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# TTJ Travel Trade Journal

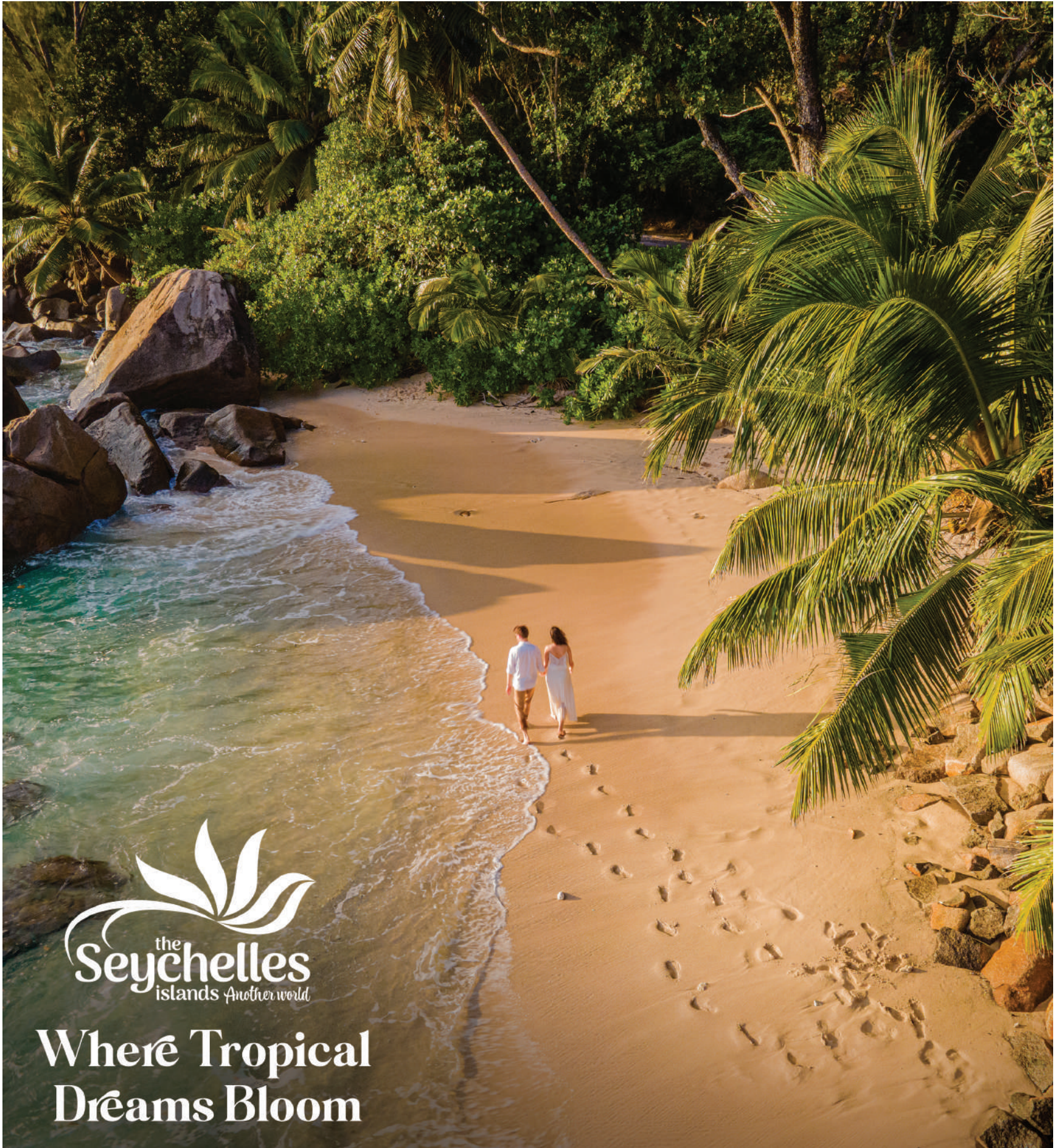
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Dear Friends,

As 2024 comes to a close, our TTJ December issue celebrates the spirit of global exploration. This edition features firsthand trip reports from stunning locales such as Rhodes and Athens in Greece to the charming landscapes of Georgia.

Our year-end issue offers in-depth insights from tour operators, highlighting emerging travel destinations—both international and domestic—and the rising trend of skiing among Indian travellers. We also present highlights from major international tourism events, collaborations with airlines, and the latest trends shaping global hospitality. Additionally, we are delighted to feature expertly crafted articles on wildlife and rural tourism, celebrating the charm and authenticity of these captivating experiences.

This issue is packed with other inspiring content to keep you motivated and excited. As we bid farewell to a year of rediscovering travel, we hope you enjoy this issue as much as we enjoyed creating it. Here's to embracing the new year and the endless possibilities it holds for travel and exploration.

Happy Reading!

**Ravi Sharma**  
[ravisharma@sampanmedia.com](mailto:ravisharma@sampanmedia.com)

Editor's Desk



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## Miray Cruises Greece appoints Griffon as its agent in India



Vivek Jain  
Managing Director, Griffon

Miray Cruises Greece and Miray Cruises International have appointed Griffon as their official agent for all sailings in India. Andreas Genthe, Head of Sales at Miray Cruises Greece, expressed confidence in the partnership, calling it a promising collaboration. Vivek Jain, Managing Director, Griffon, shared similar enthusiasm for the opportunities ahead.

Miray Cruises, with over 30 years of expertise, offers exceptional cruising experiences across Greece and Turkey, emphasising affordability, safety, and top-notch service. Their fleet highlights their commitment to creating extraordinary journeys at accessible prices, featuring departures from Athens (Piraeus Port), multilingual staff, and personalised 24/7 service.

Griffon, based in Mumbai, has introduced exclusive rates tailored for the Indian market for summer 2025, making luxury cruises appealing and affordable for Indian travellers. For bookings and inquiries, contact [sales@griffoncruises.in](mailto:sales@griffoncruises.in).

## Costa Cruises expands its distribution network in Indian market with three new PSAs



At a press conference held in New Delhi on November 29, 2024, Costa Cruises announced the expansion of its distribution network in the Indian market by appointing three new travel partners. Leveraging their extensive knowledge and expertise, Rayna Tours, Sharaf Travel, Cruise Carrot, and Lotus Aero Enterprise, which has already been representing Costa in India, will enhance local consumers' access to Costa Cruises.

Costa aims to cater to both the incentive market and individual customers seeking an international-style holiday through its newly appointed team of four preferred sales agents. These customers can explore Europe by visiting multiple countries and destinations in a single voyage—an experience that only a Costa cruise can offer.

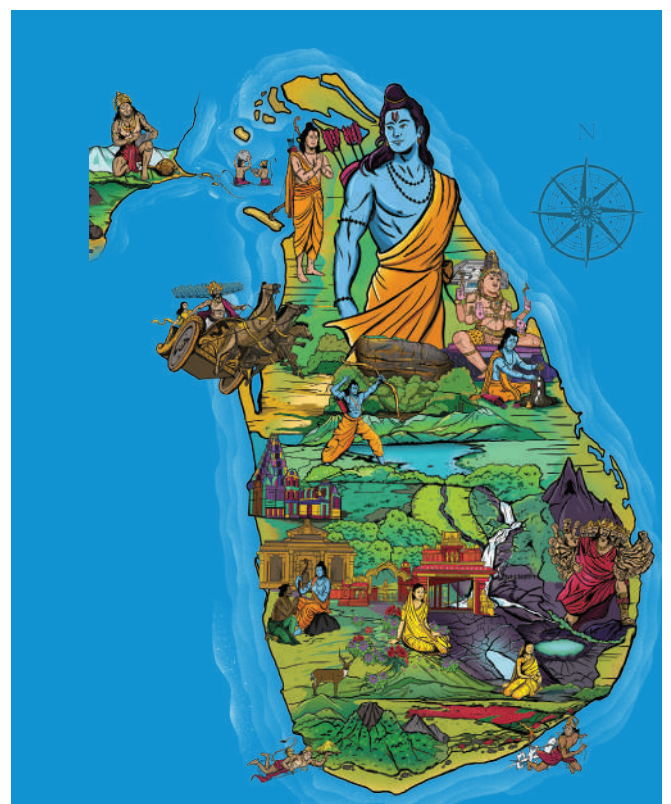
Costa offers Indian travellers a wide range of opportunities with its itineraries in the Western Mediterranean (Italy, France, and Spain), the Eastern Mediterranean (Greece and Turkey), Northern Europe, the Caribbean, and the United Arab Emirates during the winter season. Onboard, guests can indulge in themed restaurants featuring international cuisine, vegetarian options, and Indian flavours. Guests can also enjoy world-class entertainment, including shows with international artists and live performances.

## SriLankan Airlines launches Ramayana Trail package to attract Indian travellers

SriLankan Airlines has introduced the Ramayana Trail, an exclusive travel package inviting Indian travellers to explore Sri Lanka's rich connection to the Ramayana. This immersive journey covers 20 sacred sites tied to the epic, including Seetha Amman Temple, where Sita prayed during her captivity, Rumassala Hill, linked to Hanuman's exploits, and the legendary bridge built by Lord Rama's Vanara army.

Richard Nuttall, CEO, SriLankan Airlines, highlighted this initiative to deepen ties with India, the airline's largest market, while showcasing Sri Lanka's spiritual and cultural appeal. Buddhika Hewawasam, Chairman of the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotions Bureau, praised Indian travellers for their enduring support, describing the package as a celebration of shared heritage and devotion.

The trail combines spirituality with luxury, offering accommodations in premium hotels and expert-guided tours that bring the Ramayana to life. Travellers also enjoy Sri Lanka's vibrant culture, festivals, and cuisine, ensuring a holistic experience. With direct flights from major Indian cities, the package provides a seamless and meaningful journey into faith and heritage.







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## Rail Europe organises FAM trip to Switzerland and Paris for key partners



**R**ail Europe, in collaboration with Lufthansa Group, Travel Switzerland, Interlaken Tourism Board, Montreux-Vevey Tourisme, and TGV Lyria, organised an extraordinary familiarisation (FAM) tour to Switzerland and Paris for its General Sales Agents (GSAs) from India and the GCC. This trip, held after nearly four years, rewarded GSAs for their dedication to promoting train travel in Europe.

The journey began in the scenic Swiss Alps, particularly in Interlaken, with unique experiences like Raclette rafting on Lake Brienz, chocolate-making workshops, and activities such as the First Glider and First Flyer on Grindelwald First Mountain.

In the Montreux region, the group enjoyed the Prestige Class on the Golden Pass line, snow activities at Glacier 3000, wine tasting at Domaine Bovy, a visit to Charlie Chaplin's Museum, and views from Chillon Castle. The trip highlighted the Swiss Travel Pass benefits, including discounts, free museum entry, and the high-speed TGV Lyria train from Geneva to Paris.

In Paris, the group explored Montmartre, toured the city on a hop-on-hop-off bus, visited the Eiffel Tower's summit, and ended the trip with a Seine River dinner cruise.

This successful FAM trip allowed participants to experience Rail Europe's offerings, promoting #unlockconnections, #sustainabletravel, and #makingtraintraveleasy while empowering agents to advocate train travel.

## East West Marketing acquires Zing Reps to strengthen its presence in Indian tourism market

**E**ast West Marketing, a leading tourism marketing agency specialising in China and India's outbound travel markets, has acquired Zing Reps, an India-focused tourism marketing agency founded by industry expert Seldon Tenzing. This strategic decision bolsters East West's position in India's thriving



travel market, which is anticipated to grow to 29 million international travellers by 2025.

The acquisition highlights East West's commitment to innovation and growth, providing enhanced services for clients targeting India's expanding outbound tourism sector.

Seldon Tenzing will lead East West's India office as CEO, bringing over 15 years of destination marketing experience, including expertise in promoting U.S. tourism to Indian travellers.

"This partnership combines our strengths to deliver greater value to clients," said Tenzing. "With rising demand for experiences, India presents immense potential."

Alina Xiang, President and CEO of East West, praised Tenzing's expertise, expressing confidence in driving culturally relevant solutions for India's dynamic market.

## Sayaji Hotels Group to add 12,000 keys across 113 cities with focus on luxury and leisure segments

**S**ayaji Hotels Group is embarking on a significant expansion, focusing on India's luxury and leisure segments. Already a prominent name in Central India, the group plans to add 12,000 keys across 113 cities, targeting both urban and leisure markets. A significant emphasis will be on Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities, which will account for 8,700 new keys, catering to the rising demand from business and leisure travellers alike.

Sayaji aims to combine its food and beverage expertise with world-class service standards to appeal to domestic and international guests. The growth strategy includes management contracts, revenue-sharing models, and traditional leases, with plans for resort properties in scenic destinations like Udaipur, as well as wildlife and pilgrim tourism hotspots.



"Our expansion reflects our commitment to providing high-quality, accessible hospitality across the country. We aim to bring a blend of luxury and leisure that appeals to both domestic and international travellers, ensuring a unique and memorable experience at every Sayaji property," said Raof Razak Dhanani, Managing Director, Sayaji Hotels Limited.





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# Sapporo: Year-Round Charm Across Four Seasons

Sapporo, the stunning capital of Hokkaido, is setting the stage to warmly embrace Indian travellers, preparing to offer them a truly unforgettable experience. In an exclusive conversation, Tomonori Aoyama, Director General for Tourism and MICE Promotion Department of Sapporo City, shared insights into the city’s unique appeal, its plans to attract the Indian market, and what makes Sapporo a year-round destination.

Sonika Bohra

Sapporo offers a unique blend of urban sophistication and natural splendour, providing diverse and enchanting experiences no matter the season. From the cherry blossoms of spring to the lush greenery of summer and from autumnal hues to the pristine powder snow of winter, Sapporo captivates visitors year-round. “Sapporo is a destination where you can enjoy both the city and nature together,” Aoyama began enthusiastically. “We have four distinct seasons. In the spring, you can enjoy cherry blossoms. Summer offers opportunities for kayaking and exploring nature. Autumn paints the city in stunning hues of red, orange, and gold, creating perfect settings for scenic drives, hikes, and park visits. And in winter, Sapporo is famous for its powder snow. It is a destination that can be enjoyed throughout the year.”

## A Bollywood Boost

Sapporo City’s efforts to attract Indian travellers have been significantly bolstered by a partnership with Global Destinations and All Nippon Airways (ANA). This partnership was sparked by the upcoming release of a film by Aamir Khan Productions in 2025, partially set in Sapporo. Recognising the film’s potential to showcase the destination, Aoyama noted, “It felt like the perfect opportunity to begin promoting Sapporo to India, a market we hadn’t focused on before.”

## Cultural Customisation

Sapporo is keen on tailoring experiences for Indian travellers. “This trip to India itself has been a learning experience for us. We discovered that Indian travellers love nature and outdoor activities and enjoy the nightlife, a big plus since Sapporo is Japan’s third-largest



▲ Tomonori Aoyama

nightlife destination. Of course, we also learned that Indian travellers appreciate having Indian food available when abroad,” shared Aoyama.

## Numbers Game and Future Goals

Last year, Sapporo attracted 1.61 million international visitors, but only about 0.4 percent of the total were from India. Despite the small numbers, Aoyama is optimistic about growth. The city aims to increase this number significantly by focusing on incentive group tours and luxury travel, with a near-term goal of doubling Indian visitation.

## How Long to Stay and What to Do?

As part of the broader Golden Route itinerary, which includes Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto, Sapporo is recommended as a three-night stop. “If they are already visiting Tokyo, Osaka,

and Kyoto, we suggest spending three nights in Sapporo. However, many visitors come to Hokkaido for up to one or two weeks,” Aoyama suggested.

He highlighted three must-do activities in Sapporo, “In May, you can see both cherry blossoms and snow simultaneously—a rare experience. In February, we are famous for the Sapporo Snow Festival. And the night views from Mount Moiwa or Okurayama Ski Jump Stadium, accessible by cable cars, are among the top three in Japan.”

## Hidden Gem: Hill of the Buddha

Aoyama shed light on a relatively lesser-known attraction—the Hill of the Buddha at Makomanai Takino Cemetery. Designed by renowned Japanese architect Tadao Ando, it features a 13.5-meter-tall Buddha statue surrounded by 150,000 lavender blooms each summer. “The building was completed in 2016, and it started gaining attention around 2017-2018 as tourists discovered its charm. Surprisingly, it remains relatively unknown even among locals. It is a tranquil and awe-inspiring destination that truly deserves a visit,” he highlighted.

With its mix of natural beauty, unique cultural offerings, and openness to cater to Indian preferences, Sapporo is poised to capture the hearts of Indian travellers. As Aoyama said, “Sapporo is a city for all seasons, and we are excited to share it with the world.”






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## Discover Sapporo: The Heart of Japan's Winter Wonderland

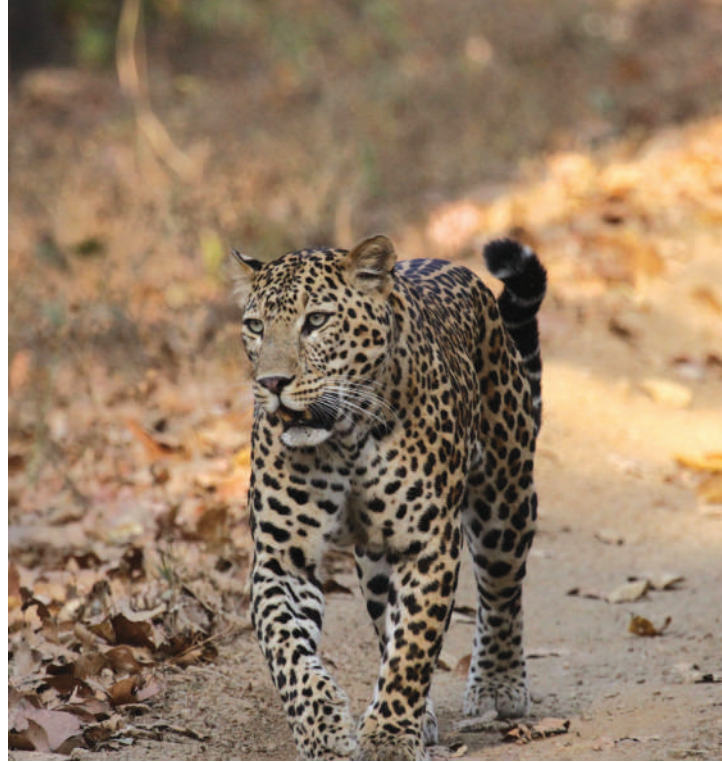
Nestled on Hokkaido's snowy island, Sapporo is a captivating city that thrives during winter. Its blend of urban charm and natural beauty makes it a perfect getaway for anyone seeking adventure, culture, or relaxation. At the heart of Sapporo's winter appeal is the **Sapporo Snow Festival**, held every February. This iconic event transforms the city into a wonderland of glittering ice sculptures and artistic snow creations, illuminated beautifully at night. The festival is a must-see for visitors of all ages, offering a magical atmosphere that lingers in memory. For winter sports enthusiasts, Sapporo is home to world-class ski resorts like **Teine** and **Kokusai**, offering powdery slopes for all skill levels. It has good access to ski resorts within 30 minutes to reach from the city side. Therefore in a day you can enjoy day time skiing & also enjoy

night life in a city as well. This is the main attraction for the Ski lovers Beyond skiing, try snowshoeing or simply revel in the pristine snowy landscapes of Hokkaido. Sapporo's culinary scene is equally enticing. Savor the city's signature **miso ramen**, fresh Hokkaido crab, and sea urchin, paired perfectly with locally brewed **Sapporo Beer**. Each bite offers a taste of the region's rich flavors and traditions. Explore cultural landmarks like the historic **Red Brick Building**, shop at **Tanukikoji Street**, or enjoy panoramic views from **Mount Moiwa**. The city's warm hospitality completes the experience, leaving every traveler with cherished memories. Sapporo is a treasure trove of winter delights. This season, discover its magic and create unforgettable moments in Japan's enchanting northern capital.

**To learn more join our webinar series as per the schedule below:**

- Northern Region: 11<sup>th</sup> December 2024
- Southern Region: 12<sup>th</sup> February 2025
- Eastern Region: 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2025
- Western Region: 5<sup>th</sup> March 2025





# The Untapped Potential of India's Wildlife Legacy

India's unparalleled biodiversity and breathtaking landscapes position it as a formidable contender in the global wildlife tourism arena. With its incredible growth trajectory in recent years, India is poised to carve out a legacy in wildlife tourism, perhaps even giving tough competition to Africa's iconic offerings.

Amit Sankhala

Various wildlife tourism models exist today, spread across varied landscapes, climatic conditions, population densities, and political philosophies - hence, there is no 'one size fits all' model. To the traveller, the first thought that comes to mind when looking for a wildlife-centric trip is Africa. To be fair, its large, undisturbed landscapes, low population density, and economic dependence on foreign exchange from wildlife tourism put Africa at the top for its experiences. Just the sheer number of mammals you witness in one glance over a migration or predators making a kill in one of the countless private conservancies is mesmerising.

But let me tell you a different story: the story of the Indian tiger and Project Tiger.

## King of the Jungle

The Indian tiger is a creature of hypnotic power and fascination. A glimpse through the green foliage of the sleek golden body gliding by like a phantom is an experience to behold and that no words can describe. While protecting the tiger, India has saved countless habitats within which many iconic species have flourished in the wild today. There is no place in the world where, within one country, you can see all the iconic species, from tigers, Asiatic lions, wild elephants, wild dogs, snow leopards, one-horned rhinos, and more, all living among 1.4 billion people. We must have done

our conservation right to boast about this co-existence, and to me, that is inclusive wildlife tourism within the country.

## India Embodies Inclusive Tourism

Unlike Africa, where many of these areas are owned privately, resulting in the majority of Africans never experiencing a safari, or seeing the natural beauty their country has. On the other hand, India has crossed the mark of 50 tiger reserves, which flourish with help from Indian tourists, who have contributed to local economies around all national parks, giving the locals an opportunity to benefit from the very wildlife around them. This is inclusive tourism at its best.

Today, India boasts a healthy population of tigers almost throughout the country. Our parks are very well organised, and zones are distributed to avoid overcrowding. The more popular national parks are sold out months in advance, particularly to discourage picnic tourism and make tourists realise the value of wildlife tourism in India. A properly planned trip to any of our national parks with a good naturalist can teach you so much about the whole ecosystem and how even the smallest insect or blade of grass plays its part.

## Kaleidoscope of Experiences

Keep in mind, with India being such a diverse country, you experience so much more than just these exotic creatures. While exploring its jungles, you can encounter its people,

traditions, culture, and history. A trip to India allows for a complete experience, offering opportunities to witness different cultures, languages, religions, and traditions. Discover monks chanting in soul-soothing monasteries of the Leh, or be entranced by a mystical evening aarti on the sacred Ganges of Varanasi or ride in the deserts of Rajasthan on regal Marwari horses, used by the royals.

India has it all, whether it is culture, religion, beaches, trekking in the Himalayas, spirituality, or wildlife. There are not many places in the world where you can experience so much under one nation. Wildlife tourism may be a small percentage of the country's overall tourism. However, it has massive potential, and we have only scratched the surface.



**About the Author:** Amit Sankhala is the owner of Encounters Asia Tiger Resorts Pvt Ltd and Jamtara Wilderness Camp. As the proud grandson of Padma Shri, the Late Kailash Sankhala and the son of Pradeep Sankhala, celebrated for pioneering tiger conservation in India. He takes forward the Sankhala family mission. Amit is especially known for redefining Snow Leopard expeditions.



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# Saudia Drives Global Ambitions with New Routes and Fleet Enhancements

TTJ proudly presents an exclusive interview with Arved von zur Muehlen, Chief Commercial Officer, Saudia, marking the airline's first-ever interaction with an Indian travel trade publication. He shared insights into Saudia's extraordinary growth trajectory, bold strategies, and visionary future in the global aviation industry.

**Prativa Vaidya Bhalla**

**S**ince its inception in 1945, Saudia, the national carrier of Saudi Arabia, has built an inimitable 76-year legacy as a leading force in global aviation and one of the largest airlines in the Middle East. As Saudi Arabia catapults onto the global tourism stage, Saudia emerges as the perfect partner, driving the nation's vision and connecting the world to the kingdom's undiscovered treasures. As we delve deeper into the conversation, we gain a clearer understanding of the strategies and vision brought to life by Arved's decades of experience in the aviation industry.

## Please provide an overview of Saudia's current fleet and route network.

Saudia currently operates a fleet of 144 aircraft, facilitating approximately 16,503 flights to over 100 destinations across four continents. This extensive network supports various sectors, including tourism, business, sports, entertainment, and Hajj and Umrah travel.

Saudia is strategically enhancing its network in Asia, with a new route to Calicut (CCJ), India, set to commence in January 2025. Operating three times weekly, this new service will strengthen Saudia's presence in South Asia and support the airline's continued growth across the region.

In addition to this expansion, Saudia maintains established routes to China, connecting Jeddah (JED) and Riyadh (RUH) with Guangzhou (CAN) and Beijing Daxing (PKX). With three weekly flights

from each Saudi hub to Guangzhou and multiple weekly flights to Beijing, Saudia provides consistent and reliable connections between Saudi Arabia and these key Chinese destinations. This network expansion underscores Saudia's commitment to fostering robust business, cultural, and tourism ties throughout Asia.

Looking ahead, Saudia is poised for significant growth, having finalised major agreements with Boeing and Airbus for the acquisition of 103 new aircraft in the coming years. This expansion will strengthen our fleet and route offerings, allowing us to meet evolving travel demands and enhance our service capabilities.



▲ Arved von zur Muehlen

## Could you elaborate on recent technological advancements like the Travel Companion and specific enhancements implemented onboard and at airports to elevate the passenger experience?

Saudia has launched the beta version of its innovative Travel Companion (TC), an AI-powered digital platform designed to transform the travel industry as part of a two-year strategy focused on digital innovation. In collaboration with Accenture, Travel Companion





redefines how travellers engage with the airline, offering personalised solutions tailored to individual preferences. This comprehensive platform enables seamless booking of concierge services—including hotels, transportation, restaurants, activities, and attractions—from trusted sources, eliminating the need to navigate multiple platforms. Additionally, it facilitates smooth connections with transportation services and train companies, ensuring an uninterrupted travel experience.

Furthermore, the revamped digital experience of the 'AlFursan' loyalty programme emphasises Saudia's commitment to simplifying procedures, allowing guests to effortlessly manage rewards, track mileage activity, and upgrade membership levels with a single click.

Additionally, Saudia recently inaugurated a new First and Business-class check-in Lounge at Terminal 1 of King Abdulaziz International Airport in Jeddah. This luxurious space caters to First and Business Class guests and AlFursan Gold members, providing tailored services to enhance their travel experience. These advancements collectively underscore Saudia's dedication to improving guest experience and supporting the Kingdom's tourism goals.

## **G**iven Saudi's emergence as a burgeoning global tourist destination, how does the airline aim to further support and contribute to the development of Saudi's tourism industry and its goals?

Saudia is dedicated to supporting Saudi Arabia's burgeoning tourism sector in alignment with the Kingdom's Vision 2030. We continue to innovate in parallel with the Kingdom's flourishing tourism industry, focusing on our mission to provide an air link that connects the world to Saudi Arabia and serves as (one of) the wings of the nation's Vision 2030. We are implementing a comprehensive digital programme and revitalising our brand while actively collaborating with industry stakeholders to advance the National Aviation Strategy. This strategy aims to establish Saudi Arabia as a global aviation leader by enhancing the guest experience.

Our initiatives include launching new routes, increasing flight frequencies, and partnering with tourism stakeholders to showcase Saudi destinations. Through innovative digital platforms like the Travel Companion, we enhance the guest experience by offering tailored travel solutions, ensuring our effective contribution to the growth of Saudi Arabia's tourism industry.

As part of our expansion goals, we aim to facilitate the arrival of approximately 330 million visitors to the Kingdom by 2030, helping them achieve the objectives of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.

## **W**hat are Saudia's key global markets, and where does India stand within this strategy?

Saudia considers several key markets essential to its global strategy, including Europe, the Americas, Asia, and the Middle East. India is a significant focus, having been part of our journey since we commenced our inaugural flight to Mumbai in 1965. Over five decades, we have established a steadfast presence in India, currently operating 54 flights weekly to six major cities.

Recognising India's potential, we aim to attract 7.5 million Indian visitors annually by 2030, positioning India as the top source of tourists to Saudi Arabia. This commitment underscores our dedication to strengthening our presence in this strategic market while enhancing service offerings to cater to Indian travellers.

## **W**hat is the airline's growth strategy in terms of India as well as international operations and fleet expansion?

Saudia's growth strategy in India focuses on increasing flight connectivity and enhancing service offerings to meet rising demand. We are committed to expanding operations by increasing flights between Saudi Arabia and India and offering Maintenance, Repair, and Overhaul (MRO) services to Indian carriers.

In the coming years, we will take delivery of 103 new aircraft, aligning with our strategy to double seating capacity and expand to new global destinations by investing in modern, fuel-efficient aircraft. This investment underscores our commitment to bringing the world to the Kingdom in line with Vision 2030. Through these initiatives, we strive to enhance the overall travel experience and reinforce our dedication to serving both Indian and global markets.

## **W**hat are Saudia's primary challenges in the current Indian market, and how are you addressing them?

In the Indian market, Saudia is navigating various challenges, including strong competition from other carriers, regulatory complexities, and diverse consumer preferences. We are actively investing in market research to effectively address these opportunities and gain deeper insights into local demands. We are also committed to building strong partnerships with travel agents and corporate clients in India to enhance our presence and better serve our guests.

Our focus on delivering exceptional guest service and personalised travel experiences remains at the forefront of our strategy, allowing us to strengthen our brand in India. These efforts collectively reinforce Saudia's commitment to becoming a leading airline that supports Saudi Arabia's tourism ambitions while expanding our global footprint.







© Michel Denouisse

# Seychelles

## Where Tropical Dreams Bloom

With its postcard-perfect beaches, contrasting hues of blues, and a dollop of adventure, there is something magical about the granite boulder-dotted islands of Seychelles. Swaying from one palm tree to another, hopping from one island to another, Seychelles is a place that has been collecting love stories from royal honeymooners to Hollywood A-listers.

**W**ith 115 islands dropped like jewels in the Indian Ocean, Seychelles lends itself as *THE* backdrop for couples looking for a sweet escape after their wedding. Just a short flight from India, newlyweds find themselves in a haven where the remaining pieces of wedding mayhem dissolve into the gentle rhythms of tropical tranquillity.

### Tranquillity in the Tropics

While the temptation to do nothing more than laze under palm trees with cocktails infused with locally crafted rum is very

inviting, Seychelles helps find the perfect balance between relaxation and escapades. The archipelago allows honeymooners the chance to find their pulse, whether that means active exploration or uninterrupted stillness, the island nation is full of discoveries and inspiration. Honeymoons can include watching blooming coral reefs on one day and hiking through prehistoric palm groves the next! Whether it's walking alongside giant Aldabra tortoises, exploring prehistoric forests or simply existing in a bubble of uninterrupted connection – it is as close to paradise as one can imagine.



© Anna Sandul



© Anna Sandul



## Dive into Romance with Aquatic Adventures

The best way to embrace island life is to be in the water. From snorkelling and diving to glass-bottom kayaking, couples are spoiled for choice with options to explore the world underwater. For those looking for a different way to experience the water, the semi-submarine tours in the Saint Anne Marine National Park gives a window to the world underwater. The ultimate experience would be gliding together in a glass-bottom kayak through the clear waters of Anse Source D'Argent, where granite boulders lend themselves as their quintessential honeymoon backdrop. Another experience in the Saint Anne Marine National Park could be hiring a private yacht and cruising through the uninhabited islands where they can snorkel to see the underwater together and create memories in the company of tropical fish and corals.

## A Culinary Affair in Mahé

Creole refers to the people, culture, and their French-based language, and the food, and the best way to soak in the culture is through the food. For couples who want to learn more about the culture and cuisine of the country, Mahé is the place to be. Explore the capital city Victoria, wander through the busy market in the morning where the air is filled with the aromas of familiar spices and the laughter of locals exchanging stories. Next, head to Jardin du Roi, where the fragrant history of Seychelles' spice trade comes to life in a living museum. Head over to Takamaka Rum Distillery to learn about the island rum and how they converted this heritage site into an island rum experience. Iconic restaurants like Marie Antoinette and Maison Marengo – unquestionably the most famous restaurants on the island –



serve authentic Creole cuisine made from fresh local ingredients.

## Island Tales and Trails

For those who like a little bit of adventure, hike one of the many trails that lead to breathtaking views of the island and the islands nearby, or soak in the views while ziplining across the forest. On a thrilling journey through Seychelles' wilderness is the Copolia Trail or the highest peak on the Morne Seychellois Nature Trail, at the end of which one is rewarded with breathtaking views of Mahé's coast and its scattered island neighbours. Base to several water

sports activities, the Beau Vallon Beach is ideal for an activity-packed day by the sea. After dining at one of the many beach-front restaurants, couples who enjoy a little bit of competition can participate in a friendly game of football or volleyball on the beach too! On the lookout for some Indian food? Mahek Restaurant on the Beau Vallon Beach serves up authentic Indian cuisine. Island hopping in the Seychelles is also an easy affair all thanks to the ferry system here. Cycle around La Digue or hike through Praslin's 45-acre UNESCO-listed Vallée De Mai Nature Reserve, which is famed for its coco de mer nut and home to the elusive black parrot.





### Private Island Escape

Couples can begin their getaway on Mahé, then drift to the dreamy landscapes of Praslin or La Digue, before surrendering completely to the ultimate romantic escape – a private island resort! On Platte Island, couples can enjoy candlelit dinners on the island’s runway. Desroches Island provides a distinctive sundowner experience at its lighthouse, complemented with panoramic views of the surrounding seascape. Félicité Island presents a natural spectacle with sea turtle nesting sites, where one can watch the turtles leave the nest and head to the ocean. Seclusion is synonymous with North Island and Denis Island offers a more serene experience with couples’ spa treatments that come with the soothing sound of waves and the soft chirping of fairy terns. Alphonse Island becomes the perfect getaway for marine enthusiasts given its location among the outer islands surrounded by pristine coral reefs that are teeming with diverse marine life.

### Accessibility

After months of wedding whirlwinds getting to Seychelles is miles away from anything stressful. Heading to these islands is incredibly convenient, especially since it is a direct 4-and-a-half-hour flight from India (Mumbai). As the country is visa-free for Indian travellers, one would only need to apply for a Travel Authorization Letter which takes about 24 hours to process, perfect for those who want a quick escape.







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# Alamo Steers the Future of Self-Drive Holidays for Indian Travellers

Self-drive holidays are fast becoming the travel choice for Indian travellers seeking to explore at their own pace. Alamo provides an extensive range of options for car rentals, ensuring that customers can find the perfect vehicle to suit their needs. Sanjay Kapoor, Director, Cruises and Leisure, STIC Travel Group, shares insights with TJJ on how evolving preferences are transforming the car rental industry as more Indian travellers seek flexible, personalised, and convenient transport options.

Prativa Vaidya Bhalla

With the rental car self-drive market expected to grow by 3.75 per cent during the forecast period (2024 - 2032), India is geared to witness a rise in the volume of travellers opting for car rental services. Alamo provides the perfect platform for convenient road travel, delivering top-notch service and meticulously maintained vehicles, all backed by their Standard of Care.

## Alamo: A Leader in Self-Drive Rentals

Established in 1974, Alamo Rent a Car is renowned for offering competitive rates and a seamless experience in top travel destinations worldwide. With a combined inventory of over 2.3 million cars across 300 makes and models, Alamo, with National and Enterprise, offers an unparalleled selection, from budget-friendly options to luxury convertibles and high-end supercars, meeting the needs of every traveller. For car enthusiasts, Alamo's extensive selection is a dream come true. If you cannot own your ideal car, you can still rent it for your holiday!

Sanjay notes that inquiries from Indian travellers for self-drive rentals are increasing as the concept gains traction. He explains, "Indian travellers' rental choices span all categories, from budget options to high-end models like BMWs and Mercedes. Many prefer self-driven cars for their privacy, flexibility, and the economical choice they offer compared to chauffeur-driven options. Self-drive cars are available around the clock, giving travellers full control over their schedule and destinations."

He adds, "The demand is higher from travellers who have previously lived or studied overseas. They are accustomed to driving in those countries and are now returning for a holiday or work. They are used to the ease and convenience of a self-driven vehicle."



▲ Sanjay Kapoor

## A Global Footprint with Custom Solutions

Alamo's global presence spans 90 countries, and it has over 1100 plus convenient car rental locations worldwide. From major cities in the US to scenic landscapes across Europe, the UK, Australia, New Zealand, and beyond, Alamo offers its customers easy access to a wide range of vehicles. The brand has also expanded into the Middle East and Asia, with locations in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Muscat, and, most recently, Thailand.

One of Alamo's key selling points is its commitment to inclusivity. The brand prioritises accessibility, offering tailored solutions for differently-abled consumers. Its vehicles are typically no older than two or three years, and customers can choose between

manual and automatic transmissions, further enhancing the convenience and user experience.

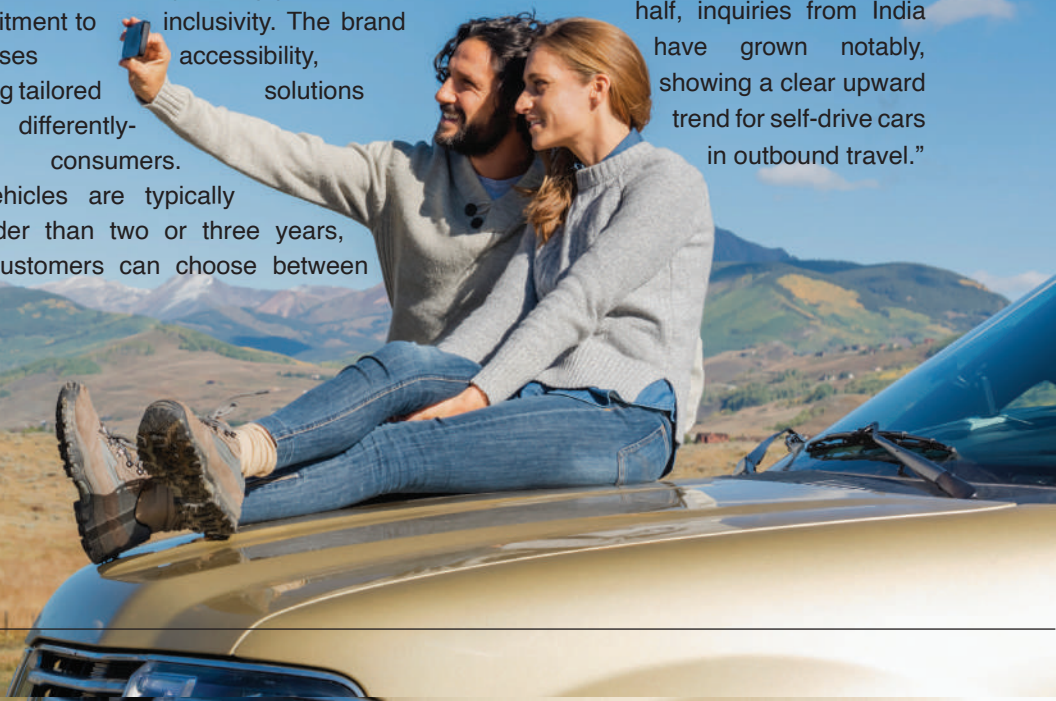
## Embracing New Experiences

Sanjay addresses a common concern among Indian travellers, explaining, "A key challenge is that while India has right-hand drive vehicles, many international destinations use left-hand drive cars, making some travellers hesitant. However, the younger generation, in particular, quickly adapts and finds enjoyment in the driving experience."

He continues, "Many travellers are enthusiastically embracing self-drive options, even if they are initially unfamiliar with local driving rules. By taking the time to learn about regulations like parking and road rules, they can confidently navigate and avoid any penalties. This awareness allows them to fully appreciate self-drive rentals' freedom and flexibility."

In regions like Europe, where public transportation can be limited in rural areas, self-driven cars are becoming an essential part of the travel experience. Exploring scenic landscapes without being restricted by schedules is a significant advantage.

Sanjay concludes, "We are seeing a significant rise in demand for self-drive options. Over the past year and a half, inquiries from India have grown notably, showing a clear upward trend for self-drive cars in outbound travel."





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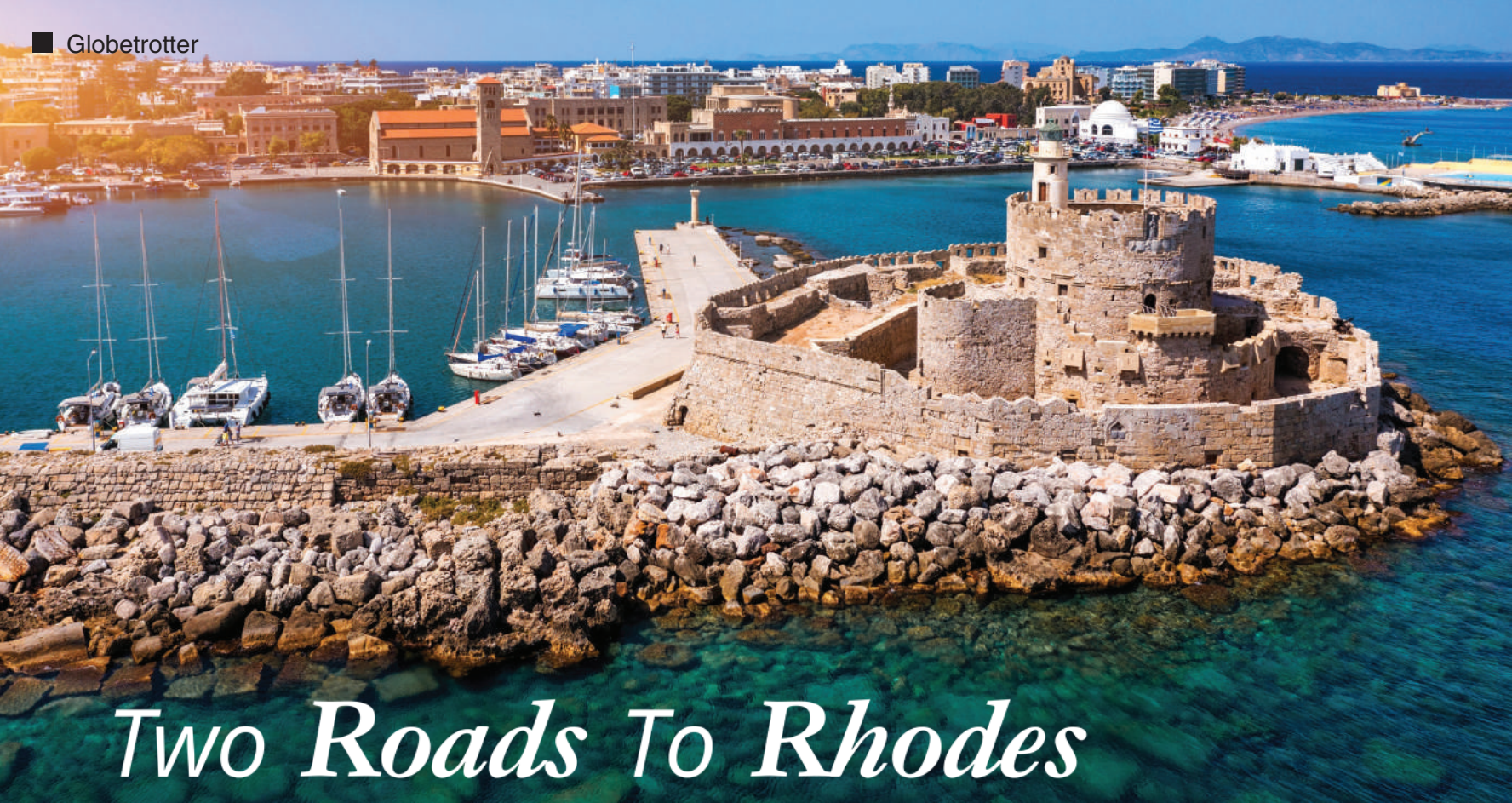
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# Two Roads To Rhodes

A meticulously planned journey through Athens and Rhodes was organised by the WOTF Group, represented by Global Destinations in India, in collaboration with the Rhodes Tourism Promotion Organization, Air Arabia, and Grecotel Hotels and Resorts. This partnership ensured a well-rounded exploration of both destinations, blending the ancient allure with the modern charms of Athens and Rhodes.

Vartik Sethi

**T**hey say that you don't visit the Greek Islands, but the islands visit you. And when they do, they stay with you for a lifetime!

My journey to Greece began with a smooth and comfortable flight aboard Air Arabia, departing from Delhi to Sharjah and then connecting to Athens. Air Arabia offers frequent flights from various Indian cities, making Greece's cityscape and ancient wonders easily accessible to Indian travellers.

After landing at Athens' Eleftherios Venizelos Airport, I headed to my accommodation in the Athens Riviera, a beautiful coastal region gaining popularity for its scenic charm. My stay was at Grecotel's The Roc Club, a brand-new resort Club-Maison offering the perfect balance of comfort and luxury. Its location in the Athens Riviera allowed easy access to the city's main attractions while providing a serene retreat away from the urban hustle.

The Dolli At Acropolis



That evening, I enjoyed dinner at The Dolli's rooftop restaurant, an upscale restaurant in central Athens renowned for its magnificent views. An infinity pool with a direct view of the illuminated Acropolis, The Dolli at Acropolis is said to offer the best view in all of Athens. The setting, paired with delicious Mediterranean-inspired dishes made for an unforgettable dining experience that set the tone for the adventures ahead.

## The Heart of Athens

Stepping into Athens, the birthplace of democracy and ancient philosophy, feels like entering a vast outdoor museum. Plaka, the city's oldest neighbourhood, with its neoclassical architecture, vibrant tavernas, and winding cobblestone streets, offered an immediate immersion into Athenian life. With the iconic Acropolis towering above, I wandered through Monastiraki Square, where historic landmarks coexist with bustling markets and street cafes.

Exploring the historic heart of Athens, I was struck by the majesty of the Acropolis and the Parthenon, symbols of Greece's Golden Age. The Parthenon's towering columns, designed in devotion to Athena, gave me a deep sense of reverence. For anyone who has been a Greek mythology enthusiast like myself, witnessing all those mythological stories come to life was an incredibly enriching experience.

Scooter-ising my way through Athens,



Plaka, Athens

I came across Athens' legacy as the home of the modern Olympic Games came to life at Panathinaiko Stadium. Built from gleaming white marble, this stadium hosted the first modern Olympics in 1896 and remains a stunning tribute to athleticism and Greek craftsmanship. I encountered more architectural marvels—the Temple of Olympian Zeus, with its Corinthian columns reaching skyward, and the elegant Zappeion, used for state events and symbolising Greece's commitment to the arts.



## Island Hopping – The Charms of Hydra, Poros, and Aegina

Venturing beyond Athens, I set sail for the Saronic Islands: Hydra, Poros, and Aegina on the Athens Day Cruise. Each island presented a distinct charm. Hydra, a car-free haven, is renowned for its peaceful stone streets and historical mansions, evoking the Greece of centuries past. Here, donkeys are the primary mode of transportation, adding a unique touch to the island's tranquil setting. Here, you can also treat yourself to some delicious gelato to add to the sweetness of your island-hopping expedition.

Poros, with its pine-covered hills and inviting cafes, was a perfect spot to relax and soak up the Greek lifestyle. Aegina offered yet another facet of Greek culture, famous for its pistachios and rich culinary traditions. Sampling local dishes and treats, I discovered the heart of Aegina's vibrant food culture, enhanced by stunning coastal views.

A visit to Aegina would not be complete without exploring its ancient Acropolis, the Temple of Aphaia. Set atop a hill surrounded by pine trees, this well-preserved Doric temple was dedicated to the goddess Aphaia, a deity unique to Aegina. Built around 500 BC, the temple's architecture and its alignment with the Parthenon in Athens and the Temple of Poseidon at Sounion form a mysterious "Sacred Triangle" on the map of Greece. Standing at the Acropolis, with panoramic views of the Saronic Gulf, it was easy to see why this place held such sacred significance.

Upon returning to the mainland, I retreated to Cape Sounio, Grecotel's iconic Athens Riviera resort that became a highlight of my trip. Cape Sounio is set against the backdrop of the majestic Temple of Poseidon at Cape Sounion. My view for the night was a private pool overlooking the sparkling Aegean Sea and the ancient temple perched on the cliff on a full moon night. As evening descended, the Temple of Poseidon was bathed in golden light, creating a mesmerising view that felt almost surreal. Moreover, dining at Cape Sounio was an experience unto itself.

The resort's restaurants served gourmet Mediterranean cuisine crafted from fresh, locally sourced ingredients.

## Rhodes' Living History and Vibrant Legends

Arriving in Rhodes, I was welcomed into a world where medieval legends and myths converge with the beauty of the Aegean. Rhodes' Old Town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, invites exploration within its fortified walls. Wandering the cobbled streets, I came across the Grand Master's Palace, a testament to the Knights of St. John who once ruled here. The Gothic architecture, combined with artifacts from the medieval era, created an atmosphere that felt otherworldly. This preserved medieval city, with its narrow alleys and vibrant bazaars, made me feel like I was walking through a chapter of history.

### There are two roads to Rhodes!

The island offers a captivating dual experience, blending its rich historical and mythological heritage with modern leisure and entertainment. Steeped in legend as the island of the Sun God Helios, Rhodes invites visitors to explore its UNESCO-listed Old Town, the medieval Palace of the Grand Master, and the mythological narratives that shape its identity. At the same time, the island is a haven for contemporary indulgence, with sun-kissed Tsambika beach, vibrant nightlife hubs in Faliraki, and the upscale Casino Rodos offering endless entertainment. Whether you are drawn by its timeless history or its lively modern charm, Rhodes promises a journey like no other.

For my stay, I checked into the luxurious Grecotel LUXME Dama Dama, Greece's leading hospitality group. Situated along the famous Faliraki beach, the resort offers sun-filled public spaces, a 100-meter pool, and gardens with bungalows framed by a vast beach line. One can also opt for LUXME Dama Dama's holiday concept, which offers a completely indulgent experience with exclusive beachfront stays, curated dining, unlimited beverages, child-friendly perks, and dynamic activities, perfect for a stress-free getaway.



Athens Day Cruise

© Anita Jain



Grandmaster's Palace, Rhodes



Homemade ice-cream at Hydra Island



Aerial view of Greece



Temple of Olympian Zeus





*Grecootel LUXME Dama Dama*

### Symi Island

Just a short boat ride from Rhodes, the island of Symi unfolds like a picture-perfect Venetian painting. As our boat approached, I was struck by the colourful neoclassical houses cascading down Symi's steep hillsides. The island has preserved its charm through the ages with its traditional architecture and bustling sponge shops. Wandering through its narrow streets, I found myself transported to another time. Symi's quiet elegance and unique cultural heritage made it a hidden jewel in the Aegean, offering a slower, more contemplative side of Greece.

Upon returning to Rhodes, I found myself craving the familiar flavours of home. To my delight, I discovered *Cosmopolitan Cuisines*, an authentic Indian restaurant in Rhodes Town. The restaurant offers a variety of distinguished Indian specialties, providing a comforting taste of home for travellers. The warm ambience and attentive service created a delightful dining experience, satisfying my longing for Indian cuisine amidst my Greek adventure.

### Kallithea Springs and the Serenity of Lindos

Kallithea Springs, a picturesque bay renowned for its healing waters, was a tranquil retreat. Surrounded by Roman-inspired architecture and lush palm trees, the springs have been cherished for their therapeutic properties since antiquity. The experience rejuvenated and refreshed me for the next destination—Lindos, a scenic village that perfectly balances history and beauty. In Lindos, the Acropolis on a hilltop offered breathtaking views over the Aegean, while the traditional whitewashed houses and winding alleyways below added to the village's charm. As I climbed to the ancient ruins, the panoramic views of the sea and the historic Virgin of Lindos Chapel created a profoundly spiritual experience. Lindos encapsulates the very essence of Greece—an enchanting blend

of ancient history, natural beauty, and peaceful ambience.

### Sweet Discoveries at the Bees Museum and the Filerimos Cross

The Bees Museum in Rhodes offered a fascinating look into the island's beekeeping tradition. Transparent observation hives allowed a glimpse into the intricate world of bees, revealing the remarkable processes of honey production. Rhodes has a long history of beekeeping, and the museum showcased its evolution from ancient practices to modern techniques. Tasting local honey was a delightful highlight, a reminder of how closely Greek culture is tied to its land and natural resources.

The Filerimos Cross, located on a hill overlooking Ialysos, offered one of the most striking views of Rhodes. Standing at the top, I could see the sprawling towns and shimmering bays below, framed by the island's rolling hills. The nearby Monastery of Filerimos, with its tranquil courtyards and sacred history, added a spiritual layer to the experience. Watching the sun set over the Aegean from Filerimos was a moment of sheer beauty, capturing the timeless appeal of Rhodes.



*Cosmopolitan Cuisines, Indian Restaurant in Rhodes*



*Stathis Hatzis, Local Hero and Legendary Sponge Diver of Symi Island*



*Natural sponge from the depths of Symi's waters*



*A jet flying by The Filerimos Cross*





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# Celestyal Cruises sets sail on a Future of Innovation and Sustainable Growth

Renowned for its culturally immersive itineraries and dedication to sustainability, Celestyal Cruises is redefining the cruise experience. Under the leadership of Marios Polydorou, Vice President, Business Development, Celestyal Cruises, the focus is on less-explored destinations and cutting-edge technology - offering travellers a transformative journey connecting deeply with local cultures. Celestyal focuses on the Indian market through its GSA, STIC Travel Group, promoting culturally immersive itineraries tailored to Indian travellers.

Prativa Vaidya Bhalla

Celestyal's strategy for promoting cruise travel in destinations where tourism is not a priority revolves around offering a dynamic mix of iconic landmarks and hidden gems. Marios noted, "Its mid-sized ships are designed to access ports that larger vessels can't, enabling guests to explore both popular destinations and remote, lesser-visited locales. This unique approach is complemented by extended stays in these regions, allowing travellers to immerse themselves in the local culture and history."

Celestyal stands out for its strong partnerships with local economies, creating authentic experiences that not only benefit guests but also support the communities they visit. From guided tours to tasting local delicacies, Celestyal ensures that each excursion offers a deep connection to the destination.

## Technology Enhancing the Cruise Experience

Celestyal is leveraging the latest in technology to enhance guest experiences both on and off the ship. Since 2023, the fleet has been equipped with Starlink LEO (Low Earth Orbit) satellites, providing guests with fast, reliable internet, ensuring connectivity no matter how far off the beaten path they sail.

Marios further shared, "Celestyal is set to launch a comprehensive mobile app in 2025, designed to streamline the cruise experience with features like digital boarding passes, activity reservations, onboard purchases, and even access to emergency protocols. The app, paired with onboard self-service kiosks, will give guests full control of their journey, ensuring a smooth and enjoyable trip."



▲ Marios Polydorou

## Introducing Immersive Itineraries

Celestyal's focus on less-explored destinations is not just about avoiding the crowds—it is about offering travellers authentic, culturally rich experiences. The cruise line prioritises destinations based on their cultural significance, sustainability, and the ability to provide immersive, local experiences. Extended stays in ports allow guests the time to truly connect with the place, rather than just visiting tourist spots.

Celestyal is committed to crafting itineraries that minimise environmental impact while supporting local businesses. The company is making conscious efforts to align its itineraries with the global trend towards responsible tourism.

## Navigating Uncharted Horizons

Looking ahead, Celestyal Cruises is expanding its offerings to cater to the growing demand

for cultural immersion and exotic destinations, particularly in the Arabian Gulf and Indian markets. This year, Celestyal's fleet will operate year-round in the Arabian Gulf, with its flagship ship Celestyal Journey homeporting in Doha and offering cruises to both iconic cities like Dubai and Abu Dhabi and lesser-known locations such as Sir Bani Yas Island and Khasab.

"In 2025, Celestyal will debut its Desert Days itinerary, specifically targeting Indian travellers with cultural experiences such as local culinary traditions and immersive adventures that resonate with the Indian market's growing appetite for culturally enriched travel. Additionally, the upcoming Celestyal Discovery will further enhance the cruise line's presence in the region, offering shorter, culturally immersive cruises that cater to Indian travellers seeking warmth and exotic experiences during the winter months," Marios announced.

Celestyal's flexible itineraries, offering options ranging from three to seven-night cruises, allow travellers to design their perfect vacation, making it the ideal choice for those seeking flexibility, cultural depth, and a more personalised cruising experience.

## A New Era of Cruise Travel

With its forward-thinking approach, Celestyal Cruises is setting the stage for the next generation of cruise travel. By combining technology, sustainability, and a focus on authentic cultural experiences, the cruise line is differentiating itself in an increasingly competitive market. As it expands into new destinations and continues to refine its offerings, Celestyal is making waves in the cruise industry, offering travellers a unique way to explore the world, one hidden gem at a time.

For bookings, please contact STIC Travel Group at 0124-4595300 Extn. 370 | Mobile: +91 9717179273 and Email: celestyal.india@sticgroup.com





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from only **US\$509** pp/cruise

Dubai - Khasab - Sir Bani Yas - Abu Dhabi - Doha - Bahrain - Dubai

**Dep. date 2024:**

December 09, 16, 23, 30

**Dep. date 2025:**

February 17, 24



### 3 Night Desert Days

from only **US\$319** pp/cruise

Abu Dhabi - Doha - Bahrain - Dubai

**Dep. dates 2024:**

Dec 13, 20, 27

**Dep. dates 2025:**

Jan 03; Feb 21, 28



### 4 Night Desert Days

from only **US\$399** pp/cruise

Dubai - Khasab - Sir Bani Yas Island - Abu Dhabi

**Dep. dates 2024:**

Dec 09, 16, 23, 30

**Dep. dates 2025:**

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# Jumeirah Zabeel Saray capturing the heart of India's growing affluent travel market

Jumeirah Zabeel Saray, an iconic luxury resort in Dubai, offers a perfect blend of Ottoman-inspired design, opulent amenities, and world-class service. Mark Hehir, General Manager, Jumeirah Zabeel Saray, highlights the resort's growing appeal to the Indian market, making it a top choice for Indian travellers seeking an extraordinary experience, including memorable weddings and luxurious stays.

**Prashant Nayak**

**J**umeirah Zabeel Saray, located on the West Crescent of Palm Jumeirah, Dubai, is an opulent beachside resort inspired by the grandeur of the Ottoman Empire. Since its inception in 2011, Jumeirah Zabeel Saray has been a symbol of luxury, offering 405 rooms and suites, many with stunning panoramic views of the Arabian Gulf or Dubai skyline. The resort also features 38 exclusive Royal Residences. A standout attraction is the award-winning Talise Ottoman Spa, celebrated as one of the largest and most lavish spas in the Middle East. The resort features diverse dining options and a variety of indoor and outdoor venues for business events, corporate functions, and weddings, making it a perfect destination for luxury travellers.

## Appeal Across Regions

The resort has a diverse clientele, attracting guests from the UK, Europe, Russia, and the CIS region, including Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Mark says, "Guests typically stay for six to twelve nights, especially during school holidays. We also welcome a significant number of regional guests from the GCC countries, such as Saudi Arabia, and those opting for staycations. Our clientele is very mixed in nationality and age, with families representing about 35–40 per cent of guests, and couples. We also often see multi-generational travel, with two to three generations travelling together."

The hotel maintains an average occupancy rate of around 75 per cent year-round, with peaks during weekends, especially in the summer, when it attracts many local GCC travellers. The resort's unique location, surrounded by the sea, offers guests stunning waterfront views and a serene beachside atmosphere. During peak season, from October to May, occupancy often exceeds 85 per cent.



▲ Mark Hehir

## Capturing the Growing Indian Market

Jumeirah Zabeel Saray has seen steady growth, particularly within the Indian market, which is drawn to the resort's opulent design and cultural heritage. Mark adds, "The Indian market is growing rapidly, especially in the wedding segment. Indian travellers tend to meet halfway in Dubai for family gatherings, particularly when their relatives live in the UK or other parts of the world. The Indian core market makes up around 10 per cent of our business, though it is a mixed market due to the high number of Indians living abroad, making it hard to track precisely."

In addition to family-friendly services, the resort has made a concerted effort to cater to the culinary preferences of Indian guests. The hotel's acclaimed Indian restaurant, Amala, offers traditional dishes crafted by a skilled Indian chef, enhancing the dining experience with authentic flavours.

Weddings play a significant role in attracting affluent Indian guests. Jumeirah Zabeel Saray's picturesque garden lawn offers an exceptional venue for weddings, while the luxurious foyer adds to the grandeur, making it an ideal backdrop for large celebrations. Mark mentions, "The Indian market has consistently grown, particularly in the wedding segment. We aim for a balanced approach, ensuring that the property is not overwhelmed by consecutive wedding events, as this could impact the hotel's operations. However, each wedding provides the potential for repeat business and valuable referrals."

## Innovative Initiatives for a Greener Future

The hotel is committed to sustainability with initiatives to reduce environmental impact. An automated water bottling system produces 4,500 reusable or glass bottles daily. A sustainable garden grows leafy greens, cutting reliance on imports. Mark notes, "We are installing solar panels on the rooftop, expected to offset 15 per cent of energy consumption. We have also upgraded laundry systems with energy-efficient equipment using less gas and electricity."

## Enhanced Luxury and Exclusivity in the Future

In terms of future growth, the hotel plans to reduce its room count from 405 to 375, allowing for larger, more luxurious accommodations and further enhancing the exclusivity and premium experience for discerning travellers. Mark explains, "This change is part of our strategy to offer a more refined experience for guests, with a focus on personalisation and luxury." Future developments, particularly from 2025 onwards, will further elevate the resort's offerings, focusing on enhancing culinary experiences and guest satisfaction.





JÜSTA SHIVIR



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# INDIANS CARVE NEW TRAILS IN

# SKI TOURISM

The siren song of serene snow-clad mountains has long inspired countless books, films, and dreams, painting vivid images of powdery snow, cosy log cabins, and roaring fires. Add the exhilaration of skiing down pristine trails; the pull is magnetic. What was once the exclusive domain of the privileged is now becoming increasingly accessible, bringing the joys of mountain retreats to a larger audience. TTJ explores the factors fuelling the rapid ascent of ski tourism in India and its growing presence on the global stage.

**Prativa Vaidya Bhalla**

In recent years, India has witnessed a surge in winter tourism, with ski holidays carving a niche in the travel itineraries of both domestic and international explorers. From thrilling adventures on snowy slopes to luxurious stays and culinary delights, ski tourism is transforming into a wholesome experience that combines adventure and comfort in the lap of nature.

## Do Indians Ski?

Ski tourism is steadily gaining popularity among Indian travellers, though it remains a niche segment compared to mainstream activities like beach vacations, city breaks or cultural tourism. Harjit Singh, Founder Travel Twist, with 24 years of experience in the travel and tourism sector, explains, “During the 2023-24 winter season, approximately 30,000 Indians travelled overseas for ski tourism, reflecting the rapid rise of this emerging niche in the Indian travel industry. This growth is fuelled by rising demand for immersive adventure-driven

experiences, increasing affluence of upper-middle-class Indians, and aspirational social media content. Better infrastructure at domestic ski resorts and easier access to international destinations, supported by direct flights and relaxed visa policies, are making skiing holidays more feasible.

Rohit Shorey, Founder and CEO, Kazin DMC, backed by his expertise in Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, adds, “Increasing disposable incomes and exposure to global travel experiences is encouraging more Indians to consider skiing holidays

abroad, especially to the CIS countries. Their affordability compared to European Ski holidays, world-class ski facilities, improved flight connectivity, and simplified visa processes make these destinations more accessible. At the same time, unique cultural experiences and family-friendly activities add to their charm. Tailored services like Indian cuisine and Hindi-speaking guides attract Indians to CIS ski resorts.

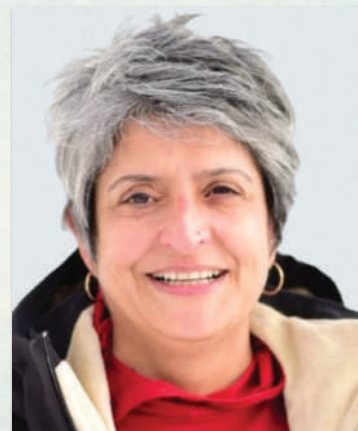
Dilshad Master, Director, Bull’s Adventures, hailing from the first family of skiers, reminisces, “When we first started



▲ Harjit Singh



▲ Rohit Shorey



▲ Dilshad Master





our family ski programmes in 2010, the takers were mostly friends and family. It was passion prevailing over profit! The programme picked up in 2015, and I admit, I used my four-year-old as my marketing icon! She learned to ski at three and a half years of age and influenced many others, which is how our groups grew. By 2019, we had run two ski groups in Gulmarg, each with 24 -26 guests. I do not like taking large groups, as we like to focus on the progress of our guests.”

### The Winter Wonderland Experience

While some seek the thrill of skiing and other adventures, most Indian travellers are interested in the overall ambience, including picturesque landscapes, cultural experiences, shopping, and après-ski options. Rohit notes a growing trend: “Indian parents want to introduce their children to exotic sports like skiing and snowboarding, and destinations offering family-friendly facilities, beginner lessons, and engaging child-centric activities align perfectly with this trend.”

Harjit points out, “While interest in skiing as an activity is growing, for Indian travellers, it is the combination of adventure, scenic beauty, cultural exploration, and après-ski indulgence that truly enhances the appeal of ski holidays. Destinations showcasing a diverse array of winter experiences are more likely to attract Indian travellers.

Après-Ski literally means ‘After-Ski’ as the end of a skiing day is celebrated with friends in lively bars, enjoying warming drinks. Dilshad asserts, “The concept of après-ski does not exist in India. There is no partying or champagne toast on the slopes! Once we wrap up our skiing for the day – everyone settles down in the common room

for hot chocolate and Kahwa while the kids step out for snowball fights. Our groups are family-centric with kids, so the après-ski is focused on what they would like to do. Our guests have fun bonding with their families while everyone learns a new sport.

### Indian Skiers on International Slopes

Europe remains a timeless favourite for ski enthusiasts, offering a charismatic blend of prestige and luxury at iconic destinations. Naming the most popular destinations, Harjit shares, “Switzerland offers ski hotspots like Zermatt, St. Moritz, and Jungfrau, France weaves icy magic with Chamonix and Courchevel, and Austria presents high-end resorts like St. Anton and Kitzbühel. Additionally, resorts such as Whistler in British Columbia are drawing Indian travellers who wish to combine skiing with their broader North American travel plans. These winter playgrounds are celebrated for their expansive slopes, top-notch facilities, spectacular gastronomy, colourful après-ski scene, and rich cultural experiences.”

Highlighting several up-and-coming ski destinations gaining global admiration, Harjit names Gudauri in Georgia, Andorra nestled between Spain and France, Niseko and Hakuba in Japan, and Erciyes and Uluda in Turkey. These emerging newbies offer exceptional snow, top-tier facilities, less crowded slopes against rich cultural backdrops and also offer compelling alternatives to traditional ski hubs with competitive pricing and direct connections from India. Dilshad recalls a ski location in Italy and shares, “We did a ski trip to the Dolomites in Italy in December 2019 with many returning guests who now regularly join us in Gulmarg.”

Rohit identifies the CIS countries as the



next big thing in ski tourism. Destinations like Shymbulak in Kazakhstan, Shahdag in Azerbaijan, and Gudauri in Georgia are emerging as attractive alternatives to pricier European options. They offer modern facilities, diverse terrains suitable for various skill levels, and unique cultural experiences, all at competitive prices. Improved connectivity, simplified visa processes, and a growing interest in offbeat winter destinations increase their popularity.

### Beloved Indian Ski Destinations

Gulmarg in Jammu and Kashmir easily tops the list of popular skiing destinations in India, closely followed by Auli in Uttarakhand and Solang in Himachal Pradesh. Harjit believes Gulmarg is the heart of skiing in India. “The



Gulmarg Gondola, one of the highest cable cars in the world, attracts both beginners and seasoned skiers. Auli is gaining fame as a family-friendly destination, offering stunning views of Nanda Devi and easy-to-learn beginner slopes. Its relatively low cost and growing infrastructure make it highly appealing to domestic travellers.”

Rohit emphasises, “Gulmarg and Auli’s rising popularity is due to their affordability, improved infrastructure, and accessibility compared to international destinations. Growing media coverage and government promotions have fuelled interest, making these destinations attractive and affordable. Dilshad proudly shares, “Our next ski trip in Gulmarg is scheduled for the end of February 2025, and we have already started signing up guests who know this is an annual pilgrimage for us!”

### Domestic Market Challenges

India’s emerging ski market faces significant challenges, particularly in infrastructure, weather conditions, and environmental impact caused by overcrowding. Harjit highlights critical obstacles, including the limited availability of well-developed ski resorts, inadequate access to advanced equipment, and poor connectivity to high-potential locations. Additionally, low participation rates due to a lack of familiarity with skiing among many Indians, shortage of structured learning programs for beginners and unpredictable snowfall due to climate change further complicate these issues.

However, Harjit sees great opportunities ahead with the rise of more ski schools and organised training programs. Many Indians returning from international ski trips aim to refine their skills locally. Government and private investments in winter sports infrastructure, along with events like ski



festivals, are driving awareness and participation.

Rohit asserts that India’s winter sports tourism market is growing, driven by rising adventure tourism demand and government initiatives like the Khelo India Winter Games. However, challenges such as limited facilities, safety concerns, and environmental impact require to be addressed.

Outlining key on-ground challenges, Dilshad explains, “To be serious about winter sports, we need serious infrastructure in India, and I do not see anything happening for the next 10 – 15 years at least. The Gulmarg Gondola to Station 1 at Kongdori was built in 1998 and Apharwat in 2005 - no further ski lift networks have been constructed for the past 20 years! In 2010, we only saw serious skiers on the slopes, but today, holiday tourists have surpassed the skiing crowd by 10x, and getting on to the Gondola to Kongdori is such a fight!”

Offering solutions, Dilshad further clarifies, “We need to spread out the skiing activity. Build more ski destinations in Kashmir to take the pressure off Gulmarg. Today, the beginner slopes in Gulmarg are

so crowded with wandering holidaymakers that sometimes I fear for my guest’s safety. Earlier, Gulmarg received a good three months of ski weather from December to March - today, it has come down to one month!” She proposes an innovative remedy, explaining, “There are snow-making machines used in renowned destinations like the Swiss Alps to supplement natural snowfall. If we aim to extend the ski season and compete globally in creating world-class ski destinations, the ability to produce artificial snow is essential. The technology is already in place—artificial snow played a pivotal role in delivering optimal conditions during the Winter Olympics in Sochi (2014), Pyeongchang (2018), and Beijing (2022).”

### The Future Ahead is Snowy!

As more Indian travellers discover the thrill of skiing and snowboarding, the country is steadily carving its niche in the global winter sports arena. With a focused push in promotion, training, and state-of-the-art infrastructure, alongside collaborative efforts of the government and private enterprises, India’s snow-laden slopes are poised to become a hotspot for adventure enthusiasts.





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# Tailored Luxury and Sustainability, Destination Weddings and Beyond Shangri-La Muscat's Distinct Edge

In this insightful interaction with Philippe Kronberg, Resort General Manager, Shangri-La Muscat, we understand what sets the resort apart in Oman's luxury hospitality landscape. From its blend of Omani heritage and modern luxury to its focus on sustainability, wellness, and tailored guest experiences, discover how Shangri-La Muscat is redefining luxury travel for global and Indian guests.

**Prashant Nayak**

## What sets Shangri-La Muscat apart in Oman's luxury hospitality market?

To begin with, Shangri-La Muscat is a destination in itself. Beyond five-star luxury, we blend Omani heritage and thoughtful services rooted in Middle Eastern hospitality. The staff, dressed in traditional Omani outfits, welcome guests with coffee and dates. Our unique location between the Al Hajar Mountains and the Gulf of Oman offers a unique sense of place, blending the ocean and the land.

## How has Shangri-La Muscat adapted to the growing preferences of Indian luxury travellers?

India is one of the key source markets for us, and we keep a close tab on it. A surge in the travel volumes to the Middle East, especially Oman, has been recorded this year. Shangri-La Muscat is well-positioned to appeal to guests, which includes UHNIs and HNIs looking for luxurious destinations. Our brand resonates with them globally as well. We are also perfect for quick getaways, especially as the trends of long weekends and festive break travels have taken precedence in India.

We understand that a cookie-cutter approach does not appeal to Indian guests. They seek tailored experiences and curated menus, especially during celebrations. This is exactly why Shangri-La Muscat fits the bill. We are well-equipped to offer multi-generational families a holistic stay. There are engaging activities for younger

guests, such as Cool Zone Kids Club, a Splash Pad and a mini-golf course, and a lazy river meandering through two wings of Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah. There is something to satisfy every foodie, as they can pick from 14 restaurants, including Italian fare at Capri Court, fresh seafood at Bait Al Bahr, buffet meals at Al Tanoor, and Southeast Asian flavours at Chow Mee. For couples and honeymooners, adults-only Shangri-La Al Husn provides a romantic setting and privacy, complemented by a bespoke Dine by Design experience.



▲ Philippe Kronberg



## What is Shangri-La Muscat's vision for the future of luxury hospitality, enhancing guest experiences, wellness offerings, and sustainability practices in Oman?

The future belongs to personalised luxury. Eco-luxury and mindful consumption are two buzzwords that hospitality brands will take into consideration. We are constantly innovating, going beyond the usual to redefine guest journeys, immersing them in Omani essence. As soon as you enter the property, you will be welcomed by the fragrance of Luban wafting through the lobby and corridors. We offer a guided tour of the on-property Frankincense Garden, led by Muscat's first-ever Frankincense Sommelier, where guests can touch and smell this resin in its natural, purest form. We have an Indian contemporary restaurant, Aangan, helmed by Michelin-starred Chef Rohit Ghai. All this is wrapped into tangible, luxurious products and bespoke services tailored to the guests.

## How has Shangri-La Muscat leveraged its culinary offerings, and could you share highlights from the recently concluded 'Taste of Shangri-La' festival?

Culinary excellence is at the heart of the annual month-long Taste of Shangri-La festival. Guests and diners indulge in a curated journey of flavours crafted by our talented chefs at five specialty dining venues: Bait Al Bahr, Capri Court, Chow Mee, Sultanah, and Aangan by Rohit Ghai, featuring specially curated six-course tasting menus. What makes it unique is that, in addition to a variety of flavours, guests have the opportunity to meet and interact with the chefs behind this culinary experience.

## How is Shangri-La Muscat leveraging destination weddings and MICE tourism, and what are the key takeaways from the recent Love, Shangri-La: A Muscat wedding showcase?

Love, Shangri-La: A Muscat Wedding Showcase was a successful edition, exceeding our expectations. It provided a firsthand look at the extraordinary possibilities we offer, multi-faceted venues, and services tailored specifically for Indian weddings. We hosted over 1,000 attendees, including top Indian wedding planners and couples looking for a dream destination for their weddings. It underscored our commitment to becoming the premier destination for grand celebrations. It also aligns with the Oman Ministry of Heritage and Tourism's aim towards promoting the sultanate as a prime wedding destination.

Considering that Indian weddings, pre-wedding celebrations, and honeymoons are leading to international travel and the Middle East emerging as a preferred choice, we are poised to host more weddings in 2025.

## How is Shangri-La Muscat leading in sustainability while maintaining exceptional guest experiences?

Our sustainability efforts are embedded in our operations, from eliminating single-use plastics, installing water dispensers around the resort, replacing plastic bottles, water conservation, an energy-efficient electricity system to save 20 per cent of the resort's energy



annually, and upcycling food waste. Our water recycling system has recycled over 120 Summer Olympic pools' (50 mt) worth of water since 2022. We source locally, like seafood from the fishermen at Muttrah Market and herbs and vegetables from the chefs' garden. Even bathroom amenities are made with Luban (Frankincense) from the Najd region of Oman.

Our dedicated in-house Turtle Ranger works relentlessly to protect the endangered Green Turtle and critically endangered Hawksbill Turtle nesting on our beaches. In 2023, 154 turtles successfully hatched 4,369 hatchlings, giving them a chance to return to the sea.

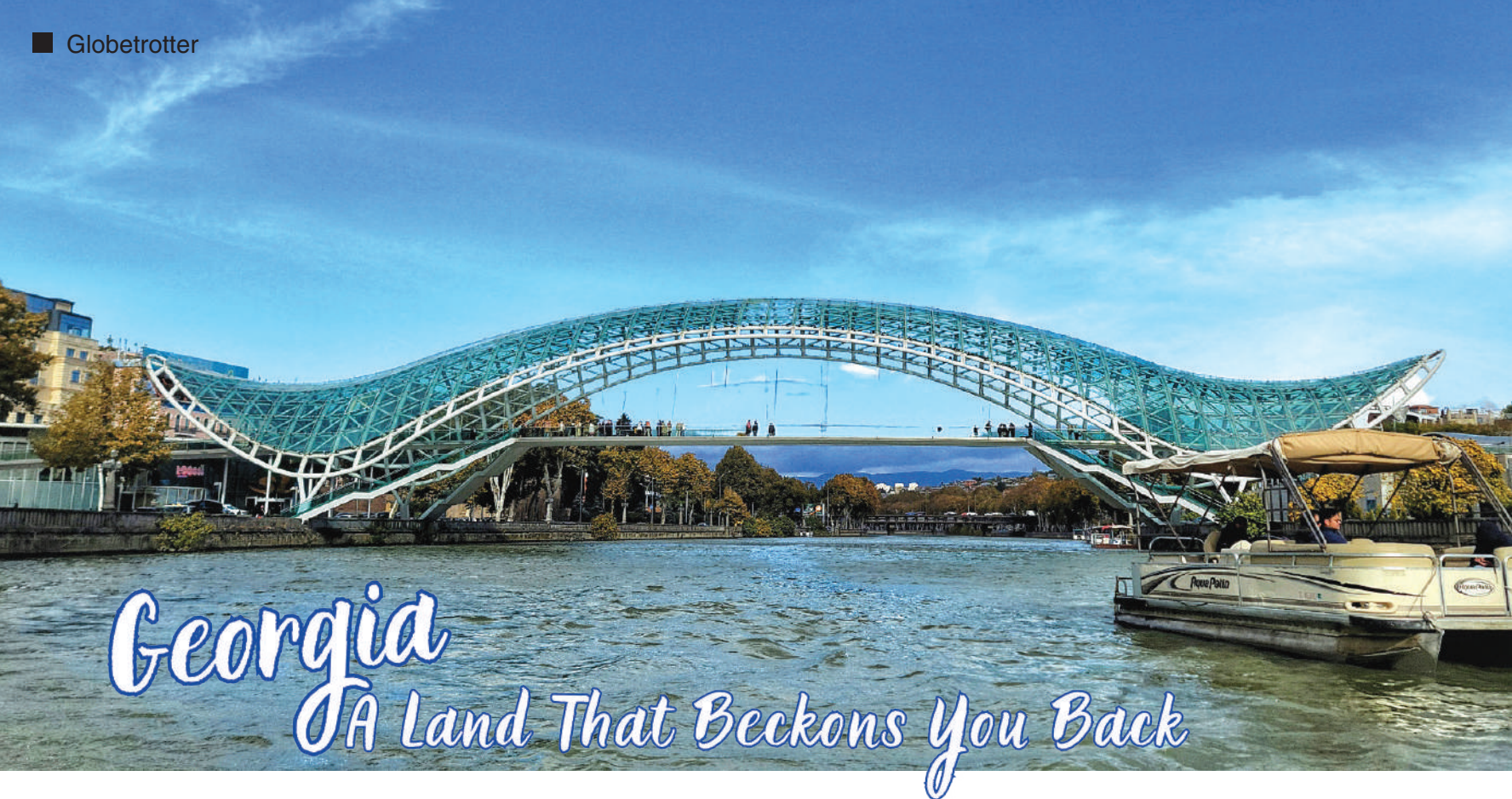
## Looking ahead to the broader luxury travel landscape, what trends do you foresee shaping the industry over the next few years, and how is Shangri-La Muscat preparing to stay ahead?

The global luxury market is expanding and evolving towards experiential and personalised. The Middle East is on the cusp of becoming a giant in this segment, as travel volumes have surged significantly compared to pre-pandemic time, both from India and globally. With world-class hospitality infrastructure and tourism products, we are equipped to capture more volumes sustainably.

At Shangri-La Muscat, we anticipated these shifts and enhanced our cultural and wellness offerings and tailored packages for multi-generational vacationers.







# Georgia

## A Land That Beckons You Back

Located on the southeastern coast of the Black Sea, surrounded by Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia, lies Georgia. A country steeped in history, valour, and folklore and one of extreme natural beauty. Kazin DMC, a leading B2B incoming agency specialising in Georgia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, recently organised a week-long luxury familiarisation tour for its partner agents from India to Georgia. TTJ was invited as a media partner to explore, discover, and share its wonders and delights.

**Gurjit Singh Ahuja**

A direct five-hour thirty-minute Indigo Airlines flight from New Delhi brought us to the Georgian capital of Tbilisi just past midnight. My valid US visa was my *carte blanche* to entry, as it provided me with visa-free entry to Georgia. Immigration was smooth, and I soon collected my luggage and headed out with our group to be greeted by the Kazin DMC's welcome team. Ani Dadunashvili, Vikrant Grover, Gubazi Abuladze, and Tsotne Mirotadze from Team Kazin were right there, all beaming to welcome us, and we were whisked away in our waiting vehicles headed to our hotel in the heart of Tbilisi.

Tbilisi Marriott Hotel on Rustaveli Avenue is a great location; this grandiose heritage hotel would be our homeport for the next two nights as we explored Tbilisi and its environs. A warm Georgian welcome awaited us here, too, as we all had a shot of Chacha as we collected our room keys. Our rooms reflected classic elegance with high ceilings, coffee and beige-toned interiors, contemporary lighting, and luxurious amenities. The bed was so comfortable that I quickly drifted off to sleep for whatever was left of the night.

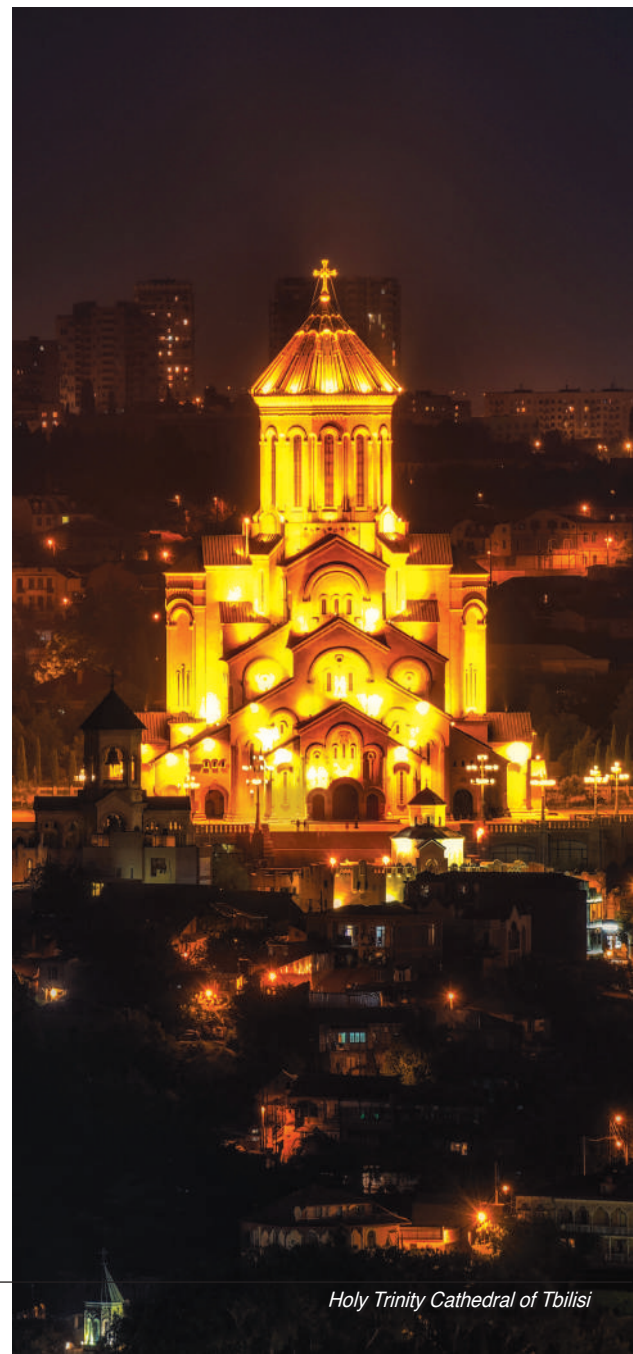
### Exploring Tbilisi Free and Easy

Our hotel was located in the best part of the town, close to the Georgian parliament building and Liberty Square, with the terrace of our presidential suite offering perhaps the best open-air panoramic view of Tbilisi from a private setting.

Special golf carts were arranged for our introductory tour of Tbilisi as we whizzed past important streets and landmarks, soon reaching the riverfront where a special boat awaited us for a panoramic river tour of the city. It was a super breezy and chilly morning, but thanks to our heavy jackets and welcoming shots of Chacha and paper glasses filled with home-brewed classic Georgian Saperavi wine by our boat crew, we were all warm and comfortable.

After our river cruise, we crossed into Tbilisi's historic old town via the ultra-modern Peace Bridge, a striking tubular structure with a wave-like design. This journey led us to one of the city's most iconic landmarks, the magnificent Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition, a symbol of the Georgian Orthodox Church named after Mount Zion in Jerusalem.

Our exploration continued with a visit to the underground Meidan Bazar that still holds the rustic charm of the ancient bazaars and is a single point for you to pick up Georgian handicrafts, cheese, wines, Chacha, fridge magnets, and touristic memorabilia. This was followed by a stroll along Shardeni







Zhinvali Reservoir



The group sightseeing in Tbilisi

Street, renowned for its vibrant European-style café culture and charming restaurants.

The Holy Trinity Cathedral of Tbilisi, a recent addition to the city and currently the largest cathedral in all of Georgia, with its gold-gilded dome, stands as a Tbilisi landmark and also a must-visit, especially during the evening as the sun goes down and the evening prayers are being recited. A ride on the Tbilisi Funicular is highly recommended, offering breathtaking panoramic views of the city below, whether bathed in daylight or glowing with lights at night.

### Excursions from Tbilisi

Visits to the picturesque Zhinvali Reservoir, Ananuri Fortified Castle, Gudauri, and Kazbegi are a must-do on your travels to Georgia. Gudauri's ski resort is the largest and most modern in Georgia, with over 57 km of ski runs and seven ski lifts. It is also a great place to enjoy paragliding. Ideally, if you have time, I strongly recommend spending a night, perhaps two, at the elegant Rooms Hotel in Kazbegi. The hotel's sundeck and floor-to-ceiling height lobby windows offer magnificent views of Mt. Kazbegi.

Mount Kazbegi, standing at 5,054 meters, is the third-highest peak in the country. To make the best of your stay, please book the Mt. Kazbegi view rooms. The hotel also

features an indoor temperature-controlled swimming pool and serves excellent food.

A half-day trip to Mtskheta is not to be missed; it is one of the oldest cities in Georgia and one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. It is approximately 20 km north of Tbilisi. Mtskheta, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is celebrated as the birthplace of Christianity in Georgia and remains one of its most vibrant spiritual centres. Among its treasures is the Svetitskhoveli Cathedral, the second-largest church in the country and a masterpiece of Georgian religious architecture.

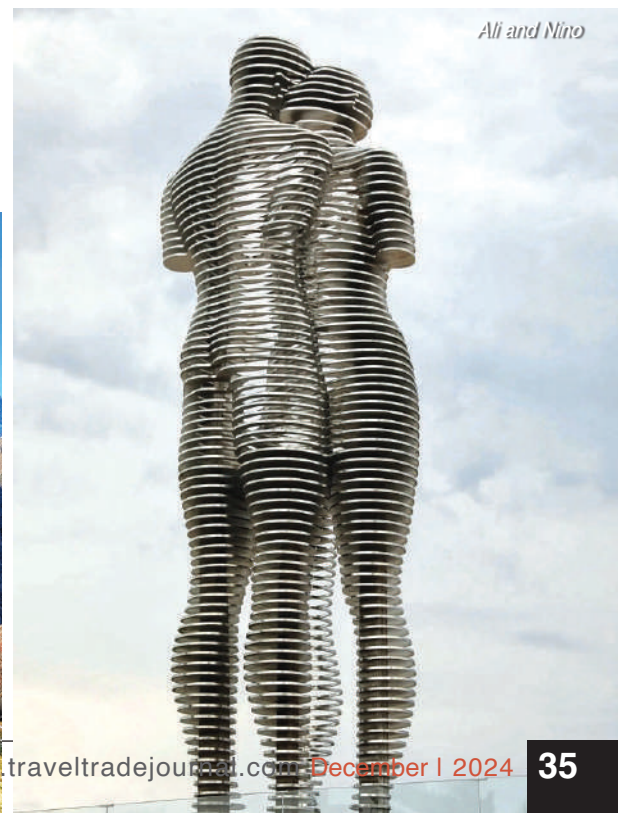
### Batumi – The Georgian Riviera on the Black Sea

A five-hour train journey from Tbilisi brings you to the second-largest city of Georgia, located on the Black Sea coast, close to the Turkish border. Your first impression of the town is that it is a hybrid between Monte Carlo and Las Vegas with an Eastern European touch, making Batumi unique. Much of Batumi's economy revolves around tourism and casinos; it is nicknamed 'The Las Vegas of the Black Sea.'

The Argo Cable Car takes you to the Batumi viewpoint, offering a panoramic view of the city and the Black Sea. The sunset cruise on the Black Sea aboard a pirate-themed schooner sets the tone for



Neptune Fountain



Ali and Nino



Mount Kazbegi



the evening, as you disembark to witness the pure bliss and magic created by the illuminated statues of Ali and Nino.

A visit to the Batumi Botanical Garden calms your nerves and offers a different view of the city; for the fun-seeking, there is also a wonderful zip-line experience.

### The Birthplace of Wine

Georgia boasts of 8,000 years of winemaking heritage, making it perhaps the birthplace of winemaking. The traditional way of making wine in a clay qvevri is unique to Georgia and is still practiced.

Wine is an integral part of Georgian culture, and home winemaking for personal consumption is still practiced in abundance. The Saperavi grape of Georgia is a local favourite of cultish proportion and a part of the folklore. For the wine lovers, Georgia is a dream come true. A day trip visiting wineries in the Kakheti region will be a great introduction to start your love affair with Georgian wines.

My visit to Vineria Kakheti was enlightening, as was their well-informed sommelier. Romeo took me on a journey through time, educating me about the history of Georgian winemaking, local grape varieties, and then nosing and tasting some of the most delicious wines.

Chateau Mukhrani is a classical wine estate with an aristocratic legacy, where we could experience the merger of the old ways and modern ways of winemaking as clay qvevri's, oak casks, and stainless-steel silos coexist to create different versions of wine.



Rustavi International Motorpark

The Chateau boasts expansive grounds that narrate the tale of its winemaking heritage. We enjoyed a lovely lunch in its luxurious and classy restaurant that featured high ceilings, crystal chandeliers, and great service.

### Georgian Dining: The Supra Experience

A few experiences are as vibrant and memorable as the traditional Georgian supra, a feast to celebrate food, drink, friendship, family, and sharing experiences. Central to any Georgian feast is the Tamada, a toastmaster who hosts the dinner table. The Georgians sure love to entertain their guests with abundance, and our experience at the Ethnographer was memorable. I am in love with the Khinkali and Khachapuri, followed by grilled chicken, fish, Georgian wine, and Chacha. For Indian food lovers, Indian restaurants like Maharaja offer great vegetarian and non-vegetarian options.

For the sweet-toothed, the Georgian Barambo Chocolates are a godsend. Churchkhela is a traditional Georgian delicacy that is basically candied and stringed dried fruit, and you will see hordes of Churchkhela hanging almost everywhere, and they make for a great photograph and a must-try local delicacy.

### Great Hotel Options

Georgia offers accommodation options to cover all pockets, from the budget-friendly to the top-of-the-line hotels like the super-elegant Paragraph, Marriott, Biltmore, Swissotel, Rooms Hotel, and more, all



The Tamada Toasts

offering great world-class accommodation and dining options.

I covered a lot in my seven days in Georgia, but still, a lot remained unexplored, and I am sure to return for more soon. Georgia is a beautiful destination that makes you feel welcome, tugs at your heart, and is fast emerging as a great holiday option for Indian families and groups.

Georgia beckons, offering a world of enthralling experiences waiting to be discovered.



Classy Accommodation



Churchkhela and Other Georgian Delights



Georgian Wines



Ethnographer Restaurant





# Destination DC and TBO.com team up to offer exclusive travel deals for Indians visiting Washington, DC

Washington, DC, is set to shine as a top holiday destination, with a bustling calendar of major events, including the 2025 presidential inauguration and WorldPride 2025. In collaboration with Destination DC, TBO.com offers Indian travellers exclusive travel deals to explore the city's rich culture, festivals, and lively atmosphere.

### Team TTJ

As Washington, DC's \$10.2 billion tourism industry continues to thrive, fuelled by major international events, citywide conventions, and exciting new openings, Destination DC (DDC), the official destination marketing organisation, is preparing for sustained growth.

### DDC Boosting Tourism and Economy

At its annual Marketing Outlook Meeting, DDC outlined its strategy to capitalise on major upcoming events, such as the 2025 presidential inauguration and WorldPride 2025, while

building on the success of its current "Only One Washington, DC" campaign. In 2023, Washington, DC, welcomed a record 25.95 million visitors and generated \$10.2 billion in spending, underscoring the city's vital role in supporting local jobs and tax revenue.

### Exclusive Deals Await

TBO.com has partnered with Destination DC to promote Washington, DC, as a top holiday destination for Indian travellers. With a packed calendar of festivals, cultural attractions, and vibrant nightlife, Washington, DC, is set to top every traveller's list. Major upcoming events,

including the 2025 presidential inauguration and WorldPride 2025, are expected to attract millions of visitors, further enhancing the city's global reputation and economic growth. Exclusive offers and deals for travel bookings to Washington, DC, are available through TBO.com, making it easier than ever to explore the city.

TBO.com's collaboration with Destination DC ensures that Indian travellers can access the best travel deals and exceptional packages, offering the best of the city's festivals, culinary scenes, parades, and unmatched nightlife, promising an unforgettable adventure for all.

GOA

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# Australia Builds a Winning Partnership with India Through Sports Tourism

Tourism Australia hosted a media address in Delhi on November 11, 2024, led by Phillipa Harrison, Managing Director, Tourism Australia, with a delegation of 15 CEOs of Tourism conventions and bureaus from Australia. Taking sports tourism to the next level, Phillipa makes exciting announcements of sporting events in Australia that are guaranteed to get Indian fans extremely excited.

**Prativa Vaidya Bhalla**

India has emerged as Australia's 5th largest inbound market for arrivals, surpassing pre-COVID levels. For the year ending August 2024, arrivals reached 423,400, marking a 6 per cent growth over 2019 (399,300). From January to August 2024, arrivals totalled 285,400, an 11 per cent increase compared to both 2023 and 2019.

According to Phillipa, Australia and India have never been more closely aligned, both politically and economically. With strong governmental ties, a recently signed free trade agreement, and thriving trade and investment relations, the partnership between the two nations continues to deepen. The flourishing visitor economy is the significant outcome of this growing partnership, poised to strengthen further in the years ahead.

## World Class Sporting Events

Australia sets a great example of how sports and tourism can go hand in hand and be mutually beneficial while bringing nations closer together. Phillipa proudly declares the commencement of a headlining sporting event, "We had the Border Gavaskar series kick off on November 22, in Perth, with a set

of five matches across Australia culminating in New Year's Eve. We see this as a pivotal moment when India's attention is focused on Australia. We aim to use this opportunity to showcase the story of Australia, which extends far beyond the stadiums."

She further shares, "Cricket remains a cornerstone of the bond between India and Australia, and we continue to leverage this shared passion. Cricket inspires travel, and the excitement around the Border-Gavaskar series is proof—bookings from India for this year's series have surged fivefold compared to 2018, reflecting the growing momentum."

Australian Test captain Pat Cummins stars in Tourism Australia's special Come and Say G'day campaign aired on Indian TV during the five-test series. With up to 50 million Indian cricket fans expected to watch the matches, Cummins joins brand ambassador Ruby the Kangaroo in the segment Howzat for a Holiday? to showcase Australia's world-class tourism destinations and experiences beyond its stadiums.

In addition, the Victorian government has announced a significant cultural crossover - a demonstration match of Pro Kabaddi,

India's second-largest sport, will take place in Victoria. It is an exciting step, blending sports diplomacy with cultural exchange. Sydney has been announced as the seventh Marathon destination, and significant numbers from southeast Asia are already signing up. Another major opportunity for Australia lies in the upcoming 2032 Olympics in Southeast Queensland. After the Sydney Olympics in 2000, the country experienced a significant surge in international visitation in the following years.

## Marketing Strategy for 2025

Addressing the strategy behind the announcement of such world-class events, Phillipa explains, "Tourism Australia's role is not to sell seats in stadiums - rather to make the most of the moment when the eyes of the world are on Australia. So, our work is to exhibit the depth and breadth of the country and its experience during those big moments. A whole range of big sporting events is coming—what we call the runway of green and gold—leading up to the Olympics."

Beyond sports, Australia boasts a



diverse calendar of global, world-class events, which the organisation plans to actively promote. By showcasing these experiences, Tourism Australia aims to attract more visitors and drive engagement to highlight the country's vibrant offerings. Phillipa notes, "We are also working with our key distribution partners and airlines to convert demand into bookings. We offer exceptional culinary experiences with our produce, where it comes from, the culinary artisans who make it, and how that is delivered to someone's plate. As food and wine are significant travel drivers, we will also dial up our agritourism space next year."

Tourism Australia plans to leverage authentic stories from real people, sharing their personal experiences to encourage Indian travellers to visit the country. Advocacy has always been a cornerstone of their marketing strategy, and they will continue to utilise the power of influencers to highlight what makes Australia truly unique. As part of a new social media campaign, former Australian cricketer David Warner features some of his favourite holiday destinations and experiences in Sydney, Melbourne, and the Gold Coast.

### Cost of Event Experiences

When planning a trip to Australia, the first consideration is often the budget. On average, an Indian traveller spends between \$5,000 and \$5,900. The key to securing the best deals is booking early. If you plan to visit Australia during the Indian summer school holidays in June, booking in advance gives you access to multiple flight options, with 10 to 12 airlines offering connections. Further collaborations with airlines on tactical campaigns help drive visitation and ensure bookings. Early bookings typically result in better deals, while last-minute bookings tend to come with higher premiums. Moreover, Indians often incorporate events as part of their overall holiday experience, which makes the cost more reasonable when averaged across the entire trip.

### From MICE to Leisure

There has been a significant surge in MICE (Meetings Incentives Conferences Exhibitions) visitation, and India is consistently one of Australia's top two markets. Large groups are choosing Australia as a top destination for recognising stakeholders, employees, and dealers. This growth is driven by the increase in direct flights, which have expanded from eight flights pre-COVID to nearly 25 flights post-COVID—and the number continues to rise.

Phillipa says, "We focus on incentive travel, and you will see activity in this segment grow. We provide assistance to

get larger groups across the line for the association space." The most significant advantage to MICE travellers is the streamlined visa process. There are no biometrics or personal interviews, and the entire application is 100 per cent online. Additionally, the multi-entry visa is valid for up to five years, allowing travellers to continue exploring new Australian cities with ease. MICE travellers generally spend almost twice as much as leisure travellers, even though their stay is shorter, making them an important high-yielding segment.

Leisure travel has two parts: one is pure holidaymakers, and the other is a large growing friends and relatives segment. Phillipa notes, "The leisure traveller is key for us, and we have had great growth out of this market. We have grown about 11 per cent over the last decade, with 423,000 arrivals this year, looking to grow that to 482,000 next year." Indian students are vital to Australia's visitor economy, with around 110,000 currently studying there. Their parents often visit, boosting tourism as they explore the country.

### Unique Work Opportunities for Indians

Australia has received a phenomenal response from India, which recently joined the Working Holiday Maker programme. The predefined quota offered up to 1,000 visas, with 100 applicants selected through a ballot, but over 40,000 people applied for these visas. This programme presents an excellent opportunity for Indians looking to work and holiday in Australia. Outlining the importance of this programme Phillipa said, "This is a cohort that we love, and it is an important area of focus as working holidaymakers come, work, and they also travel far and wide across Australia."



L-R: Phillipa Harrison, Jennifer Doig, and Andrew Hogg

Another unique programme, the MATES (Mobility Arrangement for Talented Early-professionals Scheme), is designed for technically skilled Indians who wish to travel and work in Australia. Nearly 3,000 individuals can participate in this programme, allowing them to live and work in Australia for a few years. It is part of the broader Economic Cooperation Agreement between India and Australia, reflecting the increasingly close relationship between the two countries, which have become 'best mates' in recent years.

Phillipa concludes, "There is a strong ambition to grow the Indian market across Australia, with New South Wales, Sydney, and Melbourne leading the charge. Perth is also eager to expand its reach and is actively pursuing a direct flight from Delhi to Perth this week. Every state in Australia is focused on attracting Indian visitors, which is why all the state CEOs are here. Melbourne is currently the top destination for Indian arrivals, followed closely by Sydney. We look after our visitor economy and our people-to-people links are a significant part of the puzzle, which will only continue to grow."



L-R: Nipun Aggarwal, Phillipa Harrison, Campbell Wilson and Andrew Hogg  
Tourism Australia signed a three-year agreement with Air India to boost Indian tourism to Australia through joint marketing efforts.





# VisitBritain Hosts Maiden Destination Britain Middle East and Asia Trade Mission in India

VisitBritain successfully brought the best of Britain to Bengaluru from November 20 to 22, 2024, hosting its flagship trade event, Destination Britain Middle East and Asia (DB MEA), in India for the first time. The three-day event connected UK tourism suppliers with over 70 top travel buyers from India, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Japan, and South Korea, underscoring Britain’s commitment to strengthening ties with these key markets.

**Vartik Sethi**

Speaking exclusively to Travel Trade Journal, Patricia Yates, CEO, VisitBritain shared important insights into the remarkable growth and plans for the future of tourism between the UK and India at the Destination Britain Middle East and Asia trade mission.

Indian visitors are set to spend £843 million in 2024, an increase of 5 per cent compared to 2023, with 711,000 visits expected—a record-breaking 18 per cent growth year-on-year. From January to June alone, Indian travellers spent £417 million, up 20 per cent from 2023, while visits surged 27 per cent to 351,000 during the same period.

## Connecting India to the UK

Flight connectivity has been a cornerstone of this growth. Non-stop seat capacity in 2024 is up by 49 per cent compared to 2019, with routes connecting nine Indian cities to the UK. The addition of Air India’s Bengaluru-Gatwick route, launched in August, has further strengthened ties.

“Air connectivity is key, and we’re seeing tremendous collaboration with airlines like Air India, British Airways, and Virgin Atlantic,” Yates explained. “More routes mean more opportunities for travellers to discover Britain.”

Flight bookings for October-December 2024 have already outpaced 2023 by 16 per cent, with further growth anticipated in the coming months.

## The Power of Regional Britain

Despite the success, challenges remain. “Half our visitors never go beyond London. While we celebrate its appeal, we are committed to encouraging travellers to explore regional Britain,” Yates said. To address this, VisitBritain is working on making regional destinations more accessible and aligning offerings with Indian travellers’ preferences. With reliable public transport and shorter travel times—Cumbria, for example, is just two and a half hours from London by train—Britain’s compact size is an advantage.

While London remains the top destination, with 43 per cent of Indian visitors spending time in the capital, VisitBritain is making a concerted effort to showcase regional destinations. More than half of the nights spent by Indian travellers (57 per cent) are now outside London, thanks to targeted campaigns like Showcase Great Britain and strategic partnerships with regional airports and trade.

“India’s travel trade is pivotal in this effort. Through roadshows and familiarisation trips, we are equipping agents to sell

regional Britain confidently,” Yates said. The upcoming Showcase Britain in January 2025 is where Indian agents will explore Newcastle, Yorkshire, and the North East to promote premium experiences.

## The Shift to Experiential Travel

Today’s travellers want fewer sightseeing tours and more curated, authentic experiences. Yates said, “Britain has always excelled in creating those moments, whether broomstick (Harry Potter) lessons at Alnwick Castle or enjoying a ‘Champagne Experience’ on the London Eye.”

Film and TV tourism have also become significant draws. Research shows that 94 per cent of Indian travellers are interested in visiting UK destinations featured in movies and TV shows. Newcastle, a favourite Bollywood filming location, is among the destinations being actively promoted to Indian audiences.

## Strengthening the Living Bridge

The ‘Living Bridge’ concept, introduced by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, symbolises the deep cultural ties between the two nations. VisitBritain is embracing this narrative through its campaigns, celebrating the flow of ideas, culture, and people.

“Living Bridge is exemplified by tourism





and people coming and understanding more of the authentic culture of Britain and seeing the differences in the regions, just like there are differences in the states across India. Britain is a much smaller country, but there are real differences if you are sitting in London, Newcastle, Manchester, Wales, or Scotland, and you can get that experience in a very small destination,” Yates shared.

The future looks bright. VisitBritain’s Starring Great Britain campaign, launching

in January 2025, will focus on film and TV destinations to inspire Indian travellers. Additional initiatives aim to cater to high-spending Indian tourists with tailored products and premium experiences.

In closing, Yates had a message for the Indian travel trade, “Britain is a great destination for you to visit this year. We are launching a campaign to inspire your visitors, who we know already want to come to Britain. We will work with you to ensure

you have the products needed to build your itineraries, encouraging more visitors to come and helping both you and us generate greater revenue.”

Alongside productive business meetings, the programme included engaging seminars and networking dinners. Following a full day of intensive meetings, buyers and sellers would unwind, network, and enjoy lively moments at the Gala Dinner.

## On the sidelines of the trade mission, suppliers and buyers shared their experiences of the event with Travel Trade Journal

“ DB MEA was the perfect platform for reaching quality buyers from multiple country markets. As sponsors of the Gala Dinner, we were able to showcase what Manchester has to offer clients, what’s new and coming up, and how we can support the trade to sell Manchester, putting the City front of mind for all those attending the event.



**Victoria Braddock**  
Managing Director  
Marketing Manchester

“ We’ve been attending the Destination Britain events in India for many years now and have been working in the market for at least 20 years. We have seen the market develop from keen on visiting the Tower of London to visiting many other palaces we represent, like Hampton Court Palace and Kensington Palace. It is great to be back and promote the new exhibitions and attractions coming to the tour operators and travel agents for inclusion in future programmes and itineraries.



**Ann Wilson**  
Head of Sales  
Historic Royal Palaces

“ The VisitBritain tourism trade meet facilitates and fosters business connections between the suppliers and us. The networking and one-to-one meet helps us know and keep updated with Britain’s diverse products, services, and experiences. It is a great platform to connect and collaborate, generating new business leads and deals leading to contribute to the growing numbers of Indian tourists visiting the UK each year.



**Neshij Raje**  
Senior Exec. Product & Sales,  
Europe & UK  
Flamingo Transworld

“ With the UK being our top destination, DB MEA offers us a fantastic platform for networking, relationship-building, and staying updated on industry trends. I must say it has been a very successful event for us.



**Sarfaraz Shaikh**  
Head of Business Development  
and Client Relations,  
Gold Medal (Consolidation brand of  
Dnata Travel Group)

“ DB MEA event was great. The focus was on the regions, particularly the new regions that VisitBritain wanted to bring to market. There were also some fresh ideas for existing products, which is exactly what we wanted to explore. The event was well-organised, and I think the meetings were well-planned.



**Ian Alves**  
General Manager, SOTC





# Mayfair Manor Alibag delivers an exceptional setting to create lasting memories

Mayfair Hotels and Resorts recently unveiled Mayfair Manor Alibag, a new addition to their portfolio, offering an exclusive villa experience in Alibag situated in Raigad district, Maharashtra. To showcase the luxurious new property, they invited Mumbai's media to experience firsthand what it had to offer. From the moment we arrived, it became clear that Mayfair Manor Alibag was the perfect escape, and it truly lived up to its promise of offering a unique and unforgettable experience.

**Prashant Nayak**

**K**nown for its substantial presence in Eastern India, Mayfair Hotels and Resorts is now setting its sights on expanding further into the country's western region, following the successful opening of Mayfair on Sea in Morjim, Goa, last year. Operated under Mayfair Elixir, the management division of Mayfair Hotels and Resorts, this new property highlights the group's strategic focus on growing its presence across India through the management model.

## Getting There

There are three convenient travel options from Mumbai to Alibag. The quickest and most

scenic is by speedboat, taking just 20 minutes from the Gateway of India. This thrilling ride offers stunning views of the Taj Mahal Palace, the Gateway of India, the Mumbai skyline, and maritime activities. Another option is to take the RoRo ferry from Bhaucha Dhakka (Ferry Wharf), which accommodates both passengers and vehicles. This 45 to 60-minute journey is a bit pricier but offers the convenience of bringing your car, making it perfect for exploring Alibag. The RoRo ferry runs throughout the year, even during the monsoon season. The third option is by road, typically taking around two to three hours, depending on your starting point. We

were given the speedboat experience for its convenience and scenic beauty. Upon reaching the Alibag jetty, a 15-minute car or auto ride takes you to Mayfair Manor Alibag, offering a glimpse of rural village life with lush greenery and traditional homes along the way.

## The Mayfair Warm Welcome

Mayfair Manor Alibag is a serene and upscale villa retreat perfectly designed for couples, families, and small groups. This exquisite property offers a one-of-a-kind experience of tranquillity and indulgence, set against the backdrop of lush greenery and soothing sounds of nature. The resort is a haven for nature lovers, with the chirping of birds as your constant companion. On entry, I spotted a few red-whiskered and red-vented bulbuls, magpie robins, sunbirds, a few green bee-eaters, and a paradise flycatcher. The property was adorned with Singapore cherry trees, which serve as a natural food and nectar source for many birds and butterflies.

At the villa, we were warmly welcomed



Lawn



Outdoor seat out





Indoor seat out



Dining Hall

by Bjorn DeNiese, Managing Director, Mayfair Elixir, Randhir Gupta, Vice President, Commercial and Business Development, Mayfair Elixir and Harsh Talreja, a key management team member. Bjorn shared his excitement about expanding Mayfair Elixir's presence, promising unique experiences. Randhir gave us a tour of the stunning property, showcasing Mayfair's signature blend of rich history, vibrant culture, and natural beauty. Harsh, with his impressive F&B background, was focused on delivering an exceptional dining experience. Together with the other team members, they embodied the warm hospitality that defines the Mayfair brand in India.

### Designed to Impress

Set over three acres of lush greenery, Mayfair Manor Alibag is home to two exquisite villas, each offering a unique blend of luxury and charm. The first villa features five spacious and beautifully designed rooms, while the second provides a more intimate retreat with two elegantly appointed rooms. Both villas seamlessly combine traditional sophistication with modern comforts, creating an ambience of refined elegance. Guests can relish every moment, whether unwinding in the luxurious interiors or soaking in the serene natural surroundings. The bathrooms are a standout feature—expansive and impeccably designed, complete with lavish bathtubs for ultimate relaxation. To enhance the convenience of each stay, every room is thoughtfully equipped with large refrigerators, ensuring a seamless and refreshing experience. The wall hangings and opulent interiors of the villa are equally striking and noteworthy, enhancing the overall charm and elegance of the rooms.

Guests can immerse themselves in the beauty of the landscape while enjoying a range of world-class amenities, including a spectacular swimming pool and a relaxing Jacuzzi. For those who enjoy indoor relaxation, the resort features a cosy indoor



Mumbai travel media with Bjorn DeNiese, Randhir Gupta, and Harsh Talreja on the right

sit-out area with a library and an impressive collection of books. Outdoors, the property offers multiple sit-out spaces and a bar, each perfect for unwinding with family or friends. Guests can enjoy a variety of games, such as table tennis, snooker, and carom, or simply soak in the serene atmosphere. It also offers expansive lawns and private areas for private celebrations and get-togethers. I thoroughly enjoyed both the indoor and outdoor ambience at Mayfair Manor Alibag. It was the kind of place where I could easily imagine spending time with loved ones creating lasting memories.

### Delectable Dining

Dining at Mayfair Manor Alibag is an experience in itself. The resort offers a classy dining room where guests can enjoy meals prepared with the finest ingredients. We were treated to a variety of delightful dishes, and one that truly stood out was the innovative theplas with mutton kheema. It was a perfect fusion of traditional flavours with a creative twist. The culinary team is happy to customise menus to meet the specific tastes and preferences of guests, ensuring every meal is a memorable one. The dining space can also be ideal for small events, offering a perfect setting for intimate gatherings or corporate retreats. Harsh was equally enthusiastic about offering guests a barbecue experience, providing the

perfect opportunity to enjoy the outdoors while relishing flavourful grilled treats.

### A Tranquil Escape

Beyond the property, Alibag unfolds as a serene sanctuary for peace seekers and adventurous souls alike. Its tranquil beaches, such as Kihim and Varsoli, invite visitors for leisurely strolls and to soak in mesmerising sunsets. While not all beaches boast pristine sands, their calm ambience perfectly escapes the daily grind. Alibag also tempts food enthusiasts with its mouthwatering seafood and authentic Maharashtrian cuisine. With its harmonious mix of history, culture, and natural splendour, Alibag serves as an idyllic retreat for relaxation. Conveniently accessible, it remains a cherished weekend getaway for Mumbai's residents.

The whole experience at Mayfair Manor Alibag is designed to leave guests mesmerised and yearning to return. Whether one is seeking a romantic getaway, a family retreat, or a peaceful place for a small event, Mayfair Manor Alibag offers a truly immersive experience. With its blend of luxury, nature, and personalised service, this resort is set to become a sought-after destination for Mumbaiers looking to escape the city and experience a slice of paradise. It is more than just a getaway—it is a place that makes you feel truly at home amidst nature and luxury.



Bed Room



Bathroom





Shukhrat Yadgarov and Ajay Arya

# Uzbekistan Airways and Arya Enterprises Drive India-Central Asia Travel

As the Indian market shows increasing interest in Central Asia, Uzbekistan Airways JSC is expanding its route network in India. With their long-standing partnership with the airline, Arya Enterprises and Aero World Travels play a key role in the Indian market while shaping the future of tourism between India and Uzbekistan. TTJ met Ajay Arya, Managing Director of both companies, at the 29th Tashkent International Tourism Fair (TITF-2024), where he shared insights on this growing collaboration.

Prashant Nayak

The Tashkent International Tourism Fair (TITF), held for the first time at the newly inaugurated Central Asian Expo Uzbekistan (CAEx), has become a key event for Uzbekistan and Central Asia's tourism sector. The event promotes Uzbekistan as an appealing tourist destination while providing a platform for forging new business connections between local and international companies. The fair has been held since 1995 with the official support of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). In collaboration with Uzbekistan Airways JSC, Arya Enterprises also participated in TITF-2024, themed 'Tourism on the Silk Road.'

## Expanding Uzbekistan Airways' Reach in India

Ajay Arya has been pivotal in establishing Uzbekistan Airways' presence in India. Arya Enterprises currently serves as the Sales and BSP Consolidator for Uzbekistan Airways JSC in India, managing all online distribution across major OTAs such as MakeMyTrip, Yatra, Cleartrip, IXIGO, Akbar Online, Riya Connect, and others in the Indian market. Founded in 1983, the company holds IATA BSP accreditation and is a proud, long-standing member of TAAI. Meanwhile, Aero World Travels has been serving as a direct Passenger Sales Agency (PSA) for Uzbekistan Airways JSC in India since the airline's inaugural operations in the country in 1992. Both sister companies are based in New Delhi, with additional branch offices strategically located in Mumbai, Goa, and Punjab.

## The Strategic Initiatives and Support

Uzbekistan Airways JSC has been focused on expanding its presence in India, recognising the growing demand for travel to the CIS region. The airline currently operates daily flights from Delhi and biweekly flights from Mumbai and has also introduced regular biweekly flights from Mopa, North Goa, every Sunday and Wednesday.

The teams at Arya Enterprises and Aero World Travels are highly skilled in the operations and sales strategies of Uzbekistan Airways JSC and have extensive knowledge and strong connections within India's travel industry. The extensive experience of their company has contributed to strong revenue generation for the participating airline in the Indian market.

When asked about the strategies and initiatives Arya Enterprises has implemented to support and expand the airline's presence in the Indian market, Ajay Arya explains, "Since 2009, Aero World Travels has introduced group fares for MICE and family groups from India. We have consistently supported agents handling MICE groups for top corporates such as Microsoft, Asian Paints, Moser Baer, Ambuja Cements, Cadila, Ranbaxy, BOSE, Luxottica, Exide, TATA Motors, Larsen & Toubro, Infosys, Hindalco, and many others."

Ajay adds, "Over the past 10 years, Aero World Travels has helped make Uzbekistan a sought-after destination with Uzbekistan Airways. Goa marks the airline's second route launch in India in October 2024, following the introduction of regular flights

from Mumbai in April 2024. Additionally, agreements with local tour companies have promoted fixed departures, advertised in local newspapers, which have attracted family travellers from across India."

## Spreading the Word

To raise awareness, Uzbekistan Airways JSC, in collaboration with Arya Enterprises, organised informative roadshows in Goa, Mumbai, and Ahmedabad in 2024. Prominent tour companies from Uzbekistan, such as Asia Luxe, Orient Star, and Alpina Tour, were invited to highlight the growing tourism potential of Uzbekistan for Indian travellers. The roadshows received an enthusiastic response, with attendees praising the airline's expansion efforts in India and engaging in meaningful discussions with airline representatives. Ajay Arya mentions, "In December, we are preparing for roadshows in Hyderabad, Bangalore, and Cochin, targeting key potential markets."

## Goa's Participation at TITF 2024

At TITF 2024, Goa was the only Indian state represented. The delegation, led by Rohan A. Khaunte, Hon'ble Minister for Tourism, showcased Goa as a holistic destination, highlighting hinterland experiences and responsible tourism. Khaunte also met Shukhrat Yadgarov, Deputy Chairman of Uzbekistan Airways, to discuss enhancing air connectivity and increasing flights between Tashkent and Goa. Strengthening this connection is expected to boost tourism and foster closer bilateral ties, paving the way for mutual growth.



अतुल्य ! भारत  
Incredible India







**महाकुम्भ  
चलें हम**

13 जनवरी, पौष पूर्णिमा से 26 फरवरी,  
महाशिवरात्रि, 2025, प्रयागराज

## A Grand Cultural Prelude to Mahakumbh 2025

Uttar Pradesh Tourism Department flagged off a grand event for the upcoming Mahakumbh 2025 on November 30, 2024, at the Ashoka Hotel, New Delhi. The evening aimed to provide a glimpse into the spiritual essence of Prayagraj, the host city.

**Prativa Vaidya Bhalla**

The road to Mahakumbh 2025, the world's largest spiritual gathering, was marked by a breathtaking curtain-raiser that left attendees spellbound. The event was graced by the presence of Union Minister of Tourism and Culture, Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, Uttar Pradesh's Minister of Tourism and Culture, Jaiveer Singh, and an illustrious assembly of dignitaries, including diplomats, ambassadors, high commissioners, and senior government officials.

The packed hall of dignitaries and guests watched in awe as the evening unfolded with powerful renditions of Indian classical dance and music, setting the tone for the grand event. It also featured an engaging exhibition, film screenings on Mahakumbh 2025, and a showcase of the tent city models erected in Prayagraj. The primary objective of the event was to highlight the cultural, spiritual, and infrastructural preparations underway for this iconic gathering, which is expected to draw

over 40 crore devotees from across the globe.

Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, Union Minister of Tourism and Culture, described the Kumbh Mela as a unique confluence of faith, tradition, and social harmony, attracting millions of pilgrims worldwide. He extended an invitation to participate in this monumental event, emphasizing its role in fostering global unity and cooperation. "If you wish to see India in one place, Mahakumbh Mela is the place," he said.

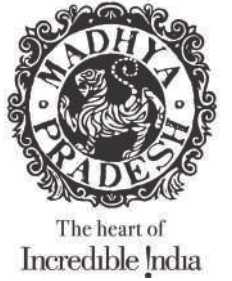
Jaiveer Singh, Tourism Minister, Uttar Pradesh, echoed similar sentiments and highlighted the Mahakumbh 2025 as a spiritual gathering and a rare alignment that embodied India's philosophy of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' - the world is one family. He conveyed the importance of this monumental event that aims to converge diversity into unity. He invited international visitors to witness the grandeur of this event, which not only showcases India's cultural depth but also sets new global benchmarks in religious tourism.

Mukesh Kumar Meshram, Principal Secretary - Tourism, Uttar Pradesh, highlighted preparations for Mahakumbh, including a modern tent city near the Parade Ground with luxury accommodations like villas and Maharaja tents. Additionally, 1,600 Swiss cottages in Arail and 200 cottages each in Jhunsi and the Parade Ground are being built. Activities like helicopter rides and water sports will enhance the visitor experience.

Ambassadors and dignitaries from countries including Suriname, Malaysia, Seychelles, Nepal, and Switzerland, among others, attended the event, showcasing the global interest in this iconic festival.







Heart of Incredible India, Madhya Pradesh, is a kaleidoscope of rich cultural experiences, traditions, and history. The state has been a crossroads for civilisations for centuries and has woven a vibrant tapestry of customs, languages, and artistic expressions. Its annual cultural extravaganzas offer a captivating glimpse into this mesmerising mosaic. Madhya Pradesh's grand festivals are not merely celebrations but immersive experiences that let visitors dive deeper into the state.

# 100<sup>th</sup> Tansen Samaroh in Madhya Pradesh

## A Century of Music, a Lifetime of Inspiration

### 100<sup>TH</sup> TANSEN MUSIC FESTIVAL – DECEMBER 15 TO 19

Madhya Pradesh beckons you to celebrate the life, legacy, and contributions of the legendary musician Tansen at the Tansen Music Festival. Renowned for its rich cultural heritage, Madhya Pradesh has contributed substantially to Hindustani classical music. Gwalior, a UNESCO-designated Creative City of Music, is the annual venue for the prestigious Tansen Festival. This musical extravaganza showcases the rich heritage of Indian classical music, attracting music enthusiasts, scholars, and artists from around the world. The festival's roots can be traced back to the early decades of the 20th century. Over time, these events evolved in both scale and significance, transitioning into key fixtures on Madhya Pradesh's cultural calendar. Among them, the Tansen Music Festival has emerged as a globally celebrated event, earning international recognition and attracting a diverse array of participants and audiences from around the world. Its prominence has positioned it as a symbol of cultural pride and artistic excellence, bridging traditions and communities on a global stage.

As the Tansen Music Festival evolves, Madhya Pradesh Culture Department and Madhya Pradesh Tourism Board are set to leave a mark. The state has planned a series of initiatives to mark the centennial year, including a pre-launch event in New Delhi, a variety of musical and thematic exhibitions, and a week-long Tansen-focused film festival at Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal. Notable efforts include collaborations with the ICCR, Indian embassies abroad, and foreign embassies in India to host international performances featuring artists from around the world, pioneering steps towards achieving global recognition for the event.



### 51<sup>ST</sup> KHAJURAHO DANCE FESTIVAL - FEBRUARY 20 TO 26, 2025

51st Khajuraho Dance Festival - February 20 to 26, 2025  
The land of a UNESCO World Heritage Site and renowned pilgrim of architecture, Khajuraho resonates with the grace of classical dance. The Khajuraho Dance Festival will mark its 51st edition in February 2025, continuing its tradition of showcasing classical dance forms against the backdrop of the iconic temples of Khajuraho. Renowned classical dancers from across India converge here to enthral audiences with their rhythmic footwork and melodious ghunghrus. For adventure enthusiasts, the Madhya Pradesh Tourism Board offers a plethora of exciting activities.

### IMMERSE IN A MUSICAL ODYSSEY IN THE HEART OF INDIA

This year's Tansen Music Festival promises an unparalleled experience, honouring the legacy of the maestro. Join us as we celebrate music, scholarship, and cultural exchange. In addition to these prominent festivals, Madhya Pradesh hosts many other cultural events highlighting the state's rich legacy. Festivals such as Lokrang, Artichol, Ustad Allauddin Khan Sangeet Samaroh, Akhil Bhartiya Kalidas Samaroh, Pranati, Raag Amir, Ghungru, and many more showcase the diverse cultural heritage of Incredible India, making it a vibrant hub for art and tradition. Whether you are a dance enthusiast, a music lover, or simply seeking an authentic cultural experience, Madhya Pradesh has something to offer everyone.





# The Evolution of Travel Preferences

## Embracing Rural Life Through Homestays in India

In recent years, India has witnessed a significant shift in travel preferences, with an increasing number of travellers seeking authentic experiences over luxury vacations. The growing trend of homestays and rural tourism is revolutionising how people explore the country. This movement is redefining tourism and promoting sustainable tourism development and community-based travel.

**Dr Niralee Shah**

The growth of homestays and rural tourism has gained significant momentum in recent years, offering travellers authentic, off-the-beaten-path experiences. Staying in homestays, visitors get a deeper connection to local cultures, traditions, and cuisines, fostering sustainable tourism. Rural tourism supports local economies by generating income for families and communities in remote areas. This rise in interest is driven by the desire for more personalised and immersive travel experiences. Additionally, it promotes environmental conservation by encouraging responsible travel practices in less commercialised regions.

According to a report by Statista, the Indian tourism market was valued at approximately \$190 billion in 2022, and it is projected to grow significantly, with rural tourism and homestays playing an increasingly vital role in this growth. The Ministry of Tourism's Dekho Apna Desh campaign has further highlighted the importance of promoting less-explored destinations, encouraging travellers to venture beyond the usual tourist hotspots.

### Why Homestays and Rural Tourism Gaining Popularity

**Authentic Experiences:** Rural tourism and homestays offer travellers an authentic, immersive experience, allowing them to connect with local culture, traditions, and hospitality. These stays provide a unique opportunity to live like the locals, exploring serene landscapes and gaining insights into rural lifestyles.

**Sustainability:** Rural tourism and

homestays offer authentic, immersive experiences that foster cultural exchange while supporting local economies. By promoting these sustainable travel options, we contribute to preserving heritage and ensuring environmental conservation.

**Economic Empowerment:** Rural communities provide rustic experiences, which bridge the gap between urban and rural communities by encouraging a healthy dialogue that helps equate the cultural and economic gap between the two. Homestays bring travellers to the doors of local homes, the warm hospitality of local hosts, and the depth of the existential human essence found only in diverse cultural exchange.

**Personalised Stays:** Rural tourism and homestays offer travellers an authentic, personalised experience where they can immerse themselves in local culture and enjoy warm, personalised hospitality. It is a chance to connect deeply with nature, traditions, and the everyday lives of rural communities.

**Cultural Preservation:** Rural tourism provides authentic cultural experiences that connect travellers with indigenous customs. This sustainable approach helps safeguard heritage while supporting rural economies through increased awareness and appreciation of regional cultures.

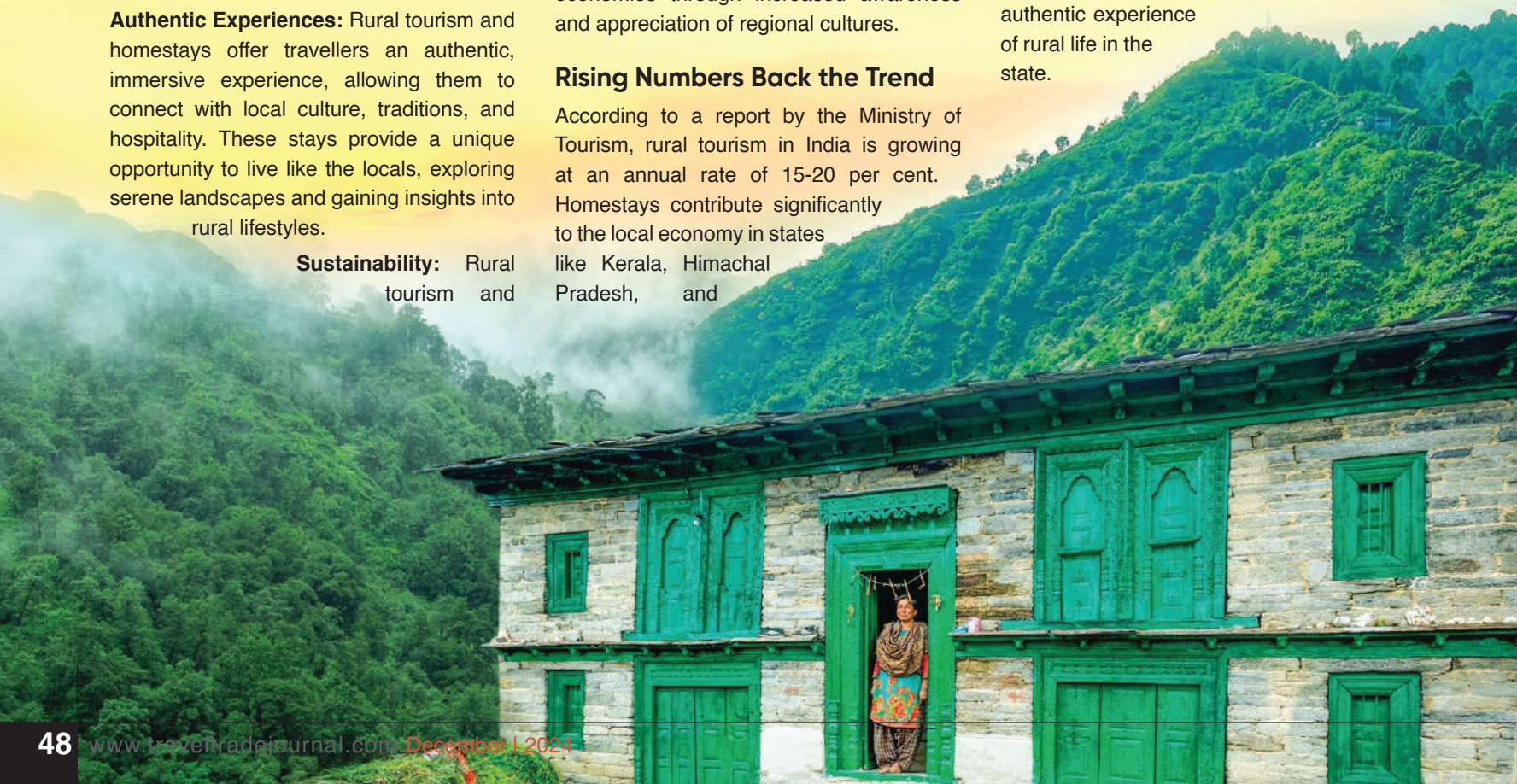
### Rising Numbers Back the Trend

According to a report by the Ministry of Tourism, rural tourism in India is growing at an annual rate of 15-20 per cent. Homestays contribute significantly to the local economy in states like Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, and

Uttarakhand. A 2023 report by the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) highlighted that 37 per cent of international travellers to India expressed interest in cultural and rural tourism. Furthermore, platforms like Airbnb and NotOnMap have reported a substantial rise in demand for homestays in remote destinations. Airbnb India noted a 100 per cent increase in bookings for rural destinations between 2021 and 2023.

### Noteworthy Rural Tourism Initiatives

Several state governments and private organisations have launched initiatives to promote rural tourism and homestays across India. The Paryatan Parv, organised by the Ministry of Tourism, aims to boost rural and cultural tourism by highlighting lesser-explored destinations and encouraging tourists to experience India's diverse traditions and landscapes. In Maharashtra, the 'Streekon' initiative is a women-led enterprise that offers eco-friendly stays and cultural experiences in Sindhudurg, focusing on sustainability and local traditions. Meanwhile, Himachal Pradesh has been a leader in village tourism with its Homestay Scheme, which has registered over 2,200 homestays, offering visitors an authentic experience of rural life in the state.







## Key Destinations Leading the Trend

India offers a wealth of destinations where homestays and rural tourism are flourishing, providing visitors with a chance to experience authentic local life, traditions, and cultures in serene settings.

Kerala, known as 'God's Own Country,' is a top destination for rural tourism. With its lush backwaters, tea and rice plantations, and traditional villages, the state provides a peaceful escape. In regions like Alleppey, Wayanad, and Thekkady, visitors can enjoy boat rides, savour fresh seafood, and explore the rich cultural heritage of Kerala, including Ayurveda, festivals, and local crafts.

Himachal Pradesh offers a perfect blend of majestic mountains and rural charm. Areas like Spiti Valley, Kullu, and Manali provide peaceful retreats where travellers can stay in homestays, explore remote Buddhist monasteries, visit fruit orchards, and indulge in traditional Himachali cuisine. The region's tranquillity allows visitors to connect with the local hill lifestyle, participating in farming activities and immersing in nature.

Uttarakhand, known as the 'Land of Gods,' is ideal for both spiritual and rural tourism. In the Kumaon and Garhwal regions, homestays offer stunning views of the Himalayas, while Rishikesh and Haridwar attract those seeking yoga and

meditation retreats. These destinations provide an opportunity to blend spirituality with rural life, offering peace, serenity, and local cultural experiences.

In Maharashtra, rural tourism allows visitors to explore the countryside, ancient forts, and vibrant culture. Many farms in rural areas offer agritourism and homestay experiences, where guests can participate in farming activities, cook traditional Marathi dishes, and learn about the region's customs and lifestyle.

Rajasthan offers a mix of royal heritage and desert landscapes. In areas like Jaisalmer and Udaipur, travellers can stay in rural homestays, experience camel rides, and immerse themselves in local Rajasthani culture. Rural homes provide an authentic glimpse into traditional crafts, food, and the unique desert environment.

Madhya Pradesh is known for its rich wildlife, cultural heritage, and rural tourism. Homestays here allow travellers to engage with local artisans, explore historical sites, and visit wildlife sanctuaries.

Lastly, Goa's rural tourism offers visitors a quieter, eco-friendly experience. Homestays in villages like Palolem, Agonda, and Canacona offer immersion in Goan culture, organic farming, and local seafood, all set against the backdrop of picturesque coconut groves.

## Conclusion

As demand for sustainable, meaningful travel grows, rural tourism is gaining prominence. Rural tourism offers more than just new destinations—it invites travellers to embrace fresh perspectives while respecting heritage. This form of travel encourages visitors to step off-the-beaten-path, experience authentic hospitality, and uncover the untold stories of India's villages. By doing so, travellers help make India a more inclusive, diverse, and responsible tourism destination.



**About the Author:** Dr Niraalee Shah is the Managing Director of Travel Design Private Limited.



# DISCOVER The Beauty of Uttarakhand WITH DMC UTTARAKHAND

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Dubrovnik, Croatia

# Emerging destinations create new opportunities for travellers and industry alike

As 2024 draws to a close, both international and domestic destinations are witnessing a surge in popularity among Indian travellers. TTJ takes a closer look at the insights shared by outbound and domestic tour operators, exploring the emerging hotspots that are capturing the attention of Indian tourists. By analysing the key factors driving this shift in travel preferences, they offer a comprehensive perspective on what shaped the travel landscape in 2024.

**Prashant Nayak**

Countries and domestic destinations once considered niche now emerge as prime choices for Indian travellers. This shift in travel preferences is fuelled by a combination of factors, including accessibility, affordability, and the growing desire for unique and less-explored experiences. With more Indian tourists seeking off-the-beaten-path destinations, the allure of these locations lies in their ability to offer fresh, authentic experiences beyond traditional holiday spots.

## The Growing Demand for Unique Outbound Destinations

Flamingo Travels, based in Ahmedabad, is known for its expertise in planning customised outbound tours for Indian travellers. Meeta Shah, Director, Flamingo Travels, highlights the emerging destinations that have gained significant popularity among Indian travellers in

2024. She says, "Vietnam is the top choice, followed by Baku in Azerbaijan. Georgia, with its unique cultural heritage and stunning landscapes, is quickly becoming a favourite, while New Zealand and Japan continue to be captivated by their natural beauty. Abu Dhabi is also attracting visitors with its luxury offerings, and Croatia stands out with its excellent infrastructure and strong social media presence."

According to Meeta, several factors drive the growing popularity of these destinations. "Vietnam offers great value, accessibility, and friendly locals, while Baku is a pocket-friendly winter destination with excellent hospitality. Georgia impresses with its affordability, stunning landscapes, and Instagram-friendly spots. New Zealand offers high-quality tourism, and Japan sees a seasonal rush during cherry blossom time. Abu Dhabi attracts with its proximity and new attractions, while Croatia's strong online

presence adds to its appeal," explains Meeta.

Flamingo Travels expects a minimum of 25 per cent growth in these markets in 2024, driven by their unique offerings. Reflecting on her travels in 2024, Meeta shares, "Our river cruise from Amsterdam to Switzerland along the Rhine was unforgettable, with its breathtaking beauty and picturesque towns."

As Indian travellers seek new adventures beyond traditional tourist hubs, many destinations are gaining popularity, offering a fresh, authentic approach to exploration. Indian travellers are increasingly seeking unique experiences, whether cultural, adventurous, or culinary.

Pushpa Khubchandani, Director, Uniglobe Pawansut Travel, observes that Indian travellers increasingly sought unique and lesser-visited destinations in 2024. She attributes this trend to the influence of social media, which has made



▲ Meeta Shah



▲ Pushpa Khubchandani



▲ Richa Guha



▲ Sakshi Kadam





▲ Suparna Dasgupta



▲ Kuncheria Thomas



▲ Dharmendra Singh

offbeat locations more accessible and desirable. She asserts, "Notable destinations gaining popularity include the Lofoten Islands in Norway, with their dramatic landscapes and crystal-clear waters, and Ammochostos in Cyprus, offering pristine beaches and a laid-back atmosphere. Hoi An and Da Nang in Vietnam are also drawing attention. Jukkasjärvi in Sweden, known for its Ice Hotel and Northern Lights, and Antigua in Guatemala, a charming colonial town, are other sought-after destinations. Finally, with its natural wonders, Yellowstone National Park in the USA still captivates adventure seekers."

Pushpa highlights the growth potential for the travel trade, with technological advancements and the shift toward sustainable and personalised travel shaping the future. She notes, "Embracing innovation and adapting to evolving traveller preferences is key for travel consultants." It also emphasises opportunities for job creation and market expansion.

Pushpa visited Italy this year, and for her, it was an unforgettable experience that was etched in her heart forever. She shares, "Italy is a melting pot of architecture, culture, art, and history, and captivates with its timeless charm. The country, with its stunning landscapes, rich history, and timeless art, left an unforgettable impression. It was simply magical."

For Richa Guha and Sakshi Kadam, Partners, SR Twin Solutions, 2024 has seen a growing interest among Indian travellers in offbeat destinations like Georgia, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. Montenegro and Slovenia have captured attention in Europe, while South American countries like Peru and Colombia are gradually gaining traction. In Asia, Japan's less-travelled regions, like Kyushu and Hokkaido, and the Philippines' hidden gems are gaining popularity.

Richa reveals several factors driving the shift in Indian outbound travel preferences. She mentions, "Affordability, accessibility, and visa-friendly policies play a key role, as many destinations offer cost-effective options and improved flight connectivity. Safety is another crucial consideration, with these destinations often rated highly for security, appealing to safety-conscious travellers. Social media platforms like Instagram have fuelled interest by showcasing the beauty and uniqueness of these locations,

sparkling curiosity and wanderlust. Indian travellers increasingly seek unique experiences, from cultural immersion to pristine landscapes and offbeat adventures."

Sakshi emphasises that this growth presents significant opportunities for the travel trade. "Specialised packages focusing on niche experiences, collaborations with local DMCs, and engaging content marketing will resonate with India's social media-savvy market. Promoting sustainability, including ecotourism, can also attract conscious travellers," she points out.

For Richa, Slovenia stood out in 2024, with its blend of Alpine beauty, after visiting charming towns like Bled and Piran. Also, sustainable tourism initiatives in Slovenia offered a truly enriching experience.

### Promoting Destinations with Connect

The Travel Cube, founded by Suparna Dasgupta, specialises in international and domestic bookings but focuses on promoting Nepal as a prime travel destination. Known for its stunning hill stations and the majestic Himalayas, Nepal offers Indian travellers a rich array of experiences, from exploring the spiritual and cultural gems of Kathmandu and Lumbini to visiting UNESCO World Heritage Sites like Pashupatinath, Janaki Temple, and Pokhara. Suparna, deeply in love with the destination, has organised FAM trips and curated itineraries ranging from 2 to 13 nights, covering highlights such as Mt. Everest trekking and Muktinath.

Suparna highlights Nepal's appeal to wildlife enthusiasts, referring to it as the 'Amazon of Asia.' Chitwan National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site, offers opportunities to spot one-horned rhinos, Royal Bengal tigers, and other exotic wildlife. She adds, "Nepal is a safe and peaceful country, making it ideal for all types of travellers, including solo female travellers and families. With affordable travel options, including low-cost flights and budget-friendly accommodations, Nepal is an accessible and comfortable destination for Indian travellers. Additionally, the similarities in food culture, language, currency, and even internet and local calls make Nepal an easy and convenient choice for Indian tourists."

"We expect a significant increase in group travel to Nepal in the coming year,"

says Suparna, confident that the destination's charm will continue to captivate.

### The Rise of New and Offbeat Domestic Destinations

Domestic tourism in India is also experiencing a remarkable transformation post COVID-19, with emerging destinations gaining significant traction among Indian travellers in 2024. Kuncheria Thomas, Director, Touracle, an inbound and domestic DMC

specialising in South India and the Andamans, has witnessed the rise of new and offbeat destinations in India that are gaining popularity among Indian travellers in 2024. According to him, "Lakshadweep is a long-term growth story, with immense potential for development over the next 20 years. Taj has already begun its expansion there, which is just the beginning."

Kuncheria highlights Rameshwaram's strategic potential, particularly in fostering closer ties between India and Sri Lanka through enhanced connectivity. He states, "Religious tourism will thrive, but there is also a shift towards new experiences that reflect the essence of the land."

As India continues to build more rooms and expand its airline network, Kuncheria believes the hospitality sector is poised for a transformative decade. With significant investments in infrastructure and the growing demand for experiential travel, he predicts substantial growth for the industry, contributing significantly to the nation's GDP.

Dharmendra Singh, Director, Plaisir Hospitality Services, highlights the rise of cruise tourism, religious tourism, and experiential travel in India, particularly in 2024. He also points to offbeat destinations like Bhadrawah in Jammu, Jibhi in Himachal Pradesh, Khimsar in Rajasthan, and Vagamon in Kerala as emerging hotspots. He mentions, "In 2024, Jamala village near Tirthan Valley has particularly impressed me during my travel."

These locations are gaining popularity due to several factors, including the desire of younger travellers to escape the monotony of work and stress. With greater disposable wealth, they seek short breaks every week or fortnight. Dharmendra adds, "Connectivity, new air links, safety, affordability, and awareness through social media are key drivers in the rise of these destinations. Tourists are also increasingly inclined to visit less commercialised spots, enjoying the bragging rights of discovering offbeat locations."

Dharmendra strongly believes that India's domestic tourism market has immense potential. He concludes, "These emerging destinations will continue to grow, bringing more business with better margins for tour operators."






## EITM TRAVMART 2024 in Kolkata strengthens travel industry connections in East India

The second edition of EITM - East India TRAVMART was held on November 20-21, 2024, at The Lalit Great Eastern, Kolkata. The event brought together 35 prominent travel suppliers, including airlines, cruise lines, international tourism boards, the India Tourism Office (Kolkata), destination management companies, hotel chains, and travel technology providers, creating a comprehensive platform for collaboration and networking.

The event commenced on November 20 with a lamp-lighting ceremony led by senior office bearers from renowned travel associations, including TAAI, IATO, TAFI, SKAL, and ETAA. Pranav Prakash, Regional Director of East India Tourism - Kolkata, served as the Guest of Honour.

With over 240 pre-registered attendees, including 30 hosted buyers from Bengal, Assam, Bihar, Odisha, and the Northeastern

states, the event fostered extensive industry collaboration. More than 3,400 one-on-one buyer-seller meetings were conducted across three business sessions, creating a platform for meaningful engagement and partnerships.

Visit Sharjah, the Gold Sponsor, showcased the Emirate's distinctive attractions, positioning it as a key destination for Indian travellers. Additionally, product presentations by Visit Kissimmee, Indigo Airlines, Celestyal Cruises, Holland America Line, Bali Trip, TravClan, CGH Earth, and TRAVMART Marketplace provided valuable insights into their offerings.

EITM 2024 successfully introduced new travel products to East and Northeast India's travel community while strengthening partnerships between travel resellers and suppliers. The event reaffirmed its role as the region's premier networking and business growth platform.















**Pradeep Agarwal**  
General Manager, Worldwide DMC

We are incredibly impressed with the professionalism and meticulous attention to detail displayed by the TTJ Events team. The execution of the event exceeded our expectations in every way. It was a full house with outstanding attendance, providing an excellent opportunity to strengthen our business connections with our valued B2B associates. A heartfelt thank you to your seamless logistics team and the friendly, hardworking professionals who contributed immensely to the overall success of this networking event. Kudos to the entire team for making it all happen! We eagerly look forward to collaborating with you on future projects.



**Sanjit Bhattacharya**  
Director- East & Central India, IndiGo

My heartfelt congratulations to TTJ team for organising such a well-received and impactful event. It serves as an outstanding platform for engagement in East India, particularly when airlines like Indigo are experiencing rapid growth. Events like this provide the momentum needed to strengthen partnerships within the travel industry and drive business expansion. Once again, I commend TRAVMART for its proactive and dynamic approach in this region. A special thanks to the organisers for the invitation—it has been a privilege to participate in and sponsor this event on behalf of Indigo. We eagerly look forward to continuing our strong collaboration with TRAVMART. Wishing you continued success and growth!



**Kanta Ray**  
Proprietor, Travel KR

The programme organised by TTJ was outstanding. Every sales interaction was highly effective and crucial in driving our business growth and shaping its future. I also participated in last year's event, which opened up excellent opportunities and generated numerous successful leads. These business events have been incredibly rewarding, and I truly enjoy being a part of them.



**Sanchit Karwal**  
Manager- Client Relationship, Visit Sharjah

It has always been a pleasure being a part of TTJ events. We receive a lot of inquiries and great responses from this market. The Kolkata market has been excellent, and the turnout here has been fantastic. We look forward to receiving even more queries moving forward.



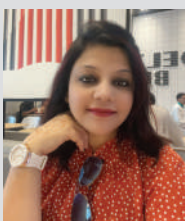
**Anjani Kumar Dhanuka**  
Chapter Chairman TAAI (Eastern Region)

I am truly grateful, as this event has far exceeded my expectations. The seamless integration of suppliers, hoteliers, tourism boards, and airlines under one roof is remarkably impressive. Everything has been showcased beautifully, and the event is managed with great efficiency. Attending has been an incredibly worthwhile experience. I extend my best wishes to TTJ TRAVMART for continued success and growth.



**Koushik Banerjee**  
Chapter Chairman - East India, ETAA

This marks the third year of their B2B roadshow, providing a valuable platform for buyers to connect with new exhibitors. I am optimistic that these two days will lead to meaningful business opportunities, encourage collaboration, and deliver a rewarding experience for everyone involved.



**Poorvi Agarwal**  
Founder, Godspeed Travels

This is my third visit to TTJ TRAVMART, and I love attending this event every single time, whether in Kolkata, Bhubaneswar, or other cities. The main benefit of being part of this platform is the quality of suppliers they bring together. What stands out is that we have ample time to engage with suppliers with whom we are genuinely interested in doing business. They provide a lot of valuable information, as they carefully handpick suppliers, unlike other large events where you exchange business cards without having quality interactions. I would like to congratulate the TTJ team for organising another successful event in Kolkata, and I look forward to attending many more of their events in the future.





## ITA Airways celebrates two years of success in India with a Gala Event

ITA Airways marked its second anniversary with a grand celebration at the Hyatt Regency New Delhi in early November 2024. The event brought together key stakeholders, industry partners, and the airline's leadership to celebrate two years of robust growth and partnerships in India.

The ITA Airways team was represented by Fabio Bigotti, Country Manager for India and Japan; Benedetto Mencaroni, Vice President of ITA Airways;

and Priyanka Gupta, Sales Manager for India. The evening highlighted the airline's achievements, its vision for the future, and an expression of gratitude to its travel industry partners for their unwavering support.

In recognition of their contributions, awards were presented to the airline's top-performing partners, including TBO, EaseMyTrip, Riya Travel, MakeMyTrip, Trip Jack, Legend Travels, Vicky Tourism, Yatra, and TSC Travel.



## The 2nd Mahabharat Circuit Conference and FAM highlights Kurukshetra as a key cultural destination

Following the success of the first conference in January 2024, the 2nd Mahabharat Circuit Conference, organised by the Ministry of Tourism's Northern Regional Office, was inaugurated on November 4, 2024, by Dr Arvind Sharma, Hon'ble Minister of Heritage and Tourism, Govt. of Haryana, at Karna Lake Banquet in Karnal, Haryana. The conference aimed to promote the Mahabharat Circuit, focusing on destinations linked to the Mahabharata epic.

Key attendees included Dr Sunil Kumar, Managing Director, Haryana Tourism Corporation; Dr R.K. Suman, Regional Director (North), Ministry of Tourism; Shri Mohan Gaurchandra Prabhu, Vice President, ISKCON; Shri PP Khanna, past President, ADTOI; Col. Manbeer Choudhary, past President, FHRAI, among others.

The event brought together 170 tourism stakeholders, including tour operators, travel agents, hoteliers, influencers, and media professionals. Discussions covered critical topics like infrastructure, accommodations, amenities, and strategies to increase tourism to Kurukshetra. The focus was also on sustainable tourism, community involvement, and training service providers. A FAM tour on November 5, 2024, showcased Kurukshetra's key attractions, such as Brahm Sarovar and Sri Krishna Museum, highlighting its cultural significance and tourism potential.



## MoT hosts Spiritual Tourism and Meditation Conference in Varanasi to boost global appeal

The Ministry of Tourism, Government of India (Northern Region), successfully organised a conference on spiritual tourism and meditation at the Swarved Mahamandir Dham in Varanasi on November 27, 2024. The event aimed to highlight Varanasi's unique position as a spiritual tourism hub and promote meditation as a key attraction for domestic and international tourists.

The session was held with the divine blessings of Sant Pravar Shri Vigyandeo Ji Maharaj and was attended by more than 100 participants, including high-ranking officials from the Ministry of Tourism, tour organisers, professors and students from Banaras Hindu University, and other dignitaries. Dr R. K. Suman, Regional Director (North), addressed the conference, emphasising its significance.

The event featured other distinguished speakers, including Sushil Singh, Chairman, ADTOI (UP Chapter); Rahul Mehta, President, Tourism Welfare Association (UP); Dr Ajay Singh, Past President, Guide Association Varanasi; Pawas Prasoon, Manager, India Tourism, Varanasi; and Praveen Singh Rana, Academic Representative from BHU.

The conference explored innovative strategies to strengthen Varanasi's global appeal as a spiritual destination and discussed collaborative efforts among various stakeholders in the tourism sector.





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## Cambodia-India Tourism Forum 2024 strengthens bilateral tourism ties



On October 31, 2024, the Borei Angkor Hotel hosted the Cambodia-India Tourism Forum 2024, attended by 400 delegates, including officials, tourism stakeholders, and representatives from both nations. Presided over by H.E. HUOT Hak, Cambodia’s Minister of Tourism, the forum marked a key initiative under the ‘First Cambodia-India Tourism Year 2024,’ endorsed by Prime Minister Samdech Moha Bovor Thipadei HUN Manet.

Launched in New Delhi in June 2024, the campaign coincides with introducing direct flights between New Delhi-Phnom Penh and Kolkata-Siem Reap by Cambodia Angkor Air and IndiGo Airlines in February 2025. The Minister urged collaboration between Indian and Cambodian stakeholders to promote Cambodia’s safety, culture, and tourism through Indian media and social networks.

H.E. HUOT Hak emphasised Cambodia’s peace, stability, and investor-friendly conditions while encouraging delegates to champion the campaign “Each Person as an Ambassador of Cambodia-India Tourism: Tourism for All, and All for Tourism!”

## Travstarz Global Group hosts training session and networking evening in Amritsar



Travstarz Global Group, a Trip.com-invested company, hosted a successful networking evening and training session for travel agent partners at the Hyatt Regency, Amritsar, on November 25, 2024. The event saw enthusiastic participation from over 45 agents from Amritsar and Jalandhar.

Pankaj Nagpal, Managing Director, Travstarz Global Group, said, “This is our third event in Amritsar within a year, following Chandigarh and Ludhiana, covering major Punjab cities. We have received overwhelming support each time. Punjab partners, especially from Amritsar, have shown tremendous interest in destinations like Baku, Turkey, Thailand, Vietnam, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, USA, and Canada. This event showcased our full portfolio, with a special focus on Japan and Georgia, which was recently added to our DMC list. Our unmatched offerings for USA and Canada include over 600 short- and long-haul itineraries managed from our Los Angeles headquarters, with Punjab as a key support market for these destinations.”

Vani Singh, Vice President, emphasised Travstarz's focus on Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities, recognising their significant outbound business potential. She added that these networking events strengthen relationships with partners and keep them informed about new offerings. Travstarz plans to host similar events across India, including South India, through April 2024.

## Himanshu Patil takes charge as OTOAI President for 2024-2026 term

The Outbound Tour Operators Association of India (OTOAI) successfully concluded its elections on December 5, 2024, marking the end of the 2022-2024 term. The newly elected Working Committee members are President Himanshu Patil, Kesari Tours and Travels, Vice President Shравan Bhalla, High Flyer, General Secretary Sidharth Khanna, Khanna Enterprises (Regd.), Joint Secretary Monia Kapoor, Travel O Holidays, and Treasurer Gurdeep Singh Gujral, Gujral Tours and Travels.

This new leadership team is poised to lead OTOAI with vision, dynamism, and a commitment to fostering growth in the outbound tourism sector. To strengthen the governance structure, the Executive Committee (EC) comprises both retained and nominated members, ensuring a diverse and capable team.

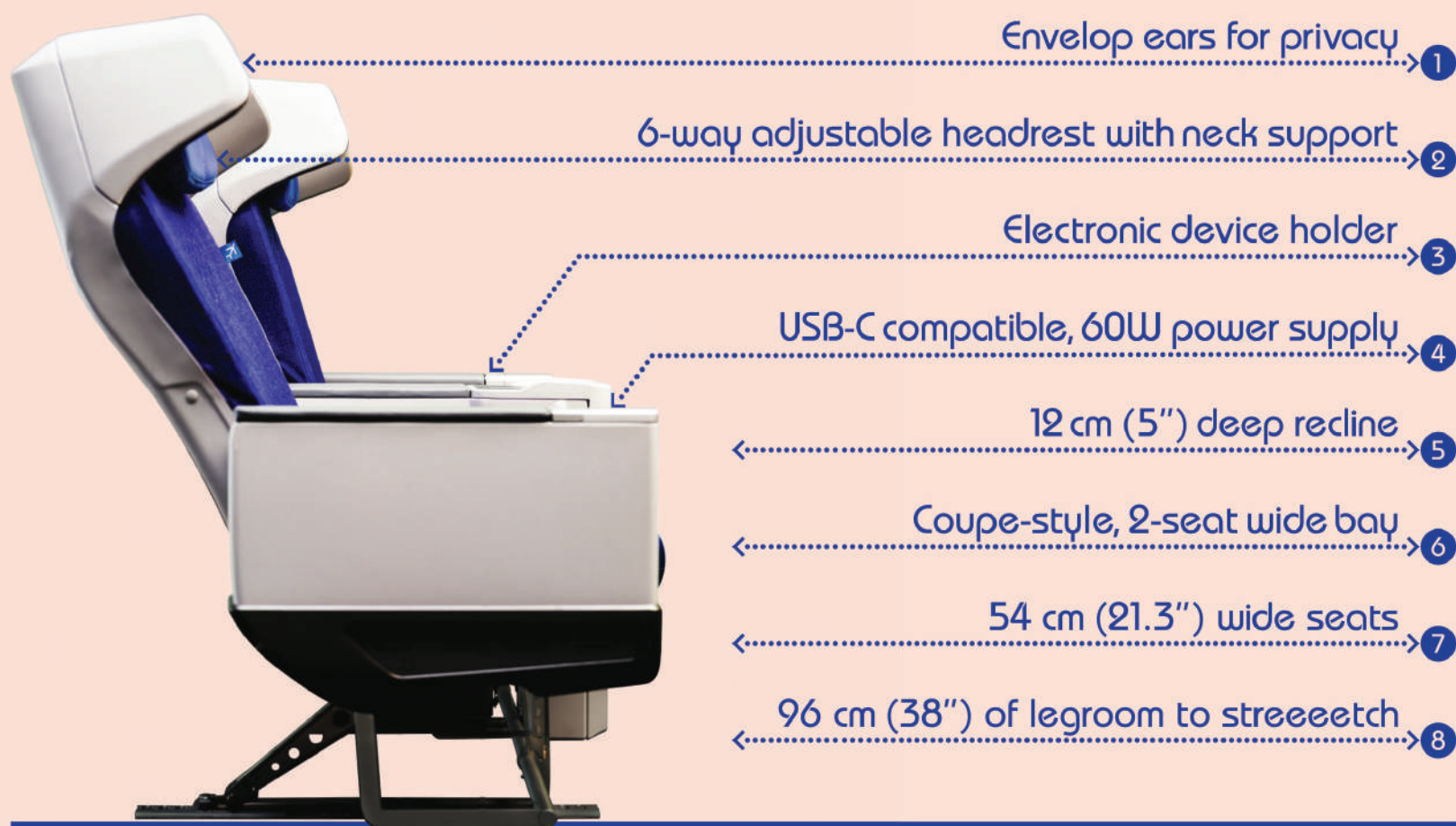
The EC members for the term 2024-2026 include Riaz Munshi, N. Chirag Travels; Adl Abdul Karim, Flycreative Online; Ankush Nijhawan, Travel Boutique- a Unit of Lap Travels; Rohit Shorey, Destination Travel Services; Vineet Gopal, Engee Holidays; and Vinayak Laud, Vinaayak Holidays.

The election process was managed with fairness and transparency by Sanjay Datta, Managing Director, Airborne Holiday, who served as the election officer for the OTOAI elections.





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