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Dear Friends,

As we step into the vibrant month of March, we are thrilled to unveil the latest issue of TTJ, wherein an array of articles navigating new territories and catering to your business and general reading interests will keep you immersed. At TTJ, we understand that every journey is an opportunity in the business world.

In addition to our outbound-specific features, we take you to enthralling destinations like the enchanting landscapes of New Zealand, where wildlife thrives in its purest form. North Thailand beckons with its scenic wonders. Explore the modern marvels of Qatar and Sharjah with us as we share firsthand experiences and insights from these dynamic Middle East destinations.

Back home, Varanasi, steeped in tradition, takes on a new dimension as every corner of this city tells a tale as old as time. Interwoven with these destination spotlights, our other features offer pragmatic insights for our valued readers.

We hope the insights contained herein add more knowledge, inspire strategic thinking, and foster lucrative collaborations. We love to be your beacon of information in the world of B2B travel.

Happy Reading!

*Ravi Sharma*

Ravi Sharma  
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Editor's Desk

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## Perth to host G'day Australia in 2024



Hundreds of international travel agents who specialise in selling Australia's world class tourism experiences to the world will gather in Western Australia later this year when Perth hosts Tourism Australia's mega-event, G'day Australia.

The event will put Australian tourism businesses face-to-face with about 300 agents from key markets worldwide, who Tourism Australia has trained to be Aussie Specialists.

G'day Australia will boost tourism in Western Australia and across the country, with state and territory tourism organisations supporting a national familiarisation programme around the event, giving visiting agents first-hand experience of the best Australia has to offer.

Experiencing Australia for themselves will help visiting Aussie Specialist agents encourage international visitors to stay longer and spend more in Australia. This is good news for Australian tourism businesses, as the sector directly and indirectly supports more than a million jobs. G'day Australia will be hosted in partnership with Tourism Western Australia from Sunday, 13 October to Friday, 18 October.

## Gulf Air, Royal Jordanian, and Saudia enhance AIUla's air connectivity



In a significant development for AIUla's travel landscape, three major airlines, Gulf Air, Royal Jordanian, and Saudia, are operating direct flights to AIUla, providing enhanced connectivity and accessibility to the luxury boutique heritage destination.

Gulf Air, the national carrier for the Kingdom of Bahrain, now operates twice-weekly flights between Bahrain and AIUla. These seasonal flights will continue till March 6, 2024, and resume from April 10 to 27, 2024.

Royal Jordanian Airlines is also operating direct flights between Amman and AIUla. Operating twice a week on Tuesdays and Fridays, this service will be available until December 22, 2024.

Saudia has made AIUla even more accessible to Europe with the relaunch of its seasonal flights from Paris. The first seasonal flight took off on January 28, 2024, and the service will continue until April 28, 2024. Flights are operating once a week, every Sunday, offering a convenient and direct link between the enchanting city of Paris and the historical wonders of the Saudi destination.

## Manta Air appoints InterGlobe Air Transport as its exclusive GSA

InterGlobe Air Transport Limited, a General Sales Agent (GSA) for multiple international airlines in India, has partnered with Maldives-based Manta Air to launch direct flights from India to Dhaalu Airport, Maldives.

Through this partnership, InterGlobe Air Transport and Manta Air intend to elevate air travel between India and the Maldives by establishing direct flights from Bengaluru's Kempegowda International Airport to the Maldives' Dhaalu Airport. This service will enable passengers to skip the inconvenience and additional ex-pense of transiting through a busy hub and land directly amidst the pristine beaches and luxurious resorts of Dhaalu. This seamless connection whisks the travellers straight to Dhaalu's breathtaking beauty, making the Maldivian getaway faster, smoother, and even more unforgettable.

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exclusively for Manta Air guests arriving at Dhaalu Airport from India, enabling quick transfers to some of the country's best resorts. Manta Air began operations on this route on March 01, 2024, with three weekly flights on Tuesday, Friday, and Sunday.



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# CPaT Global announces exclusive representative agreement with Minar Group

CPaT Global, the world's leading provider of distance learning for the airline and aviation industries, has entered into a partnership with the Minar Group to represent CPaT products and services in India.

"CPaT is honoured to be working with the Minar Group to bring CPaT's premium training solutions to the vibrant aviation community in India," said Capt. Greg Darrow, CPaT's Vice President of Sales. "This collaboration represents a shared commitment to provide high-quality, comprehensive training solutions to aviation professionals throughout the country," he said.

CPaT Global is the market leader in distance learning for the aviation industry, and it transforms aviation instruction by providing smart training solutions and a vision for curriculum spanning aircraft systems, general subjects, and operational procedures. CPaT delivers its software applications to more than 350 global aviation customers and 200,000 plus individual users each year and is looking to offer international quality learning to the Indian aviation industry.



## AVIAREPS and Shanghai Government launch B2B platform 'SmoothTravel'



AVIAREPS, an international representation, marketing, and communications company for the travel industry and the Shanghai Municipal Government, has launched Shanghai's official online B2B travel platform, SmoothTravel. SmoothTravel is the official gateway for the global travel industry to connect with both inbound and outbound Chinese travel agencies, tour wholesalers, online travel agencies (OTAs), and MICE agents in the East China market.

SmoothTravel aims to seamlessly link international travel businesses with the thriving Chinese travel market. The platform is designed for all segments of the travel industry worldwide, including major destinations, receptive tour operators, hotel groups, retailers, attractions, rental car agencies, cruise lines, and more, all eager to broaden their business outreach to the Chinese market.

Key features of SmoothTravel include China partner search, risk mitigation, China outbound market and consumer insights, training and support, and market research.

## The iconic Dusit Thani Bangkok to officially reopen this September



Situated in the same prime location as the original property, which graced the Bangkok skyline from 1970 to 2019, this highly anticipated, reimagined version of Dusit's luxury flagship hotel promises to deliver a fresh take on its predecessor's esteemed heritage. Again, it stands as a beacon of Thai-inspired gracious hospitality for discerning travellers from worldwide.

To meet the demands of modern guests, the new Dusit Thani Bangkok hotel has been meticulously reconstructed to offer an opulent accommodation experience, elevating the already high standards established by the original property. With fewer rooms (257 versus the original's 517), the newly built 39-story hotel offers ample space for guests, including deluxe rooms and elegant suites exquisitely crafted by internationally acclaimed Asian interior design firm, André Fu Studio, starting at an impressive 50 sq m.

Featuring expansive banqueting and meeting facilities exceeding 5,000 sq m, including one of Bangkok's largest grand ballrooms with a panoramic view of Lumpini Park, the new hotel continues the legacy of the original's grandeur.





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# Dubai's Blueprint for the Future

Racing through tough times, Dubai has emerged not merely as a participant but as a paragon of resilience, ingenuity, and strategic foresight. A conversation at SATTE with Bader Ali Habib, Regional Head, Proximity Markets, Dubai Department of Economy and Tourism, revealed the multifaceted strategies propelling Dubai to unprecedented heights in international tourism.

Vartik Sethi

Dubai's astonishing recovery, marked by an impressive throughput of 86.9 million passengers in 2023 and an unprecedented influx of 17.15 million international overnight visitors, is no mystical feat. It is the fruition of visionary leadership and a meticulously orchestrated response to global disruptions. Under the vision of its able leadership, Dubai exhibited unparalleled agility and foresight, reinforcing its stature as a global hub of tourism. Bader shared, "Our leader, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, has always envisioned Dubai as a leader of innovation and growth and wants to see more and more (growth) happening."

This triumph is not solely quantifiable in the growing numbers but in the qualitative enrichment of Dubai's tourism landscape. The city-state's strategic endeavours, such as the holistic approach to augment stopover tourism, mainly from India, and the tactical marketing campaigns leveraging influencers and media, signify a deep understanding of the evolving travel dynamics and consumer behaviours. Furthermore, the expansion and readiness of the Al Maktoum International Airport, poised to accommodate over a hundred million travellers, highlights Dubai's ambitious vision for the future.

## D33 Agenda and Technological Innovation

Bader elucidates that the essence of Dubai's success lies in its dynamic, data-driven strategies and a robust technological infrastructure that enables precise targeting and engagement with potential visitors. Integrating artificial intelligence into these strategies heralds a new era of personalised and efficient marketing, ensuring Dubai's



▲ Bader Ali Habib

leadership in the global tourism arena. The D33 agenda aims to double Dubai's economy and position it among the top three cities in terms of travel and liveability. The hospitality sector has witnessed expansion, boasting 1,50,000 rooms, only to underscore Dubai's readiness to accommodate the surge in visitors.

## Sustainability and Global Leadership

Sustainability and innovation emerge as the cornerstones of Dubai's future trajectory, particularly highlighted by its hosting of COP 28 and the launch of the Dubai Sustainable Tourism Initiative. Bader said, "We hosted COP 28 in December, an event nobody would have envisioned being held in Dubai, where we brought the world together to agree on achieving net zero. With the US now aiming to achieve net zero by 2050, this serves as a testament to Dubai's visionary stance as well."

## Preserving Culture in Modern Times

A city renowned for its architectural marvels and futuristic skyline remains deeply committed to preserving its cultural heritage. Bader emphasises the importance of showcasing the Emirati culture to the world, not just as a means of preserving heritage but also as a unique selling proposition that enriches the visitor experience. The wearing of the national dress by Emirati leaders and citizens alike serves as a powerful statement of pride and identity, offering a window into the nation's soul that transcends the language barrier and connects on a human level.

The restoration of the Al Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood, the heart from which modern Dubai sprang, is a testament to the city's dedication to its roots. This area, along with museums like the Dubai Museum, plays a crucial role in narrating the city's story from a small fishing village to the global metropolis it is today. Such efforts are not isolated to Dubai alone but are part of a broader UAE initiative to preserve and promote cultural heritage.

## A Home for Global Citizens

The city's evolution into a melting pot of nationalities, where expatriates outnumber locals, bears a testament to the Emirati ethos of hospitality and openness. Yet, this cosmopolitanism does not dilute the local culture; instead, it enriches the tapestry of Dubai's society, making it a living example of cultural coexistence and mutual respect. Dubai's appeal extends beyond its economic and tourism initiatives, offering a cosmopolitan, safe, and vibrant environment that attracts global citizens, including a significant number of Indians, to call the city their home.





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# Washington DC aims to drive visitation beyond its Federal legacy

As Washington DC clocks a successful year of trade milestones, Elliott L. Ferguson, II, President and CEO, Destination DC, highlights India's key role in its post-pandemic resurgence. He emphasises the significance of adapting trade strategies and making crucial market investments to capitalise on evolving travel demands.

Prativa Vaidya Bhalla

India has solidified its position as the fourth-largest market for Washington, DC, with 147,562 Indian visitors in 2023, reflecting a 54 per cent surge compared to 2022. Surpassing pre-pandemic levels by 11 per cent, Indian visits have been instrumental in DC's recovery, with similar growth anticipated in 2024. Key source Indian cities include Mumbai, Delhi, Gujarat, and Bengaluru, with growing interest observed from tier-two Indian cities.

Leisure and business travellers, alongside students, form the largest segment from India. To encourage an increase in the average length of stay for business travellers, Elliott states, "We want to ensure that they spend more nights, bring their families along to enjoy the city, and include Washington in their itineraries for more than just a day trip." For the MICE sector, DC offers expansive exhibition spaces hosting up to 60,000 people and easy connectivity to other major cities. Most Indian MICE travellers to DC are drawn to larger US-based congresses, especially in the medical and technology sectors.

## Ease of Access

Washington Dulles International Airport (IAD) welcomed 9.3 million international passengers, leveraging a 26.9 per cent increase from 2022, and is the fastest-growing international gateway airport in the United States. Elliott points out, "The non-stop flight via Air India to Washington encourages Indian travellers looking to come to the U.S. by flying into Washington and then travelling to other US cities." As a destination, visitors are drawn to DC's iconic historic sites, such as monuments, memorials, and the Capitol. However, the focus is now shifting towards a more culturally diverse array of attractions available in Washington.

The U.S. processed over 1.4 million visas in India in 2023, reducing wait times by 75 per cent, despite India's sheer size and demand volume. The goal is to leverage this visitation momentum and highlight the abundance of experiences



▲ Elliott L. Ferguson, II

beyond the well-known landmarks to attract a larger and evolving demographic. Despite geopolitical shifts, Europe remains the largest market, though pre-Covid China was the number one. India's trajectory remains positive, with concentrated expansion efforts now reaching out to cities like Chennai, Ahmedabad, and Hyderabad.

## Unique DC

Laid out in the 1700s by the French, DC is a green city with only 700,000 inhabitants. It is small but has a large international presence with 185 embassies. Speaking on the 'There is Only One DC' campaign unveiled in November 2023, Elliott highlights the unique experiences people can have only in DC. He says, "We have the largest Cherry Blossom Festival in America in the spring, while 'Passport DC' is a one-of-a-kind event held in May. Embassies open their doors to the public each weekend for free,

and visitors can enjoy that country's food, music, and dress." As travel demographics grow younger and more informed, there is a growing interest in immersive experiences that extend beyond traditional attractions to include more unique offerings. He adds, "Our goal is to make sure our markets understand the dynamics of our city versus the federal experience as we look at expanding opportunities and competing with great destinations around the world."

## Cultural Investment

Washington, DC, continually enhances its attractions and features over 100 free activities for visitors. An impressive \$8.8 billion investment is dedicated to upgrading Union Station. Efforts are underway to promote the entire region, including historic sites in Maryland, Old Town in Virginia, and the picturesque horse and wine country.

The DC event calendar is brimming with upcoming events and museum openings. The reopening of the National Museum of Women in the Arts in October 2023 marks a significant milestone as the world's first museum dedicated to women in the arts. The Go-go Museum, inaugurated in February 2024, adds to the fervour. Exciting museum anniversaries are also on the horizon, including the 20th anniversary of the DC Jazz Fest in 2024, World Pride in 2025, and America 250 in 2026. These celebrations promise citywide festivities throughout the year, making Washington, DC, a vibrant destination for visitors from around the globe.





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# NYC urges visitors to look beyond Manhattan, anticipates 383,000 Indians in 2024

New York City Tourism + Conventions organised a targeted sales mission across three key Indian cities from January 29 to February 02, 2023, hosting impactful events in Mumbai, Ahmedabad, and Delhi. With a focused delegation of partners, the mission aimed to actively engage with the Indian travel trade and provide comprehensive updates on the dynamic landscape of NYC Tourism.

Prativa Vaidya Bhalla

New York City (NYC), a global hub of culture, commerce, and diversity, is a captivating travel destination for most travellers worldwide. NYC boasts the world's busiest airport system and serves as the primary port of entry for international travellers to the United States. In a triumphant return to form, NYC welcomed an astounding 61.8 million visitors in 2023, marking a remarkable 93 per cent recovery from pre-pandemic levels and surpassing the record visitation seen in 2019. With projections soaring even higher this year, at an anticipated 64.5 million visitors, the city's magnetic charm remains as potent as ever. Among these visitors are an increasing number from India. In 2023, New York City greeted 336,000 travellers from India, with an anticipated increase to 383,000 visitors this year.

## New York City Tourism + Conventions

New York City Tourism + Conventions is the official destination marketing organisation and convention and visitors bureau for the city of New York, dedicated to maximising travel and tourism opportunities throughout the five

boroughs, building economic prosperity, and spreading the positive image of New York City worldwide. The newly rebranded NYC Tourism and Conventions led a delegation of leading tourism partners to conduct its annual sales mission in India. The partners included the Empire State Building, Trump International Hotel & Tower NY, Hudson Yards, Millennium Hotels, Circle Line Sightseeing Cruises, and Madame Tussauds. NYC Tourism + Conventions is also the official global partner of the IGLTA Foundation for their 2nd annual symposium in India.

## The Mission

The mission's objective was to engage and re-establish connections with the Indian travel trade market, effectively strengthening business relationships within the industry and establishing New York City as a premier travel destination.

Their goal is to highlight the vibrancy and diversity of New York City's offerings by encouraging visitors to look beyond Manhattan and explore neighbourhoods like Long Island, the Bronx, Staten Island, Brooklyn, and Queens.

The delegation provided comprehensive updates on the latest developments across various attractions, including transportation improvements and infrastructure expansions in iconic attractions such as the Empire State Building and Rockefeller Centre and outdoor spaces like Hudson Yards Little Island. Plans are also on the anvil for hotel developments to add 10,000 room nights by 2024.

Unique experiences that are

quintessentially 'New York' were encouraged to be added to client itineraries to showcase the diversity, inclusivity, and sheer talent of New York City. These experiences include City Climb at Hudson Yards, Roosevelt Island tram, Broadway shows, museum exhibits, dining experiences, Macy's fireworks, and seasonal events like cherry blossom viewing.

## India's Importance

With one out of every 10 visas issued globally being for Indian citizens, the demand for NYC shows no sign of ebbing. The significant increase in Indian visitor numbers in 2023, along with positive projections for 2024, highlights the importance of India as a crucial market. The launch of the Online Travel Trade Academy, featuring Hindi subtitles, demonstrates concerted efforts to attract the Indian market and empower trade partners to promote New York City's diverse offerings tailored for Indian travellers. With many of NYC's attractions catering to Indian travel preferences, this initiative aims to further enhance engagement with Indian visitors. Madame Tussauds in New York, a flagship attraction in the United States, recently introduced the wax figure of Baba Ramdev, amongst other Indian celebrities, showcasing the attraction's commitment to honouring Indian cultural icons. This addition acknowledges the significant influx and importance of Indian tourists. The additional offering of complimentary masala chai for groups at the attraction adds an extra authentic Indian hospitality touch that is sure to be a great hit.





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# The rise of Western Australia in global tourism

In the vast, untamed landscapes of Western Australia, an unfolding narrative of discovery and opportunity waves at the global travel industry. As explained by Melissa Forbes, Executive Director, Marketing, Tourism Western Australia, the region represents a formidable challenge and a golden opportunity for redefining travel paradigms. Through an engaging dialogue, Forbes unpacks the complexities of marketing Western Australia as a premier destination.

Vartik Sethi

## Bringing Western Australia to the Fore

Western Australia, with its sprawling landscapes, pristine beaches, and unique wildlife, has long stood in the shadow of its eastern counterparts, Sydney and Melbourne. Forbes articulates the primary challenge as a matter of visibility and awareness. "Indians are aware of Western Australia, but they're not necessarily aware of what it offers," she states, highlighting the gap between recognition and in-depth knowledge of the state's offerings. This challenge, however, is viewed not as a setback but as a fertile ground for opportunity.

The region's relative anonymity is its strongest asset, offering a blank canvas for the adventurous spirit of modern travellers. Forbes envisions the region as the "new destination," where travellers can claim pioneering experiences that remain untrodden by the masses. This vision is not just about attracting visitors; it is about inviting them to be part of a narrative of discovery, to be trailblazers who share unique tales of a land so vast and varied.

## Captivating the Indian Market

Forbes's strategy for propelling Western Australia onto the global stage is multifaceted, with a pronounced focus on the growing Indian market. Recognising India's economic dynamism, Tourism Western Australia is recalibrating its focus on this key demographic. The strategy transcends mere tourism, aiming for a comprehensive engagement encompassing trade partnerships, educational exchanges, and a deepening of cultural ties steered by the growing Indian diaspora in Western Australia. She shared, "Western Australia has recognised the importance of the Indian market. India is a key market, and it will indeed be for a very long time."



▲ Melissa Forbes

Central to engaging the Indian market, and any market, is overcoming the awareness gap. Forbes outlines a robust digital marketing strategy that leverages social media platforms, celebrity endorsements, and influencer partnerships to thrust Western Australia into the limelight. Yet, visibility is just the first step. The real success lies in conversion - transforming this heightened awareness into tangible travel decisions. Forbes speaks of the importance of crafting compelling itineraries that showcase Western Australia's unique offerings, ensuring the region is not merely an addition to Australian travel plans but a primary destination.

## Strengthening Industry Partnerships

Collaboration with the travel trade, airline partnerships, and the innovative coupling of destinations are pivotal elements of Forbes's strategy. Forbes shared, "We're always working with them (airline partners) and incentivising airlines to either grow their capacity or looking at how we can market or package those routes

with them." One of the most innovative aspects of Western Australia's marketing strategy, as highlighted by Forbes, is the concept of bundling destinations. This approach, particularly through connectivity with Southeast Asian hubs like Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, offers travellers a holistic holiday experience. It juxtaposes the urban allure of shopping destinations with the natural and wildlife-focused experiences Western Australia is renowned for.

Forbes suggests an ideal visit to Western Australia spans six to eight nights, allowing travellers to immerse themselves in the dual delights of Perth and the Margaret River region. This recommendation encapsulates the essence of Western Australia—a blend of urban exploration, natural beauty, and culinary excellence. The suggested itinerary is a microcosm of what the region offers: a journey that promises sightseeing and an experiential deep dive into the heart of Western Australia.

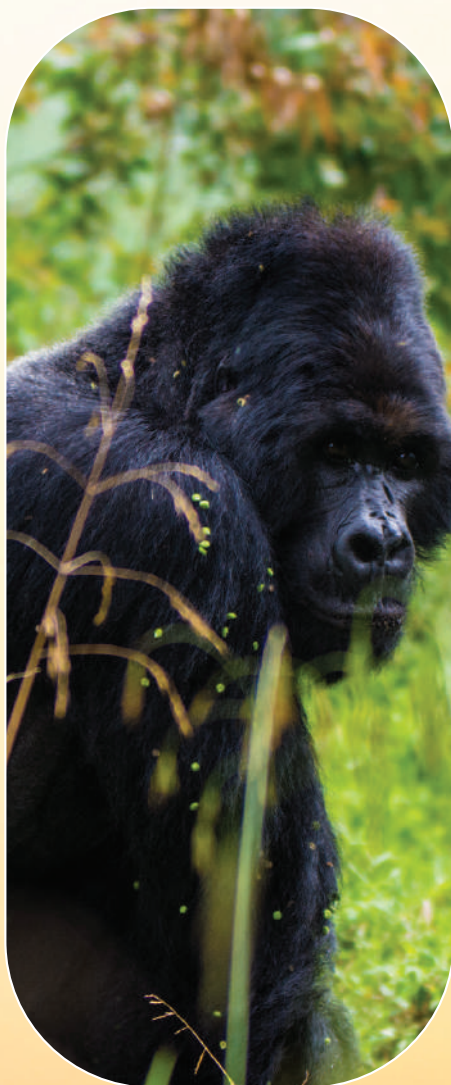
## A Call to Discovery and Exploration

The narrative crafted by Forbes is a compelling call to action for the travel industry. Western Australia, with its vast landscapes and untapped potential, stands on the cusp of a new era. The region's journey from obscurity to prominence is not just about marketing savvy; it is a broader invitation to the world to explore, discover, and be part of something truly unique. As the travel sector looks towards recovery and growth, Western Australia presents itself not just as a destination but as a frontier of new experiences, ready to welcome the world with open arms and undiscovered stories. This is the vision and challenge that Forbes articulately presents—a vision that beckons the travel trade to rethink, reengage, and reimagine the possibilities in the vast, uncharted expanses of Western Australia.





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# Batumi beckons Indians to explore its scenic blend of sea and mountains

The Ajara Autonomous Republic of Georgia stands out for its natural beauty, local customs, traditions, gastronomy, seacoast, and mountains. The region's main city, Batumi, is a must-visit on your sojourn to Georgia. TTJ had the opportunity to converse with Mikheil Koplatadze, Deputy Chairman, Georgia Department of Tourism and Resorts, Autonomous Republic of Ajara. This discussion, which took place on the sidelines of SATTE 2024, provided valuable insights into the distinctive features and attractions of the destination.

**Gurjit Singh Ahuja**

**S**howcasing Batumi for the very first time in India and as a part of a 30-member strong delegation from Georgia, Mikheil expressed his joy at the opportunity to introduce Batumi to Indian audiences, emphasising the shared value of warm hospitality between the two nations. He highlighted the Georgian proverb, "Guest is a gift from God," extending a heartfelt welcome to all visitors to experience the charm of Batumi.

## Georgia's Modern Gem

Located about a four-hour drive from the Georgian capital of Tbilisi or a 50-minute flight, Batumi is the most modern city in Georgia. It is a popular tourist destination known for its charming atmosphere, historic architecture, and scenic waterfront. The city has undergone significant development and revitalisation in recent years, making it a vibrant and attractive place for visitors. Mikheil mentions, "Many people call Batumi the Los Angeles or New Dubai of Georgia." He adds, "We have a lot to offer the visitors; we have the sea with beautiful beaches; a 20–30-minute drive takes you to the mountains; we have beautiful lakes, waterfalls, wineries, restaurants, pubs, and clubs."

One can visit Batumi all year round for business, vacation, or recreation. However, summers truly bring out the vibrancy of

the destination. Batumi boasts a mix of architectural styles, including modern structures and buildings from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The cityscape is characterised by a blend of traditional Georgian architecture and contemporary design. The old and new Batumi blend perfectly with old and modern architecture, European-style squares, high-class hotels, and other attractions.

For adventure, Batumi offers much more for the raring-to-go, adrenaline-rush seekers, adventurous types, flyboarders, divers, paragliders, trekkers, skiers, and families. It has an aqua park, horse riding club, Ferris wheel, maritime cruises, cycling, and cinemas. The city also boasts a sophisticated nightlife with casinos and an array of performance and jazz music festivals.

## Emerging Strong as a MICE Hub

Besides family vacations, Batumi is a perfect destination for high-profile international meetings, conferences, and weddings. Mikheil elaborates, "Batumi today has top hotel brands like Sheraton, Radisson, Hilton, Marriot, and more; these offer great accommodation options and venues for events, conferences, forums, and weddings. We have a great scope for MICE tourism, given our bouquet of offerings, and we also look forward to actively pursuing wedding tourism from India. As I understand, Indians organise

great overseas destination weddings, and given our infrastructure, we are a perfect match to be strong contenders for seeking destination weddings from India."

Mikheil further emphasises, "There is a great opportunity for us in the Indian market, and we are always open to discussing our support as a tourism promotion body to get large incentive groups, conferences, and events to our part of the world."

## A Feast of Culture and Cuisine

Batumi in the autumn allows travellers the opportunity to participate in two large events, Batumoba and the rural tourism festival, Gandagana. To mark these events, special markets come up, and many concerts, theatrical performances, and exhibitions take place. The Gandagana festival features special decorations representing Adjarian villages and displays a wide variety of fruits, local food, wine, and sweet delicacies.

Food and wine are at the very core of traditional Georgian life and hospitality. Adjarian cuisine is an inseparable aspect of Georgian cuisine, and dairy products are common ingredients in many dishes. Sweets also play an important role. Viticulture is essential to Georgian and Adjarian culture; around 50 different grape species grow in the region and are still used in wine production. Eco-tourism is another big opportunity, and there is a lot to offer, given the region's great natural expanse.





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# Mauritius Tourism to pragmatically approach its ambitious goals

Delve into the dynamic landscape of Mauritius tourism with Arvind Bundhun, Director, Mauritius Tourism Promotion Authority, as he outlines pragmatic growth strategies and efforts to enhance market accessibility. With its extensive history in sustainability, Mauritius prevails as a beacon of responsible tourism, offering valuable insights for global engagement while navigating towards an inclusive and equitable future.

Prativa Vaidya Bhalla

The island country of Mauritius is famed for its breathtaking scenery of sandy beaches, mountains, tea estates, waterfalls, forests, and coral-reefed lagoons. Big enough for extraordinary adventures and small enough to ensure everything on the island is within easy reach, it serves as a magnet for tourism. Its population hails from diverse origins, including Indian, Chinese, African, Dutch, French, and British. This fosters a harmonious, inclusive society that warmly welcomes all religions and ethnicities. Reminiscing on the success of the past year, Arvind states, “2023 was a good year for Mauritius. Over the calendar year, we set an objective to attain 1.3 million tourists globally, and India performed quite well. We have welcomed around 50,000 Indians, and for 2024, we aim to welcome around 100,000 tourists.”

## Ambitious Goals

This objective seems very achievable as air connectivity between the two countries continues to increase. Arvind points out, “Currently, Air Mauritius operates five weekly flights from Mumbai and Delhi, with Chennai set to be added in April. Vistara also offers five flights per week along this route. This enhanced connectivity enables us to tap into India’s immense market potential.” Additionally, Mauritius shares long-standing connections with India, with approximately 60 per cent of its forefathers hailing from India. The island nation understands and caters to all the needs of Indian travellers, offering a welcoming environment akin to a home away from home. With an array of sea and land activities, including indoor options, the island presents a diverse range of experiences. Additionally, Mauritius features rich gastronomy, culture, traditions, religions, and festivals, rendering



▲ Arvind Bundhun

it a well-rounded destination, ideal for Indian travellers.

## Diversifying Markets

The COVID-19 pandemic emphasised the necessity of diversifying target markets, prompting Mauritius’ tourism sector to adopt a strategic shift away from singular concentration in one area. This strategy includes strengthening strong source markets such as India and the Middle East. The high-performing target market is Europe, especially Eastern Europe, and regional tourism within Africa. By allocating resources across various continents, the aim is to achieve a balanced approach and mitigate reliance on any one region. One of the main challenges faced by Mauritius is its geographical distance from key markets, leading to increased fuel costs and subsequently higher air ticket prices, which act as a deterrent for travellers. Additionally, small developing island states like Mauritius

confront the impacts of changing climatic conditions on a daily basis. This presents a significant challenge for the island nation.

## Long-Term Sustainability

The pursuit of sustainability in Mauritius has been an enduring journey marked by the development of stringent regulations. Construction of properties with over 50 rooms now mandates the inclusion of sewage treatment plants, partial reliance on solar energy, and use of biodegradable products. Moreover, the ban on single-use plastic and the provision of tax rebates for electric vehicles highlights the commitment to reducing carbon footprints. This dedication to sustainability reflects a broader global awareness of environmental concerns. Arvind declares, “We are currently working with the Global Sustainable Tourism Council and have one particular village in the south of Mauritius certified as sustainable. By 2030, with the help of the private sector, we intend to certify the whole island as sustainable.”

## Prioritising Partnerships

A significant shift has been observed in the Mauritius tourism landscape, with B2B transactions now dominating 60 per cent of inbound tourism. To harness this support, direct engagement with B2B partners and collaborative efforts with airlines on joint marketing initiatives have become paramount. Moreover, digital strategies targeting B2C audiences have been implemented to capitalise on the vast reach of digital platforms. Amidst these endeavours, the overarching focus remains on sustainable and inclusive tourism development, ensuring the involvement of all Mauritians and equitable distribution of tourism benefits. This steadfast commitment highlights Mauritius’ dedication to balanced and responsible tourism practices.



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# Uzbekistan envisages over twofold increase in Indian arrivals for 2024

With a deep appreciation for the harmonious cultural bonds shared between Uzbekistan and India, Ahror Validjanov, Director, Silk Road Office, Republic of Uzbekistan Tourism Committee, acknowledges the significant surge in Indian visitors. As he eagerly anticipates further growth, Ahror shares his view on the rapidly expanding tourism potential of Uzbekistan and the strategies in place to facilitate growth.

Prativa Vaidya Bhalla

Located in the heart of Central Asia, Uzbekistan is renowned for its magnificent architecture, incredible landscapes, remnants of glorious civilizations, cultural events, and gastronomic delights. From the ancient cities of Samarkand and Bukhara to the mountainous gorges of Surkhandarya, every Uzbeki region offers unforgettable attractions. Whether exploring the vibrant metro of Tashkent or skiing in the Tien Shan foothills, visitors are captivated by its unique tourism offerings.

In terms of business from India, Ahror shares the steady growth in the number of tourists visiting Uzbekistan, “In 2023, we hit the record, and we brought in 7 million visitors from all over the world, and the number of visitors from India tripled to a robust 45,000, since the previous years. The plan for 2024 is to bring in 100,000 tourists from India.” India, China, and Europe are the biggest source markets alongside the neighbouring countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. India, especially, has shown rapid resurgence as a key player.

## Expanding Tourism Offerings

Recognising the demand for immersive and experiential tourism, they have spent the last few years developing interesting homegrown tourism products. Ahror states, “We were one of the few countries that did not stop investing in the tourism industry even during the pandemic. We went ahead and increased our investments during those difficult days. Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan were the only two countries in the world that continued



▲ Ahror Validjanov

investing in tourism during that phase.”

The longstanding challenge of limited airline connectivity has finally been addressed with the introduction of direct flights from Delhi to Tashkent and efforts to introduce direct flights from Mumbai are underway. Indigo and Uzbekistan Airways are working to further enhance accessibility.

Realising its strength lies in cultural and leisure tourism, Uzbekistan has expanded its tourism domain to encompass emerging sectors like mountain tourism, extreme tourism, and MICE tourism. Acknowledging the notable rise in Indian tourist arrivals, Ahror expressed surprise at the shifting landscape of demands, “Previously, Indian

tourists engaged only in cultural and leisure tourism. However, we are now witnessing a remarkable surge in requests for hosting weddings and MICE events as well.” He adds with candour, “We find that we are very similar to Indians in the organisation of weddings. Both nations organise weddings in a huge capacity and celebrate over an extended number of days. At least 300-500 people attend weddings, and we have huge capacity venues to accommodate that demand.”

In addition, there is a thriving market for experiential tourism, driven by the increasing demand from Indian tourists seeking a wide range of diverse experiences. The introduction of direct flights has expanded borders, and the recently upgraded mountain resorts are already beginning to attract a large number of Indian tourists. This highlights the rapid development of our mountain and ski tourism, exemplified by world-class resorts.

## Innovative Strategies

They are actively fostering partnerships through B2B channels, linking their travel agencies with counterparts in India as part of their cross-border initiatives. Additionally, the visibility on leading international media platforms such as BBC, CNN, and CNBC play a crucial role in promoting tourism potential, particularly within the Indian market.

Ahror points out, “Numerous DMCs have shown keen interest in Uzbekistan, and we are organising roadshows, FAM trips, and press trips to promote our tourism. One of our biggest upcoming investment projects is related to our mountain tourism in Chimgan, which will cost over 400 million dollars. It highlights the enormous potential of this area and also demonstrates its prodigious tourism potential.”

Embracing its urban charm, historical past, and seamless accessibility, Uzbekistan emerges as a beacon for tourism development. It is evident that Uzbekistan's tourism industry is booming as their world-class resorts strain to accommodate the surge in visitors, even as concerted efforts are being made to cater to the escalating demand.







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# INDIA INBOUND

## Still Awaiting a Bounce Back

Inbound travel to India, particularly in the leisure segment, experienced an abrupt halt owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. While there has been a gradual resurgence of inbound tourists post-pandemic, the numbers are yet to reach pre-pandemic levels. Numerous challenges continue to impede a swift recovery. TTJ engaged with some industry stalwarts to gain insights into the ground realities.

Gurjit Singh Ahuja



▲ Ravi Gosain



▲ Sanjay Razdan



▲ Tejbir Singh Anand



▲ Swadesh Kumar

Looking at the current travel scenario in India, things look pretty gung-ho, with domestic carriers expanding their network and flight frequency and enjoying higher yields. Hotels, too, have nothing to complain about, enjoying higher-than-normal occupancy rates and ARRs. Overseas flights are packed to capacity despite high-priced airfares, while embassies struggle to keep up with visa issuance.

The COVID isolation of countries activated a new market source, and this is not the usual corporate or business traveller

or overseas tourist. This new market is an explosion of a relatively dormant segment of the “domestic traveller.”

It is the domestic traveller, whether travelling over weekends, on staycations, or exploring the country, that came as a lifesaver for the Indian hotel industry. The icing on the cake was the increased demand for destination weddings and celebratory functions within India, responsible for record occupancies and increased revenue. The foreign tourists were no longer missed, except for the inbound tour operators whose livelihood depended on them.

The loss of inbound tourism for India is a big gain for our neighbours and countries offering capacity and a competitive travel product. The loss of a big chunk of charter business in Goa is a living testament to the current scenario.

### Current Challenges

Reflecting on the current landscape of the travel industry, Ravi Gosain, Managing Director, Erco Travels, shares his insights into the challenges. He explains, “The non-availability of first-class hotels, a limited number of flight seats, and the increased cost of other input products act





as spoilsports. Hotels in India are busy catering to the surged demand of domestic travellers, weddings, and corporate events; similarly, on international flights, most seats are occupied by Indian travellers despite the increase in flights.”

Shedding light on the journey of challenges, Sanjay Razdan, Managing Director, Razdan Holidays, mentions, “First and foremost, the challenge was to educate the travellers worldwide that India is safe to travel. Having overcome this, due to the emphasis on domestic tourism, the number of domestic travellers has increased manifold, resulting in hotels, airlines, and other connected services getting increasingly expensive owing to heavy demand. Keeping the costs under control has been one of the biggest challenges in the last two years.”

Bringing a refreshing perspective, Tejbir Singh Anand, Founder and Managing Director, Holiday Moods Adventures, shares, “As an adventure inbound tour operator, I see a notable shift and change. The new traveller is seeking experience travelling to India and demands unique native experiences that create engaging stories for their social media content. The traveller today wants to experience the natural heritage around them and the joy of new discoveries, making their stay unique with immersive experiences.”

“We now approach travellers with our beliefs, values, and principles to attract like-minded customers. Our mantra is go green: protect the environment, respect local cultures, and nurture local arts and culture alongside building activities and adventure experiences,” adds Tejbir.

## Lack of Promotions

The closure of overseas tourism offices of the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, without setting up an alternative foolproof mechanism has added to the

woes of the inbound industry. Sanjay Razdan, expressing his concerns, explains, “There is hardly any promotion globally, and we have been trying to impress upon the government without much success to date. The government plays a crucial role in shaping inbound travel through policies and initiatives, and we are trying our best to impress them through the IATO platform. Promotional campaigns must restart soon.”

Echoing his sentiments, Captain Swadesh Kumar, Managing Director, Shikhar Travels, shares his opinion, “We are an adventure tour operator; the world needs to know that India is much more than just forts and palaces. With the closure of the overseas tourism offices, there is no proper dissemination of information. The concerned officials in the overseas embassies are clueless. Adventure Travel needs a domain expert on the subject to address local queries and concerns and promote adventure tourism in India. Currently, there is a wide gap in this context.”

He further adds, “We have the Himalayas, and that offers us great scope for adventure activity, be it climbing, trekking, or hiking. Additionally, tremendous scope exists for skiing and activities like paragliding, but these need to be promoted and developed.”

Ravi Gosain sheds light on the overarching issue of a lack of demand for India in overseas markets. He highlights, “We need a strategic long-term marketing plan, be it trade fairs, roadshows, print or online media advertisements, or inviting bloggers and tour operators to promote destination India.”

## The Real Challenge

India has not successfully expanded its inbound market share; rather, in the current scenario, the market share has further

dropped. Initiatives to position India as a prime destination globally have not yielded the desired results, with marketing endeavours falling short. Also, we have not been able to develop new markets. The need of the hour is a strategic long-term marketing plan where India is globally positioned as one of the top 10 destinations.

## Market Dynamics

Compared to pre-COVID times, inbound business to the country is down by almost 50 per cent, a figure that finds ground amongst most operators and is not a very comfortable spot to be in. Reasons abound and have been highlighted by many industry players. Despite the downturn, there is a collective spirit of optimism as operators work towards overcoming hurdles, fostering recovery, and envisioning a future marked by growth and stability. The predicament clearly shows, as Ravi Gosain explains, “Personally, our company, Erco Travels, has had a good inbound season compared to the previous year, and we hope the trend will continue. The only worry I have is that most of the business is done on an ad hoc basis, so it is very difficult for us to make plans and budgets.”

For Tejbir Anand, the focus remains primarily on Europe and the UK, where their adventure segment thrives. “We did not try targeting new markets for the adventure segment, as the biggest honeypot is Europe, and rather than reinventing the wheel, we thought of concentrating on the existing market to revive it. Our existing markets are in the UK and Belgium, where we get regular business,” elaborates Tejbir Anand.

Currently, caution and consolidation of existing businesses and markets prevail in a top-of-mind position with most operators, a sentiment also expressed by Sanjay Razdan, “We are trying to consolidate on our present markets.”



# IATO calls for proactive government action to address inbound travel challenges

In the current landscape of slow-paced inbound tourism, Rajiv Mehra, President, Indian Association of Tour Operators (IATO), highlights critical challenges and opportunities. From the closure of Indian tourism offices overseas to concerns about reduced budgets and geopolitical hurdles, Mehra outlines the multifaceted issues impacting inbound travel. With a call for proactive government intervention and a strategic framework, Mehra provides insights into the transformative initiatives, challenges, and hopes to shape the future of the Indian inbound tourism industry.

Prashant Nayak

The closure of the last seven Indian Tourism Offices (ITOs) overseas in 2023 could have a profound impact on Indian tourism, particularly on inbound travel, due to the decline in the promotion and visibility of India as a tourist destination abroad. Additionally, the significant reduction in the budget allocation for overseas promotion and publicity, including market development assistance, in the Budget 2024–25 is alarming. The allocation has seen a staggering decrease of 97 per cent, plummeting to Rs 3 crore from the previous budget's allocation of Rs 95 crore. These factors collectively create a challenging environment for promoting India as a tourist destination internationally, negatively impacting inbound travel to India.

## A Call for Proactive Government Action

The current situation of inbound travel in India highlights several impediments necessitating proactive government intervention. In their communication to the Honourable Prime Minister, IATO outlined two critical issues. Firstly, there is a noticeable absence of promotion in both electronic and print media channels, resulting in a lack of visibility for India's tourism offerings. Secondly, the absence of a familiarisation tour (FAM) and roadshows compounds the challenge, exacerbated by the unavailability of funds for such essential promotional activities. “It is imperative that immediate action be taken to address these concerns. We risk remaining unnoticed without a concerted effort to amplify our presence on the global stage. It is crucial to initiate promotional activities promptly, as without a substantial external presence, attracting attention and participation will prove challenging,” says Mehra.



▲ Rajiv Mehra

## Concerns Over Interim Budget 2024–25

While speaking about the interim budget 2024–25, Mehra was vocal by saying that there is nothing much for the tourism industry except the government giving an interest-free loan to the states to develop the tourism sites and for advertisements and marketing, which can drive some tourism. However, amidst the uncertainty of state participation in the interest-free loan for tourism development, Mehra expressed his reservations, emphasising that the funds allocated in the increased Ministry of Tourism budget (from 1692 crores to 2450 crores) primarily lack substantial support for international market promotion. With a meagre Rs 3 crore designated for overseas promotion, Mehra believes prospects for government-funded initiatives like FAM tours to attract international travel agents are dim. He pointed out that focusing on developing spiritual tourism, including the ambitious project for the Lakshadweep Islands, requires a considerable

timeline of at least three years for fruition.

## Tactical Framework

According to Mehra, the existence of overseas Indian tourism offices is paramount in the inbound tourism strategy. Already, with the foreign offices of India's overseas promotion being closed, many tour operators have removed India from their travel brochures altogether.

Mehra proposes a nuanced approach, suggesting a selective opening rather than activating all 16 offices in the earlier locations. To optimise functionality, the experienced workforce composition should consist of 75 per cent personnel from the Ministry of Tourism and 25 per cent from the respective state government tourism departments, leveraging their expertise. These designated officers should operate within embassies, functioning under the guidance of the ambassador or high commissioner. This strategic deployment is crucial for success, as it ensures collaboration with local experts and aligns efforts with the broader diplomatic mission.

## Drawing Inspiration from Global Success

A compelling example is Saudi Arabia, where substantial investments underscore the importance of such initiatives. In the past year, Vietnam has witnessed a remarkable surge, with 30 daily flights connecting various Indian locations, showcasing a robust and successful initiative. The key to their achievement lies in comprehensive advertising efforts. Mehra mentions, “To replicate such success, our strategy should prioritise a similar promotional approach. Currently, we grapple with challenges such as steep airfares, both internationally and domestically, along with high hotel rates. While government influence may



be limited to pricing matters, it can be pivotal in addressing crucial aspects like effective international promotion. By actively supporting initiatives that enhance visibility and attract travellers, the government can significantly contribute to overcoming existing challenges. Once we implement these measures, there is a strong likelihood that inbound tourism will experience a notable resurgence.”

Rebuilding Trust and Confidence

Currently, there are other challenges, like limited access to Chinese markets despite the Chinese government granting tourist visas to Indians. Unfortunately, reciprocity is lacking, as India has not extended the same openness for tourist visas to the Chinese, besides all other visas. Mehra says, “Situations like these need urgent resolution, especially considering the normalisation of the situation after COVID-19. Furthermore, our dealings with Ukraine have experienced a significant

downturn, witnessing a substantial decline of 50 to 60 per cent. A similar impact is evident in our connections with Russia. The vibrant business we once enjoyed has diminished considerably. Moreover, disruptions in visa issuance from Canada over a two-month period further exacerbated the situation. Concerns about geopolitical tensions or unforeseen events, such as conflicts or other disruptions, contribute to this hesitation. These circumstances have created an environment of uncertainty, causing a reluctance among European counterparts and even from Israel to travel to India. Addressing these issues promptly is imperative to regain stability and confidence in our international business interactions.”

Hopeful for Inbound Tourism Recovery

Initially, IATO’s projection for March 2024 was to attain the tourism figures of 2020, assuming the situation improved.

However, as the association assesses the current scenario, Mehra thinks that even by March 2025, matching those 2020 figures seems like a considerable achievement given the challenges faced. The recovery process is gradual, and some sectors, like transportation, continue to grapple with shortages and elevated prices. Moreover, the inbound tourism sector is yet to fully rebound, and the absence of incentives, which were withdrawn in 2020, poses an additional hurdle. “In our communications with the government, we have advocated for reinstating these incentives for the tourism sector. Specifically, we propose a sustained support plan for at least next five years, enabling us to conduct effective propaganda and advertising campaigns abroad. As we navigate these complexities, we remain hopeful for a return to normalcy and appreciate any support extended by the government,” concludes Mehra.

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# OTOAI takes centre stage, forges dynamic partnerships

The Outbound Tour Operators Association of India (OTOAI) is at the forefront of driving impactful initiatives to shape the future of Indian outbound tourism. From collaborating in events with industry leaders like Qantas Airlines to formalising strategic partnerships with Korea Tourism Organization and Tourism Malaysia in February 2024, OTOAI continually strives to enhance member knowledge, forge international ties, and contribute to the growth of the global tourism industry.

Team TTJ

## Strategic Alliance with KTO

The month of February proved to be a whirlwind of initiatives for OTOAI. To start with, they partnered with the Korea Tourism Organization (KTO) for an impactful roadshow on February 13, 2024, in Delhi, unveiling the much-anticipated K-Incentive Scheme 2.0. This strategic initiative implies a significant leap in their ongoing efforts to enhance Korean tourism. The event, showcasing OTOAI's proficiency in drawing a diverse audience, underlines OTOAI's commitment to spotlighting Korea's vibrant culture, with the overwhelming response serving as a testament to its collective endeavour to boost Korean tourism.

At the event, KTO introduced the K-Incentive Scheme 2.0, tailored explicitly for travel agencies across India. This innovative scheme offers enticing benefits, including streamlined visa support for visitors to Korea, emphasising regional destinations such as Busan, Gangwon province, and Jeollanam-do province, deemed essential for eligibility under the scheme.

Monia Kapoor, Joint Secretary of OTOAI, expressed confidence in Korea's untapped



Myong Kil Yun, Regional Director, India & SAARC Countries, KTO, addressing the gathering

growth potential within the Indian market. She extended gratitude to the Korea Tourism Organization for the innovative incentive program and urged OTOAI members to actively recommend Korea to their clients. With South Korea witnessing a surge in Indian visitors, the K-Incentive Scheme 2.0 is poised to further catalyse this upward trend.

## Remarkable Evening with Qantas Airlines

On February 15, 2024, OTOAI, in collaboration with Qantas Airlines, orchestrated a spectacular Members Meet Evening in Delhi, drawing an impressive gathering of over 100 members. The event served as a vibrant platform for OTOAI members to explore new horizons and seize opportunities within the dynamic outbound tourism landscape.

This gathering received substantial support from the Qantas Airlines team, highlighting the airline's immense potential for captivating tourists. Riaz Munshi, President of OTOAI, underscored the association's unwavering commitment to enhancing members' knowledge and expertise. Munshi remarked, "The event received strong support from the Qantas Airlines team, showcasing their immense potential to attract tourists. We are thrilled with our partnership with Qantas Airlines, and the resounding success of the evening accentuates its mutual benefits."

Beyond the exchange of knowledge, the Members Meet Evening showcased the collective enthusiasm of OTOAI and Qantas Airlines in steering the future of outbound tourism from India.

## Promising MOU with Tourism Malaysia

A significant highlight during the SATTE exhibition in Noida was the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Tourism Malaysia and OTOAI. The signing ceremony, graced by Riaz Munshi, President; Shravan Bhalla, Vice President; Sidharth Khanna, General Secretary; and Gurdeep Singh Gujral, Treasurer, all from OTOAI, marked a pivotal moment in the collaboration with Tourism Malaysia.

Under the terms of this MOU, Malaysia and OTOAI commit to collaborative efforts, focusing on joint activities and initiatives to promote tourism growth between the two nations. This strategic partnership aims to facilitate seamless travel experiences, ultimately enhancing the overall appeal of Malaysia as a preferred destination for Indian tourists.

Riaz Munshi expressed enthusiasm about the collaboration, stating, "This MOU symbolises a new chapter in the relationship between Malaysia and OTOAI. We are dedicated to leveraging our collective strengths to create unparalleled opportunities for our members and contribute to the growth of tourism between our two nations."

The MOU signing ceremony served as a powerful testament to the shared vision of Tourism Malaysia and OTOAI in advancing sustainable tourism practices and nurturing a profound cultural exchange between Malaysia and India. As both parties embark on this collaborative journey, the MOU is positioned to unlock a myriad of benefits for their respective members, propelling mutual growth and success.

With a steadfast commitment to excellence, OTOAI believes that these collaborative efforts play a pivotal role in paving the way for its members and industry growth while fostering innovation. The association stands at the forefront, poised to revolutionise the landscape of Indian outbound tourism through strategic partnerships and impactful initiatives.





# Mastereign Group and STIC Travel forge partnership to pioneer educational tours

Singapore's Mastereign Group and India's STIC Travel Group have formed an exclusive partnership, representing a noteworthy stride in educational tourism.

Team TTJ

In a significant move, Mastereign Group (Singapore), a leading provider of enrichment training and educational tours, and STIC Travel Group, India, announced an exclusive partnership agreement aiming to introduce innovative educational tours specifically designed for Indian students.

Under this exclusive partnership, Mastereign will conduct educational tours in Singapore, offering students from India an unparalleled opportunity to explore the country's sustainability and technological efforts, cultural heritage, and educational excellence. STIC Travel Group will serve as India's exclusive sales and marketing partner, leveraging its extensive network of channel partners and sales expertise to promote these co-created and branded educational tour packages, along with other add-on programmes tailored to the students' enrichment learning and development

needs through fun-filled experiential activities. STIC will also have exclusive access to Mastereign's holistic range of add-on programmes for the India Educational Tour market.

Speaking on the occasion, Terry Lim, Managing Director, Mastereign Group, said, "This learning travel programme is an opportunity to foster global understanding, cultural exchange, and the development of international perspectives among students. By blending the cultural heritage and innovative landscape, particularly in the sustainable development of Singapore, with the vibrant energy and aspirations of Indian students, we aim to create unforgettable learning experiences that instruct, impact, and inspire. Together, we are setting the stage for a new era of educational excellence and international collaboration."

Subhash Goyal, Chairman, STIC Travel



Group, emphasised on the significance of educational tours while stating, "Educational tours are a vital component of student development, offering unique experiences that foster learning, cultural exchange, and personal growth. Through this partnership, Mastereign and STIC are committed to providing students with immersive educational experiences beyond traditional classroom learning."



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# Millennium Hotels and Resorts invests in greener future and sustainability

An exclusive interview at SATTE 2024 with Andy Tan, Senior Vice President of Global Sales, Food and Beverage, Partnerships, and Operations, Millennium Hotels and Resorts, offered profound insights into the dynamic interplay between sustainability, technological advancement, and the indomitable human spirit.

Vartik Sethi

The hospitality sector, according to Tan, grapples with a triad of formidable challenges: the perennial issue of manpower scarcity, the skyrocketing operational costs, and the imperative of sustainability. Yet, it's within this crucible that Millennium Hotels and Resorts (MHR) forges its path, not just confronting these challenges but transforming them into opportunities for growth and innovation. "Everything needs to be sustainable," he states, underscoring the dual challenge of maintaining operational viability while ensuring environmental stewardship.

Sustainability, once a buzzword, has now become a cornerstone of MHR's operational ethos. The transition towards eco-friendly practices, though costly, is seen as an investment in the planet's future—a sentiment that resonates with the increasing environmental consciousness of today's traveller. "The cost of making things eco-friendly is a price to pay. But in the long run, we are obviously protecting the world," Tan remarks, emphasising the intrinsic value of sustainability beyond mere regulatory compliance.

An optimistic wave fuelled by the rising middle class in emerging markets has taken over the hospitality and the tourism industry. This optimism, however, demands a recalibration of service delivery to meet the expectations of a more discerning, technologically savvy clientele.

Addressing the manpower challenge, MHR has embarked on a radical redesign of job roles within its properties. The fusion of roles such as concierge, bell boy, and front office personnel into a singular, multifunctional position not only addresses staffing constraints but also enhances the skill set of their employees, fostering career growth and job satisfaction.

Technological innovations play a pivotal role in MHR's strategy to overcome operational challenges. The adoption of robotics for tasks ranging from food service to housekeeping streamlines operations, reduces the need for extensive



▲ Andy Tan

manpower, and significantly cuts down on energy costs. Thermostat-enabled rooms that adjust based on occupancy further exemplify MHR's commitment to energy efficiency and sustainability. Tan shared, "There's an increasing demand for personalised experiences, reflecting a significant trend post-COVID, propelled by technological advancements."

The recent \$30 million renovation of the Grand Millennium Waterfront, its flagship property, with its state-of-the-art meeting facilities and enhanced guest rooms with eco-friendly features like in-room water filtration systems, not only enhances the brand's image but also significantly contributes to its competitive edge in the market, attracting both new and returning customers. This extensive renovation not only rejuvenates the property but also caters to the growing demand of eco-conscious travellers. The renovation significantly enhanced its market position, attracting new customer demographics and bolstering its revenue by almost 40 per cent.

The introduction of 'M Social' brand in Singapore marked a revolutionary step in blending traditional hospitality with the demands of the digital era. "Everything

is voice automated. It's kind of very interesting," Tan noted, underscoring the potential of such innovations to redefine guest interactions. The absence of traditional telephones, replaced by voice-automated systems, caters to a tech-savvy generation while optimising operational efficiencies and reducing costs. Tan shared, "The transition to voice-automated systems within our rooms caters to a tech-savvy generation, optimising operational efficiencies while reducing costs."

The recently opened 418-room M Social Phuket hotel is one example. Each guest room feature Phuket's first AI voice-controlled assistant, allowing guests to seamlessly control their room environment, request services, and access information with just a voice command.

In alignment with global sustainability goals, MHR's commitment to achieving zero carbon emissions by 2030 highlights an ambitious yet vital journey towards environmental stewardship. This commitment is operationalised through initiatives such as the GSTC certification for green buildings and the implementation of sustainable practices across their global portfolio.

The strategic expansion into Saudi Arabia, driven by the appointment of a country managing director, signifies MHR's proactive approach to capturing the growth opportunities presented by the kingdom's growing travel and tourism sector.

As the global hotel company navigates the complexities of the current hospitality landscape, it does so with a clear vision and a steadfast commitment to excellence, sustainability, and innovation. Under the stewardship of leaders like Andy Tan, the brand is not just poised for growth; it is setting new benchmarks for what it means to be a leader in the global hospitality industry. The journey ahead is fraught with challenges, but for Millennium Hotels and Resorts, these are but stepping stones to greater achievements and a more sustainable, customer-centric future.





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# Resorts World Cruises revolutionises cruise partnerships with 'RW CruiseBuddy'

On February 7, 2024, Resorts World Cruises launched its groundbreaking initiative in India, the RW CruiseBuddy web portal, exclusively tailored for its esteemed travel partners. Naresh Rawal, Vice President, Sales and Marketing (India), Resorts World Cruises, provided additional details on the portal and highlighted the fly-cruise developments for 2024.

Prashant Nayak

## A Revolutionary Platform

Resorts World Cruises' 'RW Cruise Buddy' web portal ([rwcruisebuddy.com](http://rwcruisebuddy.com)) is an advanced technological platform exclusively designed for the Indian market. This innovative initiative empowers travel partners by granting them direct access to Resorts World Cruises' real-time inventory and cruise fare information.

At the core of the RW CruiseBuddy web portal lies a robust marketing resource centre, which serves as a valuable repository of promotional materials and resources. Boasting a wealth of eye-catching visuals and compelling content, this platform enables travel partners to effortlessly access a diverse range of assets. From enhancing marketing efforts to fostering increased customer engagement, RW CruiseBuddy ensures that partners in India can efficiently leverage these resources.

During the launch, Naresh announced, "With the RW CruiseBuddy web portal now live, we encourage and look forward to more travel partners using the portal features, which will better serve and support them. The introduction of the RW CruiseBuddy portal marks a significant milestone in our ongoing commitment to providing unparalleled support and resources to our travel partners. RW CruiseBuddy is set to redefine how we collaborate, ensuring mutual success in the dynamic world of cruise tourism."

## Salient Features

The RW CruiseBuddy web portal stands as an informative platform rather than a booking portal. Travel agents are still required to go through the PSAs for actual bookings. However, RW Cruise Buddy streamlines this process by granting agents direct access to both the PSAs and Resorts World Cruises' marketing content within a



▲ Naresh Rawal

unified platform. Naresh explains, "We cater to approximately 8,000 travel partners across diverse geographies. The significant challenge arose when they needed quotations—having to individually approach multiple PSAs, often six or seven of them, and then wait for each quotation to be returned. Now, with this portal, we have streamlined the process, making it seamless for our partners. This consolidation not only facilitates smoother communication with PSAs but also provides a convenient hub for accessing marketing materials providing faster response time, further enhancing the efficiency of the process."

In addition, a special reward point system is being introduced for travel partners via the RW CruiseBuddy web portal as a token of appreciation and to encourage higher usage among the trade. "The notable advantage lies in the incentive system accompanying each booking our partners make. These incentives are structured every quarter, allowing them to attain specific achievement tiers. As they reach these quarterly milestones, we reciprocate

their efforts by rewarding them in various ways," informs Naresh.

## The Fly-Cruise Success

Resorts World Cruises has witnessed remarkable growth in the fly-cruise sector in India over the past two operational years. In line with its commitment to fostering the development of the local fly-cruise industry, the company is dedicated to strategic investments in resources that are both right and, more importantly, highly effective. "From a fly-cruise perspective, India stands out as one of the largest contributors, particularly in the MICE and family travel segments. The recent announcement of our itineraries for 2025 has generated robust and promising booking activity. As we navigate through 2024, the outlook appears exceedingly positive at this juncture."

Resorts World Cruise Genting Dream is homeported in Singapore, and Resorts World One, in Hong Kong. On the Genting Dream, the new season itineraries from May 2024 until April 2025 offer more convenient timings for embarkation from Singapore three times a week to Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Phuket.

"Besides MICE, the fly-cruise sector from India has witnessed significant prominence in friends and family unions. Weddings emerged as a major highlight, capturing substantial attention. The celebration of birthdays and anniversaries experienced a consistent upward trajectory, evolving into grander affairs. The Genting Dream catered to all of it in 2023. However, despite the challenges that plagued the cruising industry during COVID-19, as being first to get affected and last to revive, cruising has not only made a comeback but has returned with tremendous vigour. As we delve further into 2024, the current trends suggest irreversible momentum for the travel industry, indicating a robust and sustained revival," says Naresh.





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# Transforms Indian traditional wellness for modern global market

Niraamaya Wellness Retreats provides a tranquil sanctuary for its fast-growing global community of wellness enthusiasts, with a portfolio of seven distinguished retreats and five private residences serenely nestled in peaceful locations across Kerala, Karnataka, Goa, Nagaland, and Seychelles. Allen Machado, CEO, Niraamaya Wellness Retreats, articulates the brand's vision, evolution, and expansion.

Prativa Vaidya Bhalla

## Transformative Wellness Journey

With wellness becoming the new buzzword in travel experiences, patrons are looking for comprehensive experiences to heal the mind, body, and soul. Niraamaya fulfils this very need by providing holistic wellness experiences while addressing the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being of its guests. The winning combination of sound traditional healing practices, modern medicine, and luxurious amenities attracts guests from all over the world. Allen states, “My mission is to expand Niraamaya's positive impact globally, touching lives and enriching well-being. Committed to delivering quality experiences, we invite guests to unwind, rejuvenate, and embark on a transformative journey of self-discovery within our dedicated environment. Beyond their stay, we empower guests for a lifelong wellness journey through education and support.”

## Signature Offerings

Niraamaya offers a comprehensive range of wellness programmes, seamlessly blending traditional and modern healing techniques, which include ayurvedic wellness programmes, spa experiences, yoga, meditation, personalised fitness regimens, and guided nature walks.



▲ Allen Machado

Personalisation is vital for crafting holistic programmes tailored to diverse requirements. The brand's signature offerings include the transformative Relax and Rejuvenation Program, mindful Culinary Escape, holistic Rejuvenation Retreats, bespoke Curated Escapes, and Niraamaya Spa Immersions.

## Niraamaya Ayurveda

Niraamaya Retreat promises a unique and authentic Ayurvedic wellness experience. With a heritage spanning over 5,000 years, Ayurveda embodies a holistic

approach to well-being, emphasising the interconnectedness of mind, body, and spirit. Allen emphasises, 'At Niraamaya Wellness Retreats, our commitment to Ayurveda honours this ancient wisdom. Drawing inspiration from sacred texts such as the Vedas and the contributions of pioneers like Charaka and Sushruta, we offer a comprehensive approach to well-being, ensuring a transformative experience for every guest.'

Niraamaya offers a holistic approach to wellness, combining luxurious hospitality with a range of Ayurvedic therapies and other wellness offerings such as yoga and meditation. Our Ayurvedic treatments are customised to each guest's unique needs and are administered by expert practitioners. We provide various wellness programs, including Yoga and Meditation, designed to help guests achieve optimal health and well-being. Guests can expect a truly personalised and luxurious experience, with customised Ayurvedic treatments tailored to their individual needs.

The scenic locations in Kerala are ideal for practicing Ayurveda at this resort. In today's modern corporate world, leaders and top executives need a stress-free break for mental health. The Niraamaya brand focuses on enhancing guests' mental health and leisure aspects through activities such as outdoor yoga at the seafront, group





Yoga at Niraamaya Retreats Vaidekam, Kannur



Spa at Niraamaya Retreats Samroha, Athirappilly



Niraamaya Retreats Backwaters &amp; Beyond, Kumarakom



Niraamaya Retreats Surya Samudra, Kovalam

meditation sessions at the waterfall, etc.

## Commitment to Excellence

In the post-pandemic era, Niraamaya observes a change in guest demographics. 65 percent of domestic travellers favour local experiences, while 35 per cent of international visitors are drawn to Niraamaya's distinctive fusion of traditional wellness and luxury. Niraamaya excels through a strategic mix of standardised procedures, thorough training, technology integration, and a dedication to continuous improvement. Daily operations navigate diverse challenges, ensuring consistent service quality tailored to each retreat's uniqueness. Stringent health protocols ensure guest safety and ongoing technology management, staff training, audits, and assessments. Open communication contributes to continuous improvement, ensuring an exceptional and transformative experience at each wellness retreat. Sustainable growth is achievable solely through the systematic integration of feedback. Allen emphasises, "We highly value the feedback from our guests. Each piece of feedback is meticulously analysed to identify areas of excellence and opportunities for enhancement. Through systematic reviews and regular feedback analysis, we gain valuable insights into the preferences and expectations of our guests. This information is then channelled into our staff training programmes, refining services and influencing future offerings."

## Going Local

Niraamaya strengthens community bonds by sourcing fresh local ingredients, supporting nearby artisans, and collaborating with regional wellness practitioners. Partnering with local guides and experts ensures authentic and immersive guest experiences while contributing to the sustainability of the local economy. Allen observes, "At Niraamaya, community engagement is

integral to our ethos, and we actively seek partnerships to enrich the overall experience for our guests. We prioritise social responsibility initiatives like supporting local charities, participating in environmental conservation efforts, and organising wellness programmes for the community. These initiatives strengthen our ties with the local population and contribute to the overall well-being of the community in which we operate."

Sustainability, authenticity, and local experiences have become important to travellers. There is a growing awareness and concern for the environment, prompting people to choose options that align with sustainable practices and minimise the impact on the planet. Authenticity and the opportunity to engage with local communities and cultures are highly valued, as travellers seek meaningful experiences. To support sustainable agriculture and the local economy, we work with nearby farmers and producers to source local ingredients. This allows us to provide guests with the freshest and most wholesome produce while minimising environmental impact. "We are committed to reducing waste, and to achieve this, we employ reusable containers and actively participate in composting our food waste," says the CEO.

## Building the Brand

Niraamaya's robust marketing strategy integrates traditional and digital channels to optimise its brand visibility. A user-friendly website and successful social media collaborations with travel influencers, wellness experts, and lifestyle publications boost its online presence. Participation in wellness and travel events fosters direct connections with target audiences. The brand is a member of esteemed hospitality platforms like Relais & Châteaux, popularising world-class travel experiences and ensuring high-end services. The brand has won many international awards, such as

Outlook Traveller Hospitality Awards, World Luxury Spa Awards, Global Spa Awards, M&A Today Global Awards 2021, and World Luxury Spa Awards, etc.

Niraamaya aims for global evolution and expansion by introducing novel offerings and expanding properties to deliver wellness experiences to a broader global clientele. Leveraging Allen Machado's extensive industry knowledge and collaborative leadership approach, he aspires to lead the company through higher growth, transforming it into a global wellness and luxury destination with a worldwide footprint. Allen explains, "Presently, we are actively exploring potential domestic locations, including Yercaud, Munnar, North Goa, and Tamil Nadu, for the upcoming financial year. Simultaneously, we are devising a global expansion strategy targeting key regions in Southeast Asia and Europe

With concerted efforts aimed at positioning Niraamaya Wellness Retreat as a distinguished global entity in the realms of wellness and luxury, Allen concludes, "In my capacity as the CEO, I am deeply committed to consistently recalibrating our market strategies, introducing innovative concepts, and integrating sustainable practices into our operations, thereby minimising our environmental footprint."





# Hospitality and Heritage

## form the Quintessence of Qatari Luxury

Travelling through Qatar unfolds luxury and innovation at every step. From Qatar Airways Business Class and the elegance of Waldorf Astoria Doha Lusail to a visit to Our Habitas Ras Abrouq and experiencing one of the most anticipated sports finales, the journey highlights a blend of culture and modernity, marking it as a promising destination for luxury seekers.

Vartik Sethi

### Qatar Airways Business Class

The journey to Qatar set a high standard for luxury travel. Qatar Airways, renowned for its exceptional business-class service, provided an experience beyond mere comfort. The airline's business class featured reclining seats that transformed into beds, ensuring restful sleep. The culinary offerings were a highlight, with a three-course meal tantalising the taste buds, offering a preview of the country's rich culinary landscape. The hospitable crew, coupled with state-of-the-art infotainment systems, ensured every moment in the air was as enjoyable as it was comfortable. Upon landing, the travellers were whisked away to the business class lounge for a swift immigration process, a testament to the efficiency and hospitality that Qatar is known for.

### Waldorf Astoria Doha Lusail

The transfer from the airport to the Waldorf Astoria Doha Lusail marked the beginning of the luxury that would define this trip. Located on the only

private beach in Lusail, the hotel is a modern oasis offering unparalleled comfort and luxury. With resort-style amenities such as family-friendly pools, a waterpark, cabanas, and clubs for kids and teenagers, the Waldorf Astoria caters to every guest's needs. The property's modern, luxurious design sets a benchmark for high-end accommodation, perfectly representing Qatar's commitment to luxury tourism.

The hotel's dining experience sets a high bar for culinary excellence, offering an array of dishes catering to diverse palates. The wide selection, featuring international and local cuisine, ensured a delightful start to the day, underscoring the attention to detail and quality that is a hallmark of Qatari hospitality. SushiSamba delights guests with a unique fusion of Japanese, Brazilian, and Peruvian cuisines, offering an open kitchen and sushi counter for an immersive dining experience. Scarpetta brings Italian classics into the modern era, creating memorable food and beverage experiences with a balance of authenticity and innovation. Meanwhile, ByWater pays homage to the New Orleans French Quarter with its elegant brasserie, offering varied meal experiences that capture the essence of this vibrant cultural melting pot.







Place Vendôme

Place Vendôme is a multi-billion Qatari Riyal project in Lusail City and is a testament to the entrepreneurship, vision, and energy of Qatari commitment to national development. The mall features up to 560 retail outlets, including a luxurious wing dedicated to top designer labels and a central entertainment component that ensures constant attractions.

The Parisian-inspired architecture of Place Vendôme, reminiscent of the famous Rue de la Paix, exudes luxury and extravagance with a touch of cultural and artistic flair. The presence of a canal running directly from the sea creates a stunning open plaza experience, with cafés and restaurants overlooking the water. Strategically located at the heart of Lusail, Place Vendôme has quickly acclaimed a position of central attraction for regional and international visitors, offering a diverse mix of entertainment and retail options.

Our Habitas Ras Abrouq

The second day concluded with a visit to Our Habitas Ras Abrouq, a luxury resort located at the edge of the UNESCO-protected Al-Reem Biosphere Reserve. This visit coupled with a group meditation session at the property offered a glimpse into Qatar’s ability to blend luxury with nature and culture. Our Habitas Ras Abrouq is more than a resort; it is a sanctuary designed for connection, creativity, and adventure. With activities ranging from kayaking and paddleboarding to sunrise yoga and starlit sound ceremonies, the resort encapsulates the essence of transformative travel. The presence of resident artists and dynamic cultural programming further enriches the experience, allowing guests to engage deeply with Qatar’s artistic and cultural heritage.



The Bistro by B12 Doha and Doha Sands

The third day commenced with a luncheon at The Bistro by B12 Doha, where Philip Dickinson, who leads International Markets and MICE at Qatar Tourism, extended a warm welcome to the guests. The meal provided an excellent opportunity for all the journalists to engage in discussions about Qatar's tourism strategies and development, fostering a deeper understanding of the country's vision.

The afternoon was dedicated to experiencing the vibrancy of Doha Sands, the season's most talked-about beach destination. Doha Sands epitomises the carefree beach lifestyle with its combination of sand, sea, lights, and music. It is a place where visitors can unwind on the beach, enjoy an array of food and beverage options through the grab-and-go service, and soak in the live entertainment.

AFC Asian Cup Final at Lusail Stadium

The journey's highlight was the AFC Asian Cup final game held at Lusail Stadium, featuring hosts Qatar against Jordan. The match, a thrilling showcase of football at its best, attracted 86,492 spectators, highlighting the country's capacity to host major international sports events. Qatar's victory over Jordan with a score of 3-1, thanks to Akram Afif's hat-trick of penalties, was not just a win on the field but a testament to the nation's growing prominence in the global sports arena. Lusail Stadium, a marvel of modern architecture and design, provided the perfect backdrop for this sporting spectacle, offering a glimpse into the future of sports tourism in Qatar.



Doha Jewellery and Watches Exhibition 2024

The final day began with a tour of Qatar’s major tourist spots, including Pearl Qatar, Mina District, the local market, and a visit to the Doha Jewellery and Watches Exhibition (DJWE) 2024, hosted at the Doha Exhibition and Convention Centre (DECC). As the largest event of its kind in the region, the exhibition showcased an impressive array of high-end jewellery and watch brands, attracting both business and consumer attendees.

Qatar International Food Festival and Dinner in the Sky

The evening brought an experience that was nothing short of breathtaking. The Qatar International Food Festival (QIFF), known for celebrating culinary diversity and innovation, served as the perfect precursor to an extraordinary dining adventure - Dinner in the Sky, Qatar. This unique dining experience, suspended mid-air by a crane, offered guests not just a meal but an exhilarating adventure. The ambiance, the rush of emotions, and the impeccable service combined to create an unforgettable atmosphere. Whether it was a romantic setting for couples, a celebration of a special occasion, or a novel night out with friends, Dinner in the Sky promised and delivered a memorable experience, blending gourmet dining with a spectacular experience.







# IGLTA BRINGS THE MESSAGE OF INCLUSIVITY AND LGBTQ RIGHTS TO INDIA

The International LGBTQ+ Travel Association (IGLTA) hosted its 2nd symposium in Delhi on February 1, 2024. LoAnn Halden, Vice President, Communications, IGLTA, and Thomas ‘TJ’ Chernick, Foundation Partnership Engagement Director, IGLTA Foundation, shared their insights on creating an all-inclusive world where safe travel is accessible to everyone, irrespective of gender identity or sexual orientation. They emphasised the necessity for extensive research, education, and strategic efforts to foster global equality.

Prativa Vaidya Bhalla

Even as travel becomes increasingly accessible, the LGBTQ+ community continues to encounter hurdles on their journeys. However, organisations like the International LGBTQ+ Travel Association (IGLTA) are actively working to bridge this gap. By creating safe environments and advocating for LGBTQ+ rights worldwide, IGLTA aims to ensure freedom of travel and the opportunity to experience diverse cultures without fear or prejudice.

LoAnn states, “IGLTA is a global member-based association connecting LGBTQ+ welcoming tourism businesses to ensure safe experiences for LGBTQ+ travellers. We offer free travel resources and promote equality and safety worldwide. We have members in over 80 countries, including destinations, accommodations, transport, and service providers.” The IGLTA Accredited Programme serves as the gold standard, ensuring that properties and organisations meet comprehensive criteria to promote equality and safety for LGBTQ+ travellers.

Offering his viewpoint, TJ elaborates, “As IGLTA’s philanthropic arm, the IGLTA Foundation helps to execute its mission



▲ LoAnn Halden

through three core pillars of leadership, research, and education. This encompasses fellowships, training, and scholarships to ensure inclusion. The foundation executes original research like industry trend surveys and travel guides to help the travel trade and individuals make smart decisions regarding LGBTQ+ inclusive travel and responsible tourism.” The foundation’s free resources,



▲ Thomas ‘TJ’ Chernick

like travel safety, country guides, and HIV travel guides, aim to inform travellers about safety and security challenges and are available for both trade and individual consumers.

## Challenges and Redressal

When considering travel, especially from the



perspective of transgender travellers, safety concerns take precedence. These concerns include navigating security screenings and accessing gender-neutral spaces, among many others. Additionally, travel is subject to the laws of the destination country, which often vary significantly from one place to another. LoAnn explains, "We believe that travel and tourism can be a bridge, open dialogue, and create change. So, by creating a network through tourism and creating safe spaces for LGBTQ travellers, it brings us in contact with local communities and allows us to have dialogue that can break down barriers."

The most important advice LoAnn imparts to prospective LGBTQ travellers is to do their homework. She mentions, "I recommend accessing the free resources available for travellers on [iglta.org](http://iglta.org). But I think doing your homework, whether through LGBTQ media or content creators, is imperative, as the laws of the destination often shift and change. It is crucial to understand the laws and culture of the country that you are visiting."

### Japan's Leading Example

To offer a positive perspective, LoAnn commends Japan for its proactive engagement. "For the first time in IGLTA's 40-year history, we are taking our annual global convention to Osaka, Japan, in October this year. This is an example of a country that does not have full marriage equality yet, but they have made a concentrated effort to learn. Participating in our conventions since 2011, they have shown increasing engagement at the tourism board level. Recently, we met with JNTO, the Osaka and Tokyo tourism offices, and there is remarkable excitement about having these conversations in Japan." The Osaka event is a global gathering of travel professionals, industry leaders, tour guides, and agents from diverse backgrounds, offering industry-leading speeches, educational sessions, and networking to advance inclusivity and excellence in travel.

### The India Chapter

The India Symposium in Delhi introduced the Emerging Destinations and Communities programme, focusing on areas lacking LGBTQ+ infrastructure or governmental protections. TJ explains, "We help the local travel trade to be more connected, learn, help, and thrive to create a larger, more inclusive network of LGBTQ+ travel professionals. A quick shout out to our incredible chair of the India Initiative, Keshav Suri, Executive Director of The LaLiT Hotels, for being an incredible supporter of the IGLTA Foundation."

The IGLTA Accredited Programme involves fulfilling eight inclusion criteria, each supported by documentation showing



active support for LGBTQ travellers. Initially designed for hotels and accommodations, the aim is to broaden its scope to encompass tour guides, operators, and travel agents. This network of safe spaces enables travellers to explore destinations confidently, even unfamiliar ones. While LGBTQ travel is traditionally focused on major cities like New York City, Madrid, or Berlin, smaller regional destinations are increasingly gaining prominence in travel itineraries.

The India symposium has shed light on evolving destinations, with India becoming a top choice. The IGLTA accreditation of all Lalit properties highlights its strong commitment to inclusivity, which resonates with travellers, especially in the post-COVID era where experiential travel is prioritised. Plans for expansion to other cities are underway, with Mumbai likely to be the next destination on the agenda.

Highlighting the evolution of LGBTQ travel and marking its presence in India, LoAnn emphasises, "When I joined IGLTA in 2009, our global partners were mostly small community-based organisations. Now, our partners include major global corporate brands like Disney Destinations, Marriott International, Hilton, Hyatt, and Booking.com. These are big

corporations heavily investing in supporting diversity, equity, inclusion, and LGBTQ+ travel." She further adds, "Our initial intention in India was to host an IGLTA symposium, but it has since evolved into a vital source market. Our India initiative has grown, with a membership development manager and two interns now based in Delhi. We collaborate closely with local businesses to ensure our narrative aligns with the country's context."

### Economic Opportunity

On a concluding note, TJ says, "The LGBTQ + community is an incredible economic demographic. As the travel and tourism industry prioritises diversity and inclusion, economic growth naturally follows. Thus, inclusion not only fosters financial profit but also has far-reaching positive impacts on the world." The thriving financial success of the travel industry has far-reaching positive impacts on the world. As travel becomes more accessible, it is heartening to see inclusivity becoming a fundamental part of the journey, propelling people towards a more equal world.







# Sharjah Unplugged

## Cityscapes, Culture, and Coastal Marvels Await

Sharjah, the third-largest of the seven Emirates of the United Arab Emirates in area, is the only Emirate with access to both the Arabian Gulf Coast and the Gulf of Oman. Visitors can enjoy their holiday exploring its many heritage sites and museums, admiring its majestic mosques, discovering traditional souks, or visiting modern shopping malls. They can experience the natural beauty of the desert, mountains, mangroves, and sea rolled into one destination.

Gurjit Singh Ahuja

For those seeking a seamless connection between two vibrant worlds, Sharjah is merely a three-hour and thirty-minute flight away from India's capital, New Delhi. The accessibility is further enhanced by well-established direct flight connections from various cities across India to the well-connected Sharjah International Airport. This geographical closeness invites travellers to unlock the treasures of Sharjah's cultural, historical, and natural wonders with utmost convenience.

### Sharjah City Vibes

For the uninitiated, Sharjah can be divided into three broad regions of interest: Sharjah City, the Central Region, and the East Coast, each concealing its own secrets and wonders waiting to be explored and unfurled. In contrast to its buzzing neighbours, Sharjah offers a relatively calm and relaxed pace of life, a perfect match for visitors to unwind and explore as they wish. The original city centre of Sharjah, which was once the hub of its merchant trade, has been transformed into a vibrant heritage and arts district. A day can be well spent exploring the art spaces and museums housed in its old, traditional buildings.

### Cityscape, Culture, and Coastal Wonders

Here in the heart of Sharjah, heritage manor houses have been

transformed into The Chedi Al Bait, Sharjah, a 65-key Emirati-themed luxury five-star hotel and resort. The unique collection, now called The Chedi Al Bait, was once occupied by eminent local families, and it exhibits the rich local cultural heritage of the bygone era to date seamlessly blended with modern sensibilities.

The heart of Sharjah district is situated just off the Corniche and 20 minutes from





Sharjah International Airport. The district hosts multiple annual events. Also located close by is the Al Majaz Waterfront, a perfect family destination. This waterside address features a mini-golf, a splash park, a mini-train, and several attractions suitable for children. Al Majaz Waterfront has a host of restaurants to choose from. The Sharjah fountain light and sound display is a hot attraction for everyone here.

The “Rain Room” in Sharjah is another unique installation that offers an awe-inspiring experience for visitors. This interactive installation is centred around enveloping a person in water without getting them wet. The Rain Room uses sensors to pause the falling water wherever it senses motion. It offers an unparalleled experience and is a must-do on Sharjah’s visitor list. A visit here can be clubbed with a visit to the Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization, the Corniche, and a dining experience at one of the many restaurants nearby.

Sharjah, like its neighbours, was once renowned for the pearl trade; pearl divers fetched wonders from the depths of its surrounding seas, and its pearls were prized the world over. Ancient trade links existed with India, a very big market for the prized pearls from this region. Ancient caravan routes passed through Sharjah’s Central region to trade goods like dates and pearls.

Luxurious Desert Escapes

An hour's drive from Sharjah city will get you to the Emirate’s central region and its most important archaeological site, Mleiha. You can delve into pre-Islamic history or go trekking, dune bashing, or quad biking through the open desert and mighty sand dunes at Al Badayer and Mleiha. Stargazing is a great experience in the desert camps at Mleiha, where you can enjoy Arabic coffee with barbeque dinner and camp the night under the stars.

A great option to indulge in and spend

some vacation time at Al Badayer is the magnificent “Al Badayer Retreat by Sharjah Collection.” An ultra-luxury desert oasis experience inspired by a caravanserai heritage nestled among dunes, its luxurious private tents with private pools are perfect for couples and families to enjoy enchanting desert sunrises and sunsets. The resort hosts a spa, a family pool, and an amphitheatre and offers bespoke dining.

Sharjah Safari: A Conservation Oasis

An hour's drive from the heart of Sharjah lies the star attraction of “Sharjah Safari,” a great family destination located within the confines of 1824 hectares of protected land that not only shares a high degree of similarity in fauna, landscape, and topography with Africa but also seamlessly blends it in with the surrounding area.

Sharjah Safari is not just a great family recreational and educational initiative to bring you closer to wildlife and experience them live and thrive in the vast protected expanse, but a great effort to conserve and protect locally extinct or highly endangered species. The scimitar-horned oryx, now extinct in the wild, along with the endangered addax, also called the white antelope or the screw-horned antelope, can be seen during the safari, along with others like the lion, white rhino, black rhino, zebra, giraffe, kudu, waterbuck, and elephants.

An Ecotourism Odyssey at Kalba

Kalba, located on the east coast, offers great ecotourism opportunities where you can go wildlife spotting, trekking, kayaking, and scuba diving. Located in the Khor Kalba nature reserve, the Kalba Bird of Prey Centre has free-flying demonstrations, along with aviaries housing falcons, eagles, buzzards, vultures, and owls. It is a great opportunity to understand the different species, like the long-legged buzzard, Bonelli’s eagle, greater spotted eagle, lappet-faced vulture, and UAE’s national bird, the falcon.

The Khor Kalba Mangrove Centre provides an opportunity to experience and explore the unique ecological diversity within its mangrove forest. Located in the middle of an ancient stand of mangroves, visitors can see the oldest mangrove forest in the Emirates, with trees up to eight

metres tall. This is also a great opportunity to watch many beach birds, such as the rare Arabian collared kingfisher, marine life such as green turtles, and many varieties of fish, crabs, and microorganisms.

The Kalba Waterfront Mall, located on the banks of a calm lake surrounded by mangroves, has many outdoor stalls, indoor shops, several restaurants, and a children's play area. Chartering a luxury boat for a private lake ride and enjoying the waterfront views of the city as you sail by creates a memorable experience. The crowning glory of a visit to Kalba is your stay at the Kingfisher Retreat, located close to the mangroves with a great view of the sea and private beach access. Well-appointed luxury tents with private pools and pampering by the resort’s chefs to delectable meals and world-class dining are sure to make your Sharjah visit a memorable one.







# Exploring the *Spiritual* Significance of Varanasi

Varanasi stands as an embodiment of spiritual resonance, weaving together threads of ancient wisdom, divine mysticism, and timeless rituals. Varanasi, the holiest of the seven sacred cities in Hinduism also known as Kashi or Banaras, transcends the boundaries of time, inviting seekers from every corner of the globe to immerse themselves in its profound spiritual ambiance. Varanasi, in the year 2023 emerged as a significant spiritual tourist hub. According to the tourism department records, between January and September 2023, Varanasi was explored by 84,204,814 visitors, including 84,071,726 Indian tourists and 133,088 foreigners making India the capital of spiritual tourism in the world.

Dr. Niralee Shah

Varanasi, or Banaras (also known as Kashi), is one of the oldest living cities in the world. Varanasi's prominence in Hindu mythology is virtually unrevealed. Mark Twain, the English author and literature, who was captivated by the sanctity of Banaras, when visiting the place said, "Banaras is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend,

and looks twice as old as all them put together". The name "Varanasi" is derived from the confluence of two rivers, Varuna and Asi, which flow into the Ganges here.

Varanasi's history spans millennia, intertwining with the rich tapestry of Indian mythology and spirituality. According to Hindu tradition, Lord Shiva, the cosmic deity of destruction and transformation, is said to have established Varanasi as his

abode, making it a sacred site revered by millions. It is believed that a visit to Varanasi and a dip in the holy waters of the Ganges washes away one's sins and facilitates liberation from the cycle of birth and death, known as moksha.

## The Ghats of Varanasi

The Ghats of Varanasi, nestled along the banks of the sacred River Ganges,



stand as a timeless testament to the spiritual and cultural essence of India. Each ghat carries its own significance, offering devotees and pilgrims a unique experience of spiritual elevation. Every ghat is a testament to the eternal dance between life and death. The ghats of Varanasi are not just physical structures; they manifest the city's spiritual soul.

Amidst the vibrant chaos of Varanasi, Dashashwamedh Ghat stands as a beacon of spiritual fervour. The daily Ganga Aarti ignites the soul with mesmerising chants, symbolising the cosmic dance of creation and destruction. Assi Ghat beckons pilgrims and sages to its serene banks for enlightenment and inner reflection. In the heart of Varanasi's spiritual tapestry lies Manikarnika Ghat, where funeral pyres burn incessantly, serving as a potent catalyst for contemplating life's ephemeral nature. Panchganga Ghat embodies the convergence of diverse spiritual energies, where pilgrims seek absolution in purifying waters. Harishchandra Ghat, named after the legendary king, inspires contemplation on impermanence. Tulsi Ghat, enveloped in devotion and poetry, resonates with the divine melody. Scindia Ghat's regal architecture invites pilgrims to partake in ancient rituals, forging a timeless connection between the earthly and the divine.

### The Festivals of Varanasi

Varanasi, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, pulsates with a myriad of festivals throughout the year, each imbued with rich cultural and spiritual significance. The most vibrant and colourful festival is Holi in Varanasi paints the ancient city with vibrant hues of joy, camaraderie, and spiritual significance, as the festival approaches, anticipation fills the air, and the streets bustle with excitement as people prepare for the grand celebration. The most iconic among them is undoubtedly Dev Deepawali, celebrated on the auspicious occasion of Kartik Purnima, where the entire city is adorned with thousands of

earthen lamps, illuminating the ghats and creating a surreal spectacle along the banks of the Ganges. Another prominent festival is Mahashivaratri, honouring Lord Shiva, during which devotees flock to the temples for prayers and rituals, culminating in colourful processions through the city streets. Additionally, the vibrant celebrations of Durga Puja and Diwali infuse the air with fervour and joy, reflecting the deep-rooted traditions and religious fervency of Varanasi's inhabitants, making it a captivating destination for spiritual seekers and cultural enthusiasts alike.

### Temples of Varanasi

Varanasi, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, is renowned for its spiritual significance and numerous temples. Among its famous temples, the Kashi Vishwanath Temple stands as a testament to devotion, dedicated to Lord Shiva. Its towering spire dominates the skyline, drawing countless pilgrims who seek blessings and spiritual solace. The Sankat Mochan Hanuman Temple, another prominent site, reverberates with the chants of devotees, honouring Lord Hanuman, the epitome of strength and devotion in Hindu mythology. The Tulsi Manas Temple, constructed with elegant white marble, is celebrated for its exquisite architecture and for being the site where the Hindu epic Ramayana was composed. These temples, steeped in history and tradition, continue to be revered as sacred sanctuaries in the heart of Varanasi, embodying the city's timeless spiritual allure.

### The Soulful Rhythm of Life

Varanasi pulsates with a vibrant energy that is both palpable and profound. From the chanting of mantras at dawn to the meditative chants of evening prayers, every moment in Varanasi resonates with the rhythm of life's eternal dance. Amidst the cacophony of sounds and the kaleidoscope of colours, one finds a profound sense of stillness, a silent witness to the ebb and flow of existence itself.



### The Spiritual Heart of India

Varanasi is revered as a place where the physical and spiritual worlds intersect, where the cycle of birth and death is believed to be broken, and where souls attain liberation (moksha) from the material realm. Its sacred ghats along the Ganges River serve as sites for various rituals, including cremation ceremonies, symbolising the transient nature of life and the ultimate goal of spiritual transcendence. Pilgrims flock to Varanasi seeking spiritual purification, enlightenment, and the blessings of the divine, making it a timeless center of devotion and profound spiritual significance.



#### About the Author:

Dr. Niraalee Shah is the Managing Director of Travel Design. She is also the State Convenor of Maharashtra for the Responsible Tourism Society of India.







# Wild Encounters

## Down Under

New Zealand, nestled in the southwestern Pacific Ocean, stands as a testament to the awe-inspiring beauty and biodiversity in the lap of Mother Nature. This island nation boasts diverse landscapes, each teeming with its own distinct flora and fauna. From rugged coastlines sculpted by the relentless Tasman Sea to ancient forests echoing tales of centuries past, New Zealand's natural wonders never fail to captivate the hearts of wildlife enthusiasts.

Team TTJ

**N**ew Zealand's diverse landscapes and rich biodiversity create an unparalleled playground for wildlife enthusiasts. Whether you are captivated by the enchanting glowworms of Waitomo, the marine marvels of Kaikoura, the untamed beauty of the Subantarctic Islands, the unique wildlife of Stewart Island, or the immersive experience of the Kepler Track, each destination offers a unique and unforgettable encounter with nature. Embark on a journey through New Zealand's natural wonders, and let the captivating wildlife leave an indelible mark on your soul, forever connecting you to the awe-inspiring beauty of this island paradise.

## Must-try activities for wildlife enthusiasts in New Zealand

### Marvel Through the Magical Glowworms at Waitomo Caves

Immerse yourself in the enchanting world that has evolved over 30 million years, and be captivated by the mesmerising light display crafted by Mother Nature. Stroll through the cave on foot and then embark on a serene boat journey, gliding silently through the celestial marvel of the Glowworm Grotto. Step into a peaceful atmosphere surrounded by a constellation of miniature

living lights. Found exclusively in New Zealand, the glowworm (*Arachnocampa Luminosa*) transforms the Waitomo Glowworm Caves into an indispensable destination. Witness the radiance emitted by thousands of these tiny beings as they illuminate an underground realm, creating an unforgettable and otherworldly experience.

### Encounter Marine Life in Kaikoura

Kaikoura, located on the South Island's east coast, is celebrated for its thriving marine ecosystem. In this coastal haven, wildlife enthusiasts have the opportunity to embark on whale-watching tours, providing an awe-inspiring experience of witnessing majestic sperm whales. Additionally, visitors can encounter the playful dusky dolphins, New Zealand fur seals, and a variety of seabirds that contribute to the region's rich biodiversity. The nutrient-rich waters off Kaikoura's coast sustain a diverse array of marine life, solidifying its status as an essential destination for those intrigued by the wonders of oceanic wildlife.







### Explore the Subantarctic Islands

Embarking on the ultimate wildlife adventure, contemplate exploring the Subantarctic Islands of New Zealand. These remote and uninhabited jewels, encompassing the Auckland Islands, Campbell Island, and the Snares, hold the prestigious designation of UNESCO World Heritage Sites, underscoring their remarkable biodiversity. Visitors are privileged to observe extensive colonies of seabirds, featuring the majestic albatrosses and petrels, alongside endemic land birds and marine mammals, including fur seals and sea lions. Expeditions to the Subantarctic Islands typically set sail from Invercargill or Dunedin, presenting a rare and once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to delve into these untouched and pristine wilderness areas.

### Discover the Unique Wildlife of Stewart Island

Stewart Island, nestled off the southern tip of the South Island, stands as an undiscovered haven for wildlife enthusiasts. Boasting more than 85 per cent of its expanse designated as Rakiura National Park, this island offers an abundance of hiking trails, providing ample opportunities to encounter native wildlife in its natural habitat. On guided night tours, visitors have the unique chance to spot the iconic kiwi bird, known for its elusive nature. Additionally, the island's secluded beaches



are home to colonies of New Zealand fur seals, creating a captivating spectacle for those exploring the coastline. Amidst the untouched wilderness and tranquil landscapes, native birds like the Stewart Island robin and kaka further enhance the allure of this hidden gem. Stewart Island, with its pristine environment and diverse wildlife encounters, emerges as an essential destination for those who hold a deep appreciation for the wonders of nature.

### Hike the Kepler Track in Fiordland

The Kepler Track, one of New Zealand's Great Walks, offers wildlife enthusiasts the opportunity to immerse themselves in the breathtaking landscapes of Fiordland National Park. This multi-day hiking trail traverses through ancient beech forests, alpine meadows, and pristine lakes, providing ample opportunities to observe native birds and other wildlife. Along this enhanced trail, hikers may encounter the vibrant kea parrots, the playful fantails, and the intriguing native bats known as long-tailed bats. The Kepler Track, now offering an even more expansive adventure, remains the quintessential choice for those seeking heightened thrills and unforgettable wildlife encounters amidst the unparalleled wilderness of Fiordland National Park.







# Unearthing Hidden Wonders of NORTHERN THAILAND

Looking for experiences in Thailand away from the bustling tourist crowds? The uncharted provinces of Northern Thailand offer a unique and authentic experience that captures the region's rich culture, stunning landscapes, and untouched beauty. Notably, the growing affinity of Indian travellers towards experiential, eco-conscious, and culturally enriching exploration aligns perfectly with Northern Thailand's hidden gems and many undiscovered tourism offerings.

Team TTJ

The north of Thailand borders Myanmar and Laos, a mountainous region influenced by the rich cultures of Lanna, Shan, Karen, and various indigenous ethnic groups that consistently capture the hearts of travellers. The Golden Triangle, where Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos converge, has a slightly cooler climate than the rest of the country and offers opportunities to indulge in unique pleasures like savouring real coffee, exploring tea plantations, visiting vineyards, and getting delighted by the sweetness of locally grown strawberries. Northern Thailand offers a refreshing blend of culture and cool mountain escapes that set it apart from other destinations in the country.

## Udon Thani Where Nature, History, and Gastronomy Converge

Situated in the northeastern region of Thailand, Udon Thani captivates visitors with its rustic ambience, surrounded by lush forests, meandering rivers, picturesque paddy fields, and rolling hills with vibrant attractions that combine

natural wonders with historical charm. The Phu Foi Lom Eco-Park and Red Lotus Lake showcase the region's breathtaking natural beauty, while Phu Phra Bat Historical Park and Ban Chiang Museum offer insights into its rich history. The unadulterated atmosphere creates an excellent backdrop for outdoor activities

like glamping, rafting, trekking, and safari. The province is renowned for its textile and silk production, allowing travellers to acquire handcrafted artefacts at the local night markets. For a delightful culinary experience, don't miss the opportunity to savour authentic Isaan food at the highly acclaimed restaurant, Samuay and Sons.



Red Lotus Lake





Wat Chaloem Phra Kiat, Lampang

Lampang

Travel Through Time

Lampang, a charming province in northern Thailand, exudes a nostalgic atmosphere that takes visitors back in time. The city is adorned with ancient architectural gems, including Kad Kong Ta, an old commercial area along the Wang River, the historic Ratsadaphisek Bridge, and the renowned Khun Than Tunnel, considered the longest railway tunnel in Thailand. One unique aspect of the province is its continued use of horse-drawn carriages as a means of transportation, adding to its retro charm. Tourists can explore Lampang by cycling or taking a ride on the Tha Ma O Tram, which passes through major tourist attractions, including Pratu Pong Temple, Pong Sanuk Temple, Ku Chao Ya Suta, Ban Sao Nak, and Baan Louise. Just outside the main city, cultural treasures await, such as the ancient Wat Phra That Lampang Luang, the intricately constructed Wat Phra That Doi Phra Shan, showcasing Lanna artistry, and Wat Chaloem Phra Kiat, featuring a white pagoda atop a hill and King Mongkut's monument. Travellers can also try rejuvenating activities like soaking in the Chae Son Hot Spring, a tour of the Mae Moh Mine, rafting at Kiew Lom Dam, and dipping in the emerald crystal pools of Phu Khieo.

Sukhothai

Capital of the First Kingdom of Siam

The historic Sukhothai, situated in the lower northern region of Thailand, narrates the legendary tale of the 13th-century Thai Kingdom, accredited with the invention and development of many unique identifying characteristics of Siamese (Thai) culture. Its ancient temples, monasteries, parks, stupas, and royal palaces stand as timeless monuments, which earned it the title of



Sukhothai

UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1999. Besides its historic charm, Sukhothai's expansive greenery and scenic landscape make it an ideal destination for camping and trekking. The modern city, located just 12 km from the historical park, has buzzing night markets where travellers can shop for locally crafted accessories while savouring delicious street food. For a unique experience, visit the Boon Lott Elephant Sanctuary to witness majestic Thai elephants graze safely.

Embark on a journey through time,

striking landscapes, and tranquil rivers in the north of Thailand for an unforgettable and authentic escape from the well-trodden tourist paths.

Mae Hong Son

Serenity in the Hills

Northwest bound, near the Thailand-Myanmar border, lies Mae Hong Son, Thailand's most verdant province, defined by undulating mountain ranges, pristine lakes and rivers, breezy meadows, and enchanting caves. Populated by hospitable tribes, this province is home to Ban Rak Thai, Thailand's most beautiful village, set in a valley surrounded by hills and aromatic tea plantations on the edge of a reservoir. The Tham Pla National Park is famed for its fish cave. The local folklore suggests that the cave was made to protect the holy fish, as directed by a statue of a Hindu rishi called Nara. The scenic Pai River is an excellent spot for cruising and rafting, while Pang Ung and Phu Pha Mok offer top-notch views of the surrounding pine forests that provide a great ambience for camping. An adventurous way to explore the region is by taking a trip along the Mae Hong Son Loop, which connects with Chaing Mai.



Enchanting caves of Mae Hong Son





# Safari Trails paves way for transformative East African travel experiences

In exploration with Kenya-based Safari Trails, TTJ delves into the DMC's unique offerings that set them apart in the dynamic landscape of East African travel. Rajay Thethy, CEO, Safari Trails, guides us through a narrative where the company prides itself in crafting transformative and authentic travel experiences while embracing the untamed beauty of the wild.

Prashant Nayak

**D**espite the challenges posed by the global situation in 2023, Safari Trails remains committed to delivering unparalleled safari experiences to its clients. Notably, the Indian market emerged as a cornerstone, contributing 55 per cent to their overall business. In 2024, Safari Trails is poised to strengthen this positioning through strategic collaboration with their Indian representation partner, BRANDit. Together, they look forward to tailoring experiences that appeal to the discerning Indian traveller, emphasising authenticity over mere bucket list quests.

## Differentiators that Define

Safari Trails stands out due to three main factors: their local expertise, personalised service, and commitment to sustainability. "We excel at creating custom itineraries tailored to each client's preferences, ensuring unforgettable experiences. Our extensive network of reliable partners and exclusive access to pristine wildlife areas further differentiate us. Additionally, we are expanding into the Indian market with Ugandan packages, leveraging the new direct flights from Uganda Airlines. We focus on unique experiences like the Great Apes, offering opportunities to observe gorillas and chimpanzees in their natural habitats at Queen Elizabeth National Park. This diverse offering also includes attractions like flamingos and tree-climbing lions, along with experiences at Murchison Falls," informs Rajay.

## Tailored Experiences

Safari Trails offers a plethora of iconic

and off-the-beaten-path experiences in Kenya. From exciting game drives in iconic parks like Maasai Mara to immersive cultural encounters with tribes like the Maasai and Samburu, they showcase Kenya's rich heritage and landscapes. Rajay emphasises, "What sets us apart is our own fleet of vehicles, including mini buses and 4x4s, specifically designed for rugged terrain, ensuring optimal visibility and comfort for our clients. We prioritise our clients' experiences, offering unlimited game drives while instructing our drivers to go the extra mile to maximise wildlife sightings. We believe the key to creating a superb holiday is absolute attention to detail, expert knowledge, and a flair for the innovative and the unusual."

With recognition of the growing interest among Indian travellers in exploring East Africa's natural wonders and cultural heritage, the Indian market presents immense significance for Safari Trails. Kenya's popularity among Indian tourists can be attributed to its close cultural ties, ease of accessibility, and the allure of iconic wildlife encounters, including the Great Migration. Their tailored offerings cater to the specific preferences and requirements of Indian travellers, ensuring a seamless and enriching experience. Kenya and Tanzania, which fall into the super luxury category, have witnessed a surge in demand. Earlier, Indian travellers spent USD 5,000–10,000 for trips to Kenya and Tanzania. Now, their average spending has increased to USD 20,000–30,000. However, nowadays, Indian travellers seek more authentic African experiences through cultural immersion. East Africa has established itself as a destination of choice for travellers looking

for something special in a holiday, and Safari Trails ensures the East Africa experience is truly a memorable one.

## Beyond Metropolis

Safari Trails' marketing strategy for India highlights showcasing the diversity and authenticity of East African experiences, personalised to suit the preferences of Indian travellers. Rajay further expresses, "Whether it is a family adventure or a romantic honeymoon, our itineraries cater to a range of interests. While Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Ahmedabad have been our primary markets, we are expanding our focus to Tier-II cities like Nagpur, Raipur, Chandigarh, and Sambhaji Nagar. Recognising the potential in these markets, we are organising roadshows later this year to engage with them."

## Expansion Plans

Safari Trails plans to grow its presence in Tanzania by expanding its office and establishing fully operational offices in Uganda and Rwanda. Additionally, they aim to set up an office in Mumbai to provide immediate support to our agents and offer destination training. Furthermore, the company is considering investing in luxury camps in Kenya and Tanzania to complement its current offerings. They also intend to continue investing in specialised open-sided photographic tourist vehicles stationed in various parks across Kenya. Rajay concludes, "We are optimistic about 2024, given the improved air connectivity, swift visa issuance, availability of Indian cuisine, and warm hospitality of Kenya."





# DISCOVER BODOLAND



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# Stay Pattern, an emerging force in the J&K hospitality landscape

Since its inception in 2019 in Srinagar, Kashmir, Stay Pattern has been committed to excellence and is consistently expanding its portfolio, aiming to exceed expectations and set new industry benchmarks. Whether optimising hotel performance or creating extraordinary travel experiences, Stay Pattern is a steadfast partner dedicated to the success of crafting unforgettable memories. Faheem Qureshi, Founder and Director, Stay Pattern Hospitality Services, shares his forward-looking perspective in this enlightening interaction.

Prashant Nayak

Stay Pattern Hospitality Services has consistently led the way in introducing innovative solutions to the hospitality sector in Kashmir. In a short time, the company has broadened its portfolio, aiming to elevate the experience for its esteemed clients. "We are the first company in Kashmir to manage independent hotel brands. Given the limited presence of international or renowned brands, this was crucial to the region. We launched our first hotel in 2019 but faced disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite challenges, with our resilience, our portfolio today boasts of eight hotels," shares Faheem.

## Strategic Expansion and Growth

Stay Pattern oversees marketing and promotions for prominent Kashmir Valley hotels like The Orchard Retreat and Spa and Hotel Wood Venture Residency in Srinagar. They manage other properties in Srinagar, including Lake Avenue in the Dal Lake area and Harmukh Houseboat in Nigeen Lake, as well as Shaw Inn and Gulmarg Woods in Gulmarg. The company has recently partnered with Riverfront Luxury Cottages in Pahalgam, and Hotel Marina in Tanmarg, near the popular Drung Waterfalls.

The company is gearing up for a significant expansion, aiming to add twelve more properties by year-end. "With the surge in tourism expected in Kashmir, we anticipate increased arrivals. Our expansion isn't limited to Kashmir; we are extending our footprint to regions like Jammu, Kargil, Drass, and Ladakh. Additionally, we plan to introduce specialised travel packages in off beat destinations such as the Gurez Valley, diversifying our offerings to cater to varied travel interests," states Faheem.



▲ Faheem Qureshi

## Crafting Richer Experiences in J&K

Stay Pattern offers an extensive array of experiential services meticulously tailored to meet the diverse needs of both B2B and B2C clients. The company assists partner hotels in maximising their revenue and bolstering their online reputation while catering to the discerning preferences of individual travellers. "We offer a diverse range of experiential packages to our clients, whether it's thrilling adventures in Gulmarg like skiing or crafting special moments for occasions like honeymoons. Our goal is to elevate these packages to a level where the memories created linger for years. We are committed to providing unique and unforgettable experiences that leave a lasting impression on our guests," emphasises Faheem.

## The Visionary Approach

Faheem is also keen to work on the growth of the tourism industry in Jammu and Kashmir. Recently, the company tied up with SIDBI to take the initiative. "Our initiatives aim to increase livelihoods and enhance experiential capacity for locals. We have conducted two

training programmes, uplifting around 300 candidates from smaller hotels. Additionally, we have onboarded 50 local travel guides, providing a 14-day learning session covering training, capacity building, soft skills, and insights into Kashmir's heritage to enrich their guiding experiences. All 50 guides are now part of our team," highlights Faheem.

Partnering with SIDBI, Stay Pattern has also taken over Drangyari village in Bangus Valley, aiming to enhance the villagers' livelihoods. With 15 houses averaging an income of Rs 10,000 per month, they have identified and developed some homestays in the village. Now, their focus is on promoting these homestays through their CSR programme to multiply the villagers' earnings tenfold, ensuring comprehensive growth and prosperity.

As tourism in Kashmir flourishes due to travel connectivity, Faheem recognises the need for increased accommodation to handle the surge and homestays emerge as a vital solution. Faheem explains, "By engaging with Jammu and Kashmir Tourism, we are actively involved in training homestays for market linkage. We guide them in connecting with OTAs and teach them inventory and rate management. By onboarding them with us, we ensure active participation and generate leads, ensuring these homestays thrive by attracting substantial business."

## Winning Accolades

In a brief span, Stay Pattern has achieved significant industry recognition. Among its notable accomplishments in 2023 are winning the Outlook Business Spotlight's Business Excellence Award for Startup of the Year, being named Best MSME Enterprise of the Year at the India MSME Awards, earning recognition at the TravTour India MICE Awards and by the J&K Tourism Directorate for Outstanding Contribution in promoting tourism in the valley.



# Unrivalled destinations in Madhya Pradesh for a Luxury glamping getaway all-round-year



**Madhya Pradesh Tourism Board has set up Tent Cities with comfortable and modern facilities at various tourist places in the state. Tourists will be able to experience glamping and the thrill of adventure activities throughout the year.**

Madhya Pradesh is an ideal destination for experiencing luxury glamping at the serene yet exhilarating spots of the state. The 'Heart of Incredible India' lures tourists with its diverse heritage while its tourist destinations exhale multi-hued flavours that oscillate through culture, religion, wildlife, and gastronomy. The Madhya Pradesh Tourism Board has envisioned opulent glamping retreats to offer an array of comfortable and luxurious tented suites set amidst the tranquillity of nature.

### Kuno Forest Retreat

#### Luxury Tents in the Wild

The spacious and comfortable tents in Kuno radiate the charm of glamping with the stunning backdrop of the Kuno Forest in the Sheopur district. This wildlife tourism destination has a serene natural beauty; the travellers can savour various kinds of experiences, including the Palpur Fort and Dob Kund. One can enjoy jungle safaris, moonlit strolls, and endless hours of stargazing.

### Gandhisagar Forest Retreat

#### A Magnificent Glamping Escape

Nestled amidst the panoramic splendour of the Gandhisagar Dam in the Mandsaur district, Tent City offers a breath-taking experience of waking up to the gentle lapping of waves against the shore, surrounded by verdant forests and the vast expanse of the Gandhi Sagar Dam. This idyllic escape promises a perfect blend of adventure, luxury, and cultural immersion.

### Jal Mahotsav

#### More Than Just a Glamping Getaway

Escape the ordinary and immerse yourself in the extraordinary at Hanuwantiya Tent City, tucked away in the scenic landscapes at the backwater of Indira Sagar Dam in Khandwa. Whether you are seeking a romantic retreat, an adventurous family trip, or a culturally enriching experience, Hanuwantiya Tent City promises to create lasting memories.

### Chanderi Mahotsav

#### Indulge in the Rich Legacy of Textile City

Chanderi Tent City is an opulent glamping destination located in the city of Chanderi in the Ashoknagar district, renowned for its exquisite Chanderi Sarees. The tent city is a perfect place to experience this rich heritage. Plan a visit to the tent city and indulge in the stunning views surrounding the banks of Laxman Sagar Lake.

### Mandu Utsav

#### Feel the Zeal with History, Culture, Heritage and Nature

In the Dhar district, the Tent City of Mandu Utsav is the perfect luxurious glamping destination to relax and unwind in the 'Heart of Incredible India.' The Tent City is set within the ruins of the medieval city of Mandu, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The tents are beautifully decorated in traditional Indian style and offer stunning views of the surrounding hills and valleys.

The fully furnished luxurious camping retreats with spacious, air-conditioned tents, spotless linens, en-suite bathrooms, private balconies, premium amenities, and carefully chosen experiences are a perfect destination to explore. Engage in adventurous water, land, and air activities ranging from speed boating, parasailing, kayaking, boat rides, zip-lining, trekking, jungle hikes, nature walks, and wildlife safaris that are a lifetime memory. So, pack your bags, your spirit of adventure, and your thirst for discovery. While returning, do not miss taking away intricately carved

and designed souvenirs made by local artists representing the state's rich culture and folk traditions. The magnificent Tent Cities of Madhya Pradesh await you. Get ready to create memories that will last a lifetime.

### Kuno Forest Retreat

Tents - 25

✈️ Gwalior (176 km) 🚆 Shivpuri (70 km)

☎️ +91 9624799166

🌐 [booking.kunoforestretreat.com](http://booking.kunoforestretreat.com)

### Gandhisagar Tent City

Tents - 50

✈️ Indore (287 km)

🚆 Bhawanimandi (49 km)

☎️ +91 7808780899

✉️ [booking.gsff@evokeexperiences.in](mailto:booking.gsff@evokeexperiences.in)

### Hanuwantiya, Jal Mahotsav

Tents - 103

✈️ Indore (139 km) 🚆 Khandwa (49 km)

☎️ +91 9755501954, 8236087667

✉️ [bookings@jalmahotsav.com](mailto:bookings@jalmahotsav.com)

### Chanderi Mahotsav

Tents - 25

✈️ Gwalior (250 km) 🚆 Lalitpur (37 km)

☎️ +91 9826055595

🌐 [Chanderifestival.com](http://Chanderifestival.com)





# Tranquil Retreats for a Perfect Holiday in Daman and Silvassa

VITS Daman Devka Beach and VITS Kamat Silvassa are ideal gateways that seamlessly blend colonial history with coastal allure. Every moment is a chance to explore, from Daman's charming beaches to Silvassa's rich Warli culture. Whether you are seeking a relaxing retreat, a corporate escape, or a destination wedding venue, VITS Kamat promises an unforgettable experience in the heart of tranquility and culture.

## Discover Bliss at VITS Daman Devka Beach

VITS Daman Devka Beach is a fantastic choice for travellers seeking a serene experience. Conveniently located within walking distance from Devka Beach, the resort boasts special cottage-style accommodations, a sprawling lawn, a well-appointed banquet hall, a lavish pool, an entertaining kids play area, and a desi-style urban dhaba. A quick dip in the pool, paired with a meticulously crafted

cocktail, sets the stage for a great time. Embark on a culinary adventure where every dish is a delightful exploration for your taste buds.

## Riverside Tranquillity at Vits Kamat Silvassa

VITS Kamat Silvassa is a property in the riverside area that is situated near the Daman Ganga River and offers lush greenery and tranquil surroundings. A delightful meal overlooking the riverfront at River Side restaurant, a unique dining experience at Urban Dhaba, and an extravagant menu at Kamat's veg restaurant offer a diverse range of flavours and culinary experiences. Stunning suites, deluxe and duplex rooms, an outdoor swimming pool, and unmatched banquet venues are the gateway to a memorable experience. Spread over four acres of lush greenery, the hotel also offers other contemporary facilities, including a travel desk, an indoor playroom, and a children's play area.



VITS Daman Devka Beach



Vits Kamat Silvassa



Vits Kamat Silvassa





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Tourism Malaysia

**Manoharan Periasamy** has officially taken over as Director General (DG) at Tourism Malaysia. In his previous role, he served as Senior Director for International Promotion (Asia and Africa) at Tourism Malaysia. Manoharan has served three consecutive terms as Director of Tourism Malaysia for India and was instrumental in setting up the first National Tourism Organisation (NTO) office in Mumbai, India, in 2001.



VFS Global

**GB Srithar** has joined VFS Global as the Head of Tourism Services, after serving the Singapore Tourism Board for over 27 years. His last position as Regional Director at STB involved overseeing marketing, tourism development, and trade partnership work across India, the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa. In his new role, Srithar will provide specialised services in Travel, Trade, and Tourism to support VFS Global's client governments in achieving their strategic goals.



IRCTC

**Sanjay Kumar Jain**, a 1990 batch IRTS officer, has assumed the position of Chairman and Managing Director (CMD) of IRCTC. With over three decades of experience, he has held leadership roles in policy-making, commercial ventures, and developmental projects within the Indian government and Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs). As Group General Manager (North Zone), IRCTC, he was instrumental in giving the luxury train Maharajas' Express a new dimension through unique marketing initiatives.



STIC Travel Group

**Sanjay Kapoor** has been promoted to the role of Director – Cruises and Leisure at STIC Travel Group, transitioning from his previous position as VP - Sales Support and Marketing. With over three decades of experience in the travel industry and over two decades at STIC, Kapoor has showcased dedication and expertise in various domains. In his new role, he will spearhead the cruise and leisure business of STIC GSA Services, marking a new chapter in his journey with STIC Travel Group.



Red Sea Global

**Sébastien Carre** has been appointed Group Head of Hospitality at Red Sea Global (RSG), the developer of regenerative tourism destinations like The Red Sea and Amaala. With over 30 years of experience in luxury hospitality, Carre will lead the hospitality function for all RSG destinations and self-operated properties. His previous role was as Regional Vice President at Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, overseeing properties in various locations, including the Seychelles, Abu Dhabi, Tanzania, Azerbaijan, and South Africa.



Shangri-La Sri Lanka

Shangri-La Sri Lanka has appointed **Saharsh Vadhera** as the Director of Sales and Marketing for both Colombo and Hambantota. With a distinguished career spanning over 16 years in the luxury hospitality sector, Saharsh brings a wealth of experience and expertise. Prior to joining the leadership team at Shangri-La Sri Lanka, he held the role of Director of Sales and Marketing at Shangri-La Bangalore for over seven years.



Heavens Portfolio

Heavens Portfolio, a Sales, Marketing, and PR representative company, has appointed **Yamini Singh** as Regional Director – PR and Marketing for India and the Middle East. In her new role, she will strengthen media relations, create high-impact brand partnerships, and supercharge top-of-mind awareness for the client portfolio of Heavens Portfolio in India. Additionally, she will spearhead the PR and Marketing initiatives in Heavens Portfolio's upcoming Middle Eastern operations.



Oneworld

The oneworld® alliance has appointed **Nathaniel (Nat) Pieper**, currently Senior Vice President of fleet, finance, and alliances at Alaska Airlines, as its new CEO. Set to assume the role on April 01, 2024, Pieper will lead oneworld through its 25th anniversary year, focusing on enhancing the alliance between partners to offer customers a seamless global travel experience. Pieper reports to the alliance's Governing Board, comprised of member airline CEOs, and he brings his extensive industry experience to this leadership position.



## PM Modi inaugurates Sudarshan Setu

On February 25, 2024, Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi, inaugurated Sudarshan Setu, which connects Okha mainland and Beyt Dwarka island, built at a cost of around Rs. 980 crores. It is the longest cable-stayed bridge in the country, around 2.32 km.

Sudarshan Setu boasts a unique design, featuring a footpath adorned with verses from Shrimad Bhagavad Gita and images of Bhagwan Krishna on both sides. It also has solar panels installed on the upper portions of the footpath, generating one megawatt of electricity. This bridge will ease transportation and significantly reduce the time devotees spend travelling between Dwarka and Beyt-Dwarka. Before the bridge's construction, pilgrims had to rely on boat transport to reach Beyt Dwarka. This iconic bridge will also be a major tourist attraction of Devbhumi Dwarka.

The Prime Minister was accompanied by the Governor of Gujarat, Shri Acharya Devvrat, the Chief Minister of Gujarat, Shri Bhupendra Patel, and the Member of Parliament, Shri C R Patil.



## Kazakh Tourism opens its first international office in India



Kairat Sadvakassov, Chairman, Kazakh National Tourism JSC, participated in the opening ceremony of SATTE on February 22, 2024. The event was attended by the head of Indian tourism, the Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy of Indonesia, the head of the Asia Pacific Tourism Association (PATA), and the heads of tourism departments from Moscow, and Belarus, among others.

On the sidelines of SATTE, Kazakh Tourism strategically appointed its official representative in India. Kairat Sadvakassov presented the certification to Prashant Chaudhary, Head of Salvia Promoters, a company specialising in promoting Central Asia and Russia.

The agreement stipulates cooperation aimed at attracting tourist groups from India to Kazakhstan and representing Kazakh Tourism's interests in this significant outbound tourism market.

The first joint activity was participation in the SATTE exhibition and the upcoming organisation of Indian travel journalists' visit to Kazakhstan in the first half of this year.

According to experts, by 2026, the Indian outbound tourism market is expected to reach more than 50 million tourists. Meanwhile, Prashant Chaudhary notes that by 2026, Kazakhstan could potentially host up to 500,000 Indian tourists annually.

## Neom announces Elanan, a unique wellness retreat embedded in nature



The Board of Directors of NEOM has announced Elanan, an exclusive guest retreat that redefines luxury and well-being experiences set in the heart of nature. Its announcement marks the latest addition to NEOM – the evolving sustainable development taking shape in northwest Saudi Arabia.

Situated on the pristine Gulf of Aqaba coastline where the mountains meet the sea, Elanan sensitively emerges from within its lush oasis surroundings, fed by ancient natural springs. Featuring 80 bespoke rooms and suites, the retreat is designed with well-being at its core, offering a unique nature resort that embraces all the senses.

Elanan takes a modern approach to wellness, perfectly blending new technologies in a discreet, luxurious setting that promotes relaxation and reflection. The signature facilities provide numerous options for guests to embrace themselves in tranquility, rest, and recharge.

Elanan's architectural vision is underpinned by innovation and natural harmony. Utilising ultra-modern design techniques, it creates intricate sculptures that delicately blend with the surrounding natural beauty. It boasts a contemporary aesthetic but retains a synergy with nature, creating a unique architectural experience for all to enjoy.

Guests can explore the large plazas, enjoy specialty private dining, find relaxation in the sun garden, or soak up the spectacular views from the top of the observation tower. From the moment visitors arrive, they begin a rejuvenating journey within the calming embrace of nature.



## TAAI MP and CG Chapter explore Baku on an enriching FAM trip

The Travel Agents Association of India (TAAI) Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh Chapter organised a memorable and remarkable Baku FAM trip for its esteemed members from February 11 to 15, 2024. The group was led by Hemendra Singh Jadon, Chairman, TAAI Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh Chapter.

With Destination Launcher as the DMC partner, participants delved into the Azerbaijan capital's rich architecture, history, culture, culinary delights, and renowned tourist attractions. Moreover, the itinerary included visiting Azerbaijan's snow destination, Gabala, adding a delightful dimension to the experience.

This immersive excursion provided firsthand insights to the agents, enhancing their confidence in promoting Baku as a premier travel destination. The association looks forward to fostering more such enriching experiences for its members in the future.



## Thailand bullish on the Indian market

India is one of Thailand's most important visitor markets. Recently, Sudawan Wangsuphakijkosol, Minister, Tourism and Sports, accompanied by Thapanee Kiatphaibool, Governor, Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), visited India, and both were not only optimistic about the Indian market but also committed to delivering valuable experiences to Indian tourists. They focus on promoting Thailand as a year-round destination for Indians, their fifth-largest inbound travel market.

Sudawan Wangsuphakijkosol said, "I am determined to elevate Thailand to be a quality and safe destination that delivers a valuable experience to our visitors from India through Thailand's Soft Powers and



promote Thailand to be an all-year-round destination."

Thapanee Kiatphaibool, mentioned, "The key strategies to realise our targets will be subsidy schemes for incentive, wedding, and celebration groups. Joint promotions with airlines and travel agents will be offered for repeat visitors and golfers. Just as importantly, we will also continue to strengthen our presence through India's leading travel shows."

Further, TAT's marketing activities will aim at family, millennials, weddings and celebrations, golfers, luxury, and incentive groups. Specific initiatives will be introduced for new segments, such as senior citizens, women travellers, rejuvenating tours, and adventure sports. Gen Z and LGBTQIA+ are also earmarked as potential segments.





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