a coffee table. The room also consisted of an interactive tablet for reservation and unlimited standard WiFi. Butler’s service was attentive. I enjoyed excellent room service, including one of the best vegetarian pizzas and a delicious cappuccino. The attention to detail even extended to silver cutlery and condiments for my in-room dining experience.

The ship’s culinary offerings ranged from traditional Italian at Osteria D’Ovidio to Nobu’s Umi Uma and Sushi Bar, all delivering delectable delights. The Vintage Room,

an extra-cost dining venue, provided wine-paired meals for smaller groups. Deck 11 featured the Palm Court observation lounge with breathtaking views and exceptional tea time. Outdoor spaces, like the Seahorse Pool Deck and Tastes Kitchen & Bar, showcased excellent design. Symphony’s varied options, from the Marketplace buffet to creative dishes at Tastes, ensured a gastronomic adventure.

In summary, the recent enhancements on Crystal Symphony, with larger suite rooms with hi-tech amenities, a 1:1 ratio for staff to guests, exceptional dining, entertainment, and outstanding service, position it as an unparalleled choice for a rejuvenating and memorable voyage.





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The Evolution and Opportunities of Indian Outbound Travel in 2023

Travel is intrinsic to every human being, be it for work or leisure, but owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the world has witnessed the emergence of altered ways of travel. Today, technology adoption has changed the way travel is searched, researched, booked, and purchased, extending to the pre-pandemic non-adopted age groups. We speak to some of our industry partners to understand how things are moving now with outbound travel.

Gurjit Singh Ahuja



▲ Amit Malhotra



▲ Nishant Gupta



▲ Varun Gupta



▲ Rakesh Shetty

The past year, 2023, presented a unique set of challenges and opportunities for destinations worldwide, shaped by evolving traveller behaviours, market dynamics, and ongoing global events. High international airfares, currently prevalent, are definitely a dampener on travel plans for the willing and yearning Indian traveller. They play as a deterrent, forcing leisure travel to short-haul destinations, as does GST, the recently enforced TCS, long visa processing times, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and the recent Israel-Palestine disturbances.

Today, tourism boards are vying to woo Indian travellers as the power of these travellers is being noticed the world over as they seek quality travel products, newer destinations, and newer experiences, combined with their high spending power. Countries with traveller-friendly visa regimes and visas on arrival with shorter processing times have emerged as clear winners. This has even prompted countries like Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia to introduce waivers of visa fees for Indian travellers. As airline operations worldwide start returning to normalcy, it is expected that more realistic and affordable air ticket pricing will return, with the hope that outbound travel will not only bounce back but surpass pre-pandemic levels.

The last two years have perceived sizeable and notable shifts and changes in

the Indian outbound travel market. India's tourism advantage lies in a substantial population of travel-oriented millennials and Generation Z and a significant number of aspirational travellers, making it a compelling source market for global tourism. Indians with strong social and family connections and robust social media influence also have an edge in knowing and understanding destinations better. Amit Malhotra, Founder, Global Travel DMC, explains, "In the last two years, social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram have increased traveller awareness levels. The impact of social media and shared experiences and thoughts have increased awareness in people, and they are now more knowledgeable and comfortable with transacting online. Sometimes, there is a mismatch in expectation levels when transacting online, but most people are more knowledgeable than in earlier times. He further adds, "Overall, I am positive about these changes, as people are more vocal and specific with their queries and expectations."

On the other hand, Nishant Gupta, Managing Director, Rezbook DMC, shares, "The major shift we have noticed is that there is no longer seasonality in the travel business. Airfares have gone really high even for domestic sectors, which has led to an overall increase in the total package price." Varun Gupta, Proprietor, Citadelii,

elaborates his views, "We have witnessed a significant transformation in the travel preferences of Indian consumers. There is a growing inclination towards offbeat and experiential destinations as travellers seek unique and immersive experiences. Health and safety considerations have taken centre stage, influencing destination and accommodation choices. Travellers are now more inclined towards responsible travel." Meanwhile, Rakesh Shetty, Vice President, Sales and Operation, WOW Holidays, points out, "Over the last two years, we've observed a significant shift in the preferences of Indian travellers towards experiential and offbeat destinations. There's a growing demand for immersive cultural experiences and sustainable tourism practices."

In 2023, various challenges emerged for the travel industry, necessitating strategic responses. Navigating these challenges involved a dynamic blend of adaptability, innovation, and a proactive approach to ensure resilience and sustained growth. Varun Gupta mentions, "2023 presented its own set of challenges, including airfare fluctuations, geopolitical conflicts, and visa-related issues. To address these challenges, Citadelii adopted a proactive approach, closely monitoring global developments and providing transparent communication to clients. Our focus on offering flexible and customisable travel solutions allowed us to navigate uncertainties more effectively."

For Nishant Gupta, the staff layoffs and ensuing uncertainties during the COVID period resulted in many seasoned and experienced staff leaving the tourism sector for good. He points out, “This exodus has led to a chronic staff shortage in the industry, and we have no options except to train freshers.” Regarding challenges and strategies, Rakesh Shetty highlights that “challenges like rising aviation fuel costs and geopolitical tensions have impacted travel patterns. However, our proactive approach includes diversifying our destination portfolio, closely monitoring geopolitical situations, and providing alternative travel options to address the concerns of our clients.”

With the implementation of TCS on tour packages effective October 1, 2023, tour operators in India are left to encounter significant concerns over the increase affecting their business and scheme of things. Rakesh Shetty states, “The implementation of TCS does pose operational challenges. However, we are working closely with our financial advisors to ensure compliance and minimise the impact on our clients. Clear communication and transparency remain our guiding principles.” On his part, Nishant Gupta says, “Slowly and gradually, travel agents are getting used to collecting TCS

from clients, and since it’s a government norm, one has to abide by it.”

The surge in market players offering lower prices raises concerns about an industry-wide ‘Race to the Bottom.’ This phenomenon, driven by intense competition, may compromise product or service quality, customer satisfaction, and overall industry sustainability. However, Amit Malhotra mentions, “I believe we are in a service industry where quality is of utmost importance. Our focus has always been on the quality of products and services being delivered rather than trying to make ourselves the cheapest in the market. Moreover, as everyone knows, quality carries a price tag; run-of-the-mill work is not our cup of tea.” Sharing his sentiment, Rakesh Shetty also says, “The industry’s trend towards lower prices is a concern, and we acknowledge the importance of maintaining value while remaining competitive. Our strategy involves focusing on unique offerings, personalised services, and sustainable travel practices to differentiate ourselves in the market.” Highlighting his company’s pioneering efforts in his market, Nishant Gupta mentions, “Being one of the pioneer DMCs of CIS countries, we as a company believe in giving and maintaining quality service with 24/7 assistance.”

In 2023, Global Travel DMC expanded its portfolio to include Nordic countries. According to Amit Malhotra, the company successfully targeted and showcased Nordic travel products to its partner agents. As an independent destination specialist, Global Travel DMC excels at tailoring holidays to meet the unique needs of its clients, offering a personalised and bespoke travel experience.

WoW Holidays in 2023 strategically targeted emerging markets with a focus on the Balkans. Rakesh says that the region showcases untapped potential and aligns with the evolving preferences of their clientele. Citadelii, on the other hand, actively promoted Morocco, Northern Europe, Croatia, and Slovenia. These destinations hold immense potential in the Indian market, offering unique experiences that are relatively unexplored. Varun Gupta shared, “Our strategic focus on these regions aligns with our commitment to providing diverse and distinctive travel options for our clientele.” Meanwhile, in 2023, Nishant Gupta looked at spreading his distribution network within India. He explains, “Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Madhya Pradesh, Bangalore, and Kolkata were great potential growth regions, and we have managed to make inroads into these markets.”



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The Eclectic Charisma of Owl and the Pussycat Hotel, Sri Lanka

Nestled by the water's edge, this enchanting boutique hotel in Sri Lanka comprises 17 stylish suites and rooms and offers stunning views of the Indian Ocean. Its exceptional and personalised services aim to enchant guests and provide an unforgettable experience.

Prativa V Bhalla

The luxury boutique hotel is located along Sri Lanka's southern coast, in Thalpe, a 20-minute tuk-tuk ride from the heritage town of Galle and a 2.5-hour drive from Colombo International Airport.

Unique Hospitality Approach

The hotel owes its quirky name to Edward Lear's famous nonsensical poem "Owl and the Pussycat." The hotel's design seamlessly integrates this thematic inspiration, featuring eclectic decor that harmonises the Sri Lankan seaside ambience with international sophistication and style. It presents a clever yet elegant ambience, complemented by welcoming staff dedicated to providing inclusive and unparalleled guest experiences.

Its unique selling proposition is rooted in a personalised and artistic approach to hospitality. Instead of using room numbers, the hotel names its rooms after elements from the poem, such as 'A Small Guitar' and 'The Sea'. Each suite, individually named and designed, reflects the owner's personal vision and travel experiences. Various artists have contributed to the unique artsy atmosphere, including hand-painted motifs by Italian artist Cisky Gabriele and picture frames crafted from scrap

boards by German intern Anton Borkman. Two well-stocked libraries and comfortable seating areas create an engaging literary ambience, leading to lively interactions and fostering connections among guests.

Contemporary Sri Lankan Gastronomy

The hotel's gourmet cuisine showcases modern Sri Lankan flavours by integrating local produce to offer guests a delightful contemporary culinary experience. Fine dining is championed by a focus on local ingredients, creative presentations, and a blend of traditional and modern Sri Lankan flavours.

Named after the poem, the restaurant, 'The Runcible Spoon,' resides on an elegant dining terrace showcasing breathtaking ocean views. The restaurant prioritises food preferences, catering to vegan, Jain, and keto diets. Acknowledged as one of Galle's finest, it presents a diverse selection, including modern, light, fresh Sri Lankan delicacies.

Immersive Local Experiences

Guests can engage in curated activities on the sea, surrounding villages, and markets for an authentic local experience. Tourist attractions near the property include cultural sites, natural landmarks, adventure, wellness, and traditional markets that showcase the beauty and heritage of Sri Lanka. The front desk is at the guests' disposal to curate tailor-made activities of the best that Sri Lanka has to offer. Most popular activities are private boat ocean safari, surfing lessons, private forest picnics, beach turtle hatchery experience, Ambalangoda Mask Museum and Galle Fort visit

with tuk-tuk ride, a bike ride through Sri Lankan paddy fields, and morning market guided tours.

Sustainable Conservation Measures

The Hotel is committed to upholding sustainability across all operations to safeguard the surrounding biodiversity, ensuring it remains unpolluted and protected. Sustainable initiatives include the use of glass jugs in each room, fabric napkins, and the avoidance of all disposable cutlery. The hotel wastewater is purified into 'brown water' before being released into the town drainage system. Sheets and towels are changed every three days, and guests are educated on water conservation methods. Sensible food practices are strictly followed to reduce food waste.

Local Community Empowerment

The Owl and the Pussycat Hotel takes pride in supporting small Sri Lankan enterprises and retails unique decor pieces and handcrafted furniture from local artisans. The gift shop also features handmade dolls of owls and pussycats, the proceeds of which are donated to the development of children's libraries in underdeveloped communities. Additionally, it is the proud sponsor of the Edward Lear Prize for Poetry at the Galle Literary Festival, promoting literature and creative writing amongst young Sri Lankans between 18 and 30 years of age.

The clever poem aptly mirrors the property's atmosphere, encapsulating a blend of cool, relaxed, gourmet, and artistic ambience. This unconventional setting serves as the ideal backdrop for unforgettable holidays.



Safe exploration through splendours of Egypt tailored for India by Travstarz Egypt DMC

In the travel saga that began in 2009, Travstarz Global Group emphasises on the company's comprehensive grasp of Indian market preferences, creating travel journeys that resonate and uplift their experience.

Vartik Sethi

Pankaj Nagpal, Managing Director, leads Travstarz Global Group in an approach that is more inclusive than simply facilitating hotel bookings and tour itineraries at all their DMC locations. The company places high importance on not missing any small details or services that their client needs.

In a close-knit networking event amongst the travel trade, displaying how being considerate is key in their service model, Ali ElSamman, Operations Director, Travstarz Egypt DMC, explained, "If he needs a sim card, we provide him one for free."

Be it a history aficionado looking to delve into the depths of Egypt's past or a busy bee wanting to capture the essence of Egypt in a snapshot, Travstarz Egypt DMC tailors each experience meticulously. "We sweat the small stuff so our clients can bask in the joy of their journey," said ElSamman.

He encourages Indian travellers to experience local Egyptian cuisine, "80 per cent of our food

is vegetarian, but it's different than it is in India." This culinary adventure is part of their broader mission to offer a cultural experience.

Regarding group tours, ElSamman mentioned, "We start with fixed departure dates, covering major cities like Cairo, Aswan, and Luxor." These tours are designed to fit various budgets and time constraints, whether it's a family vacation, a romantic honeymoon, or an important business meeting. The average stay recommended for Indian travellers is six to seven nights, allowing them to experience a blend of Egypt's main attractions and hidden gems.

While the ongoing geopolitical situation might have spurred rumours about safety in Egypt, ElSamman clarified the misconceptions,



▲ L-R: Vani Singh, Sucheta Nagpal, Ali ElSamman, Pankaj Nagpal

ensuring that all itineraries are far from any conflict areas. "We are not part of this," he stated, affirming the safety of their travel destinations.

"We respect our word; this is why we have been successful in the last 10 years for the Indian market," concluded ElSamman, a testament to the company's commitment to India. Our India office is always available for all bookings and assistance you need for Egypt.

Air India adds new routes, spearheads technological innovation in aviation

Air India has showcased revolutionary digital transformation and global expansion, setting new benchmarks in the airline industry.

Vartik Sethi

In a groundbreaking move, Air India successfully deployed the industry's first generative AI virtual agent, 'Maharaja' in March 2023, leveraging the power of Microsoft Azure's OpenAI service. This technological stride has transformed customer service by efficiently handling over half a million customer queries since its inception. Currently, 'Maharaja' adeptly manages more than 6,000 queries daily in multiple languages, including Hindi, English, French, and German, thanks to its patent-pending technologies.

In a parallel leap towards enhancing its service offerings, Air India announced an innovative air-rail connection. This strategic move integrates air travel with access to over 5,600 train stations across Germany in collaboration with Deutsche Bahn. It has not only broadened travel options for passengers but has also underscored Air India's commitment to providing seamless and comprehensive travel solutions.

Further expanding its international footprint,



Air India entered into an interline partnership with Alaska Airlines. This move has proved to be a significant step in enhancing connectivity and customer convenience, offering a wider range of destinations and streamlined travel experiences for passengers of both airlines.

In addition to the strategic partnerships, Air India is set to enhance its flight operations by introducing non-stop flights on two new international routes. Starting December 15, 2023, the airline will commence non-stop flights connecting Mumbai with Melbourne and Delhi

with Phuket. A key player in adding new routes, Air India's ongoing efforts to connect India with key global destinations, facilitating travel for both business and leisure purposes, is nothing less than remarkable.

By integrating cutting-edge AI technology for enhanced customer service and expanding its network through strategic partnerships and new routes, Air India is not only redefining the travel experience but also positioning itself as a frontrunner in the perpetually evolving airline industry.

UNDERSTANDING TCS ON OVERSEAS TOUR PACKAGES

By amending Section 206C of the Income Tax Act, the Finance Bill has imposed a higher TCS (Tax Collected at Source) on foreign travel. The amendments have come into effect from October 1, 2023. For an upcoming international trip, it is crucial for the travellers and tour operators to acquaint themselves with this new regulation and understand the complexities of all the changes made in the provisions covering TCS on LRS and the purchase of overseas tour program packages. Let's examine some aspects and understand the implications related to the New TCS on foreign travel in detail.

Arjun Akruwala

The travel and tourism industry in India is undoubtedly passing through a horrendous phase since the last few years. A simple business of helping travellers book air tickets, hotels, tour packages, visas and ancillary services has been turned into a complex web of riddles since the introduction of GST and subsequently TCS. The industry barely survived the aftermath of COVID-19 and the

government announced the levy of TCS. In 2021-22, a total of USD 19.61 billion was remitted under LRS, up from USD 12.68 billion in 2020-21. In 2022-23, it rose to more than USD 24 billion and this has caught the eye of the government.

If you are planning to go on an international trip and any booking is done, offline or online, for overseas tour packages of more than Rs 7 lakh in a financial year, you have to pay TCS at 20 per cent from October 1, 2023. If the foreign tour packages cost up to Rs 7 lakh, TCS will be levied at 5 per cent.

Provisions relating to Tax Collection at Source (TCS) on Foreign Tours as introduced by Finance Act, 2020

The modification of Section 206C of the Income-tax Act, 1961, was aimed at collecting higher TCS on overseas package tours, as it is assumed that people make high-value

remittances, but their tax returns do not reflect proportionate income tax payments. TCS is an additional tax collected by sellers from buyers at the time of sale, which is then remitted to the government account. These provisions would substantially affect international travel from India.

TCS is applicable only on Overseas Tour Package

'Overseas tour program package' is defined as any tour package that offers a visit to a country or countries or territory or territories outside India and includes expenses for travel or hotel stay or boarding or lodging or any other expenditure of a similar nature or in relation thereto. To qualify as an 'Overseas Tour Program Package', the package should include at least two of the following: -

1. International travel ticket,
2. Hotel accommodation (with or without food)/boarding/lodging,
3. Any other expenditure of similar nature or in relation thereto.

FAQs for conceptual clarity of provisions

Whether the provisions also apply to travel agents or booking of the hotel or stay individually and not providing any tour package?

The intention of the legislature is clear that TCS applies only in case of the sale of a "package tour" which includes travel ticket expenses, hotel stay or sightseeing, entry tickets or boarding or lodging, etc. An individual sale of travel tickets, hotel booking, stay, and food is not covered under this definition.

Whether the provisions also apply to the entire cost of the package even if part of the package covers a domestic tour and the rest of the part is covered under an overseas tour?

Suppose a Mumbai buyer purchases a tour package which includes first visiting North India and after visiting North India proceeding to visit any overseas destinations.

In this case, two options are available with the seller. The first option is to split the invoice of the tour package into the domestic tour and overseas tour separately whereas the second option is TCS would be levied on the entire package of the tour under a single invoice.

TCS is liable to be paid by the buyer of the overseas tour package to the seller, whereas this provision does not apply when the buyer deducts the TDS.

E.g., ABC Ltd (corporate client) approached XYZ Tourism Ltd. (Seller) to organise an off-site tour for employees, which includes training as well as sightseeing out of India. Let's assume that ABC Ltd. is liable to deduct TDS on this transaction, then in that case XYZ Tourism Ltd shall not be liable to collect TCS on selling this package tour.

Whether payment through an overseas credit card would be counted in LRS?

As announced in the press release dated 28th June 2023, the classification of the use of international credit cards while

being overseas, as LRS is postponed. Therefore, No TCS shall be applicable on expenditure through International Credit Cards while being overseas till further order.

Whether the threshold of Rs 7 lakh, for TCS to become applicable on LRS, applies separately for each remittance through different authorised dealers? If not, how will the authorised dealer know about the earlier remittances by that remitter through some other authorised dealer?

It is clarified that the threshold of Rs 7 lakh for LRS is qua-remitter and not qua-authorised dealer. This is clear from the first proviso to sub-section (1G) of section 206C of the Act. Since the facility to provide real-time updates of remittances under LRS by remitter is still under development, it is clarified that the details of earlier remittances under LRS by the remitter during the financial year may be taken by the authorised dealer through an undertaking at the time of remittance.

What is the time to collect TCS?

TCS is to be collected on earlier of the following two events:

1. Amount debited by the seller i.e., on the Date of Invoice
2. At the time of receipt of the amount

Documents required to be maintained for compliance of the TCS provisions

1. Separate Invoicing/Cost Center to be developed for Domestic and International Tours.
2. Separate records need to be maintained for Domestic and International Tours.
3. Details of the PAN/Aadhar card need to be collected for International Tour buyers.
4. When a buyer makes advance payment for an international tour then in that case receipt voucher should also reflect TCS on such advance.

5. The invoice for the International Tour should also contain details of TCS collected from the buyer along with PAN/Aadhar Number.
6. Auto reconciliation of the TCS amount should be implemented for buyers who make payments in different tranches.
7. The Accounting system as well as the billing system has to be modified to incorporate TCS provisions.

Lastly, TCS can be taken as a challenge or as an opportunity as the tour operators who are not compliant will be facing a very difficult time going forward and thus this will create opportunities for the compliant and law-fearing tour operators to gain more market share. Further, the mammoth task of convincing the government regarding these draconian provisions should also not halt.



About the Author

Arjun Akruwala, a CA and LLB professional, specialises in Indirect Taxes. For the past six years, he has played a pivotal role at TAFI, serving as the official GST and TCS consultant. He is an experienced and respected travel trade industry taxation subject expert and has delivered more than 50 lectures at regional TAFI and other professional forum meetings.



The Alpine Allure of Courchevel

Beckons Travellers On All Budgets

Often called the ski capital of the world, Courchevel is the perfect discreet winter getaway in the heart of the alpine mountains of France. Alexia Laine, General Manager, Courchevel Tourisme, outlines the magic of Courchevel, the strategic importance of the Indian market, and the surprisingly accessible, cost-effective options present in this high-end luxury destination.

Prativa V Bhalla

Tucked away amidst the peaks and forests of the alpine mountains of Tarentaise Valley in the French Alps, the magical world of Courchevel beckons visitors with six villages comprising ski resorts, linked by ski lifts and shuttles, like a little magical universe of its own. Quiet elegance, exceptional quality, and phenomenal service drive the Courchevel experience. Alexis emphasises, “Quality is our legacy. The commitment to quality has been inherited from our ancestors and ingrained in our hospitality. Our focus is ensuring that everyone enjoys a high-quality experience in Courchevel, irrespective of their background or status. What matters most is the experience you have on-site.”

The Ski Capital of the World

The Courchevel adventure began first with the Saint Bon Village, with its inaugural hotel built in 1908. Steeped in history and serenity, the hotel houses a Baroque church and offers panoramic views of the rolling valleys. The village of Courchevel 1850 stands out as the pinnacle of luxury, frequented by celebrity guests and royalty enjoying discreetly expensive holidays. Peppered with high fashion, private airstrips, Michelin-starred restaurants, ski slope adventures, and state-of-the-art chalets fitted with opulent amenities, this village offers unparalleled service and quiet excellence to its high-



▲ Alexia Laine

profile guests.

The Pioneers behind the construction of Courchevel aimed to create a charming locale nestled in the mountains for winter getaways. Meticulous planning went into building ski lifts and crafting panoramic views, ensuring that the infrastructure, including the pylons and gondolas, seamlessly blended into the landscape, preserving its ethereal ambience. Courchevel ski resorts offer a wide range of winter activities such as cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, dog sledding, ski touring, tobogganing, Nordic walking, etc. However, with time, Courchevel

is rapidly evolving into a summer getaway as well, offering activities such as walking, hiking, climbing, electric biking, and tree-top adventures. Thrill seekers enjoy canyoning in landscapes shaped by erosion, jumping into natural pools, sliding down natural slides, and abseiling down waterfalls in the local rivers and rapids. Around 45 properties are operational during the winter peak, whereas 10 properties cater to guests during the summer. The increasing summer guest influx is soon expected to prompt a change in these numbers.

Budget-Friendly Options

This sought-after winter destination is considered a playground for the rich and famous, but it is a little-known fact that it offers extensive access to budget-friendly preferences as well. Alexis explains, “The charm of Courchevel extends beyond being solely a high-end luxury destination. While it does offer 5,000 beds dedicated to luxurious experiences, the majority of the 36,000-bed accommodation portfolio caters to diverse preferences. The range includes budget-friendly and mid-range options, making Courchevel a versatile destination that welcomes visitors from various economic backgrounds. The emphasis remains on providing every guest with an inclusive and high-quality experience, reinforcing the idea that Courchevel is much more than just an exclusive retreat for the affluent.”



The Indian Market Value

The strategic emphasis on India as a source market began approximately five years ago, driven by its evident growth trajectory. Courchevel exhibits a sustained commitment to upholding a strong presence in France while simultaneously pursuing diversification in foreign markets, with India being one such rapidly rising market. The current primary markets comprise Europe and the Middle East, followed by a proportional mix of Russian, Indian, Belgian, and US clientele.

Courchevel welcomes a diverse range of visitors, encompassing both leisure and business travellers. The destination previously had a significant MICE team, but due to the effects of COVID-19, it experienced downsizing. Presently, the MICE market is making a gradual comeback, with private clients engaged in MICE activities representing less than 10 per cent of the guest demographic. The majority of visitors fall under the category of FITs.

Stepping into The Indian Luxury Segment

Courchevel hosted events in Delhi and Mumbai to bring the destination to a larger Indian audience. In collaboration with ace Indian designers Falguni and Shane Peacock, a dinner was hosted in Mumbai for friends and family of Courchevel loyalists and invitees of the designer duo. Plans are underway to bring Courchevel to Kolkata in 2024 with a different format for market entry and expansion.

Discussions during a promotional tour led Courchevel Tourisme to consider the talented designers as ambassadors for India, sharing kindred values, entrepreneurial spirit, and a deep commitment to excellence. The photo shoot was unveiled at the Mumbai event. While open to other collaborations, the primary focus remains on Falguni Shane Peacock in India as a key ambassador. Loyalty drives a limited circle of partners, facilitating focused and valuable client connections in India.

Keeping The Slopes Green

Sustainability holds significant importance for Courchevel across various aspects. Those operating the ski lifts prioritise green energy consumption by exclusively purchasing green power, minimising overall electricity usage to reduce their carbon footprint. Additionally, they opt for environmentally friendly oils for machinery, such as for the groomers. Numerous hotels in the area actively pursue sustainable practices, genuinely aiming for minimal environmental impact rather than mere greenwashing tactics. Collaborating with the City Hall, ongoing projects are focused on furthering sustainability efforts in all six villages. Although ski resorts occupy just two per cent of mountain territories, environmental preservation remains a key concern.

Protecting the environment from pollution associated with ski activities is a top priority, considering that snow, the primary resource, comes from nature. Hence, the emphasis lies

on safeguarding the local biodiversity of the forests and protecting the welfare of animals within the territory.

Upcoming Alpine Adventures

Courchevel unveils new offerings annually, with 2023 introducing survival adventure camps, providing 24-hour forest immersion experiences guided by experts. Thrill-seekers can embark on wildlife safaris to study wolf habits in the forest. Moreover, a renovated historic five-star hotel is scheduled to open this winter, accompanied by new dining options, including IL Refugio, an Italian restaurant located atop a snowy peak between Verdon and Vizelle.

Alexis states, "Courchevel Tourisme is not a destination management company (DMC), yet we are happy to extend DMC-like support to both B2B and B2C clients. Serving as a primary contact point, our team leverages extensive knowledge of Courchevel to assist in crafting highly personalised stays, ensuring an extraordinary experience for our guests."

She adds, "Our philosophy centres around providing an incomparable experience in Courchevel, surpassing mere monetary value. Regardless of background or budget, we prioritise delivering an exceptional experience to all. This inclusive approach is a defining aspect contributing to an 80 per cent rate of returning guests, a testament to our unique standing in a tourism landscape filled with numerous options, and we take immense pride in this achievement."



Marriott's Remarkable Growth Trajectory in Maldives and Singapore

Cheryl Lum, Senior Area Director, Marketing – Singapore and Maldives, Marriott International, decodes the reasons behind the meteoric rise of the Marriott brand and charts the roadmap to their thriving presence in Singapore and Maldives.

Prativa V Bhalla

Marriott International emerges as a rapidly expanding hotel brand with an impressive portfolio. With nearly 8,600 properties, under 31 top brands in 139 countries, and territories globally, it is a leading example of exponential growth. In the Asia Pacific region, it features over 1,000 hotels across 24 countries, and territories, including seven resorts in the Maldives and 16 hotels in Singapore.

Cheryl states, “Marriott International’s Singapore and Maldives portfolio of hotels and resorts stand out due to our unwavering commitment to exceptional guest experiences, innovative design and architecture, strong community engagement, and a focus on sustainable practices. She further emphasises, “Our diverse portfolio of brands in both markets also offers a range of options to cater to different guest preferences.”

Brand Identity

The Marriott success story is firmly based on the robustness of its wide range of brand portfolios. Marriott International caters to diverse traveller preferences, ensuring that each brand offers a unique experience. Leveraging the strengths and individual identities of each brand, from Westin, the Ritz-Carlton, Sheraton, W, to J.W Marriott, compelling guest experiences are curated, that resonate effectively across various



▲ Cheryl Lum

demographics. This strategy aligns with the evolving preferences of travellers, enabling them to experience different and distinct hospitality under the same brand, complemented by the award-winning Marriott Bonvoy travel program.

Marriott International evaluates its operations and accomplishments through various key performance indicators. These metrics include revenue generation, market share, guest satisfaction and the strength of partnerships with stakeholders. The main objective is to prioritise stakeholder satisfaction, achieve visible returns on

investments in new hotels, and sustain profitability. All this demands a deep comprehension of market dynamics and the cultivation of robust partnerships with local allies.

Consistent Growth in Maldives and Singapore

In 2023, Marriott International demonstrated strong global performance, notably excelling in the Maldives and Singapore. Both countries achieved remarkable success, marked by exceptional occupancy rates and consistently positive guest feedback. This is a testament to an unwavering commitment to delivering distinct experiences and unparalleled service to suit every budget.

Both leisure and business segments significantly contribute to the overall business, with leisure currently comprising a larger portion of Maldives, as it is predominantly viewed as a leisure destination. In Singapore a balanced strategy is essential, addressing both sectors by offering top-notch business amenities and state-of-the-art conference facilities, alongside delivering distinctive and captivating leisure experiences. Post-pandemic, there has been a noticeable surge in MICE events in Singapore.

India Outbound Promotional Campaigns

India ranks within the top three primary source markets for the Maldives' tourism industry, contributing significantly to the island nation's overall market. Special promotions are implemented to enhance the Indian



outbound market and create more recall value. Popular ones include tailored Indian cuisine promotions, Chef collaborations, and specialised packages for multi-generational family travellers and honeymooners. Targeted marketing campaigns and exclusive partnerships with travel trade alliances also drive promotional campaigns. The Marriott Bonvoy partnership with the Mumbai Indians team during IPL, or the Marriott Bonvoy co-branded credit card partnership with HDFC Bank in India has been very popular. These offer consumers an unprecedented array of travel benefits, including Silver Elite loyalty status, with benefits such as priority late checkout, exclusive member rates, bonus points and much more. These initiatives aim to create strong brand loyalty and appeal to Indian travellers.

Emerging Travel Innovations

Cheryl notes, “I find the evolving trends in the hospitality industry, including the rise of experiential travel, sustainable practices and digital innovations particularly intriguing.” To meet these significant demands, Marriott properties regularly introduce immersive experiences that highlight the natural beauty of the Maldives and the inclusive cultural diversity of Singapore. Embracing technology remains a key aspect of growth in the travel industry, enhancing seamless guest interactions. From mobile key check-ins to smart room features, the aim is to provide a modern and efficient guest experience while minimising the carbon footprint. Sustainability is a global imperative that must be seriously considered and embraced.

The Sustainability Roadmap

Marriott International’s portfolio of hotels and resorts in Maldives and Singapore stands at the forefront of adapting to conservation goals by incorporating sustainability into core strategies and offerings. Brand Marriott has adopted and implemented diverse eco-friendly initiatives, such as sourcing renewable energy, reducing water usage, and minimising single-use plastics. This not only meets the expectations of contemporary travellers, but it also reflects a dedication to

positive environmental impact. These trends not only align with the broader industry shifts but also position Marriott International as the leader in delivering sustainable, experiential, and technologically advanced hospitality.

Notably, the recently opened Singapore EDITION on November 9, 2023, showcases a comprehensive approach to sustainability, featuring a zero-waste bar, water harvesting plant, and the absence of plastic water bottles. In the Maldives, Marriott properties have implemented robust sustainability practices, including initiatives like the 'Adopt a Coral' program at Sheraton Maldives Full Moon Resort and Spa, the 'Hydroponic Greenhouse' at Le Meridien Maldives Resort and Spa, and the 'JW Garden' at JW Marriott Maldives Resort and Spa.

impact of global events, maintaining high service standards amidst talent shortages, and aligning sustainability goals. Marriott International seeks to actively address these challenges through adaptable strategies and continuous innovative activities.

Premier Launches in Maldives

Marriott International’s promising ventures in the Maldives are poised for thrilling developments. The highly anticipated debuts of the Bulgari Resort Ranfushi Maldives and the JW Marriott Maldives Male Atoll Resort and Spa are scheduled for 2025. Marriott Bonvoy, the award-winning travel program me, and marketplace, offers members access to transformative experiences, while the Marriott Bonvoy app ensures complete personalisation and peace of mind for its members.



“While our commitment to sustainability through initiatives like the sustainability roadmap in the Asia Pacific is pivotal, it is just one facet of our overall strategy. The roadmap, aligned with our global goal of achieving net-zero emissions by 2050, underscores our dedication to positive environmental impact,” highlights Cheryl.

Biggest Challenge in Hospitality

The biggest challenges facing the hospitality industry include navigating the ongoing





Jetwing Vil Uyana, Sigiriya

Jetwing Hotels

surpasses pre-pandemic demand levels

Jetwing Hotels, a trusted name in Sri Lanka's travel and tourism landscape, is known for creating spaces seamlessly integrated with the natural environment and a genuine commitment to sustainability. As Sri Lanka prepares itself to attract increasing numbers of tourists and travellers from India, Hashan Cooray, Director, Marketing and Development, Jetwing Hotels, candidly shares insights into the unique features, offerings, initiatives, and opportunities of the hospitality brand.

Sonika Bohra

With the Sri Lankan government approving free visas for Indians, how is this decision going to impact outbound travel demand from India to Sri Lanka?

This is a very progressive decision to attract more visitors across several key source markets, with India leading the way. We expect to see a significant increase in arrivals from India with this move, regardless of the individual visitor's spending power. Given our geographical proximity, the visa fee is a deterrent that can make a potential traveller have second thoughts, especially if they're planning to visit for just a few days. Now, it's only a matter of booking the flights and accommodation, and it should be as convenient as travelling to a destination within India. We hope to see all Indian travellers thinking of Sri Lanka as a very safe and convenient destination to travel to, with great hotels and experiences, inspiring everyone to keep coming back for more!



▲ Hashan Cooray

How has the year 2023 been for you in terms of growth and recovery? Have you attained the pre-pandemic demand levels?

Thankfully, we have had steady growth this year after four terrible years. We have already surpassed pre-pandemic demand levels, as Sri Lanka suffered a severe blow in 2019, too. Our benchmark now is the previous year, 2018 and early 2019. Since July 2023, we have been averaging over 75 per cent of our occupancy and revenue for the year. If this trend continues, we expect 2024 to be the

best year in the history of Sri Lankan tourism, which comes at a fitting time as our country is now on a positive journey of recovering from the economic crisis, and tourism will play a vital role in propelling the economy as a whole.

Indian weddings have become a key segment for hotels and destinations. What kind of potential do you see in the Indian wedding segment?

With Sri Lanka's proximity to major Indian cities, it is an ideal destination for Indian weddings, be it on the beaches around the island, in lush gardens in the central regions, or in any of the decadent halls of the iconic hotels.

At Jetwing, we see a lot of potential for smaller, high-value weddings with both resident and non-resident Indian guests. This year, we had two weddings at Jetwing Saman Villas, one of Sri Lanka's premier luxury boutique hotels, which was difficult to imagine a few years ago. Previously, we have handled many weddings at our resorts in Negombo (Jetwing Blue and Jetwing Beach) and Jetwing Lighthouse in Galle. This shows the immense potential available for all Sri Lankan resorts to target specific niches in the wedding market so that the island is positioned as a destination for premier weddings, with great options available for celebrations of all sizes.



Jetwing Saman Villas, Bentota



Jetwing Lighthouse, Galle



Jetwing Kandy Gallery, Gurudeniya

Please throw some light on what makes your properties different from competitors.

One key area that differentiates Jetwing from the rest is our commitment to sustainability. We have been recognised both locally and globally for the initiatives we have taken with a genuine intention of taking care of our local communities and preserving the environment.

The designs of our properties stand out. Each of our over 30 properties is unique and suited to the surroundings, with hotels and villas designed by Sri Lanka’s leading architects, Geoffrey Bawa, Vinod Jayasinghe, Murad Ismail, and Sunela Jayawardene, among others, and the international expertise of Sim Boon from Singapore, who designed Jetwing Colombo Seven.

And finally, our primary competitive advantage is the amazing people at Jetwing. All around the island, we have amazing teams who are committed to showcasing the best of authentic Sri Lankan hospitality to our guests, with the guidance and leadership of our team of managers.

As a whole, Jetwing Hotels is a brand committed to responsible tourism while offering legendary Sri Lankan hospitality, with a legacy spanning over 50 years. Each of our properties is unique, embracing its own identity, with a deeply-rooted commitment to empower our local communities and care for the surrounding environment.

Sustainability has become key in the post-COVID world. What are your sustainable tourism measures that you are taking in your hotels?

At Jetwing Hotels, we follow a six-pillar sustainability strategy that aligns with the United Nations SDGs. Across our properties, we have numerous initiatives under each of these pillars. Our six areas of focus are energy and carbon, water and waste, biodiversity, community and culture, sourcing and production, and family.

A few measures to highlight are: the Jetwing Youth Development Programme, where we have trained and recruited over 1,200 underprivileged youth around the island (free of charge) since 2006; the creation of a man-made wetland at Jetwing Vil Uyana from a former abandoned paddy field, which is now a thriving habitat for numerous species of birds, mammals, and reptiles (and, of course, humans); 100 per cent renewable energy powered associate kitchen at four hotels (Jetwing Blue, Jetwing Yala, Jetwing Lake, and Jetwing Kaduruketha), which caters to nearly 1,000 people at every meal; producing our own renewable energy through solar PV, biomass, and biogas - each having its own positive impacts; and our own water bottling plants around the island, where we fill and reuse over 450,000 glass bottles a year, reducing over 4,500 kg of single-use plastics.

Our guiding philosophy for the work we do in sustainability was instilled in our company by my grandfather, the late Herbert Cooray, founder of Jetwing. He believed that tourism could not exist in isolation, and there had to be a benefit to the local communities. Today, we formulated his thinking into a structured

framework and carried on his legacy and vision for Sri Lankan tourism, inspiring more generations of travellers to make responsible decisions on their holidays on our paradise island.

What are your expectations for the coming year?

As I mentioned previously, we expect 2024 to be our best year yet. India will continue to be our primary source market, and we are confident that further decisions will be taken to make travel from India to Sri Lanka more convenient and hassle-free. As a company, we are also embarking on a beachfront residential development located just across the international airport, which makes it a lucrative investment opportunity for Indians who are looking at a promising investment overseas. We are also developing a beach club in Negombo, along with a tea factory and experience centre in Welimada. Additionally, we have some plans for next year to make significant changes to a few properties, making them more appealing to travellers from around the world.

Sri Lanka is finally coming back strong, and we hope to see more sustainable development in the country with the creation of new and exciting experiences to cater to the needs of modern-day travellers.



Jetwing Galle Heritage Home

Jumeirah Group to elevate brand recognition in India, with renewed focus on Tier 2 and 3 cities

India holds a pivotal position as a crucial growth market for the Jumeirah Group. They are constantly exploring strategies to enhance their appeal and welcome an increasing number of guests from this dynamic market. Kirti Anchan, General Manager, Jumeirah Emirates Towers Hotel, and Mohamed Ashraf, General Manager, Jumeirah Maldives Olhahali Island, highlight their respective hotels, underscoring the significance of the Indian market in their operations.

Prashant Nayak

Jumeirah Hotels and Resorts continues to build a strong customer base in India, announcing a 24 per cent increase in room nights booked in 2023 compared to 2022. With a focus on India, a paramount objective for the Jumeirah Group is to captivate the discerning hearts of Indian globetrotters.

Jumeirah Group's immediate objective is to elevate brand recognition in pivotal Indian urban cities, with a renewed focus on Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities. Kirti explains, "India is undergoing a transformation, extending beyond metropolitan cities, and it is an ideal time to embrace the burgeoning opportunities in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities. As we witness the escalating revenue streams from these markets, it will serve as a catalyst for additional investments, unlocking even greater potential."

Emirates Towers Hotel is a prominent feature in every Indian visitor's capture of Dubai's skyline. Boasting over 400 rooms and suites, this sleek skyscraper, situated 3 km from Burj Khalifa, ensures an unforgettable experience. "At Jumeirah Emirates Towers, we staunchly believe that maintaining a competitive edge demands an unwavering commitment to excellence across all facets of our operations. We acknowledge the significance of preserving our iconic status in the Dubai skyline, for which we persistently innovate and evolve to ensure our continued relevance and allure to our esteemed guests. We realise the power of social media with the rise of smartphone users in India and will be strategising and investing heavily in social media and digital platforms," assures Kirti.

With a formidable portfolio of 27 luxury hotels worldwide, prominently featuring 11 opulent establishments in the United Arab Emirates, the Jumeirah Group solidifies its commanding presence across Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. The growth in guest arrivals for the luxury operator follows a period of global expansion for the brand, including the opening of several new properties over the past 18 months, including Jumeirah Muscat Bay, Jumeirah Gulf of Bahrain Resort and Spa, Jumeirah Bali, and most recently, Jumeirah Makkah. The Jumeirah Group has



▲ Kirti Anchan

products for every segment, like leisure FIT, MICE, and weddings.

The past two years have been exceptionally positive for the Maldives as a destination, witnessing a substantial influx of visitors. India has consistently maintained its pivotal role as the primary source market for the Maldives. "At Jumeirah Maldives Olhahali Island, we have experienced a noteworthy annual growth of 20 per cent from India. To further strengthen our ties with our Indian partners, we have implemented additional strategies. Our focus is on reaching the appropriate audience from all corners of India to enhance footfall at our property in the Maldives," says Ashraf.

“India is undergoing a transformation, extending beyond metropolitan cities, and it is an ideal time to embrace the burgeoning opportunities in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities

The Maldives predominantly remain a luxury leisure destination, and the resort's focus lies primarily in those realms. The MICE offerings are limited as the destination



▲ Mohamed Ashraf

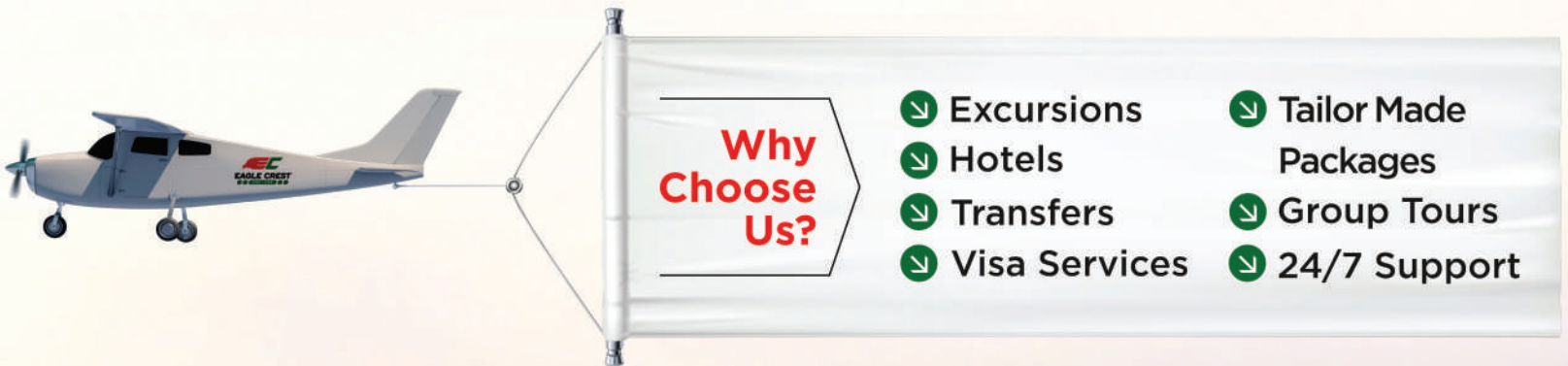
is still in the developmental phase for such activities. They have observed a shift in their guest demographics, with an increase in honeymooners, family travellers, and multi-generational groups. Ashraf also mentions, "Additionally, there's a rising trend of friends' getaways, including extended weekend holidays for groups of women. While large group requests are limited due to island size, we do receive inquiries for partial island buyouts, such as requests for 20 villas accommodating 50 to 60 guests."

Ashraf highlights the enchantment of Jumeirah Maldives Olhahali Island, emphasising its status as the ultimate romantic getaway. The resort offers a visual delight with a distinctive private rooftop dining experience, complemented by exclusive deals for a truly unforgettable trip. "Jumeirah Maldives offers 67 beach and over-water villas, all assuring stunning panoramic views of the Indian Ocean. Its idyllic location offers privacy for romantic getaways, a blissful island retreat for friends and family, and experiences. We have noticed that positive experiences prompt guests to share within their networks, leading to increased referrals. This underlines the importance of service excellence, a strength we particularly excel in across our properties," opines Ashraf.



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Fortune Park marks 48th operational property in Aligarh, eyes MICE and Cultural Tourism

Fortune Park Aligarh becomes the 48th operational property of ITC. Samir MC, Managing Director, Fortune Hotels, expressed confidence in this new venture: "We are confident that our debut in Aligarh will be very successful in the coming years." His optimism is rooted in Aligarh's growing importance as a cultural and economic hub.

Vartik Sethi

Aligarh, home to the prestigious Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), is an amalgamation of diverse cultures and traditions. This diversity is vividly expressed in its festivals, cuisine, and the harmonious coexistence of various religious sites. Attractions like the Sir Syed Academy Museum, Aligarh Fort, Dor Fortress, and Shekha Jheel not only embody the city's rich history but also serve as intriguing destinations for leisure travellers and history buffs.

The city, rich in cultural and historical heritage, is increasingly being recognised for its potential in the Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions (MICE) sector, bolstered by its growing IT and educational industries. The strategic location of Aligarh, in proximity to major economic centers like Delhi, Noida, and Agra, further enhances its appeal as a business destination.

Equipped with state-of-the-art facilities, the hotel is designed to host a variety of events, Samir MC, Managing Director, Fortune Hotels, shared, "We are excited

to offer Aligarh a premier location for hosting small weddings, company off-sites, social events, celebrations, conferences, and more."

The influx of tourists to Aligarh can be attributed to its rich cultural heritage, educational institutions, unique industries like the lock-making sector, and its proximity to other tourist hotspots. The introduction of Fortune Park Aligarh is poised to have a substantial impact on Aligarh's economy and tourism sector. The hotel's ability to draw business travellers and tourists is set to stimulate local industries. By providing a luxurious and convenient base for visitors, the hotel encourages exploration of Aligarh's historical and cultural offerings, thereby enhancing the overall tourist experience in the city.

Samir MC highlighted the strategic expansion plans of Fortune Hotels in Uttar Pradesh. "We aim to bring more Fortune hotels to UP, complementing our existing presence in the region," he said. "The introduction of two additional hotels, one in Kanpur and the other in Greater Noida, is already confirmed, signifying our commitment to the state."

In a conversation with Travel Trade Journal, Samir MC highlighted Fortune Hotels' distinctive strategy. "We have a unique ability to open hotels in tier II and III towns where other branded chains hesitate to enter. This can be attributed to our deep understanding of the Indian customer and the demographic of India, and the operational excellence at the centre," he stated. In an attempt to expand as well as contribute to the development of smaller



cities, Samir MC pointed out, "In H1 of this year, we have launched hotels in five unique markets – Kalimpong, Khajjiar, two hotels in Amritsar, and Hoshiarpur."

Advancing its expansion plans across the country, with a keen focus on tapping into uncharted territories and strategic locations, Samir MC outlined Fortune Hotels' ambitious growth trajectory. "Fortune Hotels is rapidly expanding its presence in PAN India, with a particular emphasis on entering untapped markets, smart cities, leisure, and pilgrim locations, as well as potential business districts," he explained. The brand's expansion is substantial, with 62 signed alliances across 52 cities, encompassing under 4800 rooms.

Emphasising on Fortune Hotels' strategy to holistically deliver value to its stakeholders, Samir MC shared, "Our primary focus remains on delivering value to our stakeholders. We aim to provide delight to our customers, a happy, safe workplace culture to our employees, and drive operational excellence and growth for the hotel."



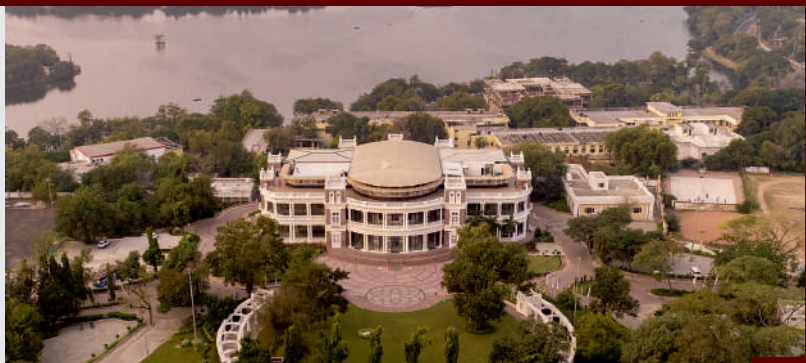


Unlock the Infinite Possibilities of MICE in Madhya Pradesh

Where Business Meets Beauty!

Madhya Pradesh, the heartland of India, is rapidly emerging as a premier MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions) destination, offering a harmonious blend of modern infrastructure and rich cultural heritage. With world-class convention centres, serene landscapes, mass accommodation capacity; good connectivity and a vibrant cultural tapestry, Madhya Pradesh is the perfect backdrop for your next corporate event. Let's take a closer look at what makes this state a MICE powerhouse.

MP's Convention Centres that Define Excellence



Located in the capital city, Bhopal, this convention centre is a marvel of modern architecture. With over 12,000 sq meters of exhibition space, it is a hub for large-scale international events. The city itself is an amalgamation of history, nature, and culture with attractions like heritage sites, lakes, and museums.

Kushabhau Thakre Hall (Minto Hall) being Bhopal's prime identity has now been renovated as an

international convention centre without disturbing its originality. The main hall is used as a multipurpose hall for occasions like conferences, banquets, felicitations, etc. The building has a capacity of around 1000 guests alongside two meeting rooms, two committee rooms, a boardroom, and a media centre.

Kushabhau Thakre International Convention Centre, Bhopal

Nearby Tourist Attractions

- Heritage Monuments of Bhopal - Moti Mahal, Gauhar Mahal, Taj Mahal and many other (5 km radius)
- UNESCO World Heritage Sites like Bhimbetka Caves and Sanchi (50 km radius)
- Boat rides and water adventure sports at the Boat Club of Bhopal (3 km)
- Safari Tour at Van Vihar National Park and Zoo
- Satpura National Park and the Pristine hill station - Pachmarhi (200 km)

Maharaja Chhatrasal Convention Centre, Khajuraho



Nestled amidst the timeless beauty of Khajuraho, a UNESCO World Heritage Site renowned for its exquisite temples, this convention centre is a tribute to grandeur. The state-of-the-art facilities and impeccable services

make it an ideal destination for corporate conferences and cultural events. Delegates can explore the ancient temples nearby, taking a trip through

history during their breaks.

The Convention hall facilitates 18000 sq. ft. of meeting space and can host 1500 guests besides a parking space for 350 plus vehicles.

Nearby Tourist Attractions

- Khajuraho Group of Monuments (5 km radius)
- Panna Tiger Reserve (27 km)
- Madla and Kundalpur Tourism Village (100 km)
- Orchha – A UNESCO listed heritage city (170 km)



Brilliant Convention Centre, Indore

Situated in the bustling city of Indore, this center stands true to its name. Its cutting-edge facilities are designed to cater to international conferences, exhibitions, and business meetings. Delegates can explore the city's gastronomic delights, shopping hubs, and historical sites during their free time.

The hall can house around 5000 people along with 103 rooms,

15 break out halls, a grand ballroom, an exhibition hall and a 1,50,000 sq ft meeting space.

Nearby Tourist Attractions

- Street Food at Chappan Dhukan and Sarafa Market (7 km)
- Mahakaleshwar in Ujjain (50 km) and at Omkareshwar Jyotirlinga (90 km radius)
- Scuba Diving at the Sailani Islands (80 km)

A Host of Global Events

Madhya Pradesh's growing reputation as a MICE destination is underlined by its successful hosting of prestigious international events, including the G-20 Meetings, UNESCO Gatherings, Pravasi Bhartiya Diwas, and Aviation Summits. These events have been facilitated by the state's commitment to world-class infrastructure and a supportive ecosystem for businesses and event organizers.

Plan Your MICE Event in Madhya Pradesh

Madhya Pradesh offers a unique blend of business and pleasure, with state-of-the-art convention centres set amidst a backdrop of timeless beauty

and cultural richness. Whether you are planning a conference, exhibition, or incentive program, Madhya Pradesh is the destination where your business aspirations can come to life. Explore

the enchanting state and experience the magic of MICE in Madhya Pradesh.

Let the heart of India inspire your next corporate event!

TTJ TRAVMART 2023 series concludes successfully in Ahmedabad

TTJ TRAVMART, the premier travel trade show, successfully concluded its 2023 series with the final event held at the Pride Plaza Hotel in Ahmedabad on December 2. The Ahmedabad edition marked the culmination of the sixth edition of TTJ TRAVMART for the year.

Gurjit Singh Ahuja

The TTJ TRAVMART in Ahmedabad proved to be a significant platform for 20 sellers, ranging from DMCs, airlines, cruises, air ticket consolidators, travel technology, and tourism boards, who engaged in 1,000 plus business meetings with local agents from Ahmedabad and other parts of Gujarat.

While Arunachal Pradesh was the Partner State for the event, Sharjah Tourism was the Gold Sponsor, thus contributing to the success of the event by supporting and enhancing its reach. The event was hailed and well-supported by all major trade associations. Senior office bearers were honoured with

mementos by the management of TTJ TRAVMART.

Looking ahead, TTJ TRAVMART has unveiled its schedule for 2024. The first mart of the year is slated to take place in Pune on January 20, 2024. Additionally, two mega marts have been announced for 2024, further expanding the reach and impact of the TRAVMART series. The East India TRAVMART (EITM) is scheduled to be held in Kolkata, while the South India TRAVMART (SITM) will take place in Chennai. These mega marts are expected to attract a wide array of industry participants, facilitating extensive business interactions across different regions of India.









TRAVMART



2024

JAN
20 PUNE

MAR
16 RAIPUR

APR
12/13 LUCKNOW

JUN
28-30 SITM
SOUTH INDIA TRAVMART

JUL
12/13 CHANDIGARH

SEP
20-22 EITM
EAST INDIA TRAVMART (KOLKATA)

DEC
14/15 BHOPAL/INDORE

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Jose Manuel Aisa Mancho joins VFS Global as CFO and member of the Executive Board

VFS Global has appointed Jose Manuel Aisa Mancho as its Chief Financial Officer (CFO). He reports to Zubin Karkaria, Founder and CEO, and is based in Dubai, the organisation’s global headquarters.

Jose joins VFS Global from Cellnex Telecom. He has over two decades of experience across the suite of finance sub-functions, including mergers and acquisitions, financial planning, investor relations, management control, treasury, and tax. He has previously worked in organisations that include Abertis Infrastructures, Criteria Caixa and Cellnex.

Jose will be responsible for the overall Finance function at VFS Global, and will also be responsible for Legal, Data Privacy and Corporate Risk functions. Jose will leverage his rich experience in strengthening VFS Global’s finance function and developing strategies to support further growth and development of the company. As a member of the company’s Executive Board, he will also play a pivotal role in the overall strategic decision-making at VFS Global.



Manoj Nair joins Sartha Global Marketing and Mileage Communications (India) as CEO

Manoj Nair has been appointed as the Chief Executive Officer of Sartha Global Marketing, a tourism marketing, representation, and destination branding company, and their sister company, Mileage Communications (India), a strategic marketing communications and Public Relations agency, a member of the Public Relations Global Network, a network of top independent companies across the globe. In his new position as CEO, Manoj will oversee daily operations, foster collaborations, establish partnerships, and facilitate growth.

With a robust background spanning over two decades in the media and travel industry, Manoj brings a wealth of top-tier experience. His professional background includes key roles at leading organisations like FCM Travel Solutions as National Marketing Leader in India, and Thomas Cook Ltd. as Vice President of Marketing.

“I am excited about taking on this dual leadership position as CEO of Sartha Global Marketing and Mileage Communications.



The opportunity to collaborate with some of the brightest minds in the marketing and travel industry is wonderful, and I aim to build on the incredible legacy of these companies, to move to the next level of success, setting new benchmarks in our industry,” said Manoj Nair.

Event planners now exempt from paying 15 per cent VAT on accommodation costs in Mauritius



From October 1, 2023, Mauritius has exempted event planners from across the world from paying 15 per cent VAT on their hotel room charges for any events such as business meetings, conferences or weddings!

Under the new scheme, an event organiser (local or foreign) may apply with the Economic Development Board (EDB) for exemption of VAT in respect of accommodation costs incurred during an event held in Mauritius subject to these terms and conditions:

- 1. The event (business meeting, conference, or wedding) should be attended by 50 or more visitors from abroad; and
- 2. Visitors stay for a minimum of 3 nights in a hotel in Mauritius.

Event organisers are required to register the specific event at least four weeks before the date of the event. Post registration, they should submit the application for VAT exemption to the Economic Development Board at least two weeks before the event date on the EDB website. Also, guests should hold a foreign passport and a valid ticket for travel by air or sea to a foreign airport or port.

To be eligible for the scheme, the event planner must ensure that each of his 50 or more visitors/guests hold a foreign passport and a valid ticket for travel by air or sea to a foreign airport or port.

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Jazeera Airways unveils new social media platforms for India



Jazeera Airways, Kuwait Kuwait-based low-cost carrier recently hosted an event in Mumbai for social media influencers and travel agents to officially announce its new social media platforms for India.

In his speech at the event, Andrew Ward, Vice President, Marketing and Customer Experience, Jazeera Airways, highlighted, “Social media and the partnership with influencers is at the heart of our marketing programs at Jazeera. We have

recently run two very successful influencer trips to Turkey and Kuwait, as well as working with individual influencers on other destinations.” He went on to announce the launch of Jazeera India Facebook and Jazeera India Instagram. He added, “We want to involve and engage with our influencers, customers and trade partners via our new India platforms with locally relevant content.”

Romana Parvi, Regional Manager- South Asia, Jazeera Airways, echoed these sentiments, conveying gratitude to the loyal travel trade agents who have played an integral role in Jazeera’s journey. “We are extremely grateful to all our loyal travel trade agents who have been an integral part of our journey. We look forward to their continued support in the years ahead,” said Romana.

Currently, Jazeera Airways connects India to a comprehensive global network, serving 64 popular destinations across the Middle East, Central and South Asia, Africa, and Europe. The destinations cater to high-demand sectors, including business, leisure, religious, and weekend travel.

SriLankan Airlines introduces double daily flights between Colombo and Mumbai

SriLankan Airlines has introduced double daily flights between Colombo and Mumbai, multiplying the convenience for passengers travelling to and from India’s financial and entertainment capital. The new double daily service to Mumbai will not only give a 50 per cent boost to SriLankan’s capacity on its Mumbai route but will also strengthen the airline’s already vast network in India.

Flights UL 142 and UL 144 will depart daily from Mumbai to Colombo at 3:10hrs and 20:45hrs, respectively. Flights UL 141 and UL 143 from Colombo to Mumbai will depart at 23:45hrs and 17:10hrs, respectively. Passengers travelling out of Mumbai on SriLankan Airlines will now have the advantage of more flight options to Colombo and convenient connections via Colombo to popular destinations in the Far East, Europe and Australia including Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, London, Frankfurt, Paris, Melbourne and Sydney.



BLS International opens a new state-of-the-art Visa Application Centre in Delhi



BLS International, a trusted global tech-enabled services partner for governments and citizens and a global leader in visa processing and consular services, inaugurated its new Visa Application Centre in Delhi on November 29, 2023.

The newly inaugurated visa application centre, located

at Dr. Gopaldas Bhawan, Barakhamba Road, is designed with cutting-edge infrastructure, advanced technology, and increased capacity to accommodate the growing demand for visa services. Spanning 7000 square feet the modern facility ensures a seamless experience for applicants, with state-of-the-art biometric enrollment and document verification systems. This prestigious center was inaugurated by H.E. José María Ridaó Domínguez, the Ambassador of Spain, adding significance to the event.

The new office boasts a significantly larger space to comfortably accommodate up to 1000 applicants daily. The expanded facilities aim to reduce waiting time and focus on capacity building to handle increased demand, ensuring timely processing of visa applications. The centre is staffed with trained professionals dedicated to providing exceptional service. The visa application centre features a modern and welcoming design, creating a positive environment.



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Expo Inn Suites and Convention rings in holiday season with cake-mixing and sundowner event

To usher into the holiday spirit Expo Inn Suites and Convention proudly presented the timely and cherished tradition of the Cake Mixing Ceremony. The well-thought-out, seamless planning and execution on behalf of the Expo Inn Suites and Convention team enabled guests to participate and savour every sweet moment.

Distinguished attendees included board members, agents, esteemed media partners, and influencers, joined by the hotel's culinary artisans and dedicated staff. Together, they indulged in the artful blending of fine-quality wine with an assortment of premium dry fruits and candied delicacies.

Barun Gupta, General Manager of Expo Inn Suites and Convention, expressed his sentiments, stating, "While the cake mixing ceremony marks the commencement of the festive holiday season, we eagerly anticipate offering our guests a series of captivating events that celebrate unity and joy."



Malaysia Airlines to double frequency on Amritsar Kuala Lumpur route from January 15

With the introduction of a 30-day visa-free entry to Malaysia for Indian citizens, Malaysia Airlines is amplifying connectivity by doubling the flight frequency on the Amritsar (ATQ) Kuala Lumpur (KUL) route, beginning January 15, 2024.

The airline will now operate four times weekly on this route. Additionally, the airline commenced direct services between Ahmedabad (AMD) and Kuala Lumpur (KUL), on December 1, 2023, raising the count of weekly flights on Malaysia Airlines to Indian destinations to 65.



Air Mauritius enhances its flight frequency between Port Louis and New Delhi

Air Mauritius has increased its flight frequency on the Port Louis-New Delhi route, introducing an extra flight on November 20, 2023. This boosts the weekly frequency to three flights, enhancing connectivity between Mauritius and India's capital. Utilising the Airbus A330-200, the aircraft offers 254 seats in a two-class configuration with 18 business class and 236 economy class seats. Flights on the Delhi-Mauritius sector operate on Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday, while the Mauritius-New Delhi sector is available every Saturday, Monday, and Wednesday.

Air Mauritius currently operates six weekly flights between Mumbai and Mauritius, and three weekly flights between Delhi and Mauritius.

Speaking at an exclusive gathering of prominent travel agents, tour operators, OTAs, representatives of the Mauritius Tourism Promotion Authority (MTPA), and travel media,

Sixtine Marot, Head of Sales and Marketing Commercial, Air Mauritius, expressed gratitude for the overwhelming support received from the India market for the airline and the destination. This positive response has led the airline to introduce this additional flight, complementing the existing twice-weekly frequency from New Delhi.

Sixtine has also unveiled expansion plans, with Air Mauritius set to add Chennai to its network from April 12, 2024, offering a once-weekly flight between Port Louis and Chennai. This expansion aims to provide travellers with more options for exploring the Indian Ocean region.



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