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Marketing Executive	:	Eklavya Ujinwal

Email: info@sampanmedia.com

Editorial and Marketing Office :

Sampan Media Pvt. Ltd. B-20, First Floor, Nangal Dewat, Vasant Kunj, New Delhi, 110070
Ph: 9560264443, ravisharma@sampanmedia.com

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Dear Friends,

Join us as we embark on this exciting journey through the TTJ February 2024 issue, which is aligned with the buzz of upcoming industry exhibitions. This edition is also a collection of narratives that showcase the diversity, resilience, and endless possibilities within our dynamic industry, capturing the essence of both the notable events of 2023 and the exciting prospects of 2024.

Furthermore, we are delighted to acknowledge the overwhelming response from our esteemed advertisers, showcasing remarkable offerings, and making the issue a hub of opportunities and insights for all.

February also witnessed the Interim Union Budget 2024 being announced. While the budget for tourism exhibits a proactive approach to laying the groundwork for long-term growth, ongoing concerns within the travel trade underscore the urgency of addressing immediate challenges for a comprehensive and sustainable recovery in the industry. However, amid ongoing challenges, we have plenty of opportunities and thus remain optimistic for better times ahead.

Happy Reading!

Ravi Sharma

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VFS Global cements Preferred Employer status with high Glassdoor scores

VFS Global has achieved exceptional recognition by securing a remarkable rating of 4.01 on a scale of 5 for 2023 on Glassdoor, a leading platform for employee feedback and company reviews.

On this achievement, Nirbhik Goel, Chief Human Resources Officer, VFS Global said, “I am thrilled to acknowledge the high Glassdoor rating VFS Global has received, a reflection of our commitment to an inclusive and empowering workplace culture. Central to our success is our vibrant workforce, comprising over 131 nationalities, which not only enriches our work environment but is also a cornerstone of our global success. This rating is particularly meaningful as it stems directly from our employees, offering a genuine and voluntary endorsement of our practices.”

With a headcount of 10,976 employees at the end of 2023, VFS Global’s impressive Glassdoor rating in 2023 reflects its commitment to its people. It reinforces VFS Global’s position as a leader in the industry and a preferred employer globally.



Egyptair appoints Bird Travels as its GSA in North India



Egyptair, the national carrier of Egypt, has appointed Bird Travels, the airline management services arm of Bird Group, as its General Sales Agent (GSA) in North India, effective February 01, 2024. This strategic move is aimed at reinforcing Egyptair's commitment to the Indian market and expanding its sales distribution network in the region.

The airline currently operates four weekly flights connecting Delhi and Cairo, providing seamless connectivity to various destinations in Europe, Africa, North America, and Canada. Additionally, Egyptair operates five flights per week out of Mumbai.

With over 50 years of excellence, Bird Travels is India's largest representation company with expertise in airline management, distribution, sales and marketing, representing some of the best aviation and travel brands as their exclusive GSA/GSSA.

NEOM announces Zardun, a luxury ecotourism sanctuary resort in Saudi

NEOM, the sustainable region in the northwest of Saudi Arabia, has unveiled Zardun, an exclusive sanctuary resort, marking a significant move towards luxury ecotourism.

Zardun, part of NEOM's ongoing development, is designed to seamlessly blend contemporary luxury with nature.

Overlooking the Gulf of Aqaba, the nature-based resort will feature four ultra-luxury signature buildings that harmonise with the surrounding landscape. Covering four square kilometres, Zardun will be a carefully restored haven filled with native plants and animals, offering a premium ecotourism experience. The resort will

include three boutique hotels with different themes, providing guests with varied experiences and stunning views. Zardun will offer various outdoor activities, including trekking, mountain biking, rock climbing, stargazing, meditation, and yoga.

The sustainability strategy involves creating oases to support diverse habitats, reintroducing native species, and conserving coral reefs and marine life.

Zardun joins other sustainable tourism destinations in the Gulf of Aqaba, aligning with NEOM's commitment to sustainable progress and responsible tourism practices.



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Coimbatore: +91 99527 17750

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Mövenpick Resort Al Marjan Island forges strategic partnership with BRANDit

Mövenpick Resort Al Marjan Island has forged a strategic alliance with BRANDit, a destination and hospitality representation company, as the Marketing and PR agency in India. This partnership aims to introduce luxury travellers, adventure seekers and honeymooners to unique experiences that the resort has to offer.

Nestled in the heart of Ras Al Khaimah, UAE, Mövenpick Resort Al Marjan Island boasts a diverse range of activities, world-class amenities and signature dining options. The resort also offers a perfect backdrop for lavish weddings, thanks to its beachfront location overlooking the Arabian Gulf and multiple venues.

“Recognising India as a robust hub for outbound travel, Mövenpick Resort Al Marjan Island is strategically positioned to meet the discerning preferences of those seeking exclusivity, thanks to its world-class amenities. With the aid of BRANDit’s prowess in marketing, communications, and extensive experience in crafting compelling brand narratives, we are confident in establishing the resort as the premier choice for leisure travel and weddings,” stated Fabien Chesnais, General Manager of Mövenpick Resort Al Marjan Island.



Santani Wellness, Sri Lanka appoints Outbound Marketing as its India Representative



Santani Wellness, the globally acclaimed luxury wellness resort in the hills of Sri Lanka, has entered a strategic partnership with Outbound Marketing (OMPL) in India. Recognised by TIME magazine as one of the World’s 100 Greatest Places, Santani is expanding its unique wellness concept to new destinations in Sri Lanka, including Kosgoda and Ranna.

The new resorts will feature Santani’s iconic ‘architecture of silence,’ designed to enhance relaxation. Santani’s gourmet wellness cuisine follows the Ayurveda philosophy of ‘Rasa Haya,’ focusing on taste-based nutrition.

Santani’s exceptional service, warmth, and professionalism ensure an unparalleled guest experience. The brand includes exquisite properties in Sri Lanka, such as Kirana – A Santani Villa, Santani Wellness Kandy, and Sama Kosgoda – A Santani Retreat.

Outbound Marketing, a hotel representation agency, has established a new vertical to cater to luxury and experiential travel trends. The partnership aims to bring Santani’s serenity and luxury wellness retreats to the Indian audience, curating exceptional guest experiences and setting innovative standards in the luxury hospitality sector.

Arago Travels expands its presence in Indian market with Outbound Konnections Reps



Arago Travels, a prominent Destination Management Company (DMC) specialising in Nordic destinations, has entered into a partnership with Ark Travel Group to expand its market reach in India. Anjum Lokhandwala has been appointed as Arago Travels’ representative in India as part of this strategic initiative. The collaboration aims to provide Indian travel agents with enhanced access to Arago Travels’ premium services in Nordic countries like Iceland, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark.

Arago Travels is known for its expertise in FIT, GIT, scheduled departures, bespoke private tours, and MICE, catering to the growing demand for unique and tailor-made travel experiences in Iceland and Scandinavia.

Yash Vakil and Tejas Vakil, Director and Founder of Arago Travels, expressed their commitment to delivering top-tier travel experiences and highlighted the significance of the Indian market. They view the partnership with Outbound Konnections (ARK Reps) as a strategic move to introduce their luxury travel experiences to Indian travellers, leveraging ARK Reps’ deep insights and proficiency in the Indian travel market.



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US announces steep fee increase for H-1B, L-1, and EB-5 visas effective April 1

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has declared a significant fee hike for several non-immigrant visas, notably the H-1B, L-1, and EB-5 visas. These revised fees are scheduled to be implemented from April 1, 2024, representing the first adjustment since 2016.

The H-1B visa, a crucial non-immigrant visa for US companies hiring foreign workers with specialised skills, will see an increase in application fees from USD 460 to USD 780 starting April 1. The H-1B registration fee will also rise from USD 10 to USD 215 next year.

Additionally, L-1 visa fees will increase from USD 460 to USD 1,385, and EB-5 visa fees will jump from USD 3,675 to USD 11,160. The EB-5 program allows high-net-worth foreign investors to obtain US visas by investing at least USD 500,000 in a business that creates 10 jobs.

The Department of Homeland Security predicts annualised net costs of USD 157,005,952 over the next 10 years, with overall costs estimated at USD 1,339,292,617.

Despite the fee hikes, the DHS argues that the changes will bring benefits such as reduced administrative burdens, increased efficiency, and improved cost assessment for providing services. Applicants may experience benefits such as reduced errors and simplified payment processes, while some visa categories will see minor fee reductions.



Canada announces two-year cap on international student visas



The Government of Canada, led by Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Honourable Marc Miller, in January, introduced measures in January to address the rapid increase in the number of international students and associated challenges.

To counter challenges, the Canadian government has set an intake cap on international student permit applications for a two-year period, with a 35 per cent decrease from 2023, totalling approximately 360,000 approved study permits for 2024. Provincial and territorial caps, weighted by population, aim for fairness, with more substantial reductions in provinces facing unsustainable growth.

Every study permit application now requires an attestation letter from the respective province or territory. Certain categories, including master's and doctoral degrees and elementary and secondary education, are exempt from the cap.

Changes to the Post-Graduation Work Permit Program include eligibility criteria changes from September 1, 2024, affecting curriculum licensing arrangements and allowing master's graduates to apply for a three-year work permit.

These temporary measures will be re-evaluated at the end of the two-year period.

Emirates partners with VFS Global, rolls out pre-approved visa on arrival for Indian travellers



Emirates has entered into an exclusive partnership with VFS Global to launch a pre-approved visa-on-arrival service for Indian passport holders who have made flight reservations with the airline. Fulfilled by the Dubai Visa Processing Centre (DVPC) and issued as a 14-day single entry visa, the new initiative will enable Emirates customers to skip queues when arriving in Dubai, simplifying their arrival formalities by breezing through customs before heading out to visit the city.

Emirates customers can book their flights through emirates.com or their preferred travel agent. After retrieving their booking through 'Manage an existing booking' on emirates.com, customers should click on the 'apply for a UAE visa' link. They will be redirected to the online UAE Visa application site powered by VFS Global Services, which sets out the requirements, terms and conditions to facilitate the visa application process.

The service is exclusively available to Indian passport holders who have a valid six-month visa for the US, US Green Card, EU Residency, or UK Residency. The issuance of visas remains at the absolute discretion of the General Directorate of Residency and Foreign Affairs.

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laying foundation for successful foray into Indian market

Confident in India's rapid growth, the Moroccan National Tourism Office (MNT0) in India is dedicated to laying the groundwork in 2024, setting the stage for Morocco's prominence as a preferred destination for Indian travellers in the years to come.

Prashant Nayak

The year 2023 was a record year for Morocco as a tourism destination, surpassing pre-pandemic figures. By the end of November, the country welcomed 13.3 million visitors, and estimates for the full year predict around 14.5 million visitors. This achievement represents a remarkable 12.5 per cent increase over the figures recorded in 2019, solidifying Morocco's status as a thriving and increasingly popular destination for travellers.

Cultural Odyssey

Nestled at the crossroads of civilisations, Morocco beckons with a rich mosaic of history and diverse landscapes. Home to the oldest human remains, this ancient civilisation serves as a gateway between worlds. Morocco's monarchy, dating back to the 9th century, stands as the world's second-oldest ruling monarchy. With over 9,000 monuments and nine UNESCO World Heritage Sites, the nation unfolds a cultural odyssey.

Morocco's landscape is a visual symphony from the Mediterranean's serene coves to the snowy peaks of the Atlas Mountains, the plains of the Atlantic coast, or the sands of the Sahara Desert. Activities abound, from trekking in mountain valleys to thrilling water sports along the Atlantic coast. Culinary enthusiasts indulge in Morocco's renowned cuisine, while global hospitality and air transport brands ensure a comfortable sojourn. Morocco, where prehistoric traces meet modern indulgence, invites exploration into its timeless allure.

Strategic Gaze on India

While the primary tourism market for Morocco currently consists of France, followed by Spain and the United Kingdom, in a strategic move for future growth, MNT0 is actively considering India as a key market. MNT0 looks forward to driving a substantial increase in the inflow of Indian tourists to Morocco. Despite the modest figures in the Indian market, the MNT0 is placing a significant bet on India's potential. This decision aligns with their ambitious global target of welcoming 26 million visitors to Morocco by the year 2026. MNT0 is confident that India's inclusion in its strategic growth plans will contribute substantially to achieving this target.



Tapestry of Timeless Marvels

For Indian travellers seeking diverse experiences, Morocco seamlessly blends the past and present, offering an enriching and unforgettable journey. A week-long exploration of the "Imperial Cities"—from Casablanca to Rabat, Meknes, and Fes, concluding in Marrakech—promises a cultural immersion. Marrakech, with its vibrant nightlife, adds a delightful touch to its historical richness. For those with additional time, southward extensions for a Kasbah Road trip or northward visits to Tangier and Chefchaouen are enticing options. Subsequent visits allow a deeper focus on preferred cities or a relaxed beach holiday in Agadir, Essaouira, Mazagan, or Dakhla.

Gateway to Morocco

E-visa is available for Indians wishing to visit Morocco. It is not conditioned by any other visa availability, like Schengen or the US. No direct flight is available right now, but the tourism board is working hard on it. Meanwhile, one can reach Morocco via Doha, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Istanbul, Cairo, Paris, London, Madrid, and a number of other international hubs.

Elevating Accessibility and Appeal

Making Morocco more accessible to Indian tourists is a key initiative for the MNT0. Firstly, a direct flight with a partner airline is being

worked out to streamline travel and enhance convenience for Indian visitors. MNT0 is actively pursuing partnership agreements with numerous tour operators, thus expanding Morocco's offerings and making it more visible in the Indian market. Furthermore, the MNT0 is committed to comprehensive trade education programmes. These initiatives include training sessions, workshops, and familiarisation trips tailored for travel agents and tour operators. To further bolster sales and presence, the MNT0 is providing robust marketing support, including materials and collaborative campaigns. Through these integrated strategies, the MNT0 is steadfast in its commitment to making Morocco a top choice for Indian travellers.

India: Aspirations and Goals

By 2030, MNT0 aims to position Morocco as the top choice for Indian tourists and hopes to welcome a minimum of 100,000 visitors by 2027. In their inaugural year in India (2024), they aim to establish the basics of tourism promotion: improving destination accessibility, increasing awareness among trade partners, and initiating activities for the public. MNT0 is confident in the fast-growing nature of the Indian market and is dedicated to seizing the opportunities it presents. Their focus in 2024 is to lay the foundation for future success, ensuring that Morocco becomes a prominent destination for Indian travellers.

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Sharjah honing its focus on tourism

Fast emerging from the shadows of its neighbouring touristy Emirates, Sharjah is now positioning itself as a unique standalone alternative destination for the ever-exploring Indian traveller. Over the years, Sharjah has enhanced its tourism portfolio to provide a unique blend of travel experiences. In an exclusive interaction with TTJ, Khalid Jasim Al Midfa, Chairman of Sharjah Commerce and Tourism Development Authorities, shares more...

Gurjit Singh Ahuja

Under the leadership of Khalid Jasim Al Midfa, the Sharjah Commerce and Tourism Authority (SCTDA) has achieved many successes at both international and local levels, becoming a major cornerstone of the Emirate's tourism development efforts. He has taken the Emirate's events and forums to even higher standards. He continues to play a key role in the execution of the new tourism strategy.

India, The Unique Market

Reflecting on notable shifts and remarkable changes in travel patterns within the Indian market over the last two years, Khalid notes, "Many Indian travellers prioritise immersive cultural experiences. While being family-friendly is essential for a significant number of Indian travellers, they are now increasingly seeking experiential and adventure-based travel. Instead of traditional sightseeing, there is a growing interest in activities such as trekking, wildlife safaris, and cultural immersions."

He adds, "There is also an increasing number of Indian travellers, especially millennials, opting for solo travel. Sharjah caters to all these segments; we craft personalised itineraries and experiences for every Indian visitor."

Product Enhancements

Given that every tourism product and destination needs constant rejuvenation and enrichment to grow and retain its market share, Sharjah is continually expanding its diverse offerings. Several projects are underway in the Emirate. Khalid shares, "Two luxury hotels—the Al Bridi Resort and Al Jabal Resort, both operated by LUX*, will be opening soon. The Al Bridi resort will be situated within the confines of a wildlife sanctuary in Sharjah, offering a



▲ Khalid Jasim Al Midfa

unique safari-style retreat."

On the east coast, the Lux* Al Jabal Resort in Khorfakkan will be a nature-surrounded resort on a hillside overlooking a beach, with a substantial eco-conscious focus. Constructed from special Finnish pine sourced responsibly through the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification, this resort, with its 45 cube-shaped chalets, is expected to open early next year.

An adventure tourism project in Khorfakkan sheds light on Sharjah's vast potential for adventure tourism. Situated on a picturesque site overlooking the serene Luluyah beach, the development will be a haven for adrenaline seekers, featuring a zipline, a giant swing, a dry-slide track, hiking trails, mountain bike tracks, and more.

Challenges and Opportunities

Not only has Sharjah experienced a positive upward trend and increase in interest, but

there has also been a significant increase in tourist arrivals. Khalid says, "Our commitment remains steadfast in positioning Sharjah as a comprehensive holiday destination, ideal for a brief escape, and conveniently accessible from India. Sharjah distinguishes itself as the premier holiday destination in the region, offering a diverse range of world-class experiences in arts, culture, adventure, leisure, nature, wildlife, and architecture."

The Growth Story

The travel industry in Sharjah and the UAE has not witnessed a decline since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic; rather, there has been a notable increase in tourist numbers. Despite global travel disruptions, the Sharjah Emirate and the UAE have experienced a surge in tourists. This trend could be attributed to the UAE's stringent safety measures and its reputation as one of the world's safest countries, assuring visitors of a secure environment, explains Khalid.

He further added, "We are consistently collaborating with key partners in the air travel and hospitality sectors to enhance the tourism experience and attract more visitors to the Emirate. This collaborative effort aims to offer enticing discounts and exclusive deals to tourists, making Sharjah a more appealing destination. Sharjah started its tourism promotion in India in 2014, and currently, India is the third largest source market. We anticipate a 15 per cent increase in tourist arrivals by the end of this year. Our commitment to attracting Indian visitors remains steadfast, propelled by meticulously researched and robust marketing campaigns tailored to resonate with the preferences of Indian tourists."



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Western Australia amplifies efforts to draw Australia-bound Indians

Post a networking lunch hosted by Western Australia at The Leela Palace, New Delhi, an insightful one-on-one interaction with Hon Rita Saffioti BBus MLA, Deputy Premier, Treasurer, Minister for Transport, Tourism, Western Australia, unfurled strategic initiatives and collaborations underway to strengthen tourism and trade relations between India and Western Australia.

Vartik Sethi

India's Significance

Saffioti began by emphasising the importance of the Indian market to Western Australia's tourism sector. The region sees India not only as a significant source of potential growth for inbound tourism but also values the strong cultural and community ties due to a substantial Indian diaspora residing in Western Australia. "India's a huge and a very important market for us," Saffioti stated, "It is my number one mission to try and increase tourism from India," signalling a strategic focus on this expanding market.

Enhancing Air Connectivity

A major facet of Western Australia's strategy to capture a larger chunk of tourists is through improving air connectivity between India and Western Australia. With Perth and Sydney Airports already increasing links to Asian countries, Saffioti detailed ongoing efforts to strengthen transport links, including collaborations with local airlines to facilitate travel within Western Australia. The recent introduction of a new rail line to the airport has also enhanced accessibility and convenience for tourists. She also highlighted that the introduction of Nexus Airlines has simplified travelling within Western Australia. Moreover, improvements in air connections between Perth and regional parts of Western Australia have equally contributed to ease travel.

She also discussed the recent codeshare arrangement between Qantas and Indigo, which facilitates travel from various Indian cities to Perth via Singapore. "We are very keen to work with the airlines and considering ways to promote Perth through those airlines in particular," Saffioti mentioned.

Strategic Positioning in the Southeast Asia Circuit

Saffioti acknowledged the geographical challenges and tourists' itineraries, often favouring eastern Australian cities like Sydney. She emphasised the need



▲ Rita Saffioti

for Western Australia to integrate its offerings into the Southeast Asia travel circuit. "It is about understanding that people probably will not tack on Perth to a trip to Sydney. So, it is how we also integrate what we offer into the Southeast Asia market," she explained.

Understanding the competitive nature of the tourism industry, Saffioti emphasised the need to package Western Australia with other popular Southeast Asian destinations like Hong Kong and Singapore with an aim to present Western Australia as a part of an attractive multi-destination package, appealing to a wide range of tourists, especially from India.

Adventure Tourism

The Deputy Premier highlighted the unique offerings of Western Australia, such as adventure tourism, pristine beaches, and exclusive fishing holidays. She suggested that a trip to Western Australia could be combined with a shopping spree in Singapore, offering a diverse experience to tourists.

Delving into the realm of tourist attractions in Western Australia, Saffioti highlighted various investments in destinations like Rottnest Island, known for its natural beauty and unique wildlife.

The focus is on creating new activities that blend adventure with tourism, such as hot air ballooning, parasailing, and interactions with marine life like whale sharks and manta rays. These initiatives are part of a broader strategy to present Western Australia as a hub for sustainable luxury tourism.

Tourism Beyond Wildlife

Recognising that Western Australia's rich wildlife has been a major draw, Saffioti discussed plans to broaden the state's tourism appeal. She noted, "Business tourism is very important for Western Australia," marked by the recent announcement of investing in a new convention centre to support business events. Additionally, there is a focus on enhancing cultural, educational, and sporting tourism, including partnerships with festivals and events to create combined cultural experiences.

Marketing Campaigns

Marketing efforts are a key component of Western Australia's strategy to entice Indian tourists. A standout campaign features F1 driver Daniel Ricciardo, endorsing self-drive holidays to explore everything from wine regions to nature reserves. Looking ahead, Saffioti expressed a keen interest in intensifying trade-related activities with India. Saffioti shared, "Hosting more travel agents, tour operators, and journalists in Western Australia is vital," aiming to provide a deeper understanding of what the region offers.

Visitor Numbers

India ranks as the seventh-largest international market for Western Australia. The region welcomed 27,000 visitors as of September 2023 contributing an estimated \$91 million in spending. With an annual growth rate of 15 per cent, there is a strong focus on not only establishing direct links but also working with airlines for efficient connections between key Indian cities and Western Australia.

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LA unfurls red carpet for visitors to behold exciting developments this year

Los Angeles is a vibrant and constantly evolving destination, embracing diversity and welcoming everyone with open arms. The City of Angels is not just a destination; it is an immersive experience, an evolving masterpiece that invites you to be a part of its ever-unfolding story. Seema Kadam, Regional Director, India, Los Angeles Tourism and Convention Board, shares insights into the exciting new developments and challenges in 2024.

Prashant Nayak

In 2024, the city of Los Angeles is undergoing transformative changes that will be evident in every aspect, offering a fresh and exciting experience for visitors and locals alike. Whether you are a local, first-time traveller, or haven't visited the city in recent years, Los Angeles promises a dynamic journey with significant developments in world-renowned dining, sports, entertainment, arts, and beyond. Also, the next generation is bound to leave an indelible mark on neighbourhoods throughout the city, as a wave of emerging talent is infusing every corner of Los Angeles with fresh energy, propelling the city into the era of LA 2.0.

“Los Angeles is a dynamic city that never stops redefining itself. There is something new every time you visit. The city is on the cusp of a thrilling transformation, and we eagerly anticipate unfurling the metaphorical red carpet for visitors, inviting them to explore the exciting developments set to unfold across Los Angeles this year,” says Seema.

Optimistic Outlook for India

With India's emergence as one of the world's fastest-growing economies in the inbound and outbound travel markets, the Los Angeles Tourism and Convention Board sees boundless potential in the coming years. Seema enthusiastically shares, “In 2023, India had already become a top-ten overseas market for LAX, with over 50 per cent of Indian travellers identifying the United States as their top travel destination. As a result, we're proud to be the only U.S. destination with our own full-time office and team members in India, with our Mumbai office opening in 2019. We continue to increase our investment in the market and are projecting a full recovery in India by late 2024 and early 2025.”



▲ Seema Kadam

Tapping Untapped Potential

In October 2023, the LA team conducted consumer focus groups in five secondary Indian cities—Ahmedabad, Chandigarh, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, and Chennai—for strategic insights. LA Tourism also organised trade engagements in key cities, including Ahmedabad, Chennai, and Chandigarh, to provide LA tourism updates and gather market feedback. Seema highlights the proactive efforts, stating, “We found interesting insights and realised that these markets have a huge potential for our destination, and we need to focus more on education and awareness. While there has been a great deal of focus on major metropolitan areas like Mumbai and Delhi, it is clear that there is incredible potential in secondary and tertiary markets, and we are working closely with our partners in the Indian travel trade to develop suitable product offerings for this emerging audience collaboratively. The future is incredibly bright for bilateral travel between India and our City of Angels. We will continue

collaborating with RTO and trade and airline partners in this endeavour in secondary and Tier II cities. In 2024, Los Angeles is also gearing up to host the IPW Expo in May, which will reunite the global travel industry again.”

Navigating Visa Wait Times

Discussing the anticipated obstacles and challenges, the visa wait time emerges as the most significant impediment to achieving exponential growth in travel between the U.S. and India. Addressing the potential hurdles, Seema says, “Our CEO, Adam Burke, is a member of the U.S. Department of Commerce's Travel and Tourism Advisory Board. Hence, he is continuously driving communication with the federal authorities of the State Department to address this critical issue with a continued sense of urgency. While there is still work to do, we are encouraged by the significant progress thus far as U.S. Travel reports that recent data shows visa wait times have dropped by 50 per cent in India.”

Evolution in Travel

Emerging trends have a significant impact on tourism, shaping the preferences and behaviours of travellers. Seema reflects on the dynamic nature of the tourism landscape, sharing, “We have continued focusing on family travel, university students, the luxury segment, and the MICE business. However, exciting new categories are emerging in India, with Millennial and Gen-Z travellers leading the way. This adventurous travel segment is passionate about experiencing LA like a local, seeking out our community's hidden gems, including eclectic culinary offerings, adrenaline-pumping outdoor activities, thriving nightlife, intimate live music venues, and one-of-a-kind boutiques.”



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Scan to know more

Discover the unfading charm and modern wonders of Uzbekistan

In this exclusive interview, Ikboljon O. Soliev, Counsellor, Embassy of the Republic of Uzbekistan in New Delhi, sheds light on the significant role India plays in Uzbekistan's strategic plans. The deep-rooted historical ties between the two nations extend beyond tourism, encompassing culture, education, politics, and the economy. Soliev is of the opinion that this profound connection serves as the foundation for a collaborative relationship, positioning India as a crucial source market for Uzbekistan tourism.

Prashant Nayak

Uzbekistan has always been a fascinating destination with a rich history, diverse culture, and stunning landscapes. It is a destination that appeals to history enthusiasts and those looking for a unique cultural experience. Uzbekistan's tourism offerings are continually evolving, and the country is actively working towards creating a dynamic and attractive destination to encompass all types of tourists.

Timeless Charms and Modern Transformations

Uzbekistan was a crucial part of the ancient Silk Road trade route, and today, visitors can explore well-preserved historical cities such as Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva. Tashkent, the capital city, offers a mix of modernity and tradition. While Uzbek cuisine is diverse and flavourful, the Uzbek people are known for their warm hospitality and friendliness towards visitors. The country has a rich tradition of craftsmanship as well.

The cities of Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva are currently undergoing a comprehensive transformation, focusing on both infrastructure development and the creation of new attractions. In a thoughtful recommendation, Soliev shares, "For those considering a visit to our destination, I recommend a comprehensive itinerary spanning at least six or seven days to explore these splendid cities and some other enchanting places in Uzbekistan. The geographical and cultural richness of our country can be best experienced with a longer stay with different things to do in different seasons."



▲ Ikboljon O. Soliev

Eyeing India's Dynamic Tourism Landscape

Soliev views India as an essential and strategic destination in its efforts to expand and deepen its engagement on multiple fronts. Uzbekistan Tourism, represented by India's Blink Brand Solutions, organised its maiden edition of the India roadshow in Mumbai in December 2023. The roadshow was aimed at showcasing the diverse Uzbekistani tourism offerings to the Indian travel trade, boosting tour operators' destination awareness, and stimulating their interest in promoting Uzbekistan as an exciting tourism destination.

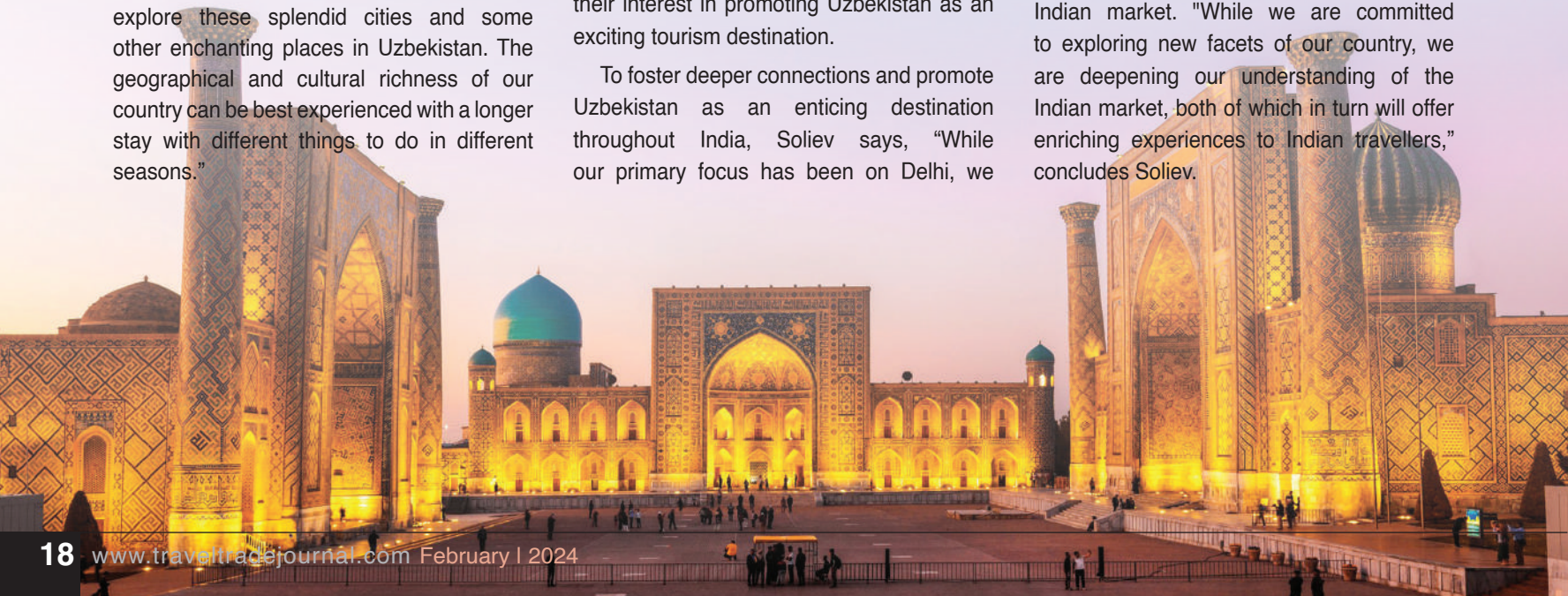
To foster deeper connections and promote Uzbekistan as an enticing destination throughout India, Soliev says, "While our primary focus has been on Delhi, we

acknowledge the importance of other cities like Mumbai, Chennai, Bangalore, and others as we recognise the vastness of India and its diverse travel preferences. In light of this, we are further keen on enhancing our ties through various promotional activities, including tourism and social media promotion, advertisements, roadshows, webinars, seminars, exhibitions, workshops, and engaging travel agents on FAM trips. Our aim is to ensure that more Indian travellers are drawn to our destination while simultaneously highlighting the diverse offerings in terms of economics and the overall charm of our wonderful country."

High Expectations from India

Soliev emphasises the anticipation of robust growth in visitor numbers from India in the coming years. Uzbekistan recorded around 29,000 visitors in 2019 and is expected to have reached more than 40,000 visitors by the end of 2023. "Our expectations are high for 2024 given the immense interest shown by Indian travellers in various segments of tourism, including nightlife, cuisine, ecotourism, and sports," says Soliev.

Looking ahead to 2024, Uzbekistan Tourism is in the process of drawing up comprehensive plans for its marketing activities in India, considering the dynamic trends and emerging opportunities in the Indian market. "While we are committed to exploring new facets of our country, we are deepening our understanding of the Indian market, both of which in turn will offer enriching experiences to Indian travellers," concludes Soliev.





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Singapore – India Tourism bond strengthens with leadership transition

At the helm of the Singapore Tourism Board's (STB) India operations, Markus Tan has stepped into the role of Regional Director, IMESA region, succeeding the accomplished GB Srithar as of January 01, 2024. At an opportune moment, TTJ engaged with both leaders, exploring the intricate facets of Singapore tourism and its performance in the dynamic Indian market.

Prashant Nayak

Soaring Visitor Numbers

The tourism landscape between Singapore and India has witnessed remarkable growth, with an upward surge in visitor numbers, reaching a total of 1.07 million Indian tourists by end of December 2023. STB's earlier statistics showcased that in 2022, Singapore welcomed 686,400 visitors from India, and pre-COVID, Singapore recorded 1.41 million visitors from India in 2019.

"The year 2023 was a bit challenging as Indians started travelling to Singapore late in April 2023. However, given the achievement of over a million Indian tourists by end of December 2023, I should say we have done very well. This has positioned India to become one of the fourth-largest tourism source market for Singapore in 2023. Air capacity has been fully restored to pre-COVID levels, and currently, the island city is connected to 17 cities in India. Singapore counts India as a key meeting and incentive market, and we have witnessed growth in solo women travel. STB has observed a good number of Indians in 2023 from these segments," said GB Srithar.

Fuelling India's Interest in Singapore

To bring Singapore closer to the hearts and minds of Indian travellers, besides trade activities in 2023, STB also focused on a lot of consumer-based activities. As per Srithar, last year, STB partnered with the Indian platform MX Player to unveil an interactive film titled 'Lost and Found in Singapore'. STB also partnered with Chumbak and LBB for a retail initiative to launch products that are Singapore-inspired. They brought to India three Singapore homegrown brands, Sage and Ylang, Fawn Labs, and GINLEE Studios—in collaboration with Nykaaland—to amplify Singapore's shopping appeal among Indian tourists.

STB also engaged Indian consumers on food aspects, like the "Taste Obsession" campaign, which aimed

at further connecting young Indians in the market through curated food-related content and activations. Regarding these initiatives, Srithar comments, "We've successfully engaged consumers and strengthened ties with the Indian travel trade through various activities. Overall, 2023 has been very fruitful."

India's Travel Metamorphosis

Over Srithar's long tenure in India, he has seen the country transform into a global travel powerhouse with a flourishing outbound tourism market. The Indian passport has strengthened, and a growing middle class has fuelled international travel demand. The average age of Indian travellers is 27–28 years, reflecting a dynamic and adventurous demographic. Indian travellers have evolved from being apologetic to confident and demanding, displaying increased savvy and keenness to access information. Their passion for travel is evident in their keenness to explore different countries. Also, the three years of the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated domestic travel growth to new levels and inspired Indians to explore more outbound travel.

Shaping the Future of STB in India

Markus, a former Regional Director for China, is happy to be in India and is keen on travelling, interacting, and meeting travel stakeholders across the country. Bringing in a wealth of experience, he is in the process of learning about the market and looks confident enough to lead STB's tourism efforts in the dynamic IMESA region. When asked about the comparison of the Indian and Chinese markets, Markus says, "China and India represent two dynamic markets,



▲ L-R: Markus Tan, GB Srithar

each unique in its own right. Comparing them directly is challenging, as each has different outbound potential. As India boasts diverse consumers and preferences, with distinct behaviours, trends, and distribution patterns varying across different regions, it is a complex market. However, India is at the forefront of global attention due to its immense growth potential. It stands as the number one growth market in the Asia-Pacific region, making it a focal point for every country seeking a share of the burgeoning outbound pie."

In reference to his new role, Markus expresses, "As STB continues its efforts to highlight the best of what Singapore has to offer, our dedication remains steadfast in maintaining existing relationships and fostering new ones within the Indian travel industry. Supported by my team, I eagerly anticipate embarking on this journey alongside our partners and friends across India. Together, we aim to inspire deeper connections between Indians and Singapore."

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Seychelles’ immersive experiences offer profound insights into local cultures

In the wake of the past year, pivotal lessons have surfaced, underscoring the crucial role of stakeholder collaboration, adaptability to shifting travel trends, and in-depth market research in understanding evolving tourist preferences. Bernadette Willemin, Director General, Destination Marketing, Tourism Seychelles, affirms that these insights are the bedrock for refining strategies in 2024 and shaping more precise and tailored marketing campaigns.

Prashant Nayak

Seychelles, an archipelago of 115 islands located in the Indian Ocean, relies on tourism, drawing visitors with pristine beaches, coral reefs, and upscale resorts. Tourism Seychelles globally markets the destination, engaging in strategic planning and campaigns to position Seychelles as a competitive and attractive destination in the global tourism market.

Market Diversification

The primary goals and objectives of Tourism Seychelles for 2024 encompass pivotal initiatives aimed at fortifying and diversifying the tourism sector in Seychelles. At present, the European market stands as their primary source, contributing 72 per cent to their overall arrival figures. Recognising the significance of market diversification, their focused ambition is to enhance their global market share, and this entails expanding their reach beyond Europe and cultivating new source markets to attract tourists and visitors from diverse regions across the world.

“Our strategy involves an intensified focus on strategic markets, such as India and China, while not neglecting our Middle Eastern markets, the American market, to augment our tourist influx. We are also making a concerted effort to enhance connectivity to facilitate easier access for tourists from these burgeoning markets to and within the Seychelles islands. Furthermore, as a small nation reliant on tourism, we continue to push the incorporation of sustainability and resilience into our tourist economy, emphasising responsible practices to safeguard our pristine natural resources and cultural heritage,” says Bernadette.

Challenges and Competition

Tourism Seychelles continues to work on solving any logistical hurdles in connecting to new and existing markets, as well as

adapting to varied cultural preferences and travel patterns. Bernadette notes that the organisation has been in discussions with international partners to improve aviation connections, including strategic alliances with airlines. Thorough market studies are underway for a better understanding of the preferences and behavioural patterns of tourists from emerging markets, allowing them to tailor their offerings to suit their needs and highlight the elements of the islands that appeal to the travellers.

While Seychelles is situated among other Indian Ocean Island states that attract a similar tourist demographic, it stands out as a unique gem. Bernadette enthusiastically emphasises, “As a tropical vacation destination, our unique qualities distinguish us from the competition. Beyond our incredible biodiversity, pristine natural beauty, and vibrant heritage, Seychelles offers guests the ideal island-hopping experience. Unlike other island nations that limit tourists to one island, we open the door to a world of immersive experiences, offering profound insights into local culture and traditions.”

Emerging Trends Influencing Tourism

Bernadette observes a clear trend emerging among travellers as they prioritise what is truly important to them while making travel plans. In 2024, the emphasis will shift towards deeper encounters that leave a profound mark long after their visit. This paradigm shift indicates a desire for meaningful and rewarding experiences that go beyond the surface level of tourism. “Recognising travellers’ growing eco-consciousness, we realise the necessity of providing greener options, not only for transportation but also for the sites they choose to visit. In light of this increasing trend, we are committed to positioning ourselves as a sustainable destination. By aligning with these ideals, we want to appeal to the expanding community of ecologically concerned visitors looking for locations



▲ Bernadette Willemin

that share their dedication to responsible travel practices,” explains Bernadette.

She further adds, “We will continue to promote our location as an excellent choice for private group travel, wellness, and culinary experiences. By emphasising these aspects, we want to attract people seeking personalised and intimate travel experiences, whether through private group getaways, health retreats, or culinary explorations.”

India-inclined Strategies

Tourism Seychelles’ forthcoming marketing campaigns for 2024 will spotlight the destination’s unique natural allure, cultural richness, and unwavering dedication to sustainable tourism. With targeted digital marketing initiatives tailored to specific demographics in India, they aim to showcase the distinct offerings of the island paradise to Indian travellers, appealing to their sense of adventure, desire for wellness, and taste for good food. They also plan to invest more efforts in fostering trade relations in the country since India has a lot of untapped potential to become an important source market for the Seychelles Islands.

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Regency Holidays tailoring Qatar's unique charm into every journey

Regency Holidays has successfully carved out a unique and enviable position in the travel industry in Qatar. The combination of meticulous planning, diverse offerings, strong local partnerships, adaptability, and a customer-centric approach has not only set the company apart but has also contributed to its positive reputation in the market. Manoj Kumar Tiwari, General Manager, Regency Holidays, sheds light on the company's success and its unique positioning in the competitive travel industry of Qatar.

Prashant Nayak



▲ Manoj Kumar Tiwari

In 2023, Regency Holidays experienced a significant year of growth and accomplishment. Their commitment to providing exceptional travel experiences allowed them to navigate the evolving landscape successfully. The organisation saw increased demand for their services, particularly post-FIFA, as Qatar's appeal as a travel destination continued to rise. The expansion of their services, strategic partnerships, and a focus on customer satisfaction contributed to a successful and fulfilling year for Regency Holidays.

Distinctive Edge

Regency Holidays takes pride in incorporating Qatari culture into its services for both local and international travellers. They design itineraries that showcase authentic Qatari experiences, including cultural landmarks, traditional cuisine, and immersive activities. Their packages feature local insights, ensuring that travellers gain a deeper understanding of Qatar's rich heritage. From exploring historic sites to participating in local events, the aim is to provide unique and enriching cultural experiences that set them apart in the travel industry.

"Our emphasis is on crafting personalised and flexible travel packages that cater to various preferences that set us apart. We have established strong relationships with local partners, ensuring that our clients experience the best of Qatar. Additionally, our adaptability to changing travel trends and a customer-centric approach contribute to our unique position in the market," implies Manoj.

Regency Holidays is also keenly focused on promoting sustainable travel practices and incorporating eco-friendly options into their packages. Additionally, the rise of experiential travel has inspired them to curate immersive itineraries, ensuring that their clients not only visit Qatar but also deeply connect with its culture and heritage.

Offering Customisable Components

Regency Holidays aims to meet the diverse needs and preferences of potential customers through a comprehensive approach. They conduct extensive market research to understand traveller preferences and incorporate a variety of experiences into their travel packages. By offering customisable components, they empower travellers to tailor their trips based on their interests and preferences. Manoj is of the opinion that their collaboration with diverse accommodation partners, transparent pricing, and continuous feedback collection ensure that they provide a wide range of options catering to the specific needs of their customers.

Tailored Excellence in MICE Solutions

Regency Holidays excels in the MICE business by offering comprehensive solutions for corporate and event travel. Sharing their strong points in MICE, Manoj mentions, "Our dedicated team specialises in organising seamless events, conferences, and incentive trips. We provide end-to-end services, including venue selection, logistics, and customised itineraries to meet the unique requirements of each client. Our

meticulous planning and attention to detail ensure the success of MICE events, making Regency Holidays a trusted partner in the business and event travel sector."

Importance of the Indian Market

The Indian market holds significant importance for Regency Holidays, especially with the Middle East region witnessing a surge in tourism. "India is a key source market for travellers exploring Qatar, attracted by its diverse offerings. Recognising this, we have tailored our marketing strategies to effectively reach and engage the Indian audience. Our strategy for India revolves around targeted outreach, leveraging digital platforms, and collaborating with local travel influencers to create awareness," informs Manoj.

Further, Manoj adds, "Our travel packages are curated to appeal to Indian preferences, incorporating elements that resonate with the travellers' preferences while ensuring a seamless and culturally enriching experience for Indian travellers exploring Qatar. These packages include cultural experiences, adventure activities, and family-friendly options, ensuring a range of offerings that appeal to the Indian market. To sum up, our transparent communication, competitive pricing, and focus on delivering value contribute to our successful engagement with the Indian audience."

Upcoming Projects and Plans

In 2024, Regency Holidays is set to embark on exciting projects and expansions to enhance its offerings and reach. Manoj shares, "While specifics are under wraps, we are actively exploring new partnerships, destinations, and innovative travel experiences to elevate our services. Our commitment to staying at the forefront of the travel industry drives our continuous efforts to provide our clients with unique and memorable journeys. Stay tuned for announcements as we unveil our plans for the upcoming year."

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SriLankan Airlines paints a picture of resilience, innovation, and excellence

Charting a course through the complexities of aviation in 2023, SriLankan Airlines achieved financial equilibrium, unveiled enticing onboard enhancements, and adeptly addressed geopolitical shifts. For 2024, Richard Nuttall, CEO, SriLankan Airlines, outlines the airline's aspirations to enhance capacity, promising more culinary delights, sustainable practices, and high-tech offerings refining the travel experience and signalling a commitment to excellence in the ever-evolving landscape of the aviation industry.

Prashant Nayak

Intertwined by a rich fabric of shared history, cultural affinities, and close geographical proximity, the connection between India and Sri Lanka transcends borders.

This intricate interweaving cultivates a profound sense of warm familiarity, forging a distinctive bond among the majority of Indians within the island nation. In the realm of air travel that bridges these two nations, SriLankan Airlines emerges as the prime choice, offering an exquisite blend of hospitality that allows passengers to experience the best of both worlds while soaring through the skies. Boasting a robust presence, the airline spans nine cities in India, a testament to the depth of its commitment to facilitating travel between these closely linked destinations.

Ambitious Expansion Vision

SriLankan's adaptive approach to the prevailing challenges within the aviation industry exemplifies their commitment to strategic resilience. In reflection of the airline's dynamic expansion of its international route network, Richard says, "In 2023, we concentrated on consolidating direct operations to cope with the current aircraft and engine shortage by redirecting capacity to high-yield markets and optimising fleet utilisation at the same time. The expansion was primarily driven by strategic interline partnerships with airlines such as Emirates and Virgin Australia, which have helped us reach new markets and customer segments."

What sets SriLankan Airlines apart is not just its network but also its eagerness to explore new horizons. The airline is very keen in expanding its network in India. "In 2024, we hope to boost our existing routes by increasing frequencies as we increase the active fleet. We do have a number of new destinations in mind, including India, but the timing of these plans will depend on how quickly



▲ Richard Nuttall

we can grow the fleet," implies Richard.

Resilience Amidst Global Shifts

In light of the shifting geopolitical landscape in 2023, many airlines faced hurdles in international operations and route planning due to the impact of these global changes. However, Richard says, "The significantly large Sri Lankan diaspora and tourism potential of Sri Lanka as a destination has cushioned SriLankan Airlines from geopolitical events and helped the airline bounce back from setbacks over the years. Going forward, we have the benefit of being relatively small, and that allows us to be proportionally agile in the face of unforeseen events."

Onboard Marvels and Innovations

In 2023, the airline introduced exciting onboard enhancements, including 'SriLankan Flavours' for traditional cuisine, eco-friendly carpets from regenerated nylon, and sustainable toys for young travellers. The Colombo

airport now features a self-check-in and self-bag-drop facility, enhancing convenience. A redesigned mobile app offers additional features for an improved user experience. Passengers can share feedback via strategically placed NPS-driven tabs, fostering a culture of responsiveness. These initiatives reflect the airline's commitment to elevating the travel experience by blending cultural richness, sustainability, and technological innovation for a more enjoyable and conscientious journey. "For 2024, we have more onboard culinary surprises on the way, including special festive treats for festivals celebrated by our customers and extending the SriLankan Flavours range using sustainable, organic local produce. We have plans to implement wireless in-flight entertainment solutions and possibly high-speed internet onboard as well," asserts Richard.

Optimistically Paving the Way for Growth

Reflecting on the chapters of 2023, the airline achieved a significant milestone by breaking even in USD terms for the fiscal year concluding in March 2023, and they expect to do better this year. However, challenges in securing replacement aircraft for expiring leases, particularly the Airbus A330s, have led to a measured contraction. "The longer-term goal is to double our current size within a relatively short timeframe. However, finalising exact details will await the outcome of the current privatisation efforts of our owners. We have added a number of products and services, as highlighted earlier. Perhaps our biggest challenge has been maintaining the schedule due to engine issues and aircraft delivery delays. We expect this situation to improve as we move into 2024, as we have a number of aircraft joining the fleet and others returning to service as the engine situation improves," concludes Richard.

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India Assist soars to new heights with collaborative spirit of widespread acceptance

Through strategic partnerships, ongoing research and development, and a deep understanding of travellers’ evolving needs, India Assist strives to remain at the forefront of the industry in emergency assistance services. Harish Khatri, Founder and Managing Director, India Assist, is committed to empowering travellers and ensuring their well-being, which drives them to continuously innovate and adapt to the changing landscape of the travel industry.

Prashant Nayak

Whether it is a medical emergency, loss of baggage or wallet, altercations, or unforeseen circumstances, India Assist is there to bridge the gap and provide 24x7 assured assistance. Their goal is to ensure that travellers feel safe, supported, and empowered throughout their travels, both within India and abroad.

Remarkable 2023

The year 2023 has been more exciting than challenging for India Assist. Launched in 2019 but forced down owing to COVID-19, like many other businesses, they had to tweak their products. Re-launched in September 2022, the company grew network-wise, team-wise, and revenue-wise in 2023. However, the constant challenge is to cater to every segment of the tourism industry and keep customising the product as per their requirements, be it hotels, tour operators, aggregators, tourism boards, airports, or airlines. As India Assist is into B2B2C, their primary customer is the B2B partners, who have their own unique requirements while catering to their own set of customers. Thus, India Assist needs to constantly keep working on their tech and product delivery so that for every B2B partner, India Assist comes out as a viable value-add for their customers.

Growth and Expansion

As India Assist continues to grow and evolve, the vision for the company extends beyond just emergency assistance services. They aim to revolutionise the way travellers perceive and experience their journeys, offering a holistic suite of services that encompass safety, convenience, and personalised support. Harish says, “Our focus is on leveraging technology to create innovative solutions that enhance the overall travel experience for individuals and contribute to the growth of the travel



▲ Harish Khatri

industry as a whole. We are already providing travel assistance services in more than 128 cities in India. With our future expansion plan, we aim to cover 200-plus cities in India by 2024 and plan to launch our services in around five countries in 2024.”

Being Relevant by Evolving

Being in such a unique space, India Assist is one of the vanguards for change and adaptation in the travel industry. “We are also driving ourselves to keep evolving and upgrading our services. Our dedicated team of professionals ensures round-the-clock support, leveraging our advanced GPS tracking technology to reach travellers in distress without any hassle. Additionally, at India Assist, we work closely with travel partners and other service providers to deliver connected travel experiences as a whole,” explains Harish.

Strategic Alliances

In a short time, India Assist has established strong ties with hotel partners, travel operators, airlines, travel aggregators, and state tourism departments. By offering their assistance packages at a landed cost, they

ensure that travellers can access their services seamlessly and conveniently. Furthermore, the B2B approach allows them to appoint franchisees in multiple cities, fostering a network of support and expanding our reach.

Harish reflects on a pivotal achievement for India Assist, stating, “We have successfully implemented a pilot project in partnership with a prominent state tourism board. The project aimed to enhance the overall travel experience of visitors to the state by providing them with real-time assistance, personalised recommendations, and access to emergency services. The positive feedback and impact generated by this project have opened doors for further collaborations with other tourism boards and government agencies. We have been participating in various travel events organised by recognised travel bodies and will continue to participate in the future as well.”

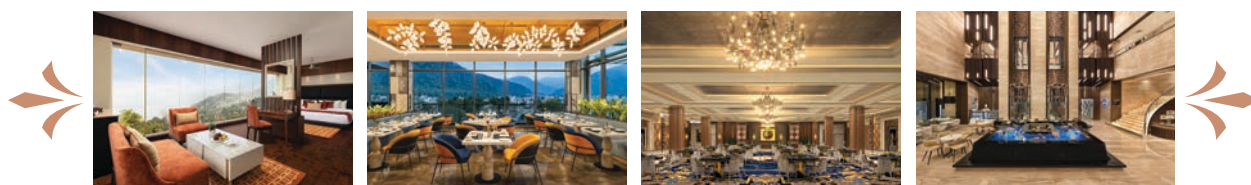
Strengthening Relationships to Serve Better

The travel industry thrives on the desire of people to explore new destinations. Travellers invest significant amounts of money, time, and resources in their journeys. Not having an emergency assistance system available to them that can provide guidance and support at every step is unfair to the traveller. India Assist, through its patented app, is looking forward to support from the entire industry in better serving their customers and strengthening their relationships. Because of industry support, they already have established partnerships with tourism boards, hoteliers, government PSUs, and travel agents who recognise the importance of filling the real-time assistance gap. India Assist complements and supports the industry partners rather than competing with them, and this has been widely accepted.

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Hyatt marks 40 years in India with robust growth and strategic plans for 2024

In 2024, Hyatt is set to open a range of hotels nationwide, catering to guests in both leisure and business destinations. Kadmbini Mittal, Regional Vice President, Commercial, India, and Southwest Asia, underscores their focus on cultivating a more diverse hotel portfolio in existing and emerging markets, aligning with evolving guest preferences and needs.

Prashant Nayak

2023 was a very significant year for Hyatt, as it marked the 40th year of operations in India. They continued to expand their presence in locations where guests are eager to travel, as showcased by the recent openings of the properties in Vijayawada, Dehradun, and Bodh Gaya. The year had been very strong for them, with strong demand in the MICE and wedding spaces as well as continued buoyancy in leisure travel. This reiterates the significance of India in Hyatt’s brand growth in the region, and they are surely excited to continue this momentum in 2024 with more hotel openings.

Renewed focus on leisure destinations

As the Hyatt brand continues to thoughtfully grow their presence across the country, the key focus will be on leisure destinations, considering leisure travel is driving current demand in the form of workcations, staycations, and weekend getaways. “Now more than ever, people are venturing out to travel for leisure. They are eager to discover new things, relax, and reconnect with each other. In addition to our expansion in metros, we will continue to expand to Tier 2 towns where there is a strong demand for wellness, spiritual tourism, and, of course, leisure. At Hyatt, we are focused on innovation and reimagining the hospitality experience for our guests, given our philosophy of ‘Care,’ says Kadmbini.

Sustainability is a priority

In today’s rapidly evolving hospitality market, staying competitive is essential for business success. One of the most important things that Hyatt learned as an organisation is how quickly and effectively businesses must adapt and act in response to unusual circumstances. Kadmbini elaborates, “Brands must be willing to adapt and evolve their strategies in response to



▲ Kadmbini Mittal

changing market conditions, shifting consumer preferences, and emerging technologies. This means constantly seeking out new opportunities, exploring new markets, and investing in emerging technologies that can help drive growth and profitability. Every organisation should also prioritise sustainability in its decision-making process. Our goal is to advance corporate, hotel, and collective action on climate change, water stewardship, waste and circularity, responsible sourcing, biodiversity, and local environment protection so that our guests can enjoy vibrant destinations around the world.”

Committed to personalisation and care

For any hotel group, it is important to ensure that products and brands remain relevant and attractive to their audience. At Hyatt, they aim to provide guests with a reimagined hospitality experience that can only be achieved through personalisation, creativity, and care. The human desire to reconnect with loved ones and experience the joy of travelling together to newer destinations has never been so strong. Moreover, travel has become extremely experiential and

educational; it is about getting hands-on exposure to the real authenticity of a destination. “With initiatives such as FIND, our global experiences platform; Hyatt Dining Club, which has a range of value-added curated offerings across all Hyatt hotels and restaurants in India; and Perfectly Yours, our bespoke wedding offering in India, we are constantly striving to exceed our guests’ expectations. Our World of Hyatt loyalty programme continues to thrive by offering guests exciting rewards and privileges,” affirms Kadmbini.

Adaptability, flexibility, and innovation

The evolving hospitality landscape emphasises innovation and adaptability. Bleisure travel remains prominent as professionals blend work and leisure trips while immersive experiences gain popularity. There is also a noticeable shift towards frequent, shorter getaways, where travellers are leveraging long weekends to explore multiple destinations throughout the year. Travellers seek authentic connections with local cultures, embracing trends like slow travel and spiritual tourism. Gen Z prioritises experiences over possessions, choosing travel for adventure and personal growth. This dynamic shift reflects a broader desire for meaningful and transformative travel experiences. These trends highlight a significant industry shift towards providing diverse and personalised experiences. Kadmbini emphasises this evolution, stating, “In line with this, we introduced FIND, a global experiences platform within the World of Hyatt, offering numerous opportunities for local exploration. Presently in India, travellers can savour a farm-to-table meal with a view of the Aravalli Hills and participate in cooking classes to learn how to create dishes from Rajasthan at Alila Fort Bishangar or relish coastal cuisine at Alila Diwa Goa, all part of the immersive offerings provided by Hyatt.”



Discover Unmatched Entertainment as Riyadh Season Takes Centre Stage

In the beating heart of the Middle East, the Saudi capital sits at the confluence of rich culture and modernity. Against this fascinating backdrop, Riyadh Season emerges as a celebration that captures the essence of a future-ready nation. From the very first step onto this dynamic arena, visitors find themselves whisked away into a whirlwind of outstanding sporting events, soul-stirring music concerts, theatrical shows, family-friendly activities, and culinary experiences. It's not just an event; it's a grand showcase living up to its current theme, Big Time.

This annual extravaganza – on until March 2024 – dazzles with its sheer scale while underlining Saudi's commitment to preserve its heritage. As the fourth season unfolds across 12 thrilling zones, even the numbers tell a success story. In just a month since its launch in October last year, the world's largest event welcomed over 5 million visitors, positioning it as a global entertainment hub.

12 Zones & Unlimited Fun

Riyadh Season spreads across 12 zones, each with its unique charm. Boulevard World ignites the spirit of cultural fusion, while Boulevard City pulsates with a cosmopolitan vibe featuring cafes, branded showrooms, a dancing fountain, and a venue to host musical performances. Kids are in for a special treat at the Riyadh Zoo that promises close encounters with exotic animals like the red panda. Wonder Garden has thrilling rides, a VR gaming arena, a butterfly house, a farm with exquisite trees, and a flock of pink flamingos. Indulgence knows no bounds, thanks to fine dining restaurants at Ramla Terraza and an array of international flavours at Food Trucks Park. The Groves offer diverse cultures, food, and art against a backdrop of inspiring spaces. Suwaidi Park emerges as a vast oasis, unveiling seven cultures over seven weeks, including a vibrant Indian pavilion. This cultural immersion invites visitors on a journey filled with culinary delights, musicals, and traditional folk dances representing a featured country.

The allure extends to Kingdom Arena, Roshn Front, Souq Al Awaleen, and VIA Riyadh—each contributing to the event's kaleidoscope, ensuring there is something for everyone.

Why You Should Be There?

The largest country in the GCC region plays host to top-tier acclaimed local and global performers, artists and entertainers, promising a lineup of concerts, shows and mega sporting events. Building up the anticipation are the upcoming Tyson Fury vs Oleksandr Usyk boxing match, Riyadh Season Cup football tournament, Supercopa de España featuring Real Madrid, Barcelona, Atlético Madrid and Osasuna, Supercoppa Italiana, UFC Fight Night 238 mixed martial arts, and more.

The festival serves as a meeting point for people from diverse backgrounds, fostering cultural exchange and dialogue as visitors from around the globe witness Saudi's warm hospitality. Riyadh Season is where you need to be.

Know more about the extravaganza on riyadhseason.com

Rayna Tours invests in systems and processes to build and expand new resources

Rayna Tours, the Dubai-headquartered DMC, has emerged as a prominent force in the UAE's tourism and hospitality industries. With a steadfast commitment to delivering exceptional service, Rayna Tours has consistently pioneered inventive travel solutions for its global partners. Senthil Velan, CEO, Rayna Destination Management, unveils the latest developments within the organisation, offering insights into the innovative strides and strategic advancements that define Rayna Tours.

Prashant Nayak

Since its launch in 2006, Rayna Tours has maintained an impressive track record by establishing its presence in different parts of the world. The company's expansion plans include establishing new destinations in the main European, Asian, and Middle Eastern countries to create comprehensive, full-fledged products for the travel and tourism industry and communities.

Navigating Challenges

Geo-political tensions emerged as significant impediments to the travel business in the UAE. The heightened competition posed another obstacle, with numerous small niche entities resuming operations post-COVID, intensifying market competition and consequently reducing profit margins. Additionally, the influx of new players led to rising attrition rates among staff as these entities sought to attract experienced professionals, further impacting Rayna Tours' workforce stability.

Speaking of mitigation measures, Senthil says, "We branched into source markets where we were not present. For example, we invested in sales resources to handle GCC and Far East markets, and this strategy helped us mitigate the reduction in business in the war-affected regions. Further, we launched our own niche products, such as hot air balloons and paramotoring, helping us create new revenue streams. Our investments in systems and processes reduce the dependence on individual resources, helping us to bring new resources up to speed within a short time frame."

Scaling Business Segments

Rayna Tours remains committed to innovation and continues to launch new leisure experiences, adding value to the destination. They are looking at launching their helicopter experiences and luxury yachts, to name a few. "We launched new business segments such as cruises, concerts, and digital concierges in 2023.

We will be focusing on scaling these segments and establishing Rayna as a major player in these segments. In 2023, Rayna Tours expanded its horizons, establishing new destination offerings in Singapore and Saudi Arabia. We will be focusing on replicating the success we achieved in the UAE in the new destinations. Committed to technological advancement, we'll showcase our AI-based digital concierge in Q1 2024," shares Senthil.

Upholding Core Values

Senthil emphasises that, regardless of emerging travel trends, Rayna's unwavering commitment lies in prioritising product expertise, customer focus, and excellent service delivery. He states, "Irrespective of new emerging trends, product expertise, customer focus, and excellent service delivery will continue to be the cornerstones of our company philosophy. We believe this will help us sustain the success we have achieved so far in the market. Over and above this, we will continue to innovate, merging new trends in technology and our destination expertise to come up with new product offerings and services for customers."

Multifaceted Strategy to Engage Markets

In 2024, Rayna Tours is strategically poised for growth and audience engagement. They are actively expanding operations in Singapore and Saudi Arabia, offering diverse destination choices to tour operators. Along with their new product launches, including helicopter and luxury yacht rides, they will be adding new products to the cruise segment and concerts. In addition, they will continue to curate niche experiences even with their existing products. Their tailor-made desert experience was a major hit



▲ Senthil Velan

among the customers. Their new drive-the-thrill camp provides an opportunity to host exclusive events. Also, active social media engagement and sustained interaction with trade partners through roadshows, exhibitions, and webinars will further solidify their presence and market reach.

Fostering the Rayna Team Spirit

In the trajectory of Rayna's expansion and introduction of new products and destinations in 2024, a key challenge lies in cultivating the Rayna team spirit among new members. Senthil mentions, "As we continue to expand, adding new products and destinations, inculcating the Rayna team spirit amongst the new members, and making them feel like part of the Rayna family would be a challenge that we actively need to manage. Scaling our systems, processes, and teams to manage the growth expected in 2024 will be one of the primary focuses."

Adding on, Senthil acknowledges the instrumental contribution of their travel trade partners and suppliers to Rayna's growth as a leading travel entity in the region. Expressing gratitude, he says, "We are thankful for their support, and we will continue to nurture these partnerships."



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Air India adds new wings in aviation

Air India's debut of the Airbus A350-900 spearheads a new chapter in Indian aviation, showcasing cutting-edge technology and an enhanced in-flight experience.

Vartik Sethi

Air India recently introduced the country's first Airbus A350-900, marking a leap forward in the industry. On January 22, 2024, the inaugural flight from Mumbai to Chennai showcased the A350's state-of-the-art technology and comfort. This aircraft, the first of a significant 470 aircraft order, is set to redefine flying in India.

The A350, initially operating on domestic routes, allows passengers from major Indian cities to experience its advanced features. This phase also serves to familiarise the crew with the aircraft before it begins international operations.

Complementing its fleet expansion, Air India revolutionised in-flight entertainment

on long-haul flights. The Panasonic eX3 IFE system, available on the A350 and B777-300ER, offers over 2,200 hours of diverse content, including international and Indian movies, TV shows, and Air India Radio.

Moreover, Air India launched South Asia's largest aviation training academy in Gurugram, India. This 600,000 sq ft facility, with over 20 simulators, will train 50,000 aviation professionals, enhancing India's aviation sector.

The maiden flight of the A350, AI 589, was fully booked as it departed from Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport for Chennai, following the aircraft's showcase at the Wings India Global Aviation Summit in Hyderabad.

The A350-900, with 316 seats across three classes, features the latest Panasonic eX3 in-flight entertainment system with HD screens. Its efficiency is amplified by Rolls Royce Trent XWB engines, resulting in a 20 per cent reduction in fuel consumption and emissions.

The arrival of the first A350-900 at Delhi's IGI Airport in December 2023 marked the start of Air India's expansion plan, with a new aircraft joining the fleet every six days throughout 2024. AI 589 now operates six days a week, excluding Tuesdays, providing a significant boost to connectivity between Mumbai and Chennai and symbolising Air India's dynamic transformation in the global aviation landscape.

Paul Merchants on a growth trajectory

In conversation with TTJ, Rajneesh Bansal, Managing Director, Paul Merchants, delves into the company's performance in 2023 and provides insights into the anticipated trajectory for 2024.

Gurjit Singh Ahuja

With over three decades of expertise, Paul Merchants is a Chandigarh-based conglomerate boasting 250 nationwide offices and a seasoned workforce. Operating in diverse sectors, including inward money transfers, foreign exchange, tours and travel, gold loans, insurance, and prepaid payment cards, it stands as a versatile industry leader.

Eyeing Robust Growth in 2024

Despite the high cost of international airfares and international conflicts, 2023 has been a rewarding year for Paul Merchants. "Indians are travelling overseas in large numbers, and international flights are full. At the same time, domestic tourism has seen a huge surge, and the domestic hotel industry has had a rewarding year," says Rajneesh Bansal.

He further explains, "Currently, we are



▲ Rajneesh Bansal

faring much better than the pre-COVID years and are happy with the overall growth we are experiencing. We are very optimistic that 2024 will be an even better year for our industry. The buoyancy in the market has given us

confidence for further expansion, and we are targeting opening 50 more offices across the country in 2024."

Product Power

In the realm of outbound travel, Paul Merchants focuses on key markets such as Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Thailand, and Vietnam. Leveraging robust partnerships with DMCs in these destinations and supported by an extensive network of offices across India, their proficiency in FOREX and remittances creates a compelling value proposition for both business partners and clients.

Paul Merchants has introduced a prepaid rupee payment card on the user-friendly RuPay platform for the domestic market. Easily obtainable via an online app and mandatory KYC, the card boasts widespread popularity, with one lakh cards already in circulation and a rapidly increasing user base.



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The Bhavya Ram Mandir inauguration positions Ayodhya as a global religious and tourism hub

The inauguration of the Bhavya Ram Mandir in Ayodhya on January 22, 2024, signifies a historic milestone, drawing dignitaries, religious fervour, and global attention. The ceremony not only cemented Ayodhya as a religious destination but also signalled its emergence as a cultural hub with vast tourism potential.

Dr. Anushree Banerjee

On January 22, 2024, the Bhavya Ram Mandir in Ayodhya hosted a momentous inaugural ceremony, drawing over 7,000 distinguished personalities from various sectors nationwide. Special invitees to the event included notable figures such as Amitabh Bachchan, Mukesh Ambani, Gautam Adani, Anil Agrawal, and Sachin Tendulkar. The focal point of the Pran Pratistha ceremony was the 51-inch idol of Ram Lalla, meticulously sculpted by Arun Yogiraj of Mysuru.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi played a pivotal role in this historic occasion, conducting the Pran Pratistha of Ram Lalla, marking the culmination of the 11-day anushthan (ritual). The ceremonies were attended by notable figures, including Mohan Bhagwat, the RSS Chief; Anandiben Patel, the UP Governor; and Yogi Adityanath, the CM of Uttar Pradesh. The grandeur was enhanced by army helicopters showering flower petals on the temple grounds.

Ayodhya was enveloped in a joyous atmosphere as chanting Hindu devotees adorned the streets with saffron flags featuring images of Lord Ram, complemented

by marigolds. Banners displaying the faces of Lord Ram, the Prime Minister, and the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh were added to the festive display. In numerous northern cities, Hindus illuminated lamps, while rooftops displayed saffron flags depicting Ram's images. Cinemas broadcasted the event, and large screens relayed Ayodhya's images to town squares and residential neighbourhoods. Celebrations extended globally - Times Square in New York was adorned with massive billboards of Lord Ram, attracting devotees despite the freezing weather. In the United Kingdom, where Indians form a substantial diaspora, temples marked the occasion with colourful posters inviting devotees to partake in festivities involving flowers, sweets, and music. Even in Muslim-majority Dubai, celebrations unfolded, acknowledging the significant Indian population.

Beyond the cultural and spiritual significance of the Ram Mandir, the ceremony spotlighted Ayodhya's potential as a central hub for Uttar Pradesh's tourism-driven economic growth. Local businesses are seizing the opportunity, with 600 paying guest facilities registered and certificates issued for 441. Anticipating 2,500 paying

guest rooms, Ayodhya's tourism strategy has embraced homestays, enhanced cultural immersion, and fostered sustainable practices for local economic empowerment.

Ayodhya's evolution into a tourism hub is backed by a holistic plan that includes incorporating an airport and enhancing railway and bus connectivity. These initiatives guarantee effortless access for tourists, both national and international. Strategic infrastructure, accommodations, and amenity development in Ayodhya further enhance the overall tourist experience.

The city, with its cultural and spiritual significance, attracts a substantial influx of visitors. Notable tourist sites include Shri Ram Janmabhoomi, Nageshwar Nath Temple, Deokaali, Ram Ki Paidi, Hanuman Garhi, Birla Temple, Kanak Bhawan, Gulab Bari, and Jain Shwetamber Temple. Mukesh Kumar Meshram, Principal Secretary of Tourism and Culture, emphasised the pivotal role of tourism in fostering economic development, focusing on the growth potential of rural homestays. Ayodhya, with its rich cultural heritage, is poised to take centre stage in the state's tourism economy through strategic improvements in connectivity and infrastructure.



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UP ascends as a premier destination, blending tradition and progress

In an exclusive interaction with TTJ, Mukesh Kumar Meshram, IAS, Principal Secretary, Tourism and Culture Department, Director General - Tourism, Government of Uttar Pradesh, reflects on the state's dynamic tourism growth in 2023, including the opening of the Bhavya Ram Temple and plans for new circuits in 2024. The interview explores Uttar Pradesh's strategic approach to tourism development and its impact on the state's cultural and economic landscape, anticipating a surge in visitors in 2024 and beyond.

Ravi Sharma

How was the year 2023 for UP Tourism? What new products, tourist circuits, destinations, and re-developments were rolled out?

In 2023, Uttar Pradesh Tourism witnessed significant growth with the introduction of diverse products, tourist circuits, and destination developments. The state focused on enhancing its cultural and historical appeal, unveiling new tourist circuits like the Heritage Trail and Adventure Circuit. A major highlight was the inauguration of the Ayodhya Heritage Complex, which attracted pilgrims and history enthusiasts alike. The rejuvenation of key historical sites, such as the Agra Fort and Varanasi Ghats, bolstered tourism infrastructure. Additionally, promoting eco-tourism initiatives in the Dudhwa National Park and the unveiling of the Braj Chaurasi Kos Parikrama project contributed to the sector's expansion. These strategic measures, aimed at diversifying attractions and improving infrastructure, positively impacted Uttar Pradesh's tourism, fostering economic growth and cultural exchange.

Several noteworthy projects are currently underway in Uttar Pradesh, India, showcasing a commitment to cultural preservation and tourism development. In the Ayodhya district, efforts include the conservation and beautification of four historical entrance gates, the restoration of 14 religious tourist places, and enhancement projects for 16 religious spots, such as the Rishabh Sarabh Panas Temple and Hanuman Temple. The Maa Vindhyavasini Corridor in Vindhyachal, Mirzapur, the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Museum in Agra, and the Sound



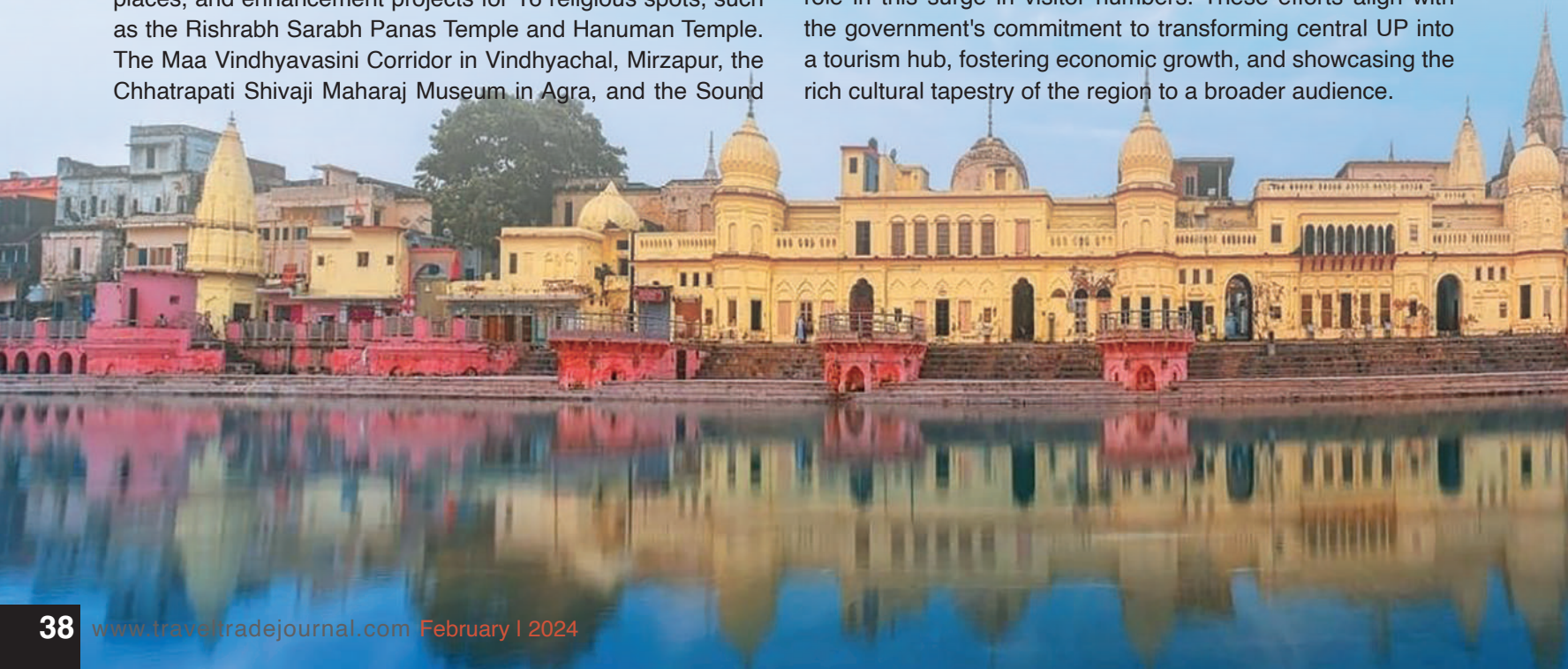
▲ Mukesh Kumar Meshram

and Light Show at Rambhar Stupa in Kushinagar reflect a focus on historical and cultural enrichment. Other notable initiatives include the Buddha Theme Park and Digital Kumbh Museum in Kushinagar, Maharaja Shuheldev Smarak in Bahraich, and the Gola Gokaran Nath Corridor in Lakhimpur Kheri. Additionally, the Bankey Bihari Temple Area Development Project in Vrindavan, Mathura, includes underground cabling and a parking facility, contributing to the overall upliftment of these cultural and religious landmarks.

Please elaborate on the growth curve of major destinations and significant increase in domestic tourism influx into UP in 2023.

The state witnessed substantial growth in popular destinations, with Agra, Ayodhya, Prayagraj, and Varanasi leading the influx.

Agra, home to the iconic Taj Mahal, continued to attract a large number of visitors. Varanasi, with its spiritual and cultural significance, also experienced dramatic growth in tourist footfall. The Heritage Trail initiative and the Ayodhya Heritage Complex inauguration further fuelled interest, drawing pilgrims and history enthusiasts. Additionally, efforts to promote eco-tourism in Dudhwa National Park contributed to increased visitation. Development initiatives, including enhanced transportation networks and improved accommodation facilities, play a pivotal role in this surge in visitor numbers. These efforts align with the government's commitment to transforming central UP into a tourism hub, fostering economic growth, and showcasing the rich cultural tapestry of the region to a broader audience.



In the year 2023, tourism statistics for various districts in Uttar Pradesh showcase a substantial influx of visitors, both Indian and foreign. Varanasi emerges as a significant tourist hub, with a total of 84,204,814 visitors, including 84,071,726 Indian tourists and 133,088 foreigners. Ayodhya attracts 20,364,347 visitors, comprising 20,362,713 Indian tourists and 1,634 foreigners. Prayagraj records a total of 44,995,996 visitors, with 44,993,289 being Indian tourists and 2,707 foreigners. The overall tourism scenario for Uttar Pradesh in 2023 is impressive, with a total of 320,150,072 visitors, including 319,195,206 Indian tourists and 954,866 foreigners, emphasising the state's popularity as a diverse and culturally rich destination.

Have foreign tourist numbers in UP reached pre-pandemic levels? Please highlight the 2023 initiatives to attract more overseas visitors.

In 2023, overseas visitor numbers to Uttar Pradesh demonstrated a promising recovery, approaching pre-pandemic levels. The state has implemented several initiatives to further attract foreign tourists. The Ayodhya Heritage Complex inauguration and the Heritage Trail project showcased Uttar Pradesh's cultural richness, capturing international attention. Additionally, targeted marketing campaigns highlighted the state's historical treasures, such as the Taj Mahal and Varanasi, emphasising safety measures in the post-pandemic context. Collaborative efforts with travel agencies and various online platforms facilitated accessibility for foreign tourists. Infrastructure enhancements and hospitality sector developments also contributed to the appeal. Overall, these initiatives in 2023 were aimed at reviving and surpassing international tourism figures, promoting Uttar Pradesh as a preferred destination for global travellers.

Are there any major initiatives to attract investment into the tourism infrastructure of the state?

In 2023, the state government rolled out policies aimed at fostering public-private partnerships, enticing both domestic and international investors. Special incentives, tax breaks, and streamlined approval processes were introduced to encourage private investment in the development of hotels, resorts, homestays, and other tourism-related projects. Additionally, Uttar Pradesh actively participated in tourism summits and roadshows, showcasing its potential and opportunities to potential investors. The emphasis was placed on enhancing overall infrastructure, including transportation, to facilitate seamless travel for tourists. These strategic measures aimed at attracting investment played a crucial role in elevating the tourism sector, fostering economic growth, and creating a more robust and sustainable tourism infrastructure in the state.

After Ayodhya's splendid Bhavya Ram Temple inauguration, how will the government manage the anticipated huge footfalls of pilgrims and visitors?

Beyond the cultural and spiritual significance of the Ram Mandir,

the inauguration ceremony spotlighted Ayodhya's potential as a central hub for Uttar Pradesh's tourism-driven economic growth. The city is now poised to play a pivotal role in the state's tourism economy, with strategic enhancements in connectivity and infrastructure. The government has focused on developing adequate infrastructure to handle the expected large influx of pilgrims, including advanced transport facilities, accommodation options, and crowd management systems. Collaborative efforts with local communities and law enforcement agencies aim to ensure a safe and organised pilgrimage experience.

Local businesses are seizing the opportunity, with around 600 paying guest facilities registered and certificates issued for 441 of them. Approximately 2,500 paying guest rooms are anticipated, incorporating homestays into Ayodhya's tourism strategy. This not only enriches the tourist experience with authentic cultural immersion but also fosters sustainable tourism practices, creating economic opportunities for local communities.

Ayodhya's transformation into a tourism epicentre is supported by a comprehensive plan, including the establishment of an airport and improvements in railway and bus connectivity. These measures ensure seamless accessibility for tourists, not only from across the nation but also opening avenues for international visitors. The strategic development of infrastructure, accommodations, and amenities in Ayodhya will contribute to an enriched tourist experience.

What other new tourist circuits and products are expected to be rolled out in 2024?

The state plans to unveil the Ganges Heritage Circuit, focusing on the cultural and historical significance of the Ganges River. Additionally, the Wildlife Expedition Circuit, centred around Dudhwa National Park, aims to promote eco-tourism. Initiatives like the Spiritual Retreat Circuit and the Rural Immersion Experience will provide visitors with unique and immersive encounters. The integration of technology, such as augmented reality guides, is expected to enhance the tourist experience.

Tourist activity in Uttar Pradesh has dynamically expanded into central Uttar Pradesh, driven by iconic destinations like Ayodhya, Varanasi, and Prayagraj. Varanasi, a spiritual and historical gem, has experienced increased footfall. Key tourist spots in the Varanasi district include the renowned Kashi Vishvanath Temple, the city's 88 ghats along the River Ganges, Sarnath, and many other important temples dedicated to Hinduism and Jainism. Prayagraj, renowned for the Kumbh Mela and Sangam, adds a grand dimension to the tourism landscape. The upcoming Kumbh Mela is expected to attract vast crowds, highlighting the region's cultural vibrancy. Noteworthy sites in Prayagraj include the Law Museum and Archives, Allahabad Museum, the New Yamuna Bridge, Khusro Bagh, Anand Bhawan, Chandra Shekhar Azad Park (Alfred Park), etc.





OUTBOUND TRAVEL

Shifting Goalposts!

The post-COVID outbound market in India has sprung many surprises and some notable shifts and changes. Today, there is a growing tribe of travellers willing to travel at whatever cost to their bucket list of aspirational destinations. TTJ spoke to some dynamic industry players to understand how 2023 was for companies and what is new for 2024.

Gurjit Singh Ahuja



▲ Pankaj Nagpal



▲ Tejbir Anand



▲ Rohit Shorey



▲ Ravi Gosain

Major Shifts and Changes

Aspirational and experiential travel are ruling the roost today. The traveller has now evolved and is more willing to explore newer destinations and create experiences and memories rather than just travel for the sake of a vacation. They are now opting for longer and unique itineraries that offer the real essence of a destination. Pankaj Nagpal, Managing Director, Travstarz Global Group, explains, "Shopping, which used to be a very important factor for the Indian traveller, has now taken a back seat. Travellers today prefer to spend on better hotels, food, and the distinct experiences that a destination has to offer. We have seen this new trend even with senior citizens who are now keen travellers looking to enjoy their golden years."

Tejbir Anand, Founder, and Managing Director, Holiday Moods Adventures, elaborates, "Earlier, not many Indians were heard travelling to places like Antarctica and Greenland, but now every year there are over a hundred passengers visiting these destinations. Destination weddings overseas are also a great new trend that has caught up, with a lot of celebrities leading the way. Rohit

Shorey, Founder and CEO, Kazin DMC, also added, "There has been a growing interest in offbeat and experiential destinations with an increased inclination towards wellness and adventure tourism. The choice of destinations that we represent and their proximity to India, combined with limited visa hassles, appeal to the Indian traveller, enhancing business for these countries."

The Indian outbound industry is all set to grow year on year despite several roadblocks. Ravi Gosain, MD, Saffron World B.V., explains, "We have seen many new outbound travellers from smaller cities. One of the major changes I observed was their well-researched knowledge about the destinations, and this helps travel agents and tour operators finalise bookings much faster since they don't have to go into detail explaining the usual things about travelling or the destination. Secondly, price-wise, overall travellers have accepted the increase in travel costs."

Challenges and Strategies

High aviation fuel costs resulted in inflated airfares, prolonged and new conflict zones,

and multiple visa issues. Staffing issues continued to hound the industry all through 2023; hopefully, things finally appear to be changing for the better. However, the resilient industry stakeholders tried their best to generate business and open new markets and destinations, and their efforts did yield positive results. On this, Ravi Gosain says, "Despite the increasing demand for outbound travel, we did face stiff challenges in getting inventory on desired flights and hotels, and most of the time, we had to work hard to find alternative solutions available, which added to our workload. Abnormally high pricing during certain periods and erratic visa situations were some of the issues with which we fought daily for the smooth functioning of our businesses."

One of the biggest challenges for each organisation after coming out of the COVID era was team building. Many companies had laid off their employees to survive the uncertain years of COVID, and getting the team back in place was the biggest priority. Tejbir thankfully did not face the problem of restructuring his team; as he explains, "We did not let go of any employee in our

company. I realised that it would be more difficult to restructure and get the team back, so we kept the team alive and kicking with us. This was a huge advantage, as when the offices reopened, and the world came back to normalcy, we were ready.”

The political situation in West Asia initially posed some challenges for Egypt and Turkiye's business for Pankaj Nagpal but has now somewhat settled once again. He optimistically points out, “The year 2023 has been a very good year for us so far, with all our DMC offices back to full operations now. Some of our DMC locations have seen phenomenal demand, which includes Egypt, Turkiye, Vietnam, and Bali, as well as Thailand, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Qatar, and Singapore. Except for high airfares, we did not see many challenges for us as most of our DMC locations are either visa-free or have e-visas, including Egypt, Azerbaijan, Turkiye, and Vietnam.” Rohit Shorey also mentions, “2023 has been a rather fruitful year for us, owing to the choice of destinations that we represent and their proximity to India, limited visa hassles, and their appeal to the traveller.”

Highlighting some problem areas, Tejbir says, “The airfares have almost doubled. Where one could have easily picked up a return air ticket to London for about ₹50,000, it has now increased to almost

₹80–90,000. The visa issues are a horror story. A lot of Schengen countries are also not very friendly and refuse a lot of visas to travellers, making it more complex by taking more than two months to issue the visas. I had to travel to Iceland in October, and there was no appointment available. A lot of clients travelling to Norway received their visas on the day of their departure.”

What’s Anew

Innovation is the name of the game to stay on top of situations and make business fruitful. There is a constant need to identify the gaps and plug them to stay profitable and relevant. As Tejbir shares, “We realised that there was a bigger vacuum in the B2B segment to promote the polar countries. These journeys are on the bucket list of almost every traveller, but the bandwidth of knowledge to promote these countries is limited. Quickly realising this opportunity, we launched our B2B offerings armed with the distributorship of a few cruise companies, such as Havilla Voyages Norway, Viking Line Cruises in the Baltic Sea, and Swan Hellenic 5-star boutique expedition cruises.”

Tejbir further adds, “Today, we specialise in countries like Antarctica, Arctic Canada, Greenland, Iceland, Norway, Svalbard, and Finland. We will soon be adding Sweden to

our offering. We now are a specialist company and promote amazing experiences like the Northern Lights, whale watching trips, polar bears, penguins, and walruses, activities such as reindeer and dog sledging, ice cave exploration, volcanic crater explorations, and glacier lagoon visits, to name a few.”

As a DMC, Rohit highlights, “We remain the most competitive in the market with an emphasis on delivering high-quality services with value ads that our competitors are unable to offer, hence placing us at a point of advantage. We are one of the very few DMCs in the world that do not outsource services to other vendors. We have added Georgia and Belarus to our existing portfolio of Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan and continue our portfolio enrichment programme.”

Pankaj continues his focus on Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities. He explains, “Since the beginning, our core strength has been our strong presence in the Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities where we continue to dominate, and all our agent partners too have been very loyal to us. Our focus continues to be on these markets, especially now that we are the joint promotion partner for both Abu Dhabi Tourism and Qatar Tourism; besides several theme parks, these markets are our drivers to generate numbers for our partners.”



Dubai Package

4 nights / 5 days
USD 355 per person
on Twin / Double sharing basis

Validity : Booking by 5th March'24 / Travel by 30th April'24

Inclusions:

- 1. 4 nights accommodation in Hotel Grand Excelsior, Deira or similar
- 2. Daily Breakfast
- 3. Half day Dubai city tour
- 4. Desert Safari with BBQ Dinner
- 5. Marina Dhow Cruise Dinner
- 6. Miracle Garden & Global Village
- 7. Burj Khalifa – 124th floor non-prime hours
- 8. Dubai Airport- Hotel- Airport transfers
- 9. All tours on SIC basis & Airport transfers by Pvt Vehicle

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AL HABTOOR CITY COLLECTION DUBAI

EMBODIES A PARADIGM OF LUXURY AND HOSPITALITY EXCELLENCE

With a distinguished career that also spans India and Dubai, Saeid Heidari, Complex General Manager, Al Habtoor City Collection, recognises the intricate and cultural dynamics of both these markets. Embodied in his leadership role is a philosophy shaped by rich experiences and a profound understanding of the hospitality industry. Through a blend of expertise and cultural awareness, Heidari is dedicated to elevating the hospitality experience at Al Habtoor City to unparalleled heights.

Prashant Nayak



Over the course of your thirty years in the hospitality industry, how has your understanding of the term 'hospitality' evolved?

At the onset of my career, I perceived hospitality predominantly as delivering

exceptional services and luxury experiences. My focus was on mastering the operational excellence required by prestigious hotels. A progression through my career made me realise that hospitality transcends mere service provision. It is about genuinely understanding and anticipating the needs of our guests, creating an environment that is not only welcoming but also respectful and empathetic. This shift in perspective is deeply ingrained in my leadership approach, where respect, empathy, and accountability are paramount.

In my leadership roles, I see hospitality as a more holistic concept today and my belief is about generosity and empowerment, both towards our guests and our team members. It is not just about the amenities and services we offer but how we make our guests feel truly valued and cared for. My focus has expanded to empowering my team and fostering a culture where they are inspired to learn, grow, and contribute to creating memorable guest experiences.

What makes Hilton Dubai Al Habtoor City unique from the other luxury hotels in Dubai?

Al Habtoor City is home to three ultra-luxurious hotels, Habtoor Palace Dubai, V Hotel Dubai, and Hilton Dubai Al Habtoor City. I can only say that the destination is a luxury haven nestled in the heart of Dubai, offering an unparalleled retreat unlike any other. Waking up to the awe-inspiring presence of the Burj Khalifa sets the tone for a day of indulgence and adventure. This exceptional destination seamlessly combines family-friendly entertainment, rejuvenating spa experiences, and a tantalising array of culinary delights, creating a symphony of opulent living. The spacious rooms, adorned with breathtaking views of either the Burj Khalifa or the serene canal, redefine luxury living.

Whether you are lounging by rooftop pools overlooking the cityscape, indulging in a round of bowling on the world's highest lane, or

exploring the myriad of enticing experiences, the Hilton Dubai Al Habtoor City promises a getaway that transcends expectations. It is a redefined Dubai escape that invites you to immerse yourself in unparalleled luxury and sophistication.

As the new General Manager of Hilton Dubai Al Habtoor City, what strategic measures do you plan to implement to enhance profitability and elevate the overall guest experience?

At the Hilton Dubai Al Habtoor City, we dive deep into technology to understand our guests better. We are going green not just to save the planet but also to appeal to eco-conscious travellers, cut costs, and rely on energy-efficient systems and local sourcing. We provide advanced training and empower our staff to make guest-centric decisions, thus ensuring top-notch personal and efficient service. Our regular guest feedback is our goldmine for continuous improvement, ensuring we are always ahead of the curve in guest satisfaction. In short, we are blending top-notch technology, sustainability, and empowered service to redefine luxury hospitality for the new era. This is how we stay ahead, modern, and cool at the Hilton Dubai Al Habtoor City. My focus is very much on revolutionising our guest experience and boosting profitability with a modern, cool approach specially tailored for the new generation of travellers and workforce.



Valor Suite, V Hotel Dubai

What are Hilton Dubai Al Habtoor City's strong points in leisure and MICE?

When it comes to leisure, guests can embrace spacious suites, connecting rooms, a pirate pool, a kids' club, and tailored family activities for unforgettable moments. There are three rooftop pools, jacuzzis, and stylish lounges offering panoramic city views. Our six restaurants cater to diverse palates, from wholesome Market fare to the comfort of American cuisine at Ribs & Brews. Guests can also engage in unique moments like bowling at The 44, chic poolside vibes at Firefly, and captivating sunset vistas at Babiole. Further, they can unwind in 20 treatment rooms, saunas, steam rooms, and a yoga studio at Elixir Spa for ultimate wellness and rejuvenation.

Our MICE offerings can elevate your meetings with our inspiring spaces designed

to ignite creativity and drive productivity. There are 13 meeting rooms, ranging from intimate boardrooms to the grand Al Joud Ballroom, capable of hosting 1,200 guests. A dedicated banquet team, high-tech equipment, and catering expertise ensure every event is seamless. There are theme-building options at Bowling at The 44, fitness classes at Chalk Training Ground, and poolside gatherings that foster collaboration and fun. Our Al Joud Ballroom, separate pre-function hall, and catering expertise make dream weddings a reality. We see great potential in positioning Habtoor Palace as the premier destination for Indian weddings.

Please provide insights into the F&B offerings, particularly the aspects of fine dining at the hotel.

We are not just about five-star luxury but also dedicated to crafting unforgettable experiences that tantalise your taste buds. Let me put it: picture yourself transitioning from the Parisian finesse of BQ French Kitchen to the sizzling American steakhouse glory of World Cut at Habtoor Palace—a culinary journey like no other. Whispering secrets over afternoon tea at Sidra or savouring bespoke cocktails under the city lights at The Polo Bar will make you feel like royalty. The Market's global array will delight every palate, while Ribs & Brews guarantee smiles and contented bellies. Watch the city painted by the sunset from Babiole's terrace, or unleash your inner champion at The 44, the world's highest bowling alley. V Hotel Dubai, however, takes the party centre stage. Dance to global beats at V Lounge, relax with canal views at Level 7 or channel your inner Gatsby at V Deck's private Jacuzzi haven.

Beyond the hotels, Al Habtoor City Boulevard is a culinary adventure waiting to be explored. Take a nostalgic trip back to the 50s at Sauce Diner, fuel your day with gourmet caffeine at Fuze Café, or indulge in Sicilian paradise at Il Pastaio. And for an experience that will truly mesmerise you, La Perle's aquatic artistry is an absolute must-see.



Ribs & Brews, Hilton Dubai Al Habtoor City



Al Joud Ballroom, Hilton Dubai Al Habtoor City

Considering your experience and India's affinity for Dubai, how do you strategise to increase Indian visitors to your hotel?

From my extensive experience in these markets, I acknowledge the robust connection between India and Dubai and the immense potential to boost Indian footfall in our hotels. Both cities share deep cultural and business links. Many Indians see Dubai as a go-to destination for both leisure and business. Dubai's status as a commercial hub makes it an attractive destination for Indian business travellers, entrepreneurs, corporate events, and incentive travel. Dubai is also increasingly popular among Indians for entertainment and as a prime location for extravagant destination weddings. The city's blend of modern luxury and traditional charm, coupled with its proximity to India, makes it an ideal choice for these high-profile events.

Dubai also serves as a strategic travel hub for Indians, particularly for those travelling to other global destinations. This positions our hotels as ideal stopover points, offering luxury and relaxation between flights. Leveraging these insights, we can surely develop targeted strategies by creating exclusive packages and services to attract more Indian guests to our hotels, enhance their travel experience, and foster deeper cultural connections.



Sidra Restaurant, Habtoor Palace Dubai



Hemant Mediratta

ONE REP GLOBAL

MASTERING MANOEUVRES OF TOURISM REPRESENTATION

As India's outbound tourism surges, an exponential increase in tourism representation companies intensifies competition among players. Delving into this evolving landscape, Hemant Mediratta, Founder and Chief Empowerment Officer, One Rep Global, HMC Enterprises, shares insights into the rapid ascent of his company, highlighting key success factors and outlining the company's vision and ambitious expansion goals.

Prativa Vaidya Bhalla

One Rep Global stands out as one of India's premier representation companies specialising in luxury and ultra-luxury hospitality, tourism, and lifestyle brands. It serves a diverse portfolio of over 20 brands spanning 17 countries, including hotels, private villas, jets, tourism boards, and shopping destinations. The curated selection of partners includes globally recognised entities like Galeries Lafayette Haussmann, Paris's shopping mall offering personal shopper assistance, My Private Villas, synonymous with personalised concierge services, and Air-Dynamic, dedicated to elevating private air journeys. Hemant shared, "We empower luxury brands to generate incremental revenue and foster a profound connection with their audience, cultivating enduring brand love. Simultaneously, we are dedicated to immersing Indian consumers in luxurious experiences that transcend the ordinary, introducing them to the epitome of global offerings."

The genesis of One Rep Global was a planned move driven by a resolute vision to bring luxury hospitality brands closer to the discerning Indian consumer. Though it coincided with the turbulent times of the pandemic, in hindsight, it turned out to be a good starting point. The unconventional timing was utilised to navigate extraordinary challenges, attract top-tier talents, bootstrap efficiently, and establish global partnerships with luxury labels. Reflecting on the journey, Hemant stated, "Today, when you look back, it is that hardship that shaped us to innovate and create demand drivers. One such success is that now India proudly ranks among the top five nationalities for a lot of our partners."

The Year of Success

2023 witnessed an immense surge in travel, driven by key factors that solidified the influence of Indian consumers in global travel metrics. India's rising GDP, buoyed by strong corporate sectors and a robust stock market resulted in increased disposable incomes specially allocated to travel expenditures. Moreover, the latter part of the year witnessed a decrease in international airfares, making travel more affordable and accessible. Strategic marketing initiatives by international brands tailored to the Indian consumer fuelled a notable increase in outbound travel. "Throughout 2023, we strategically expanded our portfolio by welcoming prestigious brands like The Grand Ho Tram, Vietnam's entertainment capital, Hilton Yala Resort, Hotel Grand Kronenhof, and Kulm Hotel St. Moritz in Switzerland, to name a few," he informed.

The One Rep Philosophy

Its distinctive approach, embodied in a triple pronged-PET philosophy, focuses on people, execution excellence, and technology integration, and this sets One Rep Global apart in the representation business. People philosophy is rooted in recruiting, training, and empowering the right individuals, fostering a culture of trust, transparency, and dedication to performance. Exhibiting its commitment to continuous executive development, One Rep Global launched ILead Academy in collaboration with the ILead Institute in Kolkata, providing tailored courses for the professional growth of working individuals. Execution excellence signifies the unparalleled capabilities of the in-house team of trained professionals dedicated to propelling incremental

revenue and nurturing brand love among partners. Its extensive network covers 25 plus cities, including Tier 2 and 3, providing deep insights into diverse consumer mindsets. The 'T' represents a technology-driven mindset, utilising AI to boost efficiency in generating revenue for partners while ensuring its position at the forefront of innovation in the representation business.

Demand for Luxury Tourism Representation

The outbound luxury travel market from India is undergoing significant expansion, propelled by shifting consumer preferences. Hemant foresees this trend persisting, placing particular emphasis on the exploration of offbeat destinations, the curation of unique experiences, and a commitment to embracing sustainable practices. He said, “Notably, the demographic landscape plays a crucial role in this surge, with 75 per cent of Indian travellers being below the age of 35. Combined with the projected increase in per capita income, both presently and in 2027, these factors are poised to drive substantial growth in the outbound luxury travel sector from India.”

The demand for luxury hotel representation services in India is evolving as brands recognise the need for strategic insights and comprehensive marketing approaches to attract discerning Indian traveller. Providing insights into the driving forces behind this trend, Hemant explained, “A burgeoning middle class with increased purchasing power, featuring 169 billionaires and approximately 796,000 millionaires, signifies a robust consumer base capable of indulging in luxury experiences.” Additionally, he noted, “A noticeable shift in income distribution, evidenced by a surge in Indians earning more than 240,000 USD per annum, reflects the growing affluence and adoption of aspirational lifestyle choices. The strategic entry of European luxury brands, capitalising on India's aspirational class and evolving consumer preferences, further fuels the attractiveness of the market.”

One Rep Global’s rapid acquisition of new clients and its expanding portfolio highlight the immense potential of this expanding market. Highlighting the company's triple-tier advantage for clients, Hemant stated, “Firstly, our unwavering commitment to superior ROI ensures that every investment yields exponential results. Secondly, we seamlessly pave the way to new markets, expanding horizons across diverse geographies, segments, and emerging channels.” This allows them to safeguard the clients’ invaluable time by taking the lead in exploring uncharted business territories, allowing them to concentrate on their core strengths amidst the intricacies of market expansion. “Lastly, we redefine the representation of luxury brands with an exceptional team that not only looks and feels the part but also speaks the language of true luxury, setting us apart in the industry,” he added.

Race for Representation

One Rep Global adopts a premium positioning strategy to distinguish itself. Instead of succumbing to a race to the bottom, the emphasis is on delivering value. Hemant pointed out, “We set ourselves apart through a focus on ROI-driven results, catering to discerning clientele, and fostering collaborative partnerships with luxury brands. Our commitment to quality, transparency, and the unique experiences offered by our partner hotels helps mitigate the risk of price-driven competition.” With its innovative approach involving strategic partnerships, personalised client strategies, a dedicated effort to cultivate brand love, and premium positioning, it ensures a nuanced and effective approach that goes beyond mere price. He added, “I have always advocated that we form synergies and collaborations in whichever industry we work. There is demonstrable evidence across hospitality and tourism businesses, which we want to bring to the representation business and call upon solopreneurs and smaller representation

companies to join hands with us and aim to create together, world-class organisations in this business.”

Client Servicing Strategies

Strategies revolve around consistently delivering exceptional results, ensuring maximum value for clients, and a firm commitment to fulfilling promises. Fostering long-term relationships, transparency, and effective communication while leveraging an understanding of local market dynamics to succeed in diverse environments ensures an enduring strategy to provide lasting value for all stakeholders. The digital arm, Eleven INC, plays a pivotal role in supporting all marketing activities, ensuring a comprehensive and impactful approach. The launch of One Edge, a series of webinar sessions facilitating direct interaction between principles and clients, enables them to learn about products, participate in Q&A sessions, and win prizes, enhancing engagement and direct connections.

Expansion Goals for 2024

“Our vision is to establish One Rep Global as one of the premier representation companies globally, specialising in the luxury and ultra-luxury space. This involves a steadfast commitment to building an efficient, ROI-driven sales organisation that remains adaptable to market dynamics while embracing innovative strategies,” Hemant articulated.

Years 2024 and 2025 are anticipated to be pivotal for One Rep Global, aligning with a significant inflection point for outbound tourism from India. By 2027, India is expected to emerge as the world’s third-largest economy, concurrently securing a position among the top five outbound markets globally as key luxury hospitality brands look to target the India outbound market. To capitalise on this trajectory, One Rep Global is dedicated to establishing a robust foundation, infrastructure, and capabilities, propelling the representation industry to new heights. Strategic assessments of evolving consumer behaviours and market dynamics are underway in Tier 2 and 3 cities, recognising their potential for exponential growth while cultivating collaborative relationships with individual partners and leveraging their unique expertise towards mutual success.

Trends for Luxury Representation

The evolving travel trends in India see a shift to purposeful and upscale experiences, with a focus on authenticity, sustainability, wellness, and immersive activities. One Rep Global's newest destination partner, Courchevel Tourisme, the world ski capital spanning six villages and 102 ski slopes, is the perfect example of this emerging trend. Ongoing exploration of opportunities in branded residences and villas will provide additional revenue streams, catering to evolving consumer preferences. Brand partner Offbeat Villas, with its 175,000 options for alternate accommodations, a pure B2B player, is a great example of this growing trend. Finally, women are assuming key leadership roles in the luxury sector, championing inclusivity and enhancing diversity within the industry. One Rep Global wholeheartedly embraces inclusivity, with 65 per cent of the workforce comprising women.

The combination of purposeful experiences, strategic expansion, diversified offerings, and inclusive leadership is poised to drive the thriving representation landscape in India. Hemant concluded, “We will see a substantial growth in global luxury hospitality and tourism products coming to India to get business. The representation companies that have a robust foundation, strong processes, and great talent aided by technology are poised to build scale and will dominate the market.”

Fortune Hotels celebrates 50th milestone with East Delhi, adds an upscale offering in Hosur

Fortune Hotels continues to elevate the hospitality experience, reaching new milestones with the inauguration of its 50th hotel, Fortune Park East Delhi. The recent addition of Fortune Hosur in Tamil Nadu underscores Fortune Hotels' commitment to providing class, comfort, and exceptional service across India's rising hospitality landscape.

Team TTJ

Fortune Hotels, a member of ITC's hotel group, on January 16, 2024, celebrated a significant milestone with the inauguration of its 50th hotel in India. Branded as Fortune Park East Delhi, the addition of this hotel further fortifies the upscale hotel chain's footprint in the key metropolitan area of the Delhi NCR region and the country.

Fortune Park East Delhi is perfectly suited to the modern-day traveller seeking a stylish locale with hassle-free access to key hubs and vantage points of the city. Following the Fortune Hotels brand promise, Fortune Park East Delhi offers contemporary and chic, well-appointed rooms, premium amenities, and oodles of comfort, ensuring guests have a warm and relaxing stay with them.

The hotel group has also announced the launch of its new upscale hotel, Fortune Hosur, in the historic city of Tamil Nadu. Nestled in the heart of the bustling industrial district of Krishnagiri, Fortune Hosur promises to be a haven of class and comfort, offering a seamless blend of enthusiastic hospitality and premium services.

Replete with stylish interiors and a contemporary ambience, Fortune Hosur encompasses 107 spacious rooms designed to suit all types of guests: city residents, business travellers, corporate guests, as well as



Fortune Park East Delhi

long-stayers. Besides Fortune Hosur, Fortune Hotels is soon to open a property in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, which will take the number to six in the state.

Lindt Home of Chocolate celebrates record year with over 750,000 visitors

The Lindt Home of Chocolate continues to captivate visitors worldwide with its chocolate expertise. The centre has become a sweet haven and is a premier Swiss attraction. With informative tours and immersive experiences, the global hotspot anticipates another enchanting year in 2024.

Team TTJ

In a sweet triumph for chocolate enthusiasts and tourists alike, the Lindt Home of Chocolate in Kilchberg, Switzerland, marked a remarkable milestone in 2023, attracting 752,053 visitors. The competence centre, now in its third year of operations, has secured its place among the most popular and visited museums in Switzerland.

With its multimedia exhibition, the world's largest free-standing chocolate fountain and Lindt shop, and the first Lindt Café in Switzerland, the Lindt Home of Chocolate drew in visitors not only from Switzerland but from around the world. Tourists from the USA, the UK, Germany, and India, in particular, visited the museum in 2023.

The popularity of the Lindt Home of

Chocolate is also shown by the 1,500 tours given by the skilled tour guides at the Lindt Home of Chocolate, who shared their knowledge of chocolate with visitors. These visitors also included around 400 school classes.

"We are delighted by this positive reception worldwide and feel very fortunate to be one of Switzerland's main attractions. I am proud of the team at the Lindt Chocolate Competence Foundation and our achievements over the past three years. We are already looking forward to a successful 2024 and to enchanting visitors from



Switzerland and abroad with our chocolate," said Ernst Tanner, President of the Lindt Chocolate Competence Foundation's Board.



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Polaris Tourism invites travellers for journeys that go beyond ordinary

The newly formed Polaris Tourism aspires to be the epitome of luxury travel, setting new standards in opulence, exclusivity, and personalised service. Darshana Seth, Founder and Director, Polaris Tourism, is set to redefine luxury travel by seamlessly blending sophistication with cultural immersion and an unwavering commitment to environmental consciousness.

Prashant Nayak

Darshana Seth is a seasoned professional with more than 22 years of expertise in the Indian travel trade and a brief yet impactful stint in the Middle East. She is an avid enthusiast on a mission to transcend journeys into unforgettable adventures. With a rich background in the industry, Darshana has actively engaged with the travel trade through joint marketing campaigns, trade education initiatives, events, sales strategies, and business development endeavours.

"I find joy, inspiration, and personal growth through exploring new places, experiencing different cultures, and meeting diverse people. Travel has had a deep effect on my life goals and has enriched the way I think and see the world. The same love for travel and exploration has led me to embark on this incredible new journey," exclaims Darshana.

Foray into Representation Business

The decision to venture into the travel representation business for Darshana was influenced by a combination of personal interests, business aspirations, and a commitment to providing valuable experiences for travellers. She explains, "Venturing into the luxury travel representation offers me an opportunity for continuous learning and adaptation to new trends, technologies, and customer preferences. However, in the luxury tourism sector, attention to detail, exclusivity, and the creation of extraordinary experiences are paramount. Polaris Tourism aims to position itself as a leader in this niche, consistently exceeding the expectations of its discerning clientele."

Darshana believes in innovation, sustainability, and building lasting partnerships that contribute to the growth of their clients and the communities they serve. "This is more than a business; it's a community of fellow adventurers, dreamers, and culture seekers," she declares, emphasising



▲ Darshana Seth

the inclusive and collective spirit of the endeavour.

Delivering life-changing holiday experiences

Polaris has partnered with an accredited UK and European DMC, CHR Travel, who has the knack for crafting memorable and seamless experiences. CHR Travel focuses primarily on handling specialised group tours across the UK and Europe and provides services catering to leisure groups, MICE groups, special interest groups, and high-end van tours.

Take Me 2 The World is a passionate New Zealand DMC that leads in curating aspirational luxury offerings for elite Indian consumers. They are proficient in providing services catering to honeymooners, family travellers, and education and sports tours. With their association with Massey University Sports and Rugby Institute and well-known New Zealand sportsman Jacob Oram, TM2TW has been organising tours for sports clubs and academies. They are also wholesalers for Latin America, targeting the FIT luxury traveller, covering South and Central America plus Mexico (Peru, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Galapagos, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Panama, Nicaragua, and Mexico).

Being Selective

Polaris Tourism ensures that the local partners are in alignment with their brand and values. Darshana highlights, "We try our best to establish and nurture relationships in order to deliver a successful collaborative effort. We regularly engage with partners who contribute positively to the community and are committed to sustainable and responsible tourism practices. We do implement quality control measures to ensure that the services provided by local partners meet the standards expected by our clients."

Standing Out Amidst Challenges

Regulatory changes, economic downturns, environmental concerns, and technological disruptions are constant threats that lead to a decline in travel, impacting businesses in the travel sector. Most importantly, the travel industry is highly competitive, with various businesses vying for the attention of travellers, notes Darshana. She emphasises, "Standing out in a crowded market and offering unique, high-quality services can sometimes be a challenge. However, it is important to note that businesses that demonstrate resilience, adaptability, and a proactive approach to addressing challenges are better positioned to navigate the dynamic landscape of the travel and tourism industry."

Expectations from the Indian Market

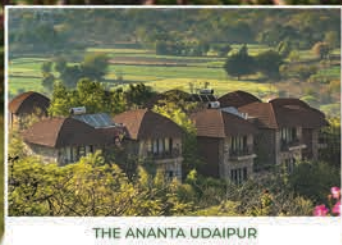
Polaris Tourism's expectations from the Indian market in 2024 are based on ongoing monitoring of market trends and consumer behaviours. "Our core strategy remains firm, i.e., targeting the elite Indian traveller who seeks experiential holidays. We regularly update our approach based on changing dynamics to stay relevant and competitive in the Indian market. Additionally, with collaborative local partnerships and insights, it helps us get valuable information in refining our strategies," signs off Darshana.

ANANTA UNLEASHED:

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RICHMONDE ANANTA ELITE, GOA



LEOPARD LAIR ANANTA EXPRESS, BERA



ASHOK VATIKA ANANTA ELITE, RANAKPUR



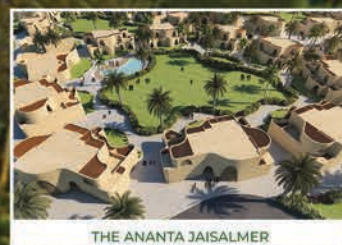
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*Coming Soon

CHILLARU - The Living Tree Resort

A few miles short of Solan and a few miles down on the Oachghat Nagali road, in the lap of pristine nature is located a brand new 25-key boutique property that found ground and transformed into reality from the dreams of its owners and promoters. TTJ was invited to review this new and delightful addition to the Shivaliks.

Gurjit Singh Ahuja

For the ever-inquisitive Dilli wallas and the ever-exploring travellers from the NCR, Haryana, and Punjab, looking at drivable options for their weekends, staycations, reunions, kitty parties, corporate retreats, and more, Chillaru Spa and Resorts has thrown in the gauntlet, seeking some serious attention.

Eco-Sensitivity and Local Flair

This boutique property, featuring 25 keys comprising three suites, eight executive rooms, eight premium rooms, and six superior rooms, recently commenced operations in the final quarter of 2023.

The property's owners acquired the land in 2006, but it was in 2019 that the dream of converting their private nature retreat into a hotel and sharing it with the world took flight.

The venture was underpinned by a strong commitment to preserving eco-sensitivity, employing local building materials, engaging local craftsmen, and leveraging traditional construction methods to the fullest extent possible.

Ajay Sood, a gracious host and the visionary owner of the resort, explained that it was a dream and vision that took wings as he built this resort from scratch; he hired no architect to design the resort, no interior decorator, no landscaper. It was just his vision, creative wisdom, and years of accumulated ideas that he and his wife collected over their decades of globetrotting.

The buildings feature locally quarried grey sandstone with energy-efficient double-layered walls filled with rock wool. This ensures optimal room temperatures and contributes to energy conservation. Cement and steel are limited to specific structural elements.

Room interiors showcase panelling from

locally sourced pine and deodar wood, with 'Khadsu' hardwood flooring from Kullu. Locally sourced slate is used for roofing, emphasising the commitment to indigenous materials that resonate with the authentic essence of the region.

Living in Harmony with Nature

Highlighting the resort's eco-sensitivity, Ajay emphasises the conscientious efforts made to preserve the natural surroundings. No trees were felled during the construction, evident in the living trunks that gracefully traverse multiple levels of rooms and public areas like the reception, banquet hall, and dining hall. These living elements extend through the roofs of the buildings, becoming a unique and integral part of the resort's architecture. Water for the resort is responsibly sourced from a nearby natural spring, prioritising sustainability. Water conservation practices are evident through the installation of low-flow faucets and showerheads, with recycled water

being utilised for irrigation purposes.

The resort uses LED lighting, energy-efficient appliances, and solar panels to conserve energy. The use of single-use plastics throughout the resort is strongly discouraged.

Amenities and Experiences

The resort boasts multiple indoor venues, a well-stocked bar, and outdoor terraces for hosting cozy private get-togethers around bonfires, but the jewel in the crown is the glass-glazed, temperature controlled all-weather swimming pool on the roof of the resort. You can enjoy panoramic views of nature from the soothing, cozy comfort of the pool.

On your visit to Chillaru, you are bound to discover your own little story in its serenity as you hike through the many forest trails around the resort.



Ajay Sood





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TUTC unveils new glamping experience with Sawai Shivr Ranthambore

Sawai Shivr Ranthambore by TUTC offers an unparalleled glamping experience amidst Ranthambore's wilderness, featuring luxurious suite tents, private safaris, spa, and organic dining. The Camp combines opulence with nature, making it an ideal weekend retreat for wildlife enthusiasts and culture seekers.

Team TTJ

The Ultimate Travelling Camp now extends its award-winning glamping experience and hospitality in the forests of Ranthambore with Sawai Shivr Ranthambore by TUTC. Spread across 16 acres near the Ranthambore National Park, the ultra-luxurious camps are perfect for travellers and wildlife enthusiasts who wish to explore the tiger-homeland while immersing in lavish nomadic living.

Sawai Shivr by TUTC features 10 stylishly designed Suite Tents that elevate the levels of ultimate sophistication, modern amenities, and breathtaking views of the surrounding wilderness. All tents are



made of 100 per cent canvas, setting them apart from the other tented experiences found in the region and positioning the luxuries at par with the best African luxury wildlife experiences. Private and intimate, all-suite tents come with ensuite bathrooms and private wooden decks; the exclusive

Presidential Suite Tent also features a private plunge pool.

Besides riveting tiger safaris and bird watching with in-house experts and in their own private fleet of luxurious, customised safari jeeps, guests can avail rejuvenating therapies at the Camp's spa, Swadhya, go for guided village walks, enjoy live cooking demonstrations, and learn traditional pottery. The Camp also

houses a water body that has drawn and inspired a whole new ecosystem within it, as well as two swimming pools and a healthy farm-to-fork restaurant that sources most ingredients from the organic garden within the campsite.

Indian tourists can now purchase Eiffel Tower tickets via UPI

The integration of UPI payments at the Eiffel Tower through NIPL's partnership with Lyra exemplifies a progressive leap in cross-border payment solutions, catering to the needs of Indian tourists and fostering seamless financial transactions in international travel.

Team TTJ

PCI International Payments Limited (NIPL), in partnership with Lyra, a French leader in securing e-commerce and proximity payments, has announced the acceptance of the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) payment mechanism in France, starting with the iconic Eiffel Tower. Indian tourists can now book their visit to the Eiffel Tower by purchasing tickets online using UPI — making the transaction process quick, easy, and hassle-free.

This announcement is of particular significance, considering that Indian tourists rank as the second largest group of international visitors to the Eiffel Tower. With

this development, Indian tourists can make secure online transactions by simply using their UPI-powered apps to scan the QR code generated on the merchant website and initiate a payment.

Acceptance of UPI in France not only provides Indian tourists with a seamless payment option but also opens up numerous opportunities for merchants across France and Europe operating in the tourism and retail sectors. While the Eiffel Tower is the first merchant to offer UPI payments in France, this service will soon be extended to other merchants in the tourism and retail space. This will make it significantly

easier for touring Indians to remotely book hotels, museum visits, etc., for their stay in France.





Madhya Pradesh

WHERE FORTS WHISPER TALES OF BYGONE ERAS

Madhya Pradesh is a land of rich history and culture, and its forts are some of the most impressive in India. Delve deeper into the forts to get dazzled by a kaleidoscope of architectural wonders. Discover the courtyards adorned with intricate carvings, colonnaded arcades casting cool shadows, and hidden chambers whispering tales of the past if you are a traveller who lets his curiosity be a guide! Madhya Pradesh Tourism Board is committed to ensuring an experiential tourism experience to get delightfully lost in the timeless beauty of these architectural marvels and around them.



GARH KUNDAR FORT

A Meticulous Architectural Gem

A mysterious and impressive yet lesser-explored fort, situated on a high hilltop at a small village, nestled in Tikamgarh district just 48 km from Jhansi, narrates the tragic love story of Nagdeo and Roopkunwar. This architectural gem is located in such a way that from 12km away, it remains visible to the naked eye, but once you get closer, it disappears and becomes difficult to locate. Unfold the endless treasures - Murli Manohar's grace, Rani Ka Mahal's secrets, Andhkoop's mystery. From ancient temples to royal chambers, stables to prisons, Garh Kunder's tapestry awaits your touch.

Nearest Airport: Khajuraho (150 km)

Nearest Railway Station: Jhansi (48 km)



ASIRGARH FORT

A Fortress Trio Etched in Stone

Asirgarh, the Satpura giant, stands defiant!

Asirgarh Fort, a 15th-century marvel built by a zamindar, hides secrets within its 60-acre embrace and is situated in the Satpura Range about 20 km north of Burhanpur. More than one, it's three: Asirgarh, Karmargarh, Malaygarh, a fortress trio etched in stone. The mosque, gurudwara, and Shiva temple whisper tolerance within its walls. Folk tales of Ashwathama, immortal and devout, offering daily flowers to the Lord are prevalent, leaving a mystery to bloom: who brings these sacred gifts before dawn? Asirgarh's history and myth captivate you to unravel its whispers.

Nearest Airport: Indore (163 km)

Nearest Railway Station: Khandwa Junction (50 km)

NARWAR FORT

A Legacy from Mythology

Embark on a safe and exhilarating exploration of Narwar Fort, positioned on top of an irregular hill 500 feet above the town just 84 km away from Jhansi, undoubtedly a sight to behold. The fort's history stretches back centuries as Narwar was once the capital of Raja Nala, a valiant king from the Mahabharata epic. The well-preserved fort offers stunning views of the surrounding countryside. This destination is a sprawling testament to architectural ingenuity with a nearly 8 km circumference. Exploring its entirety will lead you through a labyrinth of pathways, alleyways, and captivating structures. Let go of the map and experience the true magic of this magnificent fort.

GWALIOR FORT

Over a Thousand-year-old Magnificent Fort

A towering testament to history, Gwalior Fort rose in the 8th century, boasting of natural defence on a steep hill. Legend speaks of King Suraj Sen, cured by a saint named Gwalipa, naming the fort and the city in his honour. The tales of Tomar kings remain etched within the walls of Gujari Mahal's love story, Man Mandir's turquoise gleam, and Jahangir's palace splendour. In its stones, legends come alive, beckoning you to witness its epic saga.

Nearest Airport and Railway Station: Gwalior Airport (10 km)



Nearest Airport and Railway Station: Gwalior (90 km)

MANDU FORT

Not Just a Destination, But Rather an Experience

Spanning 82 km and situated in the Dhar district just 95 km from Indore, this fort beckons with tales of unsinkable ships, love-struck kings, and the echoes of ancient empires. Jahaz Mahal, Mandu's crown jewel: once a royal harem with 15,000 women is a palace resembling a majestic ship, frozen in time on a shimmering lake. Recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage City, Mandu's historical and cultural significance is undeniable. From the Jami Masjid's towering arches to the Nilkanth Mahal's serene lake, every corner promises a discovery. Mandu isn't just about stone and steel; rather, it's about the epic love story of Queen Roopmati and King Baz Bahadur.

Nearest Airport and Railway Station: Indore (95 km)

The state waits eagerly; embrace the majestic forts and feel the stateliness of yore. Don't let these legendary historical panoramas be a missed encounter on your Madhya Pradesh map.



Multifaceted Allure of Mauritius

A Kaleidoscope of Experiences

Beyond its famed beaches and sea, Mauritius unveils a surprising wealth of relaxation and adventure, making it an ideal tropical paradise with diverse attractions. Catering to a wide spectrum of interests, it stands as a versatile destination for those craving adventure, relaxation, cultural immersion, or a blend of these elements.

Prashant Nayak

Mauritius, an island nestled in the Indian Ocean off the east coast of Africa, transcends its reputation as a sought-after destination for honeymooners and families, revealing a plethora of attractions that extend beyond its popular image. The island's awe-inspiring natural beauty unfolds across a varied tapestry of landscapes, featuring enchanting soft sand beaches, majestic mountains, verdant tea plantations, cascading waterfalls, lush forests, and pristine lagoons with crystalline waters embraced by coral reefs. This diverse and picturesque scenery

firmly establishes Mauritius as the perfect tropical paradise for travellers in search of a multifaceted and captivating escape.

A Cultural Symphony of Diversity

Mauritius is known for its ethnic diversity, with a population that includes people of Indian, African, Chinese, and European descent. This aspect creates a fascinating, vibrant, and peaceful island community, contributing to a sense of harmony and tolerance making it an inviting and safe destination for tourists. Also, this diversity has contributed to a rich tapestry of traditions, languages, and cuisines, creating a harmonious and multicultural society. A majority of the population speaks Mauritian Creole, while French is the most commonly used language in media and education. Other languages spoken in Mauritius are Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Marathi,

Mandarin, and Gujarati. Visitors to Mauritius have the opportunity to experience a variety of cultural practices, festivals, and events that showcase the island's multicultural identity.

In fact, Mauritius Tourism's recent award-winning campaign 'Feel Our Island Energy' is a tribute to the rich melting pot of cultures on the island, which is unique and invites travellers to dive into immersive experiences that are offered by the locals, reflecting the harmony, generosity and welcoming nature of the Mauritian people. The campaign is an open invitation from Mauritians to come and explore mountains, lagoons, waterfalls, beaches, national parks and buzzy markets. Feel Our Island Energy embodies a perpetual celebration of life and love in every moment.

More to Discover in Mauritius

Mauritius is a small island country stretching across an area of 2,040 km and has no trains or trams. One can travel from the north to the south of the island in just three to four hours! However, Mauritius is big enough for extraordinary adventures and small enough to do it all in one holiday.





Other than the much-sought-after beach and sea adventures, in Mauritius, one can embark on extraordinary hikes in lush national parks like Black River Gorges, climb majestic mountains for breathtaking views, and discover waterfalls, viewpoints, and unique plants. Witness the wonder of the Seven Coloured Earths in Chamarel, and it is a delight to explore Bois Chéri's tea plantations and the Pamplemousses Botanical Garden's wonders. Take a trip to Ile aux Aigrettes and search for rare species like pink pigeons and giant tortoises. Gain a bird's-eye view with a helicopter tour, enjoy golf at scenic courses, and join yoga classes with stunning views from the resorts or wellness centres. For adventure, try zip-lining, quad biking, canyoning, and mountain biking, creating a truly immersive and diverse experience.

Mauritius has a rich history of its thriving sugar cane industry and one can see vast sugar cane fields around. A visit to rum distilleries is recommended for insights into Mauritius' rum and sugar culture and to sample a variety of these. Also, exploring historical sites like the UNESCO-listed Aapravasi Ghat reflects cultural and historical significance, especially in relation to indentured labour.

Mauritius, with its enchanting blend of calming landscapes, euphoric adventures, insatiable curiosity, and a spirit of boundless adventure, welcomes visitors to embrace every facet of its scintillating energy.

A Delightful Fusion of Flavours

Food enthusiasts can indulge in a variety of culinary delights that showcase the island's diverse influences. The local street food, as well as the gourmet offerings in upscale restaurants, cater to different tastes. During

a Mauritius visit, savouring local specialties like Dhal Puri, Gateaux piment (chilli fritters), Mauritian Cari, Dumplings, Bol renversé, Pineapple and Chilli salt, Vanilla Tea, Ti' Punch or Rum, Biryani, and Rougaille will render a true taste of the island's unique food culture.

Recommended places to eat include Bagatelle Mall, Port Louis Market, Le Caudan Waterfront, and Central Flacq Market. These locations offer a mix of authentic local experiences and diverse culinary options, allowing one to savour the unique flavours of Mauritius. Other than that, if you are seeking beachfront dining, a vineyard experience, or panoramic views, Mauritius has a variety of options to suit different preferences.

Bringing Home Mauritian Mementos

Exploring the vibrant markets of Mauritius offers a delightful opportunity to shop for unique souvenirs, ranging from exquisite jewellery and handmade gifts to iconic Dodo paraphernalia, coloured sand creations, ocean-themed mementos, stylish clothing and accessories, as well as local specialties like Mauritius rum, spices, and sugar. Engaging in souvenir shopping not only allows travellers to bring home tangible memories but also contributes to supporting local artisans and businesses.

It's worth noting that bargaining is a common practice in local markets, so visitors are encouraged to negotiate prices, especially for handmade items. In more formal settings like shops and shopping malls, requesting a receipt for significant transactions is advisable, and always inquire about the price of products before making any purchases to ensure a smooth and transparent shopping experience.





Winter Palace

Get Enthralled by St. Petersburg

Russia's Leading Destination for Leisure and MICE

The St. Petersburg Convention Bureau recently provided the opportunity to marvel at the enchanting city of St. Petersburg and its MICE capabilities whilst offering a deeper understanding of the city, surpassing my previous knowledge of it. St. Petersburg ticks all the right boxes not only as a remarkable cultural experience but also as an exceptional MICE destination.

Prashant Nayak

Founded by Peter the Great more than three centuries ago, St. Petersburg holds witness to a considerable amount of Russian history. For more than 200 years, it was the resplendent capital of the great Russian Empire, where the Tsars ruled, and it remains the country's cultural and spiritual centre to this day.

Architectural Splendour Across Centuries

St. Petersburg is a designed city on the Neva River, reflecting splendour from the 17th century to the 21st century and is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Russia, and it is a daunting task to pinpoint specific places to visit in the city. Adorned with intricate waterways and canals, St. Petersburg has also been known as the "Venice of the North." The city boasts numerous palaces, grand buildings, museums, and historical monuments, both within its limits and in the surrounding areas, each offering a glimpse into bygone eras. The enchanting atmosphere exudes creativity and warmth, making it impossible not to fall in love with the place. St. Petersburg is stunning because no one else has managed to build a city of such grandeur and scale so far in the north; elusive and enigmatic.

The Winters in St. Petersburg

In winter the city transforms into a magical wonderland adorned with a pristine blanket of snow, adding an extra layer of charm to its winter allure. Strolling through its lanes feels like stepping into a Russian fairytale, with enchanting views at every turn. Winter in St. Petersburg brings sub-zero temperatures and early darkness, yet it holds a unique beauty. With proper layers to keep warm, exploring the city during this season becomes incredibly rewarding. The Neva River and the canals, adorned with palaces and churches, transform into a captivating sight as they freeze solid, presenting a joyous spectacle to behold.

The MICE Showcase

The ExpoForum Convention and Exhibition Centre is truly impressive. The centre is built in accordance with the standards of the Global Association of the Exhibition Industry and uses cutting-edge technologies to minimise damage to the environment and conserve resources. Apart from other major industries, international events in the oil, gas, and energy sectors are held in this centre. Multifunctionality and transformability are major strengths of the complex. The centre boasts three exhibition pavilions, a convention centre with a total holding

capacity of 30,000 people (68 conference halls), a business centre, a customs and logistics complex, cafes, restaurants, and other such infrastructural amenities, and St. Petersburg's first Hilton hotel. ExpoForum can accommodate concerts and shows for up to 10,000 attendees, host banquets for as many as 6,500 guests, and facilitate sports events with seating for up to 5,000 spectators. Annually, ExpoForum successfully orchestrates more than 200 events, attracting a substantial 1.4 million visitors.

The Astoria offers 211 luxurious rooms and suites and opulent event space, including the hotel's sumptuous Ballroom and Winter Garden. These venues are ideal for receptions, presentations, and banquets for around 150 to 200 pax. Also, excellent meeting facilities are available at the neighbouring Angleterre Hotel. Elegantly



ExpoForum



The Tsar Room, Hotel Astoria



Church of the Saviour on Spilled Blood

adorned and equipped with cutting-edge audiovisual technology, the Angletterre features four versatile MICE venues. Among them, a 205-seat amphitheatre and two transformer halls stand ready to cater to various event needs. Boasting 79 spacious rooms, including 27 luxurious suites, each equipped with high-end technology, the Wawelberg Hotel provides a modern and comfortable stay. The highlight is the Wawelberg Hall, a historically reconstructed 740-square-metre space ideal for hosting small weddings and intimate celebrations.

Must-Visit Experiences

The Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg is not only one of the oldest museums in the world; it is also considered to be one of the best. It is located inside the Winter Palace of Empress Catherine the Great and spans more than 1,500 rooms. Leonardo da Vinci, Monet, Van Gogh, and artwork from the dawn of time—this museum will quite literally take your breath away. The Hermitage Museum showcases everything from fine art to ancient artifacts, with over 3 million items in its esteemed collection. Even if you only have limited time in St. Petersburg, be sure to add this museum to your itinerary! The Palace Square is located right in front of the Hermitage Museum and is impossible to miss.

Planetarium 1 is a former 19th-century gasholder that, in November 2017, was converted into a Planetarium. It has the

world's biggest dome, measuring 37 metres in diameter, and the full-dome projection space of 4000 m2, along with the surround sound, makes it a surreal space experience. While Russian opera and ballet productions are world-renowned, the Mikhailovsky Classical Ballet and Opera Theatre, established in 1833, still keeps traditions alive. As an Indian, it was wonderful to witness the 150-year-old ballet "Bayadere," (Beydardi in Hindi) glorified by Nacho Duato, at the Mikhailovsky Theatre.

A Visual Symphony of St. Petersburg's Opulent Past

St. Petersburg's most iconic sight is probably the Church of the Saviour on Spilled Blood. The Peter and Paul Fortress marks the very spot where St. Petersburg was founded. Walking along Nevsky Prospekt from beginning to end is the best way to get to know St. Petersburg and to check its pulse. The Peterhof Palace, on the outskirts, was built by Tsar Peter to outshine Versailles, and its grand cascade draws millions of tourists each year.

Summer Delights of St. Petersburg

In the summer months, one can embark on a boat cruise along the central Neva, Moika, and Fontanka River for a delightful exploration of St. Petersburg's landmarks. Night cruises offer a unique spectacle of opening and closing bridges, passing by

illuminated sights, and enchanting city embankments. Explore the historic cruiser Aurora, a naval ship turned museum on the Neva River, showcasing Russia's rich history. Experience the city from a different perspective as locals organise rooftop tours and romantic dates, providing unparalleled views of St. Petersburg.

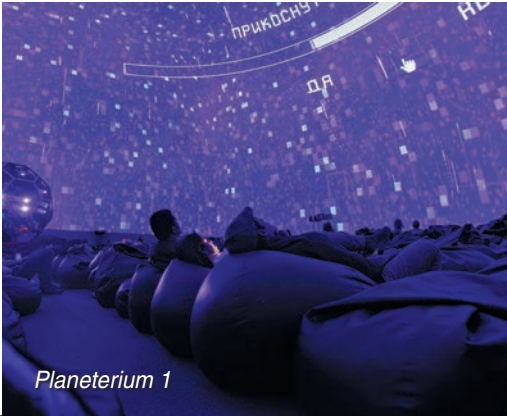
Overview

St. Petersburg is a photographer's dream, with unique architecture that stands among the world's most Instagrammable places. Rich in history, the city is easily a week-long holiday destination with diverse attractions, and one can be genuinely impressed by the lively energy and warmth of its people as they stroll through the bustling streets. My stay at the Indigo Hotel was comfortable, with cosiness evident in every corner. Noteworthy restaurants like Oh Mumbai, Schastye, VETER, BLOK, and Marso Polo in the city provided delightful settings and tantalising dishes.

From the MICE perspective, St. Petersburg, adorned with its stunning venues, is not just limited to the ones already discovered; there are undoubtedly more hidden gems scattered throughout the city. The architectural marvels and historic landmarks, combined with a rich cultural tapestry and scrumptious cuisines, make St. Petersburg an enticing destination for MICE from India.



Inside Hermitage Musuem



Planeterium 1



Mikhailovsky Theatre



Aims for tourism growth, yet unease lingers in travel industry

While the Interim Union Budget 2024 demonstrates a proactive stance toward laying the groundwork for long-term growth in the tourism sector, the persisting concerns within the travel trade underscore the need for nuanced and targeted support and attention to the immediate challenges faced by the sector.

Prashant Nayak

On February 01, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presented the interim budget for the fiscal year 2024-2025, primarily emphasising stimulating economic growth. On the tourism front, a notable announcement pertained to the focus on enhancing tourism infrastructure on islands, with specific attention given to Lakshadweep. The budget also unveiled ambitious plans for infrastructure development, particularly in the establishment of new railway and port corridors and the growth and enhancement of air connectivity and airport infrastructure across India.

Budget Surge and Cuts

One notable highlight is the boost in the budgetary allocation for the tourism ministry, which has been increased to ₹2,450 crore in the fiscal year 2024-25. This marks a significant rise of 44.7 per cent compared to the revised figure for the current financial year, which stood at ₹1,692 crore. There has been a reduction in expenditure on certain aspects, particularly in promotion and publicity. The allocation for overseas promotion and publicity, which includes market development assistance, has experienced a notable decrease of 97 per cent, plummeting to ₹3 crore in Budget 2024 from the previous allocation of ₹95 crore in the preceding budget. This year, the Prashad Darshan scheme of the tourism ministry has maintained its budget allocation at ₹240 crore, consistent with the previous year. An amount of ₹1,750 crore has been earmarked for the Swadesh Darshan scheme.

Focus on Empowering Tourism and People

"States will be encouraged to take up

comprehensive development of iconic tourist centres, branding and marketing them on a global scale. Tourism, including spiritual tourism, has tremendous opportunities for local entrepreneurship. Since the pandemic, there has been a surge in domestic tourism, and the addition of air routes and port connectivity is expected to create more jobs," said Sitharaman.

Sitharaman also highlighted the dedicated attention directed towards enhancing tourist infrastructure in the Union Territory of Lakshadweep. With many Indians seeking alternative destinations following a diplomatic row with the Maldives, the government's focus on improving Lakshadweep's tourist facilities aims to capitalise on this shift in preferences while positioning Lakshadweep as an attractive and accessible destination.

"To address the emerging fervour for domestic tourism, projects for port connectivity, tourism infrastructure, and amenities will be taken up on our islands, including Lakshadweep. This will also help in generating employment. Further, after the success of Vande Bharat trains, around 40,000 more rail bogies will be converted to Vande Bharat coaches. This will further create job opportunities while reducing travel time as well as increasing tourism across the country," the finance minister stated.

Sitharaman emphasised upon the success of organising G20 meetings in 60 places which presented the diversity of India to a global audience. She said that the country's economic strength has made it an attractive destination for business and conference tourism. "Our middle class now aspires to travel and explore. Tourism, including spiritual tourism, has tremendous opportunities for local entrepreneurship," she mentioned.

Aviation to Soar Higher

Sitharaman also reiterated the Union Government's commitment to the growth and enhancement of air connectivity and airport infrastructure across India. She highlighted the significant strides made in the aviation sector over the last decade, with the number of airports doubling to 149. Underscoring the success of the UDAN scheme in facilitating connectivity to tier-2 and tier-3 cities, the finance minister reported that 517 UDAN routes are actively serving 1.3 crore passengers. She emphasised the government's dedication to the continued expansion of existing airports and the swift development of new ones. Sitharaman also pointed out the robustness of the Indian aviation industry, noting that domestic carriers have collectively placed orders for 1,000 new aircraft.

Divergent Views

The Interim Union Budget 2024, however, has evoked a mixed reaction from various sectors of the travel and tourism industry, including hospitality, aviation, and travel associations. While the finance minister seemed very positive about promoting the tourism sector, many tourism stakeholders have expressed enthusiasm for the initiatives aimed at boosting domestic tourism, enhancing connectivity, and investing in infrastructure. However, not everyone is pleased. All major travel associations like IATO and TAAI have expressed disappointment, citing the absence of specific and immediate support measures for the travel and tourism sectors.



Delhi Tourism

Dekho Meri Dilli

Delhi Tourism & Transportation Development Corporation Ltd. (A Delhi Govt. Undertaking) was incorporated on December 12, 1975, with the objective to promote tourism activities, facilitate tourists, develop places/projects of tourist interest including entertainment, amusement parks and organise cultural shows, dances, music concerts, etc. to provide entertainment to the tourists visiting Delhi.

Since its inception, Delhi Tourism has worked towards establishing Delhi as a premier tourist destination. In this series, Delhi Tourism has developed many projects and taken various initiatives which have become milestones.

Recently DTTDC has taken new initiatives of organising Heritage Walks and Haunted Walks which have gained popularity in a short span of time.

New Initiatives and Landmark Projects

Heritage Walks

A unique way of experiencing the heritage of any area is to walk through the route with the help of a good interpreter. Heritage Walks in Delhi offer a captivating Journey through the city's past. Delhi Tourism's latest initiative to organise Heritage Walks has added another dimension to its offerings, garnering popularity among both domestic and international tourists. The following specially curated walks have become particularly well-received:

- Dekho Apna C.P. (Connaught Place and nearby places)
- Dilli ka Dil Dekho (Central Delhi near Kartavya Path)
- Walk of Shahjahanabad (Old Delhi)
- Food Walk (Old Delhi)
- Walk at Hauz Khas
- Walk of Qutab Minar and Mehrauli Archaeological Park

Haunted Walks

Delhi Tourism recently launched Haunted Heritage Walks, offering a thrilling glimpse into the supernatural side of the city. The first walk is to the enigmatic Malcha Mahal, an abandoned lodge in the Delhi Ridge forest, rumoured to be haunted by exiled princesses, Begum Wilayat Mahal and Princess Sakina Mahal. Another haunted walk at Feroz Shah Kotla Fort explores the folklore of mischievous spirits called Djinns. Delhi Tourism plans to extend similar walks to Bhooli Bhatiyari Ka Mahal and Tughlaqabad Fort.

Other Services Offered

Regular Tours

DTTDC conducts several day tours within the city and its vicinity. Some of the regular tours include:

- Delhi Sightseeing
- Delhi by Evening
- Same Day Agra Tour
- Agra-Jaipur Tour (03 Days)
- Agra-Mathura-Vrindavan-Fatehpur Sikri Tour (02 days)
- Haridwar-Rishikesh Tour (02 days)

LTC/Holiday Tours

- Delhi-Amritsar Atari-Delhi (03 days)
- Delhi-Mukteshwar-Bhimtal-Delhi (03 days)
- Delhi-Jhansi-Gwalior-Delhi (04 days)
- Delhi-Jaipur-Udaipur-Delhi (05 days)
- Explore Rajasthan (09 days)
- Delhi-Manali-Delhi (05 days)
- Delhi-Haridwar-Rishikesh-Mussoorie-Delhi (04 days)
- Delhi-Kedarnath-Badrinath-Delhi (08 days)
- Delhi-Badrinath-Delhi (05 days)

Special Hiring Service

- Car, Tempo Travellers
- Central Reservation Office, Coffee Home, Connaught Place, New Delhi-110001
- +91 11-23363607, 011-23365358
- tourism@delhitourism.gov.in

Popular Projects

DTTDC's most well-known project is Dilli Haat, located at INA, Pitampura, and Janakpuri. This permanent open-air market styled on traditional bazaars showcases handicraft items and regional delicacies from across India.

Dilli Haat Pitampura

Dilli Haat Pitampura is a unique Food & Crafts Bazaar in Delhi, covering an area of about seven acres. It offers the following features:

Craft Stalls: 108 craft stalls for display and sale of variety of handlooms and handicrafts items.

Multipurpose Pavilion: Accommodating 100 exhibits for craftspeople.

Amphitheatre: Seating capacity of 450 persons.

Exhibition Hall: One air-conditioned hall for exhibitions (commercial/non-commercial), kitty parties, conferences/workshops/seminars/school functions, performing arts/music and dance shows, competitions, social events/ birthday parties (not for marriages).

Parking Area: Capable of accommodating 232 cars and 210 two-wheelers.

📍 Near TV Tower, Adjacent Netaji Subhash Place Metro Station, New Delhi-110034

☎ +91 11-20871276, 011-20871275

Dilli Haat Janak Puri

Dilli Haat Janakpuri is characterised by its spacious layout, featuring 100 typical craft stalls, 74 open platform shops, and 46 air-conditioned shops. Additionally, Dilli Haat Janakpuri provides various other amenities and offerings, including:

Amphitheater: 800 seating capacity which can be used for conferences, cultural activities, plays, award distribution, etc. on rental basis.

AC Auditorium: Boasting a capacity of 800 persons, the AC Auditorium is equipped with the latest technology and equipment, making it the largest modern auditorium in West Delhi. It features state-of-the-art acoustics, LED lighting, stage lighting, motorised curtains, and an audio-visual system. The auditorium, with a grand entrance, foyer, and lobbies, is gaining popularity among event organisers.

AC Exposition Hall: 3 air-conditioned halls of 175/235/290 sqm are available for the public to rent for organising events/exhibitions.

📍 Opposite Virender Nagar, Janakpuri, New Delhi-110058

☎ +91 11-25612181

Kalagram

Kalagram is an enclosure on a six-acre of land adjacent to The Garden of Five Senses. This has been conceptualised and soon coming up as an open-air theatre by the DTTDC Engineering wing. At present, Kalagram is witnessing a large number of bookings for organising cultural programmes. The site has hosted successful shows featuring artists like A. R. Rahman and Prateek Kuhad, drawing a full house audience.

☎ +91 9958365102 / +91 9871540353

Delhi Tourism offers rental space at the mentioned projects at very nominal rates for organising events, cultural programmes, and shootings.



Website: delhitourism.gov.in

Download Dekho Meri Dilli (Mobile App)



BRAND USA's INDIA BLITZ

Brings Record Number of Travel Partners for Trade Mission

In the realm of long-haul travel, India emerges as a formidable economic engine generating a substantial number of outbound travellers and cements its position as an attractive source market. Jackie Ennis, Vice President, Global Trade Development, Brand USA, shares valuable insight into its success story and the addition of newer partner destinations to the growth graph of the India Market.

Prativa Vaidya Bhalla

Brand USA, the nation's destination marketing organisation, held its 10th Sales Mission in India at the Westin Goa from January 22 to 25, 2024. The meticulously organised three-day event set the stage for impactful trade interactions. With a record-breaking delegation of 39 travel partners from the US, including 16 first-time delegates, it showcased the high value of India as a source market for the US. The growth of the mission is evident, starting with just five participants during its inception and expanding to its current size. The event's rich history underscores its consistent evolution, seeking innovative approaches for meaningful engagements between US suppliers and the Indian travel trade.

The eclectic mix of visiting partners highlighted the vast tapestry of experiences that the United States unfurls for avid travellers. Each participating entity offered a unique adventure, from the breathtaking red mountains of Utah to the old-world charm of Louisiana and



▲ Jackie Ennis

the roaring majesty of Niagara Falls. While Miami beckons with its sun-kissed beaches and Art Deco charm, Los Angeles showcases a diverse cultural mosaic and Boston charms with its quaint brownstone elegance. Yet, this is just the tip of the

iceberg. Magnificent National Parks, windy surfing beaches, distinguished educational institutions, fast-paced modern cities, magical theme parks, roaring sporting stadiums, and winding ocean drives, tick every box on a travel checklist, providing varied experiences on one single itinerary.

The Meteoric Recovery of India Market

Despite 2023 being a recovery year, it has exceeded expectations and performed phenomenally in terms of visitation. Jackie states, "I am very happy to say that, the Indian market has by far been our most successful recovery. Of all our other target markets, most of them are 10 percent down in arrival numbers, whereas India is up 20 percent on 2019 numbers, which is a phenomenal achievement, especially because 2019 was also a very good year." The latest arrival number for 2023 is 1.76 million, which places India as the fifth largest source market, including Canada and Mexico. However, India comes in at



number three as an overseas international market, if you do not count these neighbouring nations. It is a remarkable accomplishment as it had just entered the top ten in 2019, so the current ranking of either fifth or third reflects significant progress, establishing its status as a key market.

Targets for 2024

In 2024, Brand USA will emphasise enhancing connectivity, aspiring for direct connections and increased flight options. Indigo's collaboration with Turkish Airlines, and British Airways further amplify accessibility to diverse cities in India. Brand USA's endeavour is to go beyond facilitating travel, with the prime objective of driving visitation to lesser-known destinations, especially to regions outside major metropolitan centres.

This sales mission marks several significant firsts, including the inclusion of a partner from North Dakota, reflecting the increasing interest from Indian visitors in less-explored destinations. Boston, a well-known city for Indian visitors, is participating for the first time, as is the state of Illinois. Kissimmee continues to join and Seattle, with its CEO in attendance, adding to the diverse mix and generating considerable interest.

Key Developments in the India Market

Students are a huge segment, and having surpassed China in 2023, India is the number one source of international students to the United States, with a 35 percent increase from 2022. The student population has now reached close to

270,000 Indian students in the US, making them the highest overseas student group from around the globe. Indian visitors are making a noticeable impact across the United States, with the presence of international students playing a crucial role. The dispersion of these students to different corners of the country not only fosters cultural exchange but also inspires friends and family to visit.

The largest segment of Indian visitors belongs to the leisure and FIT segment, comprising mostly couples, intergenerational families, and small groups travelling together.

Challenges

There is always a fear of over-tourism, and national parks have had incredible demand over the last couple of years. However, the United States is so large, that there is space and diversity of experiences for everyone. Also, the diverse vacation options in the US offer a depth and diversity that sets the US apart from its competitors. Visa issuance is on an upward trajectory with each passing day, and India is witnessing record numbers of issued visas including the highest number of student visas. The embassy has achieved significant success throughout the year, marked by the issuance of 1.4 million visas, a phenomenal accomplishment that is a huge increase over previous figures. Despite these successes, challenges persist due to the extraordinary pent-up demand for visits to the US.

Beyond sheer arrival numbers, the spending statistics from Indian travellers are remarkable. Despite intensifying challenges from other competing

destinations, the United States, has faith in its longstanding presence and familiarity among Indian travellers.

Numbers Don't Lie

The number of visitations from India was 1.76 million in 2023 and 1.25 million in 2022, as the world was just awakening from the pandemic and commercial flights from India were suspended till the end of the first quarter of last year. The year 2019 saw the last high of 1.47 million arrivals to the US. The top figures present a notable upward trend, a half-million increase over 2022. Particularly remarkable is the December surge, featuring a 49.3 percent increase over the peak year of 2019, with a total of 123,000 arrivals during that month.

Latest Indian Travel Trends

There is a surge in interest among Indian visitors for road trips, notably coinciding with the 100th anniversary of Route 66, an iconic milestone. The appeal of vast, open landscapes and the post-pandemic inclination towards more frequent but shorter vacations is becoming a prevalent reality. Another noteworthy trend is the deviation from conventional itineraries, with a growing preference for immersive experiences like road trips, wildlife adventures, and cultural exploration customised to particular tastes and choices.

"I still think our forecast for India is slightly unambitious and that we are going to do even better. I think we are going to be here in another year's time, and hopefully declaring another year of bumper arrivals," concludes Jackie on an upbeat note.

Full House at TTJ TRAVMART Pune

The TTJ TRAVMART in Pune on January 20, 2024, witnessed a packed house with over 180 registered buyers from Pune, Mumbai, Aurangabad, Nasik, and other cities in Maharashtra. The event at Novotel Pune facilitated meaningful interactions between buyers and 26 prominent sellers, spanning diverse sectors such as DMCs, airlines, cruise lines, hotels, and travel technology. With robust support from major national and local travel associations, TRAVMART Pune showcased a vibrant convergence of travel professionals, underlining its significance in the industry calendar.

Bali Trip took the stage for a detailed product presentation, offering insights into their offerings and establishing a direct connection with the audience.

Attendees were given a glimpse into the soon-to-be-launched ‘TRAVMART Marketplace,’ promising an innovative E-Advantage for both sellers and buyers participating in TTJ TRAVMART.

Senior office bearers from travel associations were presented with mementos in recognition of their contribution and support. The event added an element of excitement with lucky draws conducted for buyers, enhancing attendee engagement and participation.





Harshvardhan D. Trivedi
Sales Manager, Air Seychelles India


“I strongly believe the event was a success as we managed to connect with the right set of people. We were expecting a footfall of 100+. We successfully engaged with over 175 agents during the networking event in Pune. Kudos to the team for their great effort!”



Akshay Mehta
Sales Manager, North and West India, Travel & I

“TTJ TRAVMART Pune, was very fruitful for us. It was very well organised, and I had positive interactions with more than 100 agents who visited my table during the TRAVMART and showed keen interest in our products for Asia, Europe, the USA, and Africa.”





Nishith Saxena
Founder and Director, Cruise Professionals

“As always, the Pune event had the same energy as we are used to in any TTJ TRAVMART where we have participated since the beginning. The presence of representatives of multiple travel associations & travel agents from Pune & surrounding areas was overwhelming. We had over 40 meaningful interactions with travel agents who focus on outbound cruises, and that too within a short span of under four hours. TTJ TRAVMART is a perfect blend of business meetings and relationship building in a joyful manner. We look forward to participating in other TTJ TRAVMARTs, as it will ensure our visibility in relevant markets.”





Syed Zakir
Treasurer, TAAI Pune Chapter

“TTJ TRAVMART Pune at Novotel was an exceptional roadshow that brought together agents from across Maharashtra. I personally headed a hosted delegation of 12 enterprising travel agents from Aurangabad. This B2B networking event was specifically designed to benefit upcoming and enthusiastic agents by providing them with invaluable networking opportunities and insights into new travel markets. The event was a tremendous success, thanks to the efforts of the dedicated team at TTJ, who organised and facilitated the roadshow.”



Shripad Deshpande
Kshitij Holidays

“I am attending the TTJ TRAVMART for the third time now, and every time, they get a combination of good hoteliers, DMCs, and airlines. My compliments to the TTJ TRAVMART team for having put together a great networking event here in Pune.”



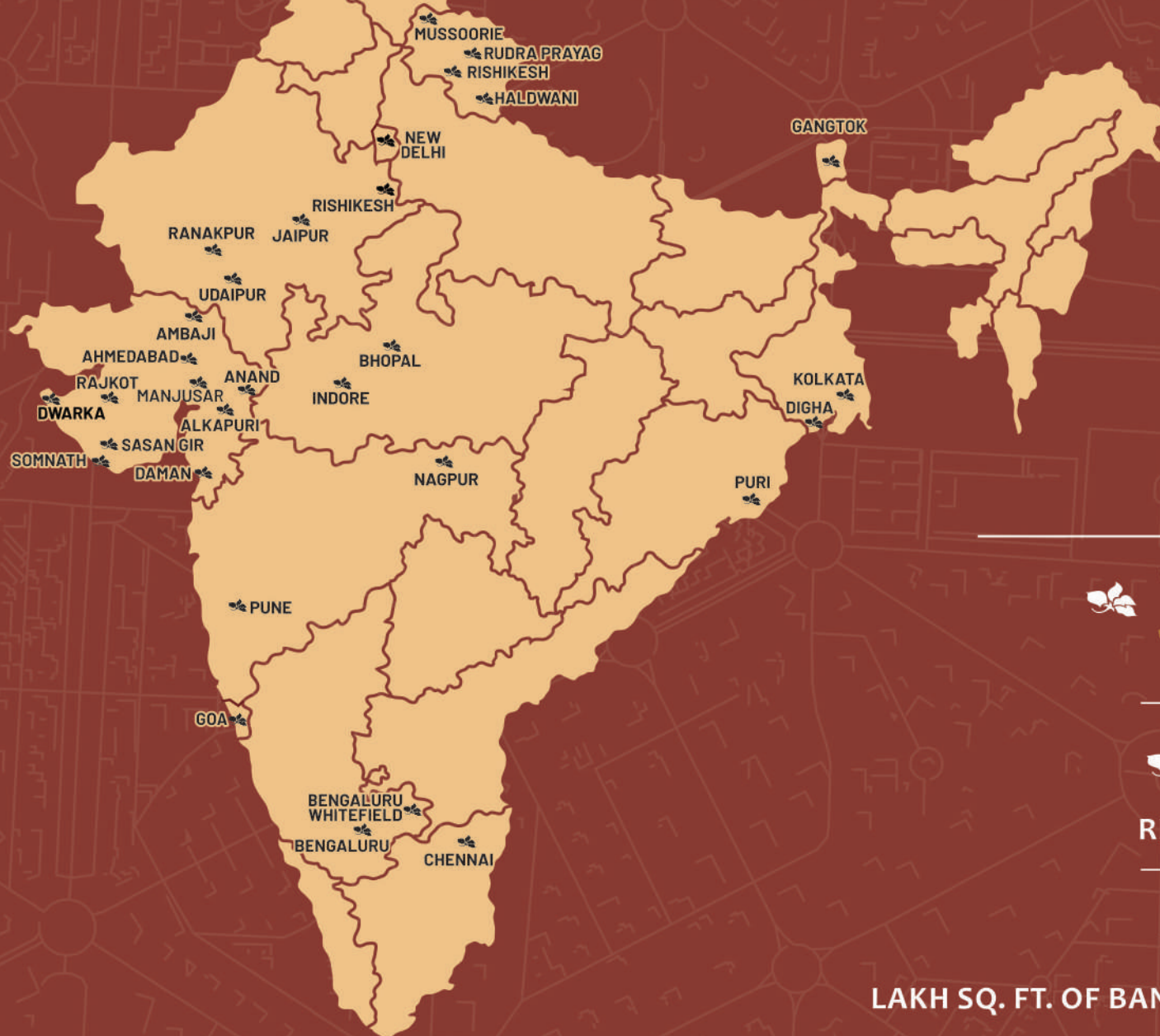
Santosh Khawale
Founder and Director, Surabhi Tourism, Pune

“The TTJ-TRAVMART at Pune has been a fantastic roadshow with a great mix of suppliers & buyers. It is a quality networking platform for travel agents, and I congratulate the organisers for putting up a great show. “TTJ Rocks!”





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Malaysia Airlines to double frequencies to Trivandrum from April 3

Malaysia Airlines is set to increase its flight frequency on the Trivandrum – Kuala Lumpur route due to positive load factor performance and growing demand. Starting April 03, 2024, the airline plans to double its current frequency, which commenced with two flights weekly since its inaugural flight to Trivandrum in November 2023. This decision aligns with the recent increase in frequency between Amritsar and Kuala Lumpur from January 15, 2024.

With the amplification of Malaysia Airlines' services from Trivandrum, this will bring the airline's connectivity into India to 71 flights weekly. Currently, the airline offers flights from nine major hubs in India, including New Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Chennai, Hyderabad, Kochi, Ahmedabad, Amritsar and Trivandrum.



Uttarakhand govt to transform Jadung into vibrant homestay destination



The Government of Uttarakhand has initiated a significant step towards the rehabilitation of Border Villages under the Vibrant Village Programme, and chosen Jadung in Uttarkashi district for a first-of-its-kind initiative.

Jadung, uninhabited since 1962 due to the Indo-China dispute, will undergo redevelopment in the first phase of the Tourism Department's plan. Six dilapidated homes will be renovated and promoted as homestays, with a unique approach—while the Department of Tourism will renovate the houses, the villagers will operate them. The refurbishment will use locally available materials and follow vernacular architecture.

The project aims to generate self-employment opportunities, making Jadung a distinctive tourism destination. Villagers are obligated to operate the homestays for at least 10 years.

The District Administration of Uttarkashi will select homestay operators through applications from the original inhabitants via a committee. Operational guidelines have been finalised, and the Tourism Department plans to provide skill training and support for marketing and promotion.

Approved by the Cabinet, this initiative is anticipated to address reverse migration and create new tourism prospects through government intervention.

Kerala bets big on 'Sky Escapes' heli-tourism project to attract visitors



Kerala Tourism has announced ambitious goals for 2024 with the launch of its innovative 'Sky Escapes' Heli-Tourism project. Unveiled in New Delhi on January 18, 2024, the initiative aims to connect the state's top destinations, providing visitors with a unique perspective of Kerala's diverse landscapes and enhancing accessibility. The project is part of a strategic campaign to attract more domestic tourists, tapping into the growing interest in experiential and adventure-based travel.

P B Nooh, Director, Kerala Tourism, described 'Sky Escapes' as a potential game-changer, comparing its impact to that of houseboats on the state's tourism industry three decades ago. Kerala has become the first state in India to introduce a comprehensive heli-tourism policy, with a micro-site providing details of travel packages offered by helicopter service providers. The initiative aims to make Kerala an interconnected tourism hotspot, enabling tourists to visit various destinations in a single trip.

Kerala Tourism's aggressive marketing strategy for the new year includes the campaign "Make up for lost time, pack up for Kerala," which received the prestigious PATA Gold Award. The government also plans to host four international adventure sporting events in 2024, aiming to put Kerala on the global adventure tourism map. With domestic tourism registering significant growth, Kerala Tourism is focusing on innovative initiatives to make the state a safe, hospitable, and all-weather holiday destination.



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Best Western Premier M Four Hotel, Dubai on a transformative journey; aims market expansion in India

Best Western Premier M Four Hotel, Dubai provides an ideal base to explore Dubai as well as everything the futuristic city has to offer. In a bold move to redefine the hospitality experience, Ravi K. Nair, General Manager, Best Western Premier M Four Hotel, is spearheading a comprehensive rebranding initiative. At the heart of this transformation is the hotel lobby, which is undergoing a remarkable renovation that promises to infuse it with an enchanting Arabic/Mediterranean touch.

Nair's ambition is clear: to position the hotel as a timeless and prominent fixture on the hotel landscape. Speaking passionately about his goals, Nair emphasises the hotel's departure from trends that often veer into the realm of

pretentiousness. He says, "I want the brand to offer refined service that is approachable and inclusive—a place where guests and employees alike feel comfortable in their own skin; that thrives on genuine human connection, not trendy, hip, pretentious, or patronising; a place free of judgement where nobody has to try to fit in to be treated like a human being."

The hotel is committed to expanding its reach and enhancing its presence in the Indian market and has appointed Rajiv Verma as the India Representative for Sales and Marketing. Rajiv has 25 years



▲ Ravi K. Nair

▲ Rajiv Verma

of rich professional travel experience and has been awarded and rewarded on many platforms for his Dubai expertise and vast tourism knowledge of the Dubai market.

Rajasthan witnesses 12-fold increase in domestic visitors since 2020



In the last four years, the number of domestic tourists visiting Rajasthan has increased about 12 times, and the footfall of foreign tourists has also seen a sharp uptick since the COVID-induced slump.

In 2020, more than 1.51 crore domestic tourists visited the state, and this number rose to over 17.90 crore in 2023. A total of 32.44 crore domestic tourists visited Rajasthan from January 2020 to December 2023, along with over 22.20 lakh foreign tourists.

The focus of the newly elected BJP government is to make Rajasthan a leader in the tourism sector, and recent visits by foreign leaders have contributed to presenting the state as a preferred destination for overseas elites.

The government aims to transform Rajasthan into a premier tourism destination, emphasising collaboration with various departments to enhance connectivity and improve infrastructure and hospitality services.

Creative Travel's annual 'Chaat Party' continues its proud legacy



The much-awaited Creative Travel's annual Chaat Party was celebrated over two days on January 27 and 28, 2024, at the Kohli residence. Both days dawned bright and sunny, bringing welcome relief during Delhi-NCR's coldest winter spell. With the who's who of the travel trade in attendance, it was full of bonhomie and good cheer shared over mouth-watering chaat.

The tradition, initiated by the late Ram Kohli and faithfully continued by his sons, Rajeev and Rohit Kohli, has been ongoing for over 34 years.

The event had over 500 partners from the industry, highlighting Creative Travel's growth and the strong support of industry partners. Rajeev Kohli expressed gratitude to the partners, seeing the Chaat Party as a way to thank them for their support. Rohit Kohli emphasised the importance of preserving the India story and thanked partners for their relationships, underscoring that it has always been about the connections rather than just business.



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E: rajiv@bestwesternpremierdxb.com

Dubai Contact Details:

Ms. Nikki

M: +971 4 306 9000

E: info@bestwesternpremierdxb.com

Tourism India Alliance signs MOU with Chhattisgarh Travel Trade Association



The Tourism India Alliance (TIA) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Chhattisgarh Travel Trade Association (CGTTA) on January 11, 2024, in Raipur. The MOU was signed by Jagdeep Bhagat, National President of TIA, and Kapil Jain, President of CGTTA. The event, attended

by over 60 travel agents, took place at Hotel Triton in Raipur and included officials from the Chhattisgarh Tourism Board, Indiatourism, Indigo Airlines, and other stakeholders.

Jitendra Shukla, Managing Director of Chhattisgarh Tourism Board, termed the event as "historic" and emphasised its long-term benefits for the development of tourism in the state. Jagdeep Bhagat spoke about the philosophy behind TIA's work and the importance of partnerships. Kapil Jain highlighted CGTTA's objectives and the philosophy of giving back to the trade.

Sambit Kumar, Vice President of Hotel Triton, made a presentation about the property's unique selling points. Certificates of membership were distributed to TIA and CGTTA members, and the event concluded with networking over high tea. This partnership is seen as a positive development in the Indian tourism industry, fostering collaboration for the benefit of the trade and promoting better connectivity, idea exchange, and information sharing among industry members.

MoT - Northern Region organises the Mahabharat Circuit Conference and FAM Trip

The conference on January 09, 2024 in Ambala was complemented by a familiarisation trip to Kurukshetra, Jyotisar, and Thanesar on January 10. The conference focused on exploring, promoting, and highlighting Kurukshetra and significant locations associated with the Mahabharat. The objective was to position these places as preferred tourist destinations for both domestic and overseas visitors.

Speaking at the conference, Dr. R.K. Suman, Regional Director North, explained, "The whole idea behind hosting this conference and familiarisation tour was to showcase the rich spiritual heritage that Kurukshetra offered. Stakeholders in the travel industry from all over the country were invited to experience firsthand what Kurukshetra offered and then share it with their client base in their respective markets."

Manisha Saxena, Director General, MoT, GOI, Dr. Raman Gupta, Joint Managing Director, Haryana Tourism; Rajiv Mehra, President, IATO; P.P. Khanna, President, ADTOI; and Mohan Gurucharandas,



Vice President, ISKON, also expressed the importance and potential of Kurukshetra.

During the FAM, the delegates were profoundly moved by the serene Brahm Sarovar and the historic Jyotisar. They also gained a holistic understanding of the cultural and historical tapestry of the region by visiting and exploring other attractions in the region.

Surat witnesses networking extravaganza at TCL T10 Cricket Tournament



The Travel Cricket League (TCL) marked its fourth year in Surat with a dynamic T10 Cricket Tournament from January 02-04, 2024, alongside a bustling Travel Trade Fair. The Le Meridian Hotel served as the epicentre of activities,

and the event gathered over 70 travel-centric organisations and more than 450 enthusiastic travel agents, igniting opportunities for networking and business expansion within the industry. The inaugural ceremony was graced by the presence of Ramesh Bhai Vaghasiya, President of the Chamber of Commerce, reflecting the substantial support garnered from the business community.

The primary objective behind this initiative is to provide a platform that uplifts the travel industry while fostering networking opportunities, emphasising a broader purpose articulated by organisers Devang Pandya and Jignesh Patel. The subsequent days featured thrilling cricket matches at the N.K. Cricket Ground in Vesu, showcasing local and visiting talents with intense sportsmanship. The Chamber of Commerce provided steadfast support, complemented by sponsorship from Forever Journey Dubai LLC and One Above DMC.



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