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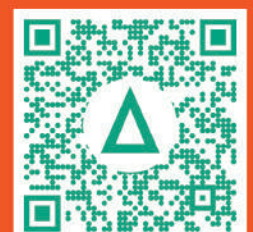


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Dear Friends,

Welcome to the February Edition of TTJ!

As always, we bring you a rich mix of insights and updates from across the travel industry. Looking ahead to 2025, we have gathered key perspectives from outbound travel stakeholders and DMCs, offering valuable foresight into this evolving segment.

This issue also covers the recent TAFI Convention in Vietnam, which was widely recognised for delivering a powerful message on sustainability and responsible travel. Additionally, we take a deep dive into the 2025-26 Budget, analysing its impact on the travel sector, and explore a thought-provoking question: Is artificial intelligence—and its applications—a boon or a bane for humankind?

This month, our FAM reports take you to fascinating destinations, including Saudi and Moscow, offering firsthand experiences and fresh perspectives.

A major highlight of this edition is our special feature on TTJ Kconnect, our debut event in Delhi, which successfully brought together industry partners for meaningful networking and collaboration.

We are excited to share these stories with you and hope this issue inspires new ideas and opportunities as we embrace another dynamic year in travel.

Happy Reading!

Ravi Sharma

Ravi Sharma
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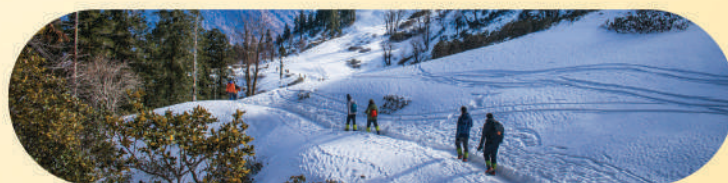
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Air Astana to commence nonstop flights between Almaty and Mumbai from April 20



Air Astana is celebrating 20 years of connecting Kazakhstan and India by expanding its services with the launch of a new direct route between Almaty and Mumbai, set to commence on April 20, 2025.

The airline has announced that flights to Mumbai will be operated using Airbus family aircraft, with three weekly services scheduled on Sundays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. Economy class return fares, including taxes, will start at US\$406, while Business class return fares will be available from US\$1,136.

This new service is expected to significantly enhance connectivity between the two nations, providing seamless travel options for both leisure and business travellers. With Mumbai serving as a major financial and cultural hub, the expansion is set to strengthen Air Astana's presence in India, complementing its existing flights between New Delhi and Almaty.

Integration of ITA Airways into the Lufthansa Group commences



Lufthansa Group and ITA Airways are enhancing travel benefits following Lufthansa's completed participation in ITA Airways. At a Rome press conference, executives outlined key improvements for passengers.

Effective immediately, 36 million Miles & More members can earn and redeem miles on ITA Airways flights, while 2.7 million ITA Airways Volare members gain access to Lufthansa Group airlines' rewards.

From March 30, 2025, ITA Airways will move to Lufthansa terminals in Frankfurt and Munich, improving transfers. Lounge access expands to 130 Lufthansa Group lounges for ITA passengers, and vice versa.

Code-sharing will cover over 100 routes initially, enabling seamless bookings and expanded travel options, including ITA's domestic Italian routes. Coordinated flight schedules will enhance connectivity across key hubs.

ITA Airways is set to join Star Alliance by mid-2026, exiting SkyTeam. These changes promise greater convenience and flexibility for travellers across both airline networks.

India and China to resume Kailash Mansarovar Yatra, direct flights

India and China have agreed to resume the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra in summer 2025 and restore direct flights, marking a step toward rebuilding bilateral ties. The decisions follow a meeting between Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri and Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong in Beijing on January 27, 2025.

Both sides also agreed to restart hydrological data sharing and enhance people-to-people exchanges, including media and think-tank interactions. The discussions aligned with the 75th anniversary of India-China diplomatic relations in 2025, emphasising efforts to restore mutual trust.

This meeting revives the foreign secretary-vice foreign minister level dialogue mechanism, following high-level talks between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping in Kazan in October 2024. Recent disengagement agreements in eastern Ladakh have paved the way for improving ties.

India has reiterated that peace in border areas remains essential for normalising relations, with economic and trade concerns also discussed to ensure transparency and long-term cooperation.




Bahrain

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Lindt Home of Chocolate welcomes over 817,000 visitors in 2024



The Lindt Chocolate Competence Foundation, located at the Lindt Home of Chocolate in Kilchberg, Switzerland, hosted an impressive 817,163 visitors in 2024. Now in its fourth year of operation, the center has firmly established itself as one of Switzerland’s most popular and frequently visited museums.

The Lindt Home of Chocolate offers an immersive experience with its multimedia exhibition, the world’s largest free-standing chocolate fountain, a Lindt shop, and Switzerland’s first Lindt Café. Its unique attractions have drawn visitors from across the globe, with a significant number arriving from the USA, the UK, Germany, and India.

Adding to the allure, the museum conducted 1,900 guided tours in 2024, where expert guides shared fascinating insights into the world of chocolate. Among the visitors were approximately 300 school classes, highlighting the museum’s appeal to educational institutions.

Disneyland Paris unveils ‘Disney Tales of Magic,’ a spectacular new nighttime show



Disneyland Paris has unveiled Disney Tales of Magic, an all-new immersive nighttime spectacular, where emotion and magic take center stage. Following the success of Disney Dreams! (2012) and Disney Illuminations (2017), this show draws inspiration from beloved Disney and Pixar films such as Inside Out, Coco, Encanto, Pinocchio, Cinderella, and The Lion King. It explores the deeper essence of magic—the joy of adventure, the warmth of love, and the nostalgia of cherished memories.

For the first time, the production integrates Main Street, U.S.A. with Sleeping Beauty Castle, using stunning projections, pyrotechnics, fountains, lasers, and drones to create a breathtaking 20-minute spectacle. Featuring over 200 LED lighting packages, 15 ultra-bright lasers, and drones forming 3D figures, the show is an unprecedented visual experience, brought to life with expertise from NorthHouse and over 17,500 hours of programming.

London's Blitz shelter tunnels to become a new tourist attraction

A vast network of tunnels built beneath Holborn, London, during World War II, is set to become the city’s largest new tourist attraction in years. Originally dug by hand in 1940 to shelter Londoners from the Blitz, the tunnels were completed in 1942 but never used for their intended purpose.

Now acquired by The London Tunnels, the site will be transformed into a memorial to the Blitz, blending museum, exhibition, and entertainment experiences. The tunnels have a rich history, having housed a spy headquarters in 1944, where James Bond author Ian Fleming worked for naval intelligence, believed to have inspired Q Branch. Later, they served as a telephone exchange for 200 staff in the 1950s and 60s.

CEO Angus Murray estimates the project will cost £120 million, with an expected 3 million annual visitors paying around £30 per entry. Set to open by late 2027 or early 2028, it aims to rival the success of the London Eye in boosting tourism.





ALMATY

AIR ASTANA LAUNCHES NEW MUMBAI-ALMATY ROUTE

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Air India to restart flights between Tel Aviv and Delhi from March 2



Air India is set to restart its direct flights between Delhi and Tel Aviv on March 2, 2025, following a suspension in August 2024 due to escalating tensions in the Middle East.

The airline will operate five times a week on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Sundays, utilising its Boeing 787-8 Dreamliner aircraft.

The decision to restore the Delhi-Tel Aviv route aligns with Air India's broader strategy to expand its international connectivity and cater to the increasing travel demand between India and Israel. The reinstatement of this service is expected to boost tourism, business, and cultural exchanges between the two nations.

Centara unveils 'The Centara Collection,' celebrating individuality and authenticity



Centara Hotels and Resorts, Thailand's leading hotel operator, has introduced The Centara Collection, a curated portfolio of unique properties designed to celebrate individuality, authenticity, and creativity. Evolving from the Centara Boutique Collection, this rebranded portfolio emphasises distinctive design, immersive local experiences, and curated creativity, catering to travellers seeking bespoke and experiential stays.

The first international member of The Centara Collection is Machchafushi Island Resort and Spa Maldives (formerly Centara Grand Island Resort and Spa Maldives). The resort offers overwater and beachfront villas, world-class diving experiences, and one of the Maldives' finest house reefs, blending Thai-Maldivian hospitality with a deep connection to nature.

Joining the collection in Thailand are Roukh Kiri Khao Yai, a rustic 13-villa retreat amid Khao Yai National Park, and Varivana Resort Koh Phangan, a tropical escape featuring a rooftop infinity pool with stunning sea views.

Asego partners with Collinson for airport lounge access during flight disruptions

Collinson International, a global leader in airport experiences, loyalty solutions, and owner of Priority Pass, has partnered with Asego, one of India's top providers of global assistance and travel insurance. This collaboration enables Asego WaitMate users to access over 1,600 premium airport lounges and travel experiences worldwide when facing flight delays, powered by Collinson's SmartDelay™ solution.

With nearly 1 in 5 flights in the Asia Pacific delayed by at least 15 minutes as of June 2024, and 33 million travellers affected by hour-long delays, the initiative aims to alleviate stress and enhance customer satisfaction. Research by Priority Pass also highlights that 3 in 5 Indian travellers experience "Fear of Switching Off" (FOSO) due to pre-flight issues.

Through this partnership, eligible Asego WaitMate users will receive real-time notifications and digital lounge access vouchers upon flight delays, ensuring a seamless and stress-free airport experience while fostering brand loyalty.





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- Encounter incredible wildlife, from polar bears, walruses, and seals in the Arctic, or penguins, whales, and seals in Antarctica
- For the adventurous at heart, Albatros offers the exhilarating polar plunge - a tradition where you can jump into the icy waters of the Arctic or Antarctic (under careful supervision). This experience is a unique highlight of their expeditions.



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VFS Global Champions Innovation, Partnerships, and Sustainability in Travel

At the TAFI Convention 2025, held in the breathtaking city of Ninh Binh, Vietnam, VFS Global was honoured with two prestigious awards, solidifying its reputation as a game-changer in the global travel and tourism industry. The accolades reflect the company's unwavering commitment to innovation, partnerships, and sustainability, shaping the future of international travel.

Prashant Nayak

The first award, "Game-changer in Global Travel and Mobility," was presented to Zubin Karkaria, Founder and CEO of VFS Global Group. This recognition highlights VFS Global's transformative role in simplifying international travel and making travel dreams a reality for millions of travellers worldwide.

The second honour, the "Excellence in Sustainability" award, was accepted by Shireen Mistree, Head of ESG at VFS Global. This award acknowledges the company's outstanding efforts in integrating sustainability into its core business operations and inspiring stakeholders across the global travel industry.

Fireside Chat with Ajay Prakash

Following the award presentation, Karkaria engaged in an insightful fireside chat with Ajay Prakash, President of TAFI. The discussion highlighted his visionary leadership in transforming VFS Global from an Indian enterprise into a global leader in visa and travel services. Karkaria shared his perspectives on leveraging cutting-edge technologies, fostering strategic partnerships, and championing environmental sustainability to drive the company's growth and industry impact.

Expressing his gratitude, Karkaria stated, "I am truly honoured to receive this recognition from TAFI. I also extend my thanks to our Vietnamese counterparts for hosting this remarkable convention in Ninh Binh. This is my first time here, and I must say, I am deeply impressed. It is a destination that deserves more attention, and this event is a great opportunity to promote tourism to this beautiful region."

The Remarkable Growth of VFS Global

Reflecting on the inception of VFS Global in 2001, Karkaria recalled identifying a critical gap in the market. He remarked, "A few



Bui Van Manh, Director, People's Committee of Ninh Binh Province, Dept. of Tourism, Vietnam, presenting the award to Zubin Karkaria, Founder & CEO, VFS Global Group.

decades ago, as a tour operator, arranging visa appointments for our customers was a challenge. Recognising this, we saw an opportunity to create a service that would streamline the process, ease the burden on embassies, and enhance efficiency for applicants."

Starting with its first major client, the U.S. Embassy in Mumbai, VFS Global has since expanded its operations across 69 countries, serving millions of travellers annually. When asked about the key to this phenomenal growth, Karkaria modestly attributed it to strategic foresight and a customer-centric approach. "Success comes from identifying real needs and ensuring that the solutions we provide benefit not just our business but also our customers and the broader community."

Embracing Innovation

With rapid advancements in the travel and tourism industry, Karkaria emphasised the role of artificial intelligence (AI) and technological innovation in shaping the future of visa processing. He revealed, "We started focusing on Artificial Intelligence (AI) 18 months ago, and today, we have 16 data scientists globally working on AI-driven solutions in collaboration with governments. It is crucial to remain adaptable and embrace change."

As part of this innovation drive, VFS Global is set to launch six new AI-powered

products for the British High Commission, aimed at enhancing the efficiency and accessibility of visa services worldwide.

The Power of Partnerships

Karkaria firmly believes that collaborations and partnerships have been instrumental in VFS Global's success. He stressed, "We are continuously developing AI solutions to simplify and enhance the visa application process. Partnerships are fundamental to our growth, and everyone in this industry is a valuable partner. If any

of you need support from our team of data scientists at VFS, please do not hesitate to reach out to us."

Sustainability with Corporate Responsibility

Amid all the technological and business growth, Karkaria remains deeply committed to sustainability. When Ajay asked him about the convention's theme "Tourism for Tomorrow: Protecting the Planet," Karkaria acknowledged the magnificence of planet Earth and the urgent need to protect it.

VFS Global's commitment to sustainability is embedded in the company's culture. Karkaria explained that every employee of its 15,000 staff, from top executives to those on the ground in 150 countries, has an ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) target tied to their bonus structure, highlighting the seriousness with which VFS Global approaches corporate responsibility. He added, "7.5 per cent of our bonus is calculated based on meeting our ESG targets. This reflects how seriously we take our responsibility toward environmental protection, inclusion, and diversity."

Zubin Karkaria's leadership in the travel and mobility sector, coupled with his emphasis on innovation, partnerships, and sustainability, continues to shape the future of international travel.

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ProChile at 50

Strengthening Chile-India Trade and Tourism Ties

As ProChile celebrates its 50th anniversary, the organisation continues to enhance Chile’s global image as a vibrant hub for trade, culture, and tourism. In an exclusive conversation with TTJ, H.E. Juan Angulo Monsalve, Ambassador of Chile to India, and Jorge Loyola Castro, Chilean Trade Commissioner to India, Embassy of Chile, highlight the significance of this milestone year, particularly in strengthening Chile-India relations.

Sonika Bohra

On December 6, 2024, the Chilean Residence in New Delhi hosted a remarkable celebration—ProChile’s 50th anniversary. Importers, restaurateurs, diplomats, and industry leaders came together to honour five decades of Chile’s steadfast commitment to fostering meaningful global connections.

The evening was a blend of culture, trade, and camaraderie, showcasing the shared journey of Chilean excellence and its growing partnership with India.

Diversification and Sustainability

“As we celebrate ProChile’s 50th anniversary, I am proud of the strides we have made in enhancing Chile’s image, particularly in India. Our efforts have been anchored in two main pillars: diversification and sustainability,” remarks Ambassador Angulo.

Chile’s diversification strategy has enabled significant inroads into the Indian market, particularly in exports like walnuts, which dominate 80 per cent of India’s import market, alongside kiwis, cherries, and the rising popularity of Chilean wines. Additionally, initiatives to connect Indian tech hubs with Chile and promote ‘Shooting in Chile’ aim to attract Bollywood filmmakers to Chile’s stunning landscapes.

On the sustainability front, Chile’s commitment to green practices remains a cornerstone. “We are proud to have won the Leading Green Destination award at the



▲ Juan Angulo Monsalve

World Travel Awards (WTA) 2024 for the 10th consecutive year, affirming our leadership in sustainable tourism,” says Jorge Loyola Castro.

One of the highlights of 2024 was the Chile Summit India, held in August, marking an important milestone in ProChile’s golden jubilee. “The summit provided opportunities to foster partnerships across fresh fruits, seafood, wine, creative industries, and tourism,” he adds.

“Looking ahead, we at ProChile are excited to continue sharing Chile’s best offerings—whether through our products, tourism, or



▲ Jorge Loyola Castro

cultural collaborations—while strengthening our bond with India,” states Jorge.

Indian Tourism to Chile

Tourism in Chile is witnessing a steady rebound. As of October 2024, the country welcomed 4,085,940 visitors, reflecting a 38.8 per cent increase from 2023. While 77 per cent of these arrivals come from South America, Asia and Oceania accounted for 1.5 per cent of visitors, with India ranking sixth at 3,784 arrivals.

“Although Indian tourist numbers are increasing steadily, and the potential for



growth remains immense. Our target for 2025 is to significantly boost Indian arrivals through roadshows in key Indian cities alongside Chilean tour operators and LATAM Airlines. These initiatives will spotlight Chile's diverse offerings, from unique landscapes to rich culture and sustainable tourism practices," shares Jorge.

Chile's Appeal for Indian Travellers

"Chile offers a truly unique experience for Indian travellers, combining breathtaking natural beauty, exciting adventure, rich culture, and delightful cuisine," says Ambassador Angulo.

Jorge emphasises the unique appeal of Chile to Indian travellers, stating, "Chile's blend of nature, culture, and food makes it an exciting destination for Indian travellers, offering a memorable and enriching experience."

The Atacama Desert, renowned for its surreal landscapes and world-class stargazing, has earned recognition as South America's Most Romantic Destination, making it a perfect getaway for couples. For adventure enthusiasts, Chile's diverse terrain—from the majestic Andes to its extensive coastline—offers activities like skiing, kayaking, and diving, drawing young, thrill-seeking travellers.

Cultural explorers can immerse themselves in Chile's Mapuche heritage, vibrant festivals, and artistic hubs like Valparaíso, celebrated for its colourful murals. Gastronomy in Chile also takes centre stage, featuring fresh seafood, locally sourced produce, and exquisite wines from regions like the Colchagua Valley. These offerings cater to a wide range of preferences, including vegetarian options, ensuring a rich culinary experience for all.

Promoting Chile in India

Chile has undertaken numerous initiatives to raise awareness of its offerings in India. Campaigns like 'Unboxing Chile,' 'Flavors from Chile,' and 'Know Chile Through Wines' have been pivotal in showcasing Chile's products and tourism opportunities. Events like the latest Chile Summit India, the first high-impact event from Chile in India, have been conducted in key cities like Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru.

"ProChile, in collaboration with LATAM Airlines and tour operators like Antarctica21, has been working on enhancing connectivity between Chile and India. Through various roadshows and events, discussions have been taking place with local Indian tour operators and airlines to find the best ways to link Chile with the Indian market," says Jorge.

Improving connectivity is central to Chile's strategy. "ProChile, in collaboration with LATAM Airlines and Indian tour operators, is actively working on enhancing travel options between Chile and India," notes Jorge. "These partnerships aim to position Chile as a must-visit destination for Indian tourists by 2025."

Culture, Heritage, and Wine Tailored for India

Jorge describes Chile as a captivating destination with a perfect mix of culture, heritage, and wine tourism, sure to appeal to Indian travellers. "Imagine walking through the Colchagua Valley, savouring Carmenera wine paired with vegetarian options crafted especially for Indian tastes," he shares, highlighting the seamless blend of Chile's renowned wines and flavours tailored to Indian preferences.

He further emphasises Chile's vibrant festivals, like the Fiesta de la Vendimia, which

bring together lively colours and energy, making Indian visitors feel at home and immersed in something fresh and exciting. "For those who appreciate history, Easter Island's iconic Moai statues and the rich traditions of the Mapuche people offer a deeply enriching cultural experience," Jorge adds.

Adventure enthusiasts, he notes, will be drawn to Patagonia's breathtaking landscapes, offering incredible trekking routes and wildlife spotting, where challenge meets beauty.

"With all these offerings, it is no surprise that Chile was recently named Leading Youth Travel Destination at the World Travel Awards, highlighting the country's vibrant culture and activities for younger travellers," he informs.

Vision for the Future

Chile's emphasis on sustainability is key to its tourism strategy. With over 20 per cent of its land protected through national parks, sites like Torres del Paine exemplify eco-tourism.

"My vision for strengthening Chile-India travel relations in the coming decade is grounded in fostering deeper cultural understanding, enhancing accessibility, and building sustainable partnerships that benefit both nations," says Ambassador Angulo.

Advocating for direct flight connections and streamlined visa processes will be central to ensuring seamless travel between Chile and India.

"Chile's diversity and charm offer Indian travellers an experience that is both unique and deeply memorable," concludes Jorge. With sustained efforts in connectivity, sustainability, and cultural collaboration, Chile is set to strengthen its place as an exciting destination for Indian tourists in the years to come.

Minor Hotels Set to Craft Extraordinary Experiences Through Local Culture

Minor Hotels has established itself as a forward-thinking leader in the global hospitality industry, driven by an innovative approach. In this exclusive interaction with TTJ, Puneet Dhawan, Head of Asia, Minor Hotels, unveils the company's bold vision for global expansion, with a particular focus on the rapidly growing markets of Asia and India. Minor Hotels is reshaping the hospitality landscape through innovative brand concepts, its unique 'asset right' strategy, and capitalising on India's rising appeal as a destination for luxury and immersive travel experiences.

Prashant Nayak



Minor Hotels has ambitious global growth plans. Are there any specific targets or priority regions for expansion set for the coming years? Can you share more about the company's strategy for growth, particularly in Asia and India?

Minor Hotels' strong growth trajectory is continuing into 2025 and beyond. We recently announced an update on our development pipeline, including almost 300 properties and over 47,000 keys, set to open by the end of 2027. This expansion puts us on track to surpass 850 hotels and resorts globally and positions us among the world's largest hospitality groups.

Of the 300 properties, we expect to add more than 100 in Asia, which includes new openings across the region, with strategic expansion specifically in North Asia and India. For other regions, the addition of more than 60 properties in the Middle East and Africa and 40 in Australia and New Zealand will lead to a more balanced global portfolio distribution, which today is more than 50 per cent of our properties in Europe.

In mid-2024, we also announced our target to open 50 properties in India within 10 years. We hit a significant milestone by launching the first luxury Anantara in India—Anantara Jewel Bagh Jaipur Hotel—in November 2024, and we are in various stages of discussions with partners across the country to expand our India portfolio.

In tandem, we are investing heavily in uplifting many luxury properties across our portfolio. For example, in Thailand, we recently completed renovations at our two Anantara resorts on Koh Samui—Anantara Bophut Koh Samui Resort and Anantara Lawana Koh Samui Resort—and Anantara Hua Hin Resort, the original Anantara, is undergoing significant upgrade works.

Minor Hotels has introduced an innovative "asset right" approach, combining the benefits of both asset-light and asset-heavy models. How does this dynamic strategy work in practice, and how does it align with the company's long-term growth goals?

Minor Hotels has a long history of asset ownership, and we have an ownership stake in the majority of our portfolio. Today, around 70 per cent of our portfolio falls within an 'asset heavy' classification, where we own or lease the property, versus the 30 per cent that is managed or 'asset light'. As part of the latest review of our 'asset right' strategy, we want to bring the 'asset heavy' and 'asset light' proportions closer to 50-50 by adding

▲ Puneet Dhawan

more managed and franchised properties. This move will also ensure more sustainable and diversified growth. More than 90 per cent of the projects in our pipeline are hotel management agreements (HMAs) or franchise deals, which will help us meet our rebalancing goal.

Having an ownership stake in our properties and owning strategic assets allows us to do many things our 'asset-light' competitors cannot. For instance, we have greater control over defining and delivering the brand experience, which is especially important in the early days of building the brand. We also have more room to experiment and innovate, and it has allowed us to become a pioneer in many areas, like wellness with concepts like Layan Life by Anantara in Phuket, guest experience with the Jungle Bubbles at Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp and Resort in Chiang Rai, and our branded residence projects.

As owners ourselves, we know what matters to our owners in the 'assetlight' portion of our portfolio in ways other groups do not. Our stake in our hotels means we understand how to run profitable hotels that deliver results and return on investment for their asset.

How does Minor Hotels approach property development, particularly with regard to conversions, brownfield, and greenfield projects?

We consider all types of projects. In our current global pipeline, 62 per cent are greenfield development, while 38 per cent are conversions and brownfield development opportunities.

Our team evaluates if a project is one where we should take an ownership stake or manage the asset. Often, as evident in our current pipeline, we see a growing demand for Minor Hotels to come into a project through an HMA. For projects where we will manage an asset, partnership is one of the most important factors for us. We look for partners committed to creating something unique and special for our guests, where we can deliver memorable experiences that build loyalty to our brands.

With new properties expected, are there any new brands or concepts that you're particularly excited about? How do you envision these brands resonating with local markets?

Destination creation has been instrumental in Minor Hotels' strategy and success, and we see immense opportunities to apply this approach in India. The country has many untapped hotspots and immense potential to establish new destinations for domestic and international tourists.

Our focus in India is on expanding within the luxury and premium hotel segments with our Anantara, Avani, and NH Collection brands. Additionally, we see opportunities to introduce our upscale NH Hotels & Resorts brand to tier 2 and 3 cities, as well as airport locations, to meet the growing demand for branded hotels in these areas.

While emerging urban centres, particularly in Southern India, present exciting prospects, we are also excited about the prospect of opening luxury wilderness lodges in places like the southern hill towns and the northern Himalayas, restoring historic palaces or forts, or launching Ayurvedic wellness retreats. These concepts align with Anantara's strength in blending cultural authenticity with world-class luxury.

We also have two new brands in development that will launch later this year—joining our portfolio of eight hotel brands—which could address owners' and travellers' needs in India.

Anantara is the flagship luxury brand of Minor Hotels. What differentiates Anantara Jaipur from other luxury offerings in the region, and what makes it a standout property?

Anantara Jewel Bagh Jaipur Hotel is an excellent opportunity for us to introduce the Anantara brand to India. Jaipur has a vibrant heritage, and there are so many ways that we deliver an authentic cultural experience that immerses guests in the city.

The property's distinctive design draws on Rajasthan's regal architectural elements and evokes the luxury of a bygone era. On the exterior, the *chajjas* and *jahrokas* give the hotel a palatial feel, paying homage to Rajasthan's royal past. Once inside, the *tikri* mirror work done by third-generation artisans in the Sheesh Mahal bar creates a mesmerising glow, while the hand-painted murals and carvings of the grand Rang Mahal make it a cultural masterpiece highlighting Rajasthan's storied past.

As Minor Hotels plans to open new properties in India, what do you believe are the key drivers behind India's growing appeal as a destination for international travellers?

Travellers are increasingly curious to experience the incredible diversity of India beyond the major metros.

The country's investment in tourism infrastructure has made it even easier for travellers to access more remote, less-discovered destinations. Within the past decade, the number of operational airports has more than doubled, opening further opportunities for regional tourism.

India's vast tapestry of experiences, including ancient monuments, UNESCO World Heritage Sites, vibrant festivals, diverse cuisines, and a rich cultural heritage, will continue to draw travellers seeking authentic and immersive experiences for years to come.

As the travel industry continues to evolve, what key travel trends do you foresee for 2025 and beyond, and how is Minor Hotels positioning itself to stay ahead of these changes in India?

India's hospitality market presents a unique opportunity to bridge the gap in experiential luxury properties, despite its rich cultural heritage and historical significance. We see potential to introduce world-class luxury experiences celebrating India's history, such as revitalising legacy assets like forts and palaces. With Anantara's expertise in merging heritage with contemporary luxury, we are well-positioned to bring these remarkable properties to a global audience while preserving their authenticity.

India's youthful demographic, with a median age of approximately 30, also highlights the rising demand for vibrant, lifestyle-focused hospitality. Our Avani brand, with its 'fun and funky' ethos, is perfectly tailored to meet the preferences of this younger generation, offering dynamic spaces that align with their aspirations.

Additionally, as the birthplace of Ayurveda, India offers an unparalleled opportunity in wellness tourism. Minor Hotels' globally recognised wellness offerings, such as the Anantara Spa, naturally align with India's wellness heritage, allowing guests to engage with holistic practices in their place of origin.

The country's vast wildlife reserves also remain underutilised, presenting another avenue for development. Drawing inspiration from our success with the Elewana Collection in Africa and Anantara and Avani's presence in nature-driven destinations, we aim to create immersive wildlife experiences that combine luxury with conservation.

Lastly, as Indian hotel owners increasingly seek partners who prioritise local understanding over standardised models, Minor Hotels' philosophy of 'thinking global, speaking local' ensures we offer the flexibility and cultural alignment they value. This approach uniquely positions us to collaborate effectively with owners and deliver hospitality experiences that resonate deeply with the market.

Authentic Greek Roots for a Worldwide Audience with Myconian Collection

The Greek island of Mykonos has long been synonymous with cosmopolitan glamour, pristine beaches, and vibrant nightlife. Yet, behind the island's dazzling reputation lies a rich cultural heritage and a tradition of heartfelt hospitality, qualities that the Myconian Collection has nurtured from the beginning. Founded in 1979 by Mykonos natives Eleftheria and George, the Collection began life as a simple three-star, bed-and-breakfast-style hotel. Today, it is a constellation of 14 five-star properties under affiliations such as Relais & Châteaux and other luxury hotel groups.

Vartik Sethi

According to Anastasios Naoum, Commercial Director, Myconian Collection, the brand's growth has been driven by a commitment to preserving local authenticity without compromising on modern standards of luxury. He shared, "We started with a small bed-and-breakfast when Mykonos was still off the global tourist radar. Since then, we have worked relentlessly to evolve the offerings, from opening our first five-star hotel in 1992 to building a portfolio that caters to discerning travellers from around the world."

Staying True to Roots and Luxury

Indeed, part of what sets the Myconian Collection apart is its family-run ethos and intimate knowledge of the island. Naoum believes this personalised approach

resonates strongly with repeat clientele, who now account for around 30 per cent of the group's annual business. Further emphasising what sets the group apart, he added, "Guests sense the warmth and care that come from a family's decades-long dedication. Beyond that, we have been here longer than many other operators on the island. That experience translates into consistent quality, real insider knowledge, and a service culture that feels genuinely Greek."

Cultural and Culinary Exploration

Located across six prime sites in Mykonos, the Collection has developed a reputation for offering travellers both the excitement of the island's famous party scene and the tranquillity of lesser-known cultural corners.

Naoum highlighted that Mykonos is more than just beaches and nightlife, pointing to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Delos as an example of local heritage that surprises first-time visitors. "Delos is the birthplace of Apollo and Artemis in Greek mythology and just a short boat ride away from Mykonos," he explained. "It is an ancient city frozen in time, and exploring it adds a meaningful historical and cultural dimension to any stay. We make sure guests know about such treasures."

Cultural immersion plays a key role even within the Collection's own spaces. Naoum described how the group's 32 restaurants offer a contemporary take on traditional Greek and Mediterranean cuisines, incorporating fresh, local ingredients. He shared, "We learned early on that taste is one of the most meaningful ways to connect and share our culture with others. Our carefully curated menus showcase authentic Greek flavours, such as traditional salads and cheeses, alongside a wide variety of vegetarian specialties. These options are especially cherished by

guests from India and other regions where dietary preferences play a significant role in their dining experience."

India in Spotlight

While the United States currently stands as its top source market, accounting for about 20 per cent of arrivals, European countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany, and France follow closely behind. Naoum adds that Asia, including India, has emerged as a promising market. "It is an exciting moment for us. We see huge potential in India, particularly with the prospect of direct flights to Greece starting in 2026. Our presence and partnerships in the market have grown considerably," he added.

Sustainability

Sustainability and community engagement are at the core of Myconian Collection's brand philosophy. The Myconian Collection has built its own desalination plants to offset water scarcity on the island and uses recycled materials whenever possible. Beyond environmental efforts, the group supports local infrastructure, donating a newly built elementary school that houses 220 students and provides accommodation for teachers and funding key medical equipment and expansions for the local hospital. "Before anything, we are natives of Mykonos," Naoum emphasised. "This island is more than just a tourist destination for us; it is our home. Contributing to its well-being and preserving its authenticity is at the heart of everything we do."

What's Next?

As Mykonos continues consolidating its position as a premier luxury destination, the Myconian Collection remains a force shaping the island's hospitality narrative. Naoum concluded, "We are forging more international partnerships, especially in emerging markets like India. Our goal is to ensure that when travellers from New York, Mumbai, or Melbourne, think of Mykonos, they instantly associate it with the warmth and authenticity of the Myconian Collection."



Anastasios Naoum



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TRAVEL AGENTS – The Real Catalysts Behind the India Outbound Boom



Tour operators and travel agents are at the forefront of India’s outbound boom, propelling the country’s rise as a top source market for international destinations. This explosive growth has transformed the India outbound story into a thrilling saga of opportunity and innovation. As the world rolls out the red carpet for Indian travellers across every segment, agents are the driving force—navigating trends, overcoming challenges, and crafting strategies to shape the future of this rapidly changing market. TTJ seeks to uncover the insights and strategies shaping this remarkable trajectory.

Prativa Vaidya Bhalla

According to Future Market Insights, India's outbound tourism market is predicted to reach USD 18,817.72 million in 2024, with an impressive compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 11.4 per cent projected between 2024 and 2034. By 2034, the market value is expected to soar to USD 55,388.41 million.

Travel agents are key facilitators in India’s outbound travel success story, serving as trusted advisors, planners, and executors for millions of Indian travellers exploring international destinations. Their expertise lies in understanding client preferences, budgets, and cultural nuances of Indian travellers, enabling them to craft the perfect experience for their clients, be it business or leisure. Their keen market understanding and expert knowledge make them the frontline drivers of India's current outbound tourism boom.

Reimagining Outbound Travel

India's outbound travel scenario is evolving rapidly, with emerging trends inspiring travellers to explore new forms of tourism. To stay ahead in the game, travel agents must quickly learn, adapt, and innovate to meet these shifting demands, ensuring they remain indispensable to their clients.

Anjali Gupta, Director, Y Not Travel, emphasises the importance of staying agile in the ever-evolving travel industry. In today’s rapidly changing travel landscape, having a finger on the pulse of what travellers want is essential. She shares her approach, "As guests

increasingly seek immersive cultural, culinary, and adventure experiences, we adapt by enhancing our destination expertise, developing niche specialisations, and crafting curated itineraries." To cater to the growing demand in the luxury and sustainable travel market, where exclusivity and eco-conscious options are key, Anjali focuses on building partnerships with sustainable luxury brands, curating eco-certified itineraries, and championing responsible tourism practices.

According to Prateek Wadhwa, Director, Dream Trip4U, 2025 will see travellers prioritising personalised, immersive, and meaningful experiences beyond traditional vacations. He says, "Guests want to connect deeply with local cultures, enjoy unique activities, and opt for sustainable travel choices. There is a noticeable rise in interest for wellness retreats, culinary-focused trips, and vacations that cater to the whole family." To address these evolving needs, Prateek has a clear plan, "We are creating customised travel plans tailored to each traveller’s interests and goals while enhancing our digital tools to make trip planning interactive, fun, and engaging for our customers."

Varun Godia, Manager, Product Development, Varun Worldwide Vacations, highlights a significant shift in travel trends; the fading concept of seasonality in travel products. He notes, "People are no longer limiting their trips to the 'best' time of year for a destination. Instead, they plan their travels based on their schedules while juggling jobs, family commitments, and financial considerations," he explains.

Sharing examples, Varun elucidates, “Western Europe, once primarily associated with summer vacations and ski trips, is now drawing visitors year-round, with increasing interest in Christmas markets, New Year celebrations, and the vibrant spring season. Similarly, the Masai Mara, which traditionally saw peak tourism between June and October, is now experiencing steady visitor numbers even during its off-season.”

Dheeraj S Kandur, Partner Flight Shop Holidays, shares his approach to capitalising on the growing demand for experiential travel, “We are building strong partnerships with local suppliers and hoteliers well in advance to secure the best offers. Additionally, we are collaborating closely with tourism boards to craft exclusive, tailored itineraries that resonate with the Indian diaspora.” Acknowledging the phenomenal influence of social media and technology, he adds, “We actively track trending experiences and incorporate them into our offerings, ensuring we meet the demand for experiential travel among our clients.”

Ensuring Stress-Free Travel

Prateek defines travel as constantly changing and challenging, with complicated visas, last-minute policy updates, and connectivity issues. He points out, “To make things easier for our clients, we stay on top of all the latest rules and maintain good connections with airlines and embassies. We help with all the pre-travel details, and our support team is available 24/7 to handle sudden issues like flight changes to ensure smooth running of trips.” He shares a recent example, “Our HNI client faced a sudden visa policy change just days before her Europe trip; we stepped in immediately, sorted her paperwork, and ensured she could travel without any hassle.”

Travel is one of the few industries where every moment brings a new challenge, given each client’s unique preferences. Dheeraj explains, “We have developed tailored SOPs for every departure and category of travel to address challenges. We ensure thorough preparation by revising documentation multiple times, applying for visas well in advance, and advising clients to book refundable options wherever possible. Additionally, we provide a personal travel manager to ensure peace of mind before and during the trip.”

Anjali knows the value of time and encourages clients to apply for visas as soon as travel is planned—within 180 days for Schengen and 60 days for Japan, and always maintain a valid USA visa for seamless transit. She adds, “Our team provides end-to-end visa support, ensuring timely submission and accurate documentation. A dedicated WhatsApp group provides real-time support connecting the guests, suppliers, and our office for instant communication, quick issue resolution, and stress-free travel.”

As a policy, before the Varun Worldwide DMC sends out any quotes, they request the client to provide a list of valid visas they have. Varun explains, “We study the requirements of the destination they are going to and only plan if it is a hassle-free and smooth visa experience. A lot of tourism boards are trying to improve this process, such as France, Hungary, and Australia.”

Beyond The Touristy Trail

Assessing the increasing popularity of trending destinations, Prateek sees a noticeable curiosity among travellers for offbeat destinations. He says, “This is something we are excited to nurture. Destinations like Russia, Georgia, Almaty, Baku, and Fiji are becoming increasingly popular due to their unique cultural offerings, picturesque landscapes, and affordability.” Outlining his prime focus, he states, “We promote such places by crafting exclusive itineraries and highlighting their hidden charms through storytelling, social media campaigns, and testimonials. Collaborations with local partners and influencers further help us to provide authentic insights, ensuring these destinations appeal to Indian travellers looking for fresh experiences.”

At Y Not Travel, the demand for cultural tours to Japan and bucket-list trips to see the Northern Lights has surged exponentially. Anjali notes, “Our team stays ahead by continuously learning and adapting to trends.” In Japan, travellers are increasingly seeking unique and immersive experiences. “From gastronomy tours and chrysanthemum viewing to scenic train journeys and stays at Legoland or Disneyland, the demand for diverse experiences is growing. Our team even arranged a film shoot for a superstar against the stunning backdrop of autumn foliage, highlighting our expertise in curating highly personalised and extraordinary requests,” shares Anjali. Popular activities for Northern Lights trips include skiing, snowmobiling, and icebreaker tours. Anjali reminisces about an unforgettable moment when a Mumbai industrialist proposed under the shimmering auroras, celebrating the occasion with his 20-member family.

Travel today is shifting towards unique, unusual, and personalised experiences, moving away from the concept of mass tourism. Dheeraj points out, “Our team conducts extensive research on destinations we specialise in, such as Australia, New Zealand, Finland, and Iceland. We travel extensively to these regions, allowing us to build strong partnerships with local hoteliers, boutique stays, and providers of bespoke experiences to enable us to craft truly immersive experiences.”

Varun has noticed a growing trend among Indian travellers seeking destinations off the beaten path that are unique and filled with authentic local experiences. Varun and his team have adopted a more tailored approach to cater to these evolving preferences. Teams are being trained to understand client requirements better, be it accommodation, specific F&B needs, or any special kind of experience. He recounts a memorable example of a client who spent 21 days in Japan. “For this trip, we arranged some truly unique cultural and dining experiences, including a reservation at an exclusive eight-seater tempura restaurant that sells out in minutes,” Varun adds.

Charting The Course for 2025

Indian travellers today seek more than just vacations; they want unique, curated experiences that stand out, some that may even be new for the trip curators themselves! Dheeraj highlights this trend, “We are meeting the rising demand for luxury family getaways, off-the-beaten-path destinations, immersive tours, and other unique requests by offering tailor-made packages that seamlessly blend comfort with excitement. Flexibility is key, allowing us to customise every detail and handle last-minute plans for those spontaneous moments.”

In 2025, Flight Shop Holidays will focus on offering exclusive, deeply personalised experiences. “Our goal is to showcase places and experiences still off the radar for Indian travellers. We aim to promote new destinations and curate luxury honeymoons, active adventure groups, wildlife tours, and culinary journeys,” shares Dheeraj. To streamline the travel process, the company has partnered with tech platforms like DocsNow for hassle-free visa documentation uploads and Guesto, a mobile app providing live updates, local transport details, culinary recommendations, and shopping tips. He adds, “We are actively collaborating with hoteliers, experiential suppliers, and tourism boards worldwide, including regional boards, to ensure seamless transitions and deeper cultural understanding.”

Y Not Travel will focus more on trend-specific offerings like bleisure travel, combining business with leisure as remote work gains popularity. To meet this demand, it will offer

tailored packages with extended stays and work-friendly accommodations. The growing demand for short-haul getaways to destinations like the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Europe calls for a focus on quick visa solutions and weekend-friendly itineraries.

As experiential travel grows, Anjali believes guests will need guidance on local customs, “We provide destination-specific tips on greetings, tipping, and etiquette, like Japan’s quiet culture or Italy’s dining practices that help clients. In Norway, guests must be advised to handle their luggage due to the absence of bellboys or discouraged from eating, drinking, and talking loudly on Japanese trains.”

According to Varun, the truth is that the ‘Travel Agent’ is no longer always the most experienced person in the itinerary-building process. Sharing his strategy, Varun advises, “Clients have exposure to social media, and word of mouth of unique travel experiences travels very fast. Hence, we have to stay humble, educate ourselves, and sometimes even learn from the clients. Keep an open mind, course correct where required, and train teams to be flexible.”

The coming decade will be pivotal in shaping India’s influence on the global economy, with its outbound tourism market set to play a defining role. Travel agents at the core of this transformation—the unsung architects of global journeys—innovating, adapting, and leading the charge as they turn India’s outbound aspirations into a powerful reality.

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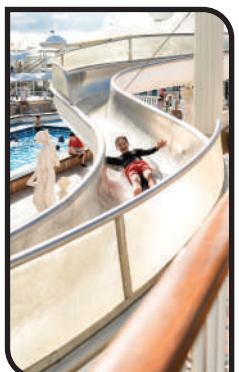
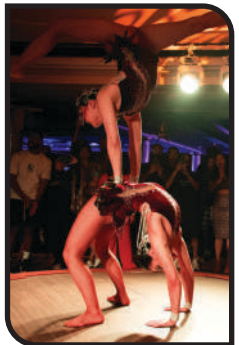


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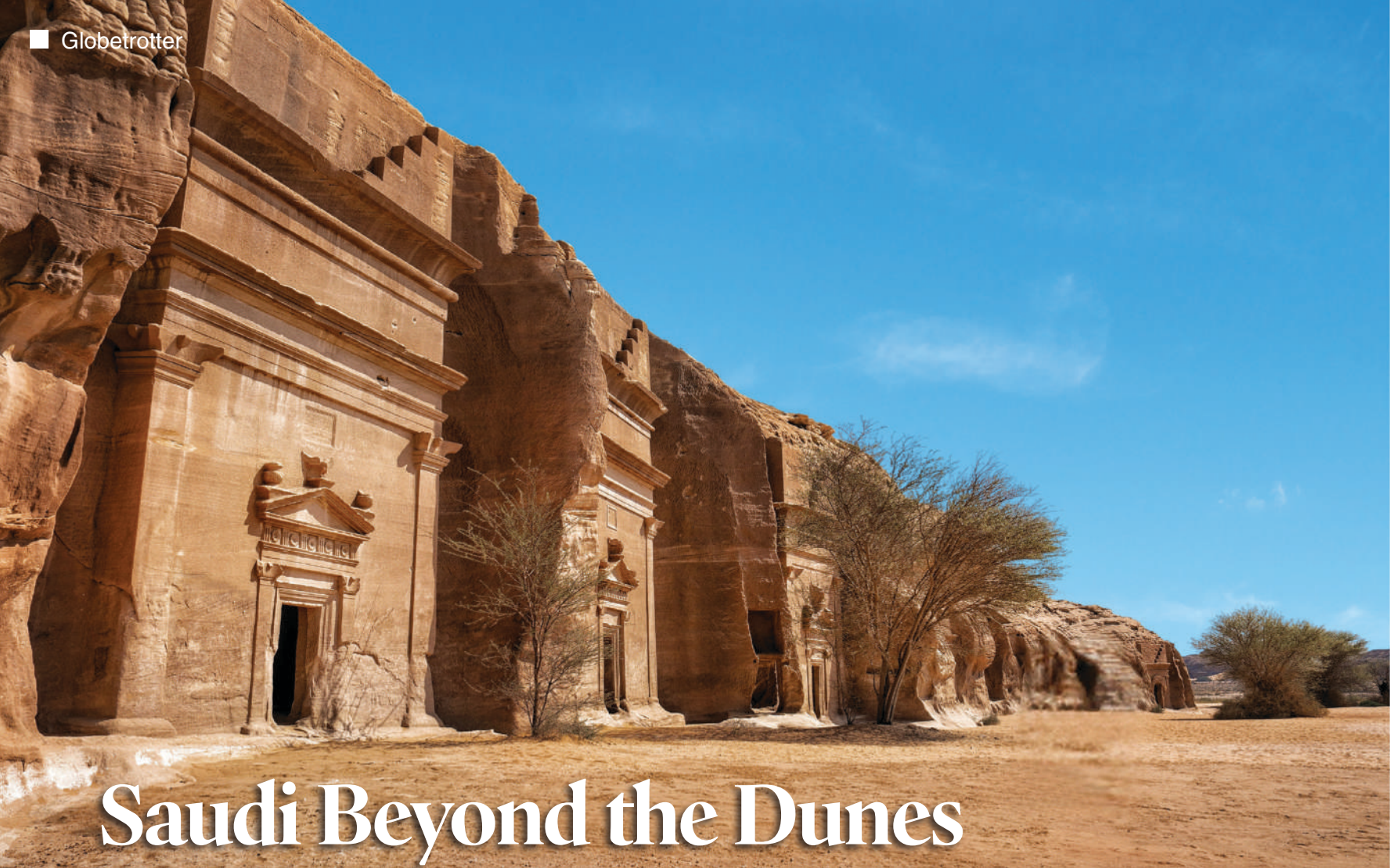
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Saudi Beyond the Dunes

A transformative journey through time

For long I had heard whispers of Saudi’s enigmatic beauty. They called it a land where ancient stories are etched into sandstone cliffs, where the past and the future intertwine seamlessly. But whispers, no matter how enticing, rarely ever capture the true essence of a place. So, it wasn’t until I set foot in this mesmerising land upon the invitation of the Saudi Tourism Authority that I truly understood what the hype was all about. Jeddah, AlUla, and Riyadh—three destinations, three completely different worlds, each unfolded like chapters in an epic novel. I approached them with a blank slate, letting their magic paint vivid strokes on the canvas of my mind.

Sonika Bohra

Saudi has long been synonymous with vast deserts. In the 70s and 80s, it was seen by many Indians as a land of opportunity. The oil boom created a demand for labour, attracting migrant workers, while Saudi’s religious significance (being home to Mecca and Madinah), made it an important spiritual destination. At the same time, its rapid wealth fostered an image of opulence. Though tourism was limited, Saudi remained a land of both mystery and hope.

Today, Saudi is undergoing a remarkable transformation as part of its Vision 2030 plan, with tourism at its core. The country is opening up to global visitors, diversifying its economy, and positioning itself as a growing cultural and economic force on the world stage.

For me, this transformation is evident in the stunning images shared by travellers experiencing its wonders, offering a glimpse of a dynamic and welcoming nation. Personally, I saw it all come alive

as I traversed through the three cities that Saudi recommends modern-day travellers make an itinerary out of.

Just Jeddah

Jeddah is a bustling port city on Saudi’s Red Sea coast. Known for its rich history, cultural diversity, and cosmopolitan atmosphere, it holds great religious importance as it is a major gateway for pilgrims travelling to Mecca and Madinah. Jeddah’s beautiful beaches, dynamic energy, and diverse culture make it both unique and inviting.

Walking along the Jeddah Corniche, a 30-km-long coastal resort area, I was captivated by the stunning views of the Red Sea. Often referred to as the Jeddah Waterfront, it features parks, beaches, walking paths, and cultural landmarks, making it a popular destination for relaxation and leisure.

At the edge of the Corniche Road is the Al Rahma Floating Mosque, also known as the Fatima Al Zahra Mosque. This mosque is called the ‘floating mosque’ because, at high tide, it appears to hover over the water



as it is built on pillars. The pristine white mosque looks like a work of art and is a must-see for visitors to Jeddah.

The 40-year-old Jeddah Fountain, also known as King Fahd's Fountain, is one of the city's main attractions. Not only is it the tallest fountain in Saudi Arabia at 312 meters, but it also holds the title of the tallest fountain in the world. Watching its majestic spray illuminate the night sky was truly mesmerising.

The Al Tayebat Museum, nestled in Jeddah's Al Faisaliyah neighbourhood, is a sprawling cultural treasure spanning 12 buildings and 300 rooms. It showcases over 2,500 years of history, from ancient civilisations to Islamic art and Jeddah's evolution as a cultural hub. The museum's intricate calligraphy and exquisite Islamic art evoke spirituality and elegance, while its artefacts tell stories of faith and resilience. The museum's architecture, with ornate mashrabiya windows, is a beautiful tribute to Jeddah's cultural legacy.

Window to the Past

Historic Jeddah, particularly the Al-Balad district, is a renowned multicultural hub that has long welcomed pilgrims and visitors from around the world. Established in the 7th century AD, Al-Balad is a UNESCO World Heritage site and once served as a major port along the Indian Ocean trade route.

As I wandered through the winding alleyways and vibrant souks, I found myself captivated by the architectural gems that define this historic quarter. Over 650 traditional houses, built by Jeddah's mercantile families, stand proudly, each telling its own story of trade, heritage, and craftsmanship. But among all the intricate details, one feature stood out—the windows.

I have never paid so much attention to windows before, but here, they are more

than just architectural elements; they are symbols of identity.

The traditional Roshan—wooden lattice balconies—extend gracefully over the streets, offering a delicate balance of privacy and openness. Each carved panel reflects the hands of artisans from another era, and every window tells the story of those who lived within.

Our guide pointed to one of the beautifully renovated homes, emphasising how restorations in Al-Balad are deeply mindful of these details. The windows, he explained, are where identity is shaped—where people express their individuality while remaining connected to tradition. It is a sentiment that lingers as I continue to explore, noticing the variations in design, the stories etched into the wood, and the care taken to preserve them. This aspect of Jeddah is often featured in Saudi's promotional campaigns, drawing visitors to its unique charm and rich cultural heritage.

Incidentally, we arrived just in time to attend the final day of the Saudi Feast Food Festival, where the air buzzed with the aroma of spices, the rhythmic beats of traditional music, and the laughter of families sharing meals. Watching the Ardah dance, a captivating display of synchronised movements and sword flourishes was mesmerising, and it was hard not to be swept away by the contagious joy of children running around the place.

Food for Thought

One of the most unforgettable parts of my culinary journey was yet to come.

We were invited into the home of Abir Abu Sulayman, Saudi's first licensed female tour guide. It was more than just a meal—it was an invitation into her world, a glimpse into Saudi hospitality at its most intimate and heartfelt.

The moment we entered, we were greeted with red tea, rich Arabic coffee, and an assortment of dates, a welcome that felt like an embrace. As tradition



dictated, we donned the traditional attire, draping a Mehrama over my head, fully immersing ourselves in the experience.

What followed was not just a dinner but a lesson in heritage and togetherness. We stood side by side with Abir's two daughters in the kitchen, learning the secrets of traditional Saudi cooking—how each spice and ingredient carried a story of past generations. The conversation flowed as easily as the laughter, turning the evening into something far beyond just a meal—a moment of connection, learning, and cultural exchange.



As we sat down to enjoy the feast we had helped prepare, I realised that this was the true essence of travel—not just seeing a place but feeling it, tasting it, and being welcomed into its heart.

Next Stop AlUla

The fastest way to get there is to fly from Jeddah to AlUla, a quick one-hour, 20-minute flight. But speed was not our priority. Instead, we took a more scenic and immersive route, allowing us to feel the land beneath our feet before stepping into its historic embrace.

We first flew from Jeddah to Tabuk, a journey that set the stage for what lay ahead. But the nearly four-hour drive from Tabuk to AlUla truly defined our arrival. The drive was mesmerising as each turn revealed new vistas of dramatic landscapes and untouched beauty. The isolation of the desert is almost serene, yet exhilarating, as the silence and space seem to stretch on forever.

We stayed at the Shaden Resort, a sanctuary nestled between the canyons, and it felt like stepping into a dream. The towering cliffs and the dramatic desert landscape created an almost otherworldly atmosphere.

The next morning, I woke up to the golden hues of the sun painting the rocky terrain, and by night, the resort glowed softly under a canopy of stars. Inspired by traditional Bedouin tents, the layout offered spacious units with garden terraces and all the modern comforts one could ask for. The tranquility of the desert, coupled with the tasteful illumination of the resort, made for an ethereal escape—one that felt both rugged and soothing, an oasis of serenity in the heart of the wilderness.

Elephant Rock, a massive natural formation resembling its namesake, was even more impressive in person. As the sun set, its red hues deepened, and I was in awe of nature’s artistry. The light

changes throughout the day, casting dramatic shadows and enhancing its awe-inspiring presence, making it a must-see. It is surrounded by a breathtaking desert valley and other towering rock formations, adding to the amazement.

The evening at Elephant Rock was captivating as more tourists gathered, creating a lively and inviting atmosphere. Music played in the background, making it the perfect place to relax against the stunning natural backdrop.

Maraya, an architectural marvel some 30-minute drive from AlUla, is the world’s largest mirrored building. It is made of 9,740 mirrored panels and designed to blend seamlessly with the desert landscape, creating an illusion of invisibility. Maraya serves as a cultural and entertainment hub, hosting concerts, art exhibitions, and conferences, making it a focal point for cultural exchange in AlUla.

Standing before its shimmering facade, my guide playfully helped me strike the perfect pose, ensuring I captured a shot worthy of my Instagram feed. The beauty of the moment was not just in the reflection but in the way Maraya seemed to reflect my sense of wonder.



Elephant Rock



Maraya



Shaden Resort AlUla



Mountains in AlUla

The Winding Lanes of Old Town

At AIUla Old Town, we wandered through winding alleyways flanked by beautifully preserved mudbrick buildings. A leisurely stroll allows visitors to pause and take in the enticing aromas drifting from nearby cafés and restaurants. Exploring the local markets and shops provides a glimpse into the region's rich culture, featuring handcrafted goods and unique souvenirs.

Another unforgettable stop is Hegra, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Known for its rich historical significance and stunning ancient architecture, Hegra is best known for its impressive rock-cut tombs carved into sandstone cliffs. These tombs date from the 1st century BCE to the 1st century CE and offer insight into the art and culture of the Nabateans. The sophisticated water management systems they developed are also a marvel.

What truly stands out is not just its historical value but the landscape surrounding it. Visiting Hegra is like stepping back into history. Both AIUla Old Town and Hegra invite reflection, exploration, and a deeper understanding of the ancient civilisations that once thrived in this region. With its fascinating blend of the old and new, AIUla indeed charms visitors long after they leave.

A visit to AIUla is not just about walking through history—it is about seeing it from new heights, quite literally. And there is no better way to take in the grandeur of this ancient desert sanctuary than by floating 1,200 meters above it in a hot air balloon.

From this vantage point, AIUla's dramatic rock formations take on an even more surreal beauty—none more so than the legendary Elephant Rock. Try to spot its unmistakable silhouette, standing proud against the endless desert.

The magic continues at the Harrat Viewpoint, where an awe-inspiring panorama unfolds before your eyes. The



AIUla Old Town



Stargazing in AIUla

landscape of AIUla sprawls beneath a vast sky, shifting in colour as the sun dips toward the horizon. It is a moment to pause and absorb the grandeur of a land where history and nature converge seamlessly.

Night Under the Celestial Canopy
As night fell, AIUla unveiled yet another spectacle, a sky untouched. The constellations emerged in all their glory, scattered across the sky like diamonds. I lay back and watched the stars across the sky. The desert night, however, was unforgivingly cold. The wind bit at my skin, a stark contrast to the warmth of the day. I should have worn a puffer jacket, but thankfully, thick blankets and long, stuffed coats were provided, cocooning me in comfort as I soaked in the breathtaking scene.

It was in those quiet moments, beneath a sky filled with infinite wonders, that AIUla left its deepest impression.

Riyadh: A City of Contrasts

Riyadh, the capital city of Saudi, is a vibrant blend of modernity and tradition, where history, culture, and innovation intersect. It is a city of contrasts. Along with towering skyscrapers, Riyadh's rich history is prominently displayed through its cultural sites and architectural marvels.

The Al Masmak Fort, located in the heart of Riyadh, was once an outpost of the Ottoman Empire. About a century ago, the late King Abdul Aziz retook the fort with his small but valiant army, marking the beginning of the gradual formation of modern Saudi. The fort, built from mud, is now a major attraction, housing a museum. One of the most interesting features is a mark on the main entrance door, left by a spearhead thrown by King Abdul Aziz during the storming of the fort. The fort is remarkably well-maintained, offering a significant piece of history for Saudi and the entire Middle East.

Diriyah, home to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of At-Turaif, is the birthplace of Saudi and the ancestral home of the Al Saud royal family.

It was here that the first Saudi State was established in 1727. The settlement dates back to 1446 and has been home to generations of leaders, and continues to inspire millions of Saudis. The light and sound show breathes new life into

Hot Air Balloon Ride in AIUla



the ancient walls, weaving together the stories of warriors, traders, and kings in a symphony of colour, music, and narration. Watching At-Turaif illuminated against the dark desert sky is a mesmerising experience that bridges the gap between centuries, turning history into a living, breathing spectacle.

Our visit coincided with a momentous occasion—the official announcement of Saudi as the host of the 2024 FIFA World Cup. The energy in the air was electric. As the news broke, cheers erupted, celebrations began, and an undeniable sense of pride filled the atmosphere. Locals and visitors gathered to witness this historic moment, their excitement turning Diriyah into a living, breathing celebration of national ambition and global recognition.

For entertainment, Riyadh Boulevard City is a stunning hub that shines like a diamond in the Arabian desert. If you are looking for a lively spot, visit Riyadh's version of Times Square, where street performances, music, dances, and fireworks light up the square. It is a perfect spot for capturing memorable moments.

Memorable Stays and Dining

Besides the stunning Shaden Resort in



At-Turaif

AIUla, two other unforgettable stays were at the Shangri-La in Jeddah and Voco Riyadh, offering exceptional luxury and service. Dining at Shangri-La's Shang Palace restaurant in Jeddah was a treat, with its flavourful Chinese dishes.

In AIUla, Saffron at Banyan Tree served a delightful Thai feast, while in Riyadh, Ruhi

elevated the dining scene with its artistic take on Indian cuisine. For an authentic taste of Saudi flavours, Najd Village in Riyadh is a must-visit, offering traditional dishes like Badya, Kabsah, Magloba, Margoog, Jareesh, and Goursan.

Somewhere Restaurant in Diriyah offers a mix of contemporary and international dishes infused with authentic ingredients and flavours from Saudi to the Mediterranean, with the Lime Corn Salad being a personal favourite. Ruhi at The Zone in Riyadh is a must-visit, featuring plenty of vegetarian options for those craving a taste of home after days of travel.

These stays and meals, combined with comfort, culture, and culinary extravagance, added an extra dimension to a remarkable journey.

This trip to Saudi has been truly unforgettable. There were moments in my journey when the mysticism of Saudi evoked thoughts of the enchanting tales from 1001 Nights—a world of timeless wonders and hidden secrets. Jeddah captivated me with its vibrant energy and coastal charm, while AIUla offered a breathtaking blend of ancient history and stunning natural landscapes. With its perfect fusion of modernity and tradition, Riyadh creates a dynamic atmosphere in the heart of the desert. Saudi is experiencing an exciting transformation, and thanks to Vision 2030, the country's incredible historic treasures are now accessible to the world. As tourism becomes a cornerstone of the nation's development, this journey of mine also highlights the remarkable evolution of Saudi and its promising future on the global stage.



Boulevard City, Riyadh



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Deep Dive into Rhodes' All-Season Potential with **Nikolas Kavalieros**

Greece has long been associated with iconic islands such as Santorini and Mykonos, often attracting visitors in a seasonal surge limited to the warmer months. However, traveller preferences have evolved towards year-round, experience-rich destinations. Forward-looking enterprises reimagined what Greece could offer to these emerging markets. One such innovator is the World of Travel Factory (WOTF) Group, a Destination Management Company (DMC) specialising in Mediterranean locales, including Greece, Turkey, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Morocco. Under the direction of Managing Director, Nikolas Kavalieros, WOTF has taken the lead in introducing the Indian travel market to Rhodes—a lesser-known yet thriving Greek destination - positioning it as a viable, 12-month, multi-experience option.

Vartik Sethi

For many first-time visitors, Greece's appeal historically revolves around Athens, Santorini, and Mykonos. Yet Kavalieros recognises Rhodes's significant potential. He explained that although Rhodes already held a leadership position in tourism arrivals within Europe, it remains less familiar to much of Asia's outbound market, including India. WOTF Group aims to demonstrate to the Indian travel trade that Rhodes offers an all-year proposition - competitive in terms of experiences, variety, and pricing. Far from being just another seasonal seaside locale, Rhodes presents a multifaceted hub rich in cultural heritage, nature-driven adventures, luxury hospitality, and strong value. Located in the Dodecanese islands, Rhodes checks all the boxes; luxury hotels, fine dining options, cultural heritage (including the UNESCO-listed Medieval City of Rhodes), beachside activities, adventure sports, and ease of connectivity. He highlighted that the island is not only active all year but also provides cost benefits, offering better value compared to more famous Greek islands.

As one of Europe's pioneers in structured tourism marketing, Rhodes established a dedicated tourist board at an early stage. The foresight ensured that the island matured into

a well-rounded destination supported by top-tier infrastructure, professional hospitality services, and a consistent influx of European visitors.

A Year-Round Destination

Rhodes stands apart from more celebrated Greek islands for several reasons – notably, scale and diversity. It is more extensive and greener, with a broad spectrum of activities extending well beyond the customary summer sun and sea narrative. From heritage walks through the UNESCO-listed Medieval City of Rhodes to adventurous pursuits like water sports, trekking, and cycling, the island appeals to travellers who crave variety. Nearby islands such as Simi, Chalki, Tilos, Kastelorizo, and even Turkey, just an hour's ferry crossing, multiply these opportunities, making Rhodes a strategic base for exploring a cluster of destinations.

Kavalieros emphasised that “Rhodes is a 12-month destination. The weather remains pleasant beyond the typical European high season, and the infrastructure—hotels, restaurants, attractions—stays operational. Indian travellers can visit even in what we call ‘shoulder’ or ‘low’ seasons, accessing special rates and fewer crowds while still enjoying a full suite of activities.”



▲ Nikolas Kavalieros

Bridging Cultural Preferences

A key factor behind WOTF Group's success lies in its profound understanding of the Indian market's preferences. India's outbound segment encompasses families, honeymooners, MICE groups, and destination wedding parties, each with distinct requirements. Vegetarian and Indian cuisine



Lindos



21 Rhodes from Above Aerial Photo



Kallithea Springs



Faliraki Watersports

options, familiar comforts, and memorable, experiential elements are generally high on the priority list. WOTF prides itself on curating experiences attuned to these sensibilities.

Gastronomy serves as a prime attraction. With its abundant vegetarian and fresh, locally sourced ingredients, Greek cuisine aligns well with Indian tastes. He shared, "Greek cuisine aligns well with Indian palates, offering abundant vegetarian and fresh farm-to-table options." For those seeking familiarity, WOTF ensures access to Indian restaurants. Service standards are similarly refined, with guides, drivers, and hospitality partners trained to understand and accommodate the unique expectations of Indian guests, consistently going the extra mile.

MICE, Weddings, and Special Interest Tourism

Rhodes' capabilities extend beyond leisure tourism. It offers two of the largest convention centres in Southern Europe, surpassing Athens in capacity. Its broad range of luxury and mid-range hotels, coupled with reliable connectivity, including direct flights arriving from across Europe between April and October, render Rhodes an ideal host for conferences, incentive programmes, and product launches. Beachfront venues and cultural landmarks lend themselves to innovative event concepts and 'wow' experiences.

Kavalieros, addressing the Indian wedding market, said, "For wedding planners, there

are over 30 top-notch beach venues and numerous hotels that can cater to the full spectrum of events, including pre-wedding functions, ceremonies, and receptions. The island's infrastructure is robust, and the environment, scenic coastlines, and historic backdrops naturally enhance the occasion."

Commitment to Sustainability

Nearby islands such as Chalki, Tilos, and Astipalia have already achieved global recognition for implementing zero-waste targets, embracing solar energy, and operating sustainably. By participating in a European Union-backed initiative, in collaboration with leading tourism stakeholders like TUI, Rhodes aims to become fully sustainable by 2030. Newly constructed properties integrate eco-friendly designs and renewable energy sources, appealing to a younger, more environmentally conscious audience, a consideration increasingly important to Indian travel professionals and their clients as well.

Opportunities for Indian Travel Professionals

Greece stands as a gateway to Europe. With potential direct flights expected by 2026 and year-round products already on offer, now is the time for Indian travel agents, tour operators, and corporate travel planners to seize the opportunity. Agents proactively incorporating Rhodes into their Greek portfolios could secure a first-mover advantage. By presenting an

island destination offering better value than Santorini and Mykonos, along with year-round activities and cultural alignment, they could differentiate their packages and enhance client satisfaction.

WOTF Group maintains a strong rapport with Indian travel agents through dedicated sales and marketing support, product training, and regular updates. The company consistently participates in major Indian travel trade fairs such as OTM and SATTE and intends to organise roadshows featuring Greek tourism boards. Kavalieros stated that WOTF's mission is to help agents appreciate how Rhodes complemented classical Greek itineraries and stands proudly as a standalone destination.

Gateway to Europe

In a broader context, Greece has served as a gateway to Europe for Indian travellers, offering cultural affinity, warm hospitality, and a harmonious blend of tradition and modernity. Rhodes fits well as an addition to the India-Greece travel corridor. India's outbound market is on a growth trajectory, with the likelihood of direct flight connections to Greece in the near future set to simplify itineraries and boost arrivals. Kavalieros said, "Now is the time to embrace new destinations like Rhodes. As Indian arrivals grow, those who pioneer these itineraries will earn client loyalty and become known for creative, memorable offerings. Greece can be a 12-month proposition, and Rhodes proves it."



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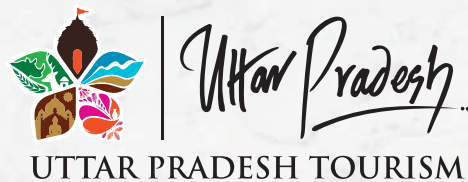
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The Spiritual Triangle

Uttar Pradesh

PRAYAGRAJ

VARANASI

AYODHYA



Shri Shankar Viman Mandapam
Prayagraj

Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple
Varanasi

Shri Ram Mandir
Ayodhya Dham

A Journey Through Prayagraj, Varanasi, and Ayodhya

Uttar Pradesh stands as a lighthouse of spiritual richness and cultural grandeur, in the heart of northern India. Among its myriad of sacred sites, three cities form an unparalleled spiritual triangle: Prayagraj, Varanasi, and Ayodhya. These cities are not just geographical locations; they are a witness to India's ancient traditions, faith, and timeless heritage. Together, they weave a narrative that travelled beyond centuries, drawing millions of pilgrims, tourists, and spiritual seekers from across the globe. This sacred triangle showcases the pious spiritual aura of Uttar Pradesh, reflecting its deep-rooted cultural ethos and serving as a vibrant witness to the state's historical significance.

In recent years, these destinations have surged to the forefront of global tourism, captivating the hearts of international and domestic travelers alike. They offer more than just religious sanctity—each city narrates stories etched in time, reverberating with chants, rituals, and celebrations that have been preserved through generations. From the bustling ghats of Varanasi, where the Ganga mirrors the lights of evening aartis, to the sacred confluence in Prayagraj that hosts the world's largest religious gathering, and the serene grandeur of Ayodhya, the birthplace of Lord Rama, this triangle is a spiritual journey that encapsulates the very soul of India.

Prayagraj: The Confluence of Faith

Prayagraj is renowned for the Triveni Sangam, the sacred confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati rivers. This site is the focal point of the Maha Kumbh Mela, held every twelve years, and is considered the largest religious gathering on earth. The 2025 Maha Kumbh Mela, spanning from January 13 to February 26, happens to be a rare cosmic event, on the verge of which the Maha Kumbh Mela is falling after 144 years; on the completion of 12 Kumbhs. This Mahakumbh is expected to draw more than 40 crore participants, establishing Prayagraj's spiritual significance and the inclination of people towards the Sanatan religion and its principles from all over the world. The city is also home to revered sites like the Bade Hanuman Mandir, Anand Bhavan, and the historic Allahabad Fort. Prayagraj serves as a spiritual confluence where religious traditions, scholarly pursuits, and ancient rituals continue to thrive in a timeless manner.

Varanasi: The Eternal City

Varanasi, also known as Kashi, is one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities. The city is said to be resting on the trident of Lord Shiva and it is believed that it will exist till the end of time, unaffected. Situated along the banks of River Ganga, it is a major center for Hindu devotion, attracting pilgrims who seek spiritual solace and purification, known for the Kashi Vishwanath temple dedicated to Lord Shiva. This city of 'ghats' has eighty six ghats in total, including famous ghats like Dashashwamedh ghat, Manikarnika ghat, Namo ghat and Assi ghat. These ghats are incessantly bustling with activities, ranging from spiritual rituals and religious ceremonies. At dawn, the ghats come alive with devotees performing Surya Namaskar, offering prayers, and taking holy dips in the sacred waters of the Ganga and at dusk the mesmerizing Ganga Aarti captivates every heart. The city's narrow lanes, bustling markets, and ancient temples resonate with timeless traditions, while the aroma of incense, the sound of temple bells, and the sight of saffron-clad sadhus create an aura of divine

mysticism. Varanasi is not just a city; it is an experience that intertwines spirituality, history, and culture, leaving an indelible mark on every soul that visits.

Ayodhya: The Birthplace of Lord Rama

Ayodhya, revered as the birthplace of Lord Rama, holds immense spiritual and historical significance in Hinduism, the city is considered first among the seven Saptपुरi's spread across India. This ancient city, situated on the banks of the Saryu River, is a focal point of devotion, especially with the newly built Shree Ram Janmbhoomi temple, attracting pilgrims from across the world. As per the official data available with the department of Tourism, Ayodhya saw over 16.44 crore visitors in 2024. The magnificence of the Shree Ram Janmbhoomi temple has become a major attraction for the pilgrims and as well the travellers from across the world. Ayodhya is mentioned in the Ramayana as the grand capital of the Ikshvaku dynasty. The city's serene ghats, temples, and the vibrant celebrations of festivals like Deepotsav make it a divine destination that symbolizes faith, devotion, and cultural heritage.

Tourism Statistics and Global Interest

In 2024, Uttar Pradesh recorded a total tourist footfall of 64.90 crore (649 million), marking an increase of over 17 crore (170 million) from the previous year. This surge is attributed to the state's rich cultural and spiritual sites, with Prayagraj, Varanasi, and Ayodhya at the forefront. These cities not only showcase the spiritual aura and heritage of Uttar Pradesh but also captivate tourists from around the globe, fostering a growing international interest in India's spiritual and cultural offerings. Collectively, the spiritual triangle of Prayagraj, Varanasi, and Ayodhya encapsulates the essence of Uttar Pradesh's cultural and spiritual heritage, offering visitors an immersive experience that resonates with the timeless traditions of India.



Sangam, Prayagraj



Dev Deepawali, Varanasi



Deepotsav, Ayodhya Dham





India Surges to #2 Spot for Overseas Arrivals to the USA in 2024

Brand USA successfully hosted its 11th India Sales and Media Mission from January 20-22, 2025, at the Taj Krishna in Hyderabad. The event brought together an impressive delegation of 48 US tourism companies and 67 exhibitors, engaging with 123 senior Indian travel trade and media professionals.

Prativa Vaidya Bhalla

A significant highlight of the event was the announcement that India saw 2.19 million arrivals to the USA in 2024, securing the #2 spot for overseas visitors with a 24.3 per cent growth from 2023.

Fred Dixon, President and CEO, Brand USA, commented, "We are extremely pleased to see strong arrival numbers from India to the USA, validating our past efforts and reaffirming our commitment for the future. As one of our top overseas markets, we are extremely bullish on Indian visitor arrivals and are committed to building stronger partnerships."

This year's mission was led by Dixon by six other CEOs representing the US destinations and a luxury receptive agency. Simon Brooks, President, Bonotel; John Percy, President and CEO, Destination Niagara USA; Doug Bourgeois, Assistant Secretary, Tourism, Louisiana Office of Tourism; Martha Sheridan, President and CEO, Meet Boston; Todd Davidson, Chief Executive Officer, Travel Oregon, and Liz Bittner, President and CEO, Travel South

USA were present in the CEO mission. Angie Briggs, Senior Vice President, Industry Partnerships and Engagement and Chief Development Office; Chris Heywood, Senior Vice President, Public Relations and Chief Communications Officer; and Jackie Ennis, Vice President, Global Trade Development, were other senior Brand USA executives at the mission.

As the #2 source market, India significantly impacts the US economy. Liz Bittner, President and CEO, Travel South USA, shared, "In 2024, 290,000 visitors generated approximately \$450 million in spending." Looking ahead to 2025, the numbers are likely to rise to 314,000 visitors and \$507 million in spending, representing a 149 per cent increase over pre-pandemic 2019 figures, she said.

John Percy, President and CEO, Destination Niagara USA, also highlighted the importance of Indian travellers, stating, "India is our number one inbound international, overseas market. If you walk into the state park, it looks like you are in India.

Other events around the mission included speaker sessions and business meetings that flowed effortlessly, giving participants plenty of opportunities to connect and build valuable relationships. The gala evening at the majestic Taj Falaknuma Palace in Hyderabad was a standout moment, as guests indulged in the rich flavours of Haleem and Hyderabadi Biryani. The event struck the perfect balance between business and leisure, with productive discussions during the day and lively gatherings in the evening. A guided tour of Hyderabad allowed attendees to immerse themselves in the city's fascinating history and royal culture.

In summary, Brand USA's 11th India Sales and Media Mission strengthened existing ties between the two nations and set the stage for deeper collaboration and future growth. With India continuing to emerge as a key source market, Brand USA's focus on building relationships with the Indian travel trade opens up exciting opportunities in the years ahead.



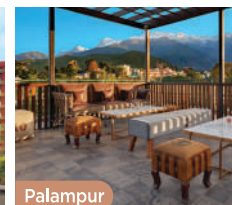
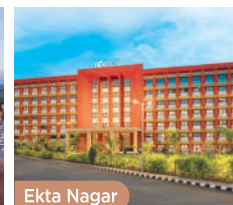
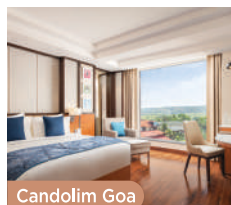
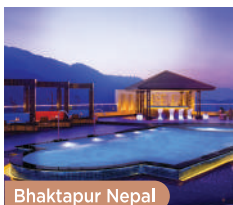
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Shaping the future of tourism in West and Central India with proactive approach

Dr Sagnik Chowdhury, Deputy Director General and Regional Director (West and Central) at India Tourism Mumbai, Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India, is leading the charge in promoting tourism across six vibrant states—Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, and Diu. With a focus on uncovering hidden gems, improving infrastructure, and supporting sustainable tourism, Sagnik is trying to bring local experiences to the global stage, ensuring a richer, more balanced tourism experience for all.

Prashant Nayak

A Regional Director for India Tourism is primarily responsible for overseeing the promotion and development of tourism within a specific geographic region of India, including activities like market analysis and research, stakeholder engagement, infrastructure development, tourism product promotion, and coordinating with local authorities and tourism associations to facilitate a positive tourist experience within their designated area. Their roles also encompass strategy development, policy implementation, event management, quality assurance and standards, and a strong focus on sustainability, among other key responsibilities.

Sagnik shares, “The main focus of the India Tourism Office in Mumbai is to showcase the diversity and unique offerings of the regions under its purview. This includes promoting cultural heritage, natural beauty, adventure tourism, and unique local experiences that set these regions apart. Efforts are made to build awareness of both popular and lesser-known destinations while enhancing accessibility and infrastructure and ensuring that tourism benefits local communities.”

Promoting Lesser-Known Destinations

The India Tourism Office in Mumbai is focusing on building awareness around hidden gems and unique experiences across these states. For instance, lesser-known destinations like the tribal regions in Chhattisgarh, unexplored forts in Gujarat, or eco-tourism in Madhya Pradesh will be highlighted in campaigns. “The aim is to promote experiences like rural tourism, offbeat adventures, and heritage trails to reduce congestion in popular tourist spots and ensure that tourism is more evenly distributed across the regions,” asserts Sagnik.

Achievements of 2024

In 2024, the Tourism Office made significant strides in enhancing the tourism infrastructure across these regions. Notable achievements include successful campaigns that attracted more domestic tourists, improved transportation links, and enhanced



▲ Dr Sagnik Chowdhury

digital marketing efforts, which resulted in an uptick in online bookings. Sagnik further informs, “We also collaborated with local stakeholders to develop immersive experiences, like ecotourism initiatives in Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat’s craft tourism. The standout moments were the hosting of cultural festivals and regional events that attracted national attention.”

Tourism Infrastructure Developments

The states represented by Sagnik have achieved remarkable advancements in infrastructure in recent years, including the development of new airports in regional cities, enhanced rail and road connectivity, and the expansion of luxury and eco-friendly accommodations. There have also been significant upgrades to tourism facilities at heritage sites and national parks, making them more accessible. Sagnik remarks, “The development of smart cities, especially in Maharashtra and Gujarat, has been a proud achievement in supporting both urban and rural tourism growth.”

Initiatives and Strategies for 2025

Looking ahead to 2025, the Tourism Office plans

to implement targeted campaigns focusing on responsible tourism, sustainability, and adventure tourism, particularly in the state of Madhya Pradesh. Sagnik adds, “There will also be a spotlight on emerging destinations in Goa, like its hinterlands, and exploring offbeat experiences in Maharashtra. To increase tourism during the off-season, we will offer themed itineraries and special offers. Focus will also be placed on better digital engagement to reach tech-savvy travellers across India and internationally.”

Personal Focus and Insights for 2025

As the Deputy Director General and Regional Director for such diverse regions, Sagnik’s focus is on creating a tailored approach that acknowledges the distinct qualities of each state. He explains, “For instance, Maharashtra’s urban charm with Mumbai, Gujarat’s rich historical and architectural heritage, and Madhya Pradesh’s diverse wildlife and temples each offer unique attractions. By evaluating the strengths and challenges of each state, my focus will be on promoting sustainability, fostering local partnerships, and developing new tourism circuits that seamlessly connect these regions, encouraging cross-regional tourism.”

International Tourism and Target Markets for 2025

For international tourism, the tourism office is focusing on markets like the US, UK, Australia, and the Middle East, while also expanding outreach to emerging markets in Southeast Asia and Europe. Sagnik says, “We plan to emphasise unique selling points like wildlife in Madhya Pradesh, beach destinations in Goa, and cultural richness in Gujarat and Maharashtra. We are also exploring collaborations with international travel influencers and tour operators, along with targeted campaigns that emphasise sustainability and responsible travel to position these regions as must-visit destinations for the modern traveller.”

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Weddings in Orchha: A Royal Affair

Orchha's understated luxury makes it an idyllic destination for weddings. Orchha is where elegance meets affordability, creating a lavish wedding experience. The royal palaces of Orchha blend rich legacy with modern luxury. Popular venues include Jahangir Palace, Orchha Palace, Amar Mahal, and more. The town's historic temples add a spiritual dimension, creating memorable backdrops for rituals.

A Cinematic Paradise for Filmmakers

Lights, Camera, Orchha! Orchha's historic charm and mystical vibe have made it a sought-after location for filmmakers. From *Bhool Bhulaiyaa 3* to the Hollywood movie *The Lovers*, Orchha's stunning architecture and serene landscapes have been featured in numerous blockbusters. The magnificent palaces, forts, temples, and cenotaphs offer a mix of Rajput and Mughal styles, ideal for period films. The Betwa River and surrounding forests provide romantic and adventurous settings. Madhya Pradesh Tourism also actively promotes the region with incentives and logistical assistance.

Adventure and Nature

For thrill-seekers and nature lovers, Orchha is a paradise. Rafting, boating, and peaceful walks along Kanchana Ghat await you. Explore the countryside on a cycling expedition or delve into the region's wilderness, home to peacocks, deer, and migratory birds. Trek through serene landscapes, enjoy invigorating nature walks, or picnic amidst lush greenery.

Spiritual Destination: For Devotees

Orchha is a spiritual hub for devotees with its ancient temples and peaceful riverside setting. The Ram Raja Temple is the only temple in India to worship Lord Ram as a king and not just as a deity. Other spiritual attractions include Lakshmi Narayan Temple and Chaturbhuj Temple, each echoing stories of devotion and faith.



Orchha Heritage: A Journey through Time

The Orchha Fort Complex is an enchanting escape steeped in architectural heritage featuring Raja Mahal, known for its beautiful murals depicting mythological themes and Bundeli life. The Jahangir Mahal is a stunning blend of Mughal and Bundela architecture, built to honour Emperor Jahangir's visit in 1605. Sheesh Mahal, once a royal residence, is now a luxurious heritage hotel. The 14 iconic cenotaphs on the Betwa River that stand as silent sentinels to history are now home to a colony of critically endangered vultures.

Folklore and Legends:

Orchha's folklore weaves a vivid tapestry of valour, devotion, and royal heritage, deeply rooted in the legendary tales of Lord Ram and Raja Madhukar Shah. These stories come alive in the town's vibrant folk performances, offering a glimpse into Bundeli's heritage. Also, immerse yourself in the mesmerising Light and Sound Show at Orchha Fort, where the enchanting blend of storytelling and illumination unveils the grandeur of Orchha's rich history and royal legacy.

Homestays: Experience Bundeli Culture

Choose a homestay to experience Bundeli traditions, authentic cuisine, and warm hospitality up close. Some popular choices are Ramabai Homestay, Sheetla Greens Homestay, and Madhav Hill View Home-Stay, among others. Be sure to book in advance, particularly during the peak tourist season from October to February.

Orchha's UNESCO Aspiration

In a significant milestone for India's cultural heritage, the Madhya Pradesh Tourism Board has successfully submitted a dossier nominating Orchha as a historic group of monuments for inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage List. This recommendation for the year 2027-28 recognises Orchha's unparalleled legacy of architectural and cultural brilliance.

Rediscover history, luxury, and nature – all in Orchha.

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FLY24HRS Scaling Travel Solutions with Innovation and Transparency

FLY24HRS is more than an air ticket consolidator—it is a game changer in the travel industry. It is the brainchild of S.R Chaudhary, Founder and CEO, FLY24HRS, an entrepreneur with a deep understanding of the industry’s challenges. From humble beginnings to an industry leader, he shares the insights and strategies that fuelled his journey, transforming a ground-up idea into a successful business.

Prativa Vaidya Bhalla

FLY24HRS was built on exclusive airline partnerships and a vision to reshape the travel trade. By leveraging deep expertise and strategic alliances, the brand empowers travel agents with unbeatable deals, seamless technology, and unmatched opportunities to maximise earnings. They also offer API solutions to help travel partners create their own online ticketing portals. With a commitment to innovation and transparency, the company continues to set new standards in the travel industry.

The Entrepreneurial Journey

The journey started in 2005 with Sahil Tours and Travels. Chaudhary reminisces, “In 2017, the market was changing, and online ticketing was emerging while we were still operating with B2B ticketing. I realised that trade was becoming increasingly digital every day due to the escalating use of smartphones and access to the internet. Over the next two years, I immersed myself in learning the ins and outs of online business—grasping its fundamentals, mastering implementation strategies, and smoothly managing the transition.”

“By 2019, after two years of groundwork, I launched Fly24HRS, an online B2B travel portal for agents. We started small, positioning ourselves as the best deal-driven player in the market,” he reflected.

Recalling the challenging years of the pandemic, Chaudhary shared, “As I gained experience, I decided to take full control of my venture. The turning point came during COVID-19, when I took charge of selling my products, leading to significant business growth. This success was driven by the expertise of Vaseem Parvez (COO) and the dedication of our vice presidents, Sunil Kumar Gupta and Dharmendra Kumar Sahu, and Raju Chauhan (API Head)

Since its humble beginnings in Delhi, FLY24HRS now has a pan-India presence. Having started with 500 travel agents,



▲ S. R. Chaudhary

today, they have a strong network of 50,000 and are looking to scale it to 70,000 in 2025. With branch offices in Delhi, Kolkata, Chandigarh, Ranchi, Siliguri and Jaipur, they are expanding into Mumbai, Lucknow, Patna, and Bengaluru by 2025.

The Company

FLY24HRS provides a diverse range of travel services and products through a seamless, user-friendly online platform designed for easy navigation and transactions and offers a comprehensive portfolio of partnership programmes.

Its successful track record indicates the company’s ability to survive business cycles and the director’s ability to steer it with its well-defined organisational structure.

Transforming the Trade

Armed with ambition and vision, Chaudhary observed, “Since the beginning, my

mission has been to bring clarity and transparency to the trade. I introduced clear fare grouping and transparent cancellation charges, eliminating unnecessary confusion. Many thought it would be difficult to launch without major funding, yet I managed with minimal credit and strategic decision-making. My goal was always to nurture and help bring effective change to the trade, and I hope I have been a part of that.”

The Partner Portfolio was designed with simplicity and ease, offering the best solutions without overwhelming travel agents. Having worked on the ground as a travel agent himself, his vision for the Fly24HRS portal was to connect agents with the best deals while addressing every potential challenge. His ability to think like an agent allowed him to create a robust platform that provides seamless solutions and maximises profitability for partners.

The FLY24HRS USP

FLY24HRS stands out with a unique approach, as Chaudhary explains, “For me, all travel agents are equal—whether, in Jammu & Kashmir or Kanyakumari, the deals are the same. As a former agent, I understand the challenges agents face, which is why our portal is designed to be seamless, with clear deals and transparent charges. Plus, we do not shut shop at 7 pm, and our team is available 24/7 to support clients at every step.”

With its year-round demand and no seasonality, the domestic market is a key growth area. His deep understanding of the market and employing local talent enhance his ability to tap into pan India regions effectively.

With exciting projects ahead, including a new holiday package portal, a visa services platform tentatively named ‘Visa Monster’, and an expanded international inventory, the FLY24HRS journey towards innovation and simplifying travel solutions promises to be an exciting one.

Cruise Carrot Charting Courses Beyond the Seas

Cruising is one of the most luxurious and exciting ways to travel—where the journey itself becomes the destination. Modern cruise ships are nothing short of floating cities, offering endless experiences to make your holiday truly unforgettable. Neeraj Sharma, Director, Cruise Carrot, shares his vision for the company's future and outlines his plans for expanding its presence, both on the sea and on land.

Prativa Vaidya Bhalla

Cruise Carrot has played a significant role in shaping the cruise industry in India, serving as a Preferred Sales Agent (PSA) for leading international cruise lines. The company has facilitated the entry of global cruise brands into the Indian market while also supporting the growth of domestic cruise travel.

Cruise Trajectory In India

Fuelled by a passion for seamless travel



Neeraj Sharma

experiences, Neeraj shared his vision for launching the company, “Our brand is designed to help people discover new places, meet new people, and truly enjoy the experience of travelling the high seas as an inclusive holiday package. Our booking system allows modern travellers to secure their tickets with ease—no long queues or waiting. Just a few clicks, and you are ready to go!”

The Indian cruise industry has seen significant growth in recent years, with 2024 marking a pivotal year for Cruise Carrot. Reflecting on this progress, he says, “Our growth in 2024 was 30 per cent compared to 2023. The cruise market is gaining momentum as more Indians embrace this mode of vacationing. Especially for multigenerational holidays, cruises offer something for everyone, making them an ideal choice for family travel.”

Navigating Growth

Neeraj anticipates that the demand for cruises in India and emerging markets will continue to rise. He highlights industry projections, stating, “The number of users in the Indian cruise market is expected to reach 1.20 million by 2029, with user penetration increasing from 0.03 per cent in 2025 to 0.08 per cent by 2029.” He also shares excitement about the arrival of Resorts World Cruises’ RW1, set to launch on March 5, 2025. He expresses his excitement about this growth and adds, “I am excited India will now have the Resorts World Cruises ship, RW1, starting from March 05, 2025.”

In outlining the long-term plan for Cruise Carrot over the next five years, he shared his clear vision, aiming to grow the cruise market by 100 per cent. He

reflects, “I do not see any real challenges in this market. Cruise Carrot is growing with full customer satisfaction and will continue to expand in the future. Our strategy is to focus on Tier 3 cities to develop the cruise industry by educating people about cruise products. We plan to educate people through roadshows, zoom meetings for their staff, and other outreach initiatives. This will be a significant market in the future, and Cruise Carrot will be there to lead the way.”

With the rising demand for cruising, new players are turning their attention to India’s expanding market. “Nowadays, people are more interested in longer cruise itineraries, with a minimum of five to seven nights, allowing them to fully experience the cruise liner and all it offers. Many international cruise companies have their sights set on the rapidly growing Indian market for business development. I firmly believe India will become a major home port for several international cruise liners by 2025 and early 2026,” Neeraj notes.

Sharing exciting updates on the company’s growth, Neeraj says, “We have recently opened two international offices in Dubai and Paris. Europe is set to become a major market for outbound travellers from India. I am happy to announce that within two years, we have been appointed as the Preferred Sales Agent (PSA) for three major cruise lines: Resorts World Cruises, Costa Cruises, and MSC Cruises.”

Expanding into Land Holidays

Recognising the growing significance of land-based tourism, Neeraj has expanded Cruise Carrot’s operations beyond cruises. The pandemic led to the creation of Carrot Holidays, a sister concern, focusing on hospitality and transportation. He shares, “Initially, we were solely focused on cruises, but we realised the potential in land holidays. Over three years, we have launched three international and three domestic offices, along with a dedicated fleet of vehicles. Today, we operate as a Destination Management Company (DMC) for Nepal, Dubai, Paris, Leh-Ladakh, Srinagar, and Manali. Moving forward, we will expand into new destinations annually, catering to evolving market demand.”

Saffron World Navigates Europe's Travel Landscape for Indian Tourists

As travel preferences continue to evolve, travellers are increasingly seeking seamless, safe, and enriching experiences across the globe. Saffron World, a leading B2B travel service provider, is at the forefront of this rising demand, offering expertly crafted journeys that blend convenience, culture, and customisation specialising in European destinations. Kumar Utkarsh, General Manager, Saffron World, examines the rising appeal of Europe among Indian travellers and highlights the company's steadfast commitment to curating the best European experiences for their Indian clients.

Prativa Vaidya Bhalla

Saffron World is a premier B2B service provider and a full-fledged DMC for Europe tours with a base office in Rotterdam, Netherlands. They specialise in curating high-quality, tailor-made travel experiences across destinations in Europe. "We offer a diverse range of curated travel services in Europe, including hotel bookings, European tours, and comprehensive ground services across the continent. With over 25 years of expertise in the tourism industry, we have built a reputation for delivering travel solutions that are both cost-effective and adhere to the highest quality."

Destination Attracting Most Indian Tourists

It offers a diverse portfolio of European destinations, such as the Netherlands, Poland, Greece, France, Italy, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. In addition to these well-known locations, the company specialises in curated travel experiences across the Balkans, Central and Eastern Europe, and the Scandinavian region. It stands committed to delivering authentic and immersive travel experiences, enabling travellers to explore both renowned landmarks and lesser-known adventures. Each journey is carefully curated to provide a deeper connection to Europe's rich history, culture, and diverse landscapes.

Utkarsh emphasised, "We specialise in European destinations with a keen eye for fresh and challenging travel experiences. Currently, Eastern Europe and the Balkans are attracting an increasing number of Indian tourists. For such long-haul destinations, van tours or customised family travel are generally preferred."

Travellers today are looking for more than just a tick on their bucket list—they want to truly experience the local flavour of a destination. "Instead of spending just a night or two, many are choosing to slow



▲ Kumar Utkarsh

down and immerse themselves in the local culture. Eastern Europe and the Balkans, in particular, have become a big draw for Indian tourists, offering a rich tapestry of history, tradition, and authenticity that sets them apart from the rest of the continent," he added.

Ensuring Stress-Free Journeys

The travel industry is constantly evolving, shaped by dynamic growth and unexpected challenges stemming from shifting regulations, geopolitical changes, and evolving visa policies. At Saffron World, Utkarsh takes pride in highlighting the well-structured processes that enable swift turnarounds, seamless adaptability, and efficient management of unforeseen obstacles. The team at Saffron World keeps abreast of all proactive regulatory updates, actively monitoring travel regulations in real-time and providing timely updates on visa requirements, health protocols, and destination-specific guidelines. Recognising the increasing demand for flexibility, they design customised itineraries that allow Indian travellers to

explore destinations while adhering to local guidelines.

Client safety remains a top priority, and Utkarsh highlights this commitment by emphasising, "Closely working with trusted local service providers, we prioritise safety by ensuring sanitised accommodations, reliable transport, and well-regulated activities. Additionally, we offer travel insurance packages covering health emergencies and disruptions." Thus, by prioritising peace of mind, Saffron World allows guests to immerse themselves in their travels without worry, knowing that every detail has been carefully managed for a secure and seamless experience.

To further enhance the travel experience, Saffron World offers round-the-clock assistance with multilingual support teams to address location-based discrepancies. "Our focus is on creating a hassle-free experience by resolving travel-related concerns promptly," shares Utkarsh.

Partner collaboration is key

Saffron World insists on high service standards, and all international offices and associates are trained to understand the nuanced preferences of Indian travellers and their cultural expectations. This ensures consistency and quality in service delivery across all locations and leads to repeat customers.

In conclusion, Utkarsh dedicates its success to the strong partnerships that have formed the company policy baseline. He goes on to say, "We maintain long-term partnerships with transport providers, hoteliers, and local DMCs to ensure reliability and quality in every aspect of the journey." With a strong network of international associates, Saffron World goes the extra mile to customise itineraries. Especially for their Indian guests, Saffron World goes the extra mile by crafting unique and personalised journeys that cater to every detail, from dietary preferences to language support.

Truly India embraces Future-Ready Hospitality

How we travel is evolving rapidly, shaped by shifting preferences, technological advancements, and a growing emphasis on sustainability. Travellers today seek more than just sightseeing; they look for meaningful experiences, cultural interactions, and deeper connections with the destinations they visit. Naresh Arora, Founder and CEO of Truly India Hotels, Resorts, Camps, and Safaris, is embracing these changes by integrating cultural elements, eco-friendly practices, and technology into his hospitality approach.

Prativa Vaidya Bhalla

Truly India is a hospitality brand committed to preserving and showcasing India's rich cultural heritage through its collection of boutique hotels and resorts. Each property is designed to reflect the architectural and cultural essence of its surroundings, providing a distinctive stay that fosters a deeper connection to each destination.

The New Way to Travel

Modern travellers are moving beyond generic vacations, opting for personalised and deeply engaging journeys. Naresh notes, "We have expanded our offerings to include eco-friendly accommodations, guided tours to lesser-known destinations, offbeat travel, and thematic itineraries that cater to niche interests such as wellness, gastronomy, adventure, heritage, and spiritual exploration." Post-pandemic, there has been a surge of interest in wellness retreats and nature-based travel, with people looking to escape urban environments and focus on health and relaxation.

Naresh believes that sustainability is no longer just a buzzword but a necessity. "There has been a growing emphasis on eco-friendly and sustainable travel options with travellers seeking destinations that prioritise environment conservation and support local communities," he shares. Truly has been at the forefront of this movement, incorporating green initiatives into their properties and curating experiences that allow travellers to engage with local cultures and traditions authentically. Niche Travel is thriving specifically in adventure, spiritual, and wellness tourism segments.

Beyond The Usual

As domestic tourism flourishes, travellers are venturing beyond traditional destinations in search of fresh experiences. Naresh shares, "We have noticed a surge in interest in Northeast States like Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, and Nagaland for their natural beauty, unique cultures, and relatively unexplored landscapes. Regions like Coorg, Wayanad, and Chikmagalur



▲ Naresh Arora

in the Western Ghats are also gaining popularity for their lush greenery, coffee plantations, and serene environment." Ladakh is attracting younger travellers and adventure enthusiasts, while people are now travelling beyond Goa to the lesser-known beach destinations of Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu.

Overcoming Hurdles

Economic uncertainty and inflation can often impact travel budgets, influencing consumer spending and overall demand. Popular destinations often struggle with overcrowding and infrastructure strain. Naresh observes, "Overcrowding is a pressing concern, and without adequate investment in facilities and services, many destinations risk losing their charm and appeal," says Naresh. At the same time, balancing tourism expansion with environmental conservation remains critical, especially in ecologically sensitive areas. "Protecting fragile ecosystems while promoting travel requires careful planning," he adds. Safety concerns can also influence travel decisions and destination popularity. Naresh asserts, "The seasonality of tourism presents a challenge. Managing the highs and lows of tourist seasons to ensure

consistent demand and employment can be challenging for many destinations."

Future Ready Tourism

In 2025, Naresh predicts, "Sustainable travel will continue to gain traction, with an increased focus on eco-friendly practices and destinations." He also foresees a growing preference for cultural immersion and deeper engagement with local traditions, heritage, and cuisine. "The era of superficial sightseeing is fading, making way for authentic, experience-driven tourism," he asserts.

Technology will play a much more significant role, with travellers expecting seamless bookings, AI-driven recommendations, and immersive virtual previews of their destinations. He adds, "Demands for Tech-Enhanced Travel or a greater use of technology for seamless and interactive experiences will be high on travellers' wishlists."

With the improvement of road infrastructure, road trips and self-drive holidays have become a preferred mode of travel for many, offering flexibility and the chance to explore multiple destinations.

Blending work and travel has become a dominant trend, and Truly has adapted accordingly. "The concept of 'workcation'—working remotely from a vacation destination is more popular than ever. Travellers are seeking serene yet well-connected locations where they can be productive while enjoying nature and cultural experiences," says Naresh.

A Vision for the Future

Truly is positioning itself to be at the forefront of these trends, ensuring that every journey is not just a trip but a meaningful experience. "Our goal is to create transformative, memorable, and sustainable travel experiences that resonate with modern travellers. Whether it is an eco-conscious stay, an adventure-packed itinerary, or a wellness retreat, we are committed to delivering travel that inspires," Naresh concludes.



ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

A MIRACLE OR A FRANKENSTEIN?

The introduction of personal computers in the last quarter of the 20th century transformed the world as we know it today, but initially, it all came with its own set of apprehensions and fears. The World Wide Web (WWW) created a transformation like no other as humanity entered the 21st century. Now, as we approach the second quarter of the century, a new technology that has the potential to control humanity stares us in the face: Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Gurjit Singh Ahuja

In the grand scheme of human evolution, our journey from primitive beings to advanced thinkers is marked by our relentless pursuit of knowledge and innovation.

The Human Journey: From Fire to Intelligence

Evolution evolved from apes to humans; we used our power to observe, tabulate, think, reason, react, and create. We developed our social structures, languages, tools, and scripts, which happened over millions of years. This learning curve made us what we are today. We harnessed fire, mastered the seas, explored the earth's depths, conquered the skies, and ventured into outer space, with probes reaching beyond our planetary system to unravel more mysteries.

We used matter and material to serve our needs and make things convenient, efficient, and manageable. Computers allowed us to conduct superfast computations; robots took over hazardous and labour-intensive jobs. Then, we started to educate our machines to perform simple tasks. Machine learning through the creation of multiple algorithms, either/or, if/but, correct/wrong, and yes/no scenarios. We gave the push to the machines,

the push to think. Yes, think! The word is "think". We started feeding machines information and giving them the power to reason, which has given them the ability to react and act!

Our Digital Shadows: The Rise of the Digital Twins

Information is knowledge, and knowledge is power. If one has both, the potential is limitless. Living and working in an interconnected world, our communication patterns, browsing habits, travel itineraries, shopping preferences, medical history, and financial transactions exist on some servers within the WWW. Every piece of information we consume, every page we visit, every flight we take, every dollar we spend, and even the reasons behind our actions are logged. This master log is a data file on us that can create a digital manifestation of us in the virtual world, like our digital twin. This affinity between us and our digital twin gets more and more accurate as more data we create gets fed into the logs of our digital avatar.

Wow! This is the first word that comes to mind, but on second thoughts, have we helped create our digital duplicate who will think, act, and react like us, taking away "our self" from us? Initially, it all started as

applications and tools to help increase our productivity, enhance experiences, increase stickiness, and make things convenient for us. But today, the same features that helped us influence our decisions even when we depend on others, especially machines, or the outputs generated by those machines influence or make decisions for us. All alarms ring loud! Welcome to the world of generative AI.

These alarms are not an individual's nightmare but a significant cause of concern for organised humanity, large corporations, and governments, who fear that power may be confined to or limited in the hands of a few techno-moguls or corporations, with a great possibility of manipulation and misuse.

Who Holds the Power?

Elon Musk has warned, "AI is more dangerous than mismanaged aircraft design or production maintenance or bad car production. It has the potential—however small one may regard that probability, but it is non-trivial—it has the potential of civilisation destruction." On a more optimistic note, Bill Gates stated, "I believe there are more reasons than not to be optimistic that we can manage the risks of AI while maximising its benefits, but we need to move fast."

November 01, 2023, saw the formulation of the Bletchley Declaration by 28 countries attending the AI Safety Summit, including the USA, UK, India, Japan, France, China, and the EU, agreed to work together to contain the potential “catastrophic” risks posed by the galloping advances and the cutting-edge frontier that AI has created. The latest Tom Cruise Hollywood blockbuster, “Mission Impossible: The Final Reckoning,” portrays a dramatic picturisation of AI going rogue. Scary it is! On March 21, 2024, the UN General Assembly adopted a landmark resolution on promoting “Safe, Secure, and Trustworthy” AI systems backed by more than 120 member states.

Open AI chat GPT-4, the generative AI application that brought AI out into the widespread public domain and simultaneous development of more AI technologies by mega players like Google, Meta, and Microsoft, clearly defines the AI roadmap for the future as more advanced platforms like Gemini, Llama, Co-Pilot, Claude, and GPT-5 are rolled out. However, there looms an unknown fear and potential of possible fallout from a powerful AI discovery called Q Star that could pose a risk to humanity, as the eminent physicist Stephen Hawking once predicted that “full artificial intelligence could spell the end of the human race.”

The Cost of Progress: Jobs, Power, and Inequality

We reap what we sow, and that is precisely the most significant challenge we are facing in our fears of the adoption of artificial intelligence. AI models are based on devised algorithms, assumptions, and the information and the data we feed them with. If the initial kernel is flawed or corrupted and the integrity of the input data is flawed, then we will get a flawed, corrupted, and manipulated AI. This could create a situation of chaos, misinformation, and monopolisation by vested interests; hence, the very strict need to monitor, legislate, and control. Also, a point to be noted is that AI initiatives demand a significant amount of power for their data centres, so in a scenario where the world is moving away from fossil fuels to renewable sources, the strain on resources will be tremendous.

According to a prediction by McKinsey & Company, depending on various adoption scenarios, automation will displace between 400 and 800 million jobs by 2030, requiring about 375 million people to switch job categories entirely. The new automation of jobs will be powered by a new generation of robotics and AI and will bring displacement to both blue-collar and white-collar jobs alike; all mid-skilling jobs will be under challenge.

Moving to a newer role and being employable will require considerable training and re-education.

The IMF (International Monetary Fund) has predicted that AI could boost global productivity and growth but may displace jobs and worsen inequality. Advanced economies face greater risks from AI adoption but also stand to gain more benefits versus emerging markets. However, the disruptions will be slower due to infrastructure disparities in emerging markets. Jobs in legal research, market research and analysis, stock market workers, accountants, customer service agents, telemarketers, cashiers, radiologists, language translators, drivers, and travel agents.

Where Do We Go From Here?

AI is undeniably here to stay, and whether we realise it or not, we are already benefiting from its advancements. However, as its influence grows, so do the risks and challenges it presents. The crucial question remains: will we take control of AI's trajectory, or will we find ourselves controlled by it? Encouragingly, awareness is increasing—not just among individuals but also within governments. The future will reveal whether we can harness AI responsibly or if it will shape our destiny in ways we have yet to foresee.



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DMCs Changing the Way Indians Travel

With Indian travellers' evolving wishlists, Destination Management Companies (DMCs) are becoming indispensable partners for Indian travel agents and tour operators, ensuring hassle-free experiences for their clients. From handling on-ground logistics to crafting tailored itineraries, DMCs are not only becoming the backbone of international and domestic travel but are also making travel more accessible, immersive, and enjoyable than ever before.

Prativa Vaidya Bhalla



▲ Rajneesh Bansal



▲ Dheeraj Ranjan Kumar



▲ Pradeep Agrawal

Destination Management Companies (DMCs) serve as the backbone of seamless travel experiences. They serve as the backbone of seamless travel experiences, offering in-depth local expertise, logistical excellence, and invaluable on-ground support. Their specialised knowledge enables travel agents to curate high-quality, stress-free itineraries for clients.

To gain deeper insights into this dynamic sector, TTJ spoke with industry experts who are shaping the industry. Rajneesh Bansal, Managing Director, Paul Merchants, advocates a one-stop-shop model that integrates travel bookings with currency exchange solutions, ensuring convenience and efficiency for travellers. Dheeraj Ranjan Kumar, Founder and Director, Balitrip Wisata, specialises in crafting curated travel experiences exclusively designed for Indian tourists, catering to their unique preferences and expectations. Pradeep Agrawal, General Manager, Worldwide DMC, a UK-based company, provides professional ground handling and tourism services across the UK, USA, and UAE, ensuring a seamless and high-quality experience for international travellers. Together, they share their insights on shifting traveller preferences, emerging challenges, and the trending destinations that will define travel in 2025 and beyond.

One-Stop-Shop

Beyond their conventional services, with frequent shifts in travel guidelines, DMCs are becoming a trusted one-stop solution for real-time visa updates, health protocols, and documentation support while tackling pesky and confusing travel regulations. This travel assurance that DMCs offer is a big attraction to consumers today. Beyond this peace-of-mind service, they meet the primary needs of Indian travellers by offering customised itineraries curated specifically to their preferences, including dietary requirements and other cultural sensitivities.

Dheeraj explains, "The global travel landscape is dynamic, and changing regulations require constant vigilance and adaptability. Our dedicated compliance team that stays updated on international policies ensures our clients remain informed about visa policies, travel advisories, and local regulations. We have robust support services in place, including 24/7 customer assistance and multilingual on-ground representatives to help travellers navigate challenges."

Rajneesh echoes the importance of this value-added service, stating, "We provide Indian travellers with real-time information about changing travel restrictions, visa requirements, and health protocols and offer personalised assistance throughout

the booking and travel process. We use multiple channels like apps, WhatsApp groups, email alerts, and SMS to ensure our travellers stay informed and avoid last-minute surprises."

Worldwide DMC is constantly adapting its services to prioritise the safety, comfort, and satisfaction of its global travellers in the face of challenging travel regulations and sudden unseen hassles. Pradeep notes, "This includes offering customised travel plans, adding new luxury vehicles to its ground fleet, investing in technology, and enhancing its collaborative network with service providers."

Safety Protocols Are Key

When you are travelling with your family across international airspace, the one thing you will want is the safety and security assurance of your high-cost travel. This includes top essentials like travel insurance and flexible booking options, especially in the current volatile global geo-political scenario. DMCs offer their clients just that. Dheeraj observes, "Our travel insurance offerings now include coverage for unforeseen delays, medical emergencies, and cancellations, where safety and comfort are prioritised at every stage."

Their unique selling point is expanding their on-ground presence in key

destinations to provide 24/7 assistance and troubleshooting. Rajneesh says, “We have dedicated support teams that cater to traveller queries regarding safety measures and protocol adherence, ensuring a smoother experience from start to finish.” Along the same lines, Pradeep notes, “Travel insurance, flexible cancellations, and 24/7 assistance are becoming the norm, and it is the basic reassurance we can offer our clients.”

Active Global Networks

A smooth international journey relies on strong existing operational networks, ensuring seamless experiences at every stage—from pre-trip planning to post-trip support. DMCs bridge the gap between travellers and travel service providers through strategic partnerships, local expertise, and cutting-edge digital coordination.

Dheeraj emphasises the importance of seamless coordination with their Bali office and global partners, stating, “We achieve smooth operations through advanced digital platforms that enable real-time communication and workflow integration across time zones. A rigorous Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) ensures consistent service quality, supported by regular training and audits to align teams with our brand values and customer expectations. From pre-booking consultations to on-ground execution, every aspect of the journey is handled with minute precision.”

Beyond logistics, ensuring high-quality service at every touchpoint requires dedicated multilingual teams, on-ground representatives, and exclusive partnerships with hospitality providers and experienced curators. Pradeep highlights this approach, “Seamless collaboration with our international offices is achieved through standardised operating procedures, clear Service Level Agreements (SLAs), cultural sensitivity training, knowledge sharing on destinations and services, and analysing client feedback for continuous improvement. Our success is driven by a team of expert professionals who work tirelessly to create memorable trips for our clients.”

Meanwhile, Rajneesh emphasises the importance of streamlined communication and local expertise in ensuring a hassle-free travel experience. He observes, “We use WhatsApp to stay connected with our customers and overseas suppliers to ensure that all teams, whether in India or abroad, are aligned with the traveller’s preferences, requirements, and specific needs. We have local teams and partners in every destination who understand the nuances of Indian travel preferences. Our 24/7 helpline ensures that tourists and local partners can quickly connect in emergencies.”

Rapidly Evolving Trends

The outbound travel landscape for Indian tourists is transforming, driven by shifting preferences for personalised, hassle-free, and out-of-the-box experiences, whether it is polar expeditions, luxury train journeys, heritage stays, or escapes in the world’s remotest corners. Visa regulations are also playing a crucial role in destination choices. As travel to traditional hotspots like the Schengen region becomes more challenging due to stricter visa policies, demand for visa-friendly destinations like Thailand, the UAE, and Turkey is rising.

Observing a shift in travel patterns, Rajneesh states, “Indian travellers are now favouring shorter trips to new destinations and opting for more frequent getaways instead of extended vacations. They are increasingly leveraging technology and digital platforms to enhance and manage their travel experiences. To meet these new requirements, we keep our website updated with new destinations, weekend getaways, regional explorations, and quick international trips.”

Meanwhile, the demand for experiential and sustainable travel continues to grow. “Indian travellers now prioritise authentic experiences over generic sightseeing,” notes Dheeraj. “In 2025, there is a heightened interest in eco-conscious travel and destinations that offer deep cultural experiences. To cater to this, we have curated itineraries highlighting local culture, cuisine, and offbeat experiences.”

Popular Emerging Destinations

Indian travellers are embracing a mix of classic favourites and emerging hotspots, with a growing preference for personalised, seamless experiences. Rajneesh identifies Dubai and Abu Dhabi as top travel choices due to their world-class attractions and ease of travel. He observes, “Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore attract families for their safe environments and excellent connectivity. Europe, including the UK, France, Italy, and Switzerland, continues to be a hot selling destination during summers.” He adds, “Emerging destinations like Japan are gaining traction due to their blend of modernity, tradition, and popular culture. With its ancient wonders, Egypt is popular with history buffs, while Saudi Arabia, recently made accessible, offers a novel cultural experience.”

For Balitrip, destinations such as Bali, Dubai, Thailand, Maldives, Switzerland, France, and Italy, remain highly popular among Indian travellers. According to Dheeraj, Indonesia is set to be a rising star in 2025. “Travellers are venturing beyond Bali to explore Yogyakarta, Lombok, Gili Islands, and Lombok Island, attracted by their rich culture and rising social media

presence. Lombok and Lombok are becoming popular for their wildlife and adventure experiences.”

Quoting the company’s forecasts, Pradeep says, “2025 promises to be an exciting year with travellers seeking unique experiences and lesser-explored travel products. Trending locations, according to us, include off-the-beaten-path destinations like Reims in France, Girona in Spain, and Northern Lights experiences in Finland, Iceland, Lapland, and Norway. Long-haul itineraries focusing on cultural experiences and local specialities, as well as destinations inspired by favourite movies and TV shows, are rising in popularity.”

Technology Driven Travel

As global tourism undergoes rapid transformations, DMCs are not only adapting but also driving change through technological innovation, personalised services, and seamless travel coordination. Going beyond traditional logistics, they are leveraging cutting-edge digital solutions such as AI-driven customer support, mobile-first platforms, automated booking confirmations, instant query resolutions by virtual chatbots, and AI-powered recommendation engines to enhance efficiency and traveller satisfaction. These also help to analyse traveller preferences and suggest tailored itineraries. Big data and predictive analytics further allow DMCs to forecast travel trends, optimise pricing, and customise offers based on traveller behaviour, helping them design better experiences for their customers. While virtual and augmented reality offerings enable travellers to preview destinations even before booking.

Technology is also playing a crucial role in helping the tourism industry meet its sustainability goals. It enables the promotion of carbon offset programs and encourages travellers to embrace green experiences, such as electric vehicle rentals and low-impact tourism activities. Technology also enables tourism businesses to embrace sustainability by cutting down on inefficiency, improving recycling, and disposing of materials responsibly through effective waste management. With tools like smart tracking and data analytics, tourism businesses can better understand their environmental impact and make smarter decisions to reduce their carbon footprint.

In summary, DMCs are evolving to meet the needs of today’s Indian travellers by embracing technology, offering tailored experiences, and prioritising sustainability. As we move into 2025, one thing is clear: DMCs are no longer just facilitators of travel—they are architects of extraordinary experiences, shaping the way Indians see the world.



Moscow During Winters

A Compelling Destination with an Extra Layer of Magic

In December 2024, I had the opportunity to attend the Meet Global MICE Congress (MGMC) BRICS Edition in Moscow, where the city revealed itself in its winter splendour—a true fairytale setting. With temperatures plunging to -10°C , Moscow’s iconic landmarks were dusted with snow, and the air was crisp and refreshing. The chill added to the city’s charm as we wandered through its snowy streets, admiring architectural marvels, vibrant Christmas markets, and a mix of the old and new, all while being introduced to the city’s remarkable MICE potential.

Prashant Nayak

At the MGMC, we gained a deeper understanding and valuable insights into Moscow’s diverse MICE potential and strengths. While engaging in the event, we also had the opportunity to explore the city’s unique attractions, vibrant culinary scene, and some great venues. The Moscow City Tourism Committee organised an exceptional showcase, bringing together a select group of mainstream and B2B travel media to discover the many facets of this captivating city.

Moscow seamlessly blends world-class venues, rich cultural experiences, and modern infrastructure, solidifying its reputation as both a historic hub and a forward-thinking city capable of hosting events of any scale. Beyond its breathtaking landmarks, the true essence of Moscow lies in its immersive atmosphere. The sight of locals wrapped in stylish winter attire and the city’s vibrant energy during the colder months create a captivating scene. This account delves into our firsthand experiences, showcasing the diverse offerings of Moscow, all set against the enchanting backdrop of winter.

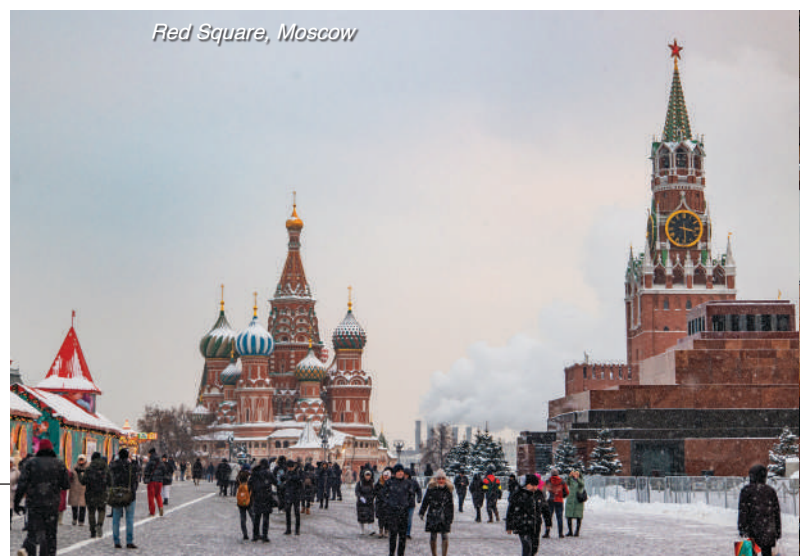
The Magnificent Duo: Kremlin and Red Square

The Kremlin and Red Square are very close, practically adjacent, and both at the heart of Moscow. We had the privilege of witnessing these incredible landmarks both in daylight and under a mesmerising nighttime snowfall. Picture the iconic red-brick walls of the Kremlin, standing proudly and imposing against the backdrop of a crisp, clear winter sky. The Kremlin is the oldest part of Moscow, the Russian capital’s main political, religious, and historical complex. It serves as the official residence and workplace of the president of Russia. As we explored its historical grounds, I wondered if I might catch a glimpse of the Russian President himself.

The territory of the Kremlin houses the Moscow Kremlin Museums (State Historical

and Cultural Reserve “Moscow Kremlin”) and is included on the UNESCO World Heritage List. We were particularly impressed by the must-see sights within the Kremlin, including the legendary Tsar Cannon and Tsar Bell, relics from the era of the royal dynasties, and the impressive collection housed in the Kremlin Armoury.

Red Square is often considered the gateway to the Kremlin, with the iconic St. Basil’s Cathedral, Lenin’s Mausoleum, and the GUM



Red Square, Moscow



The Armoury Chamber



The Diamond Fund

shopping centre forming part of the square's landmark scene. Red Square, a pedestrian-only zone, stands as the iconic symbol and one of Moscow's most historically significant sites. It is a gathering place for Muscovites during celebrations and a popular spot for leisurely strolls. This square has also been the backdrop for some of the most defining events in Russian history.

Grace and Grandeur: The Iconic Cathedrals of Moscow

St. Basil's Cathedral is one of the most iconic and recognisable landmarks in Russia and an absolute must-see for tourists. Its unique, colourful onion domes and fairy-tale-like architecture make it stand out from the typical cathedral design you might see elsewhere in Europe. The cathedral has also become a symbol of Russian culture and history and is linked to various stories from Russia's past. For photography enthusiasts, the cathedral offers plenty of angles and stunning views, especially when framed against the backdrop of Red Square or on a snowy winter day.

The Cathedral of Christ the Saviour is the principal cathedral of the Russian Orthodox Church, located near the Kremlin on the left bank of the Moskva River. As the largest cathedral of the Russian Church, it can accommodate up to 10,000 people and is built in the grandeur of the Russian-Byzantine style. The cathedral compound offers stunning panoramic views of Moscow. Adjacent to the cathedral is the Patriarch Bridge, a beautiful pedestrian bridge connecting the Moskva River's two banks, providing visitors with another scenic vantage point.

Power and Prestige: The Diamond Fund and Kremlin Armoury

The Diamond Fund opened in 1967 within the Moscow Kremlin, is one of the world's largest and most significant collections. It features

jewellery masterpieces, rare gemstones, and historical treasures. Among its jewels is the "Orlov" diamond, the largest in the collection, originally from India. As an Indian, learning about the "Orlov" diamond's journey evoked a sense of pride. It is fascinating how this extraordinary diamond, once in the hands of Mughals and Persians, eventually made its way into Russian history, adorning Empress Catherine II's sceptre.

The Armoury of the Moscow Kremlin, established in 1851, is a treasure trove of royal artefacts, including exquisite jewellery, weapons, and regalia crafted by Russian, European, and oriental masters. Home to over 4,000 items, it includes the famous Monomakh's cap, believed to have been worn by the grand princes and tsars of Russia during coronation ceremonies.

A Few Steps from the Kremlin: Iconic Zaryadye Park and GUM

Zaryadye is a cutting-edge cultural and educational centre that symbolises Moscow's innovation. Inaugurated by President Vladimir Putin and Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyenin on City Day in 2017, it features unique architecture, high-tech attractions, a children's science centre, museum and exhibition spaces, and a botanical collection across Russia. This dynamic park seamlessly blends nature, technology, and culture, offering a vibrant experience for visitors of all ages.

GUM, Moscow's iconic department store, opened in 1893 on the site of the Upper Trade Rows. Renovated in 1889, its striking pseudo-Russian architecture has made it a landmark in the heart of the city. Once Europe's largest shopping centre, it now blends rich history with modern luxury, housing premium boutiques and offering a unique shopping experience in a grand, historic setting.

The Moscow Metro: An Underground Journey Through Art and History

One experience I truly enjoyed was exploring the Moscow Metro, which offered a unique perspective of the city. Our guide took us through various stations, hopping on and off trains. At one station, the elevators were steep and long, a bit intimidating at first, but you quickly get used to them. The Moscow Metro feels like an underground city with the hustle and bustle of people, and each station showcases its unique beauty. Many stations are adorned with marble, statues, stained glass windows, mosaics, and reliefs crafted by renowned Soviet and Russian artists. Widely regarded as the most beautiful metro system in the world, it first opened in 1935 and now boasts 393 stations, including surface lines. Impressively, 44 of these stations are recognised as cultural heritage sites in Russia.

GES-2: Moscow's New Cultural Hub for Art, Creativity, and Leisure

The opening of GES-2 in December 2021 marked a significant moment in Moscow's cultural scene. Housed in a modernised former power plant that once powered trams, the Kremlin, and the city centre, it has become a vibrant hub for contemporary art and creativity. GES-2 features exhibition halls, a cinema, a concert hall, a library, artist studios, children's play areas, auditoriums for public events,



Moscow metro



GUM

a bookshop, cafes, and even a birch grove with a viewing platform over the Moskva River. I was impressed by the wide range of art forms, including visual art, installations, and experimental performances. Entrance is free, but registration is required. It is a place where children and students can spend the day unwinding while elders enjoy reading a book.

VDNH: A Cultural and Historical Wonderland in Moscow

VDNH, or the Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy, is a vast, fascinating location in Moscow that blends history, culture, and entertainment. Exploring it in a single day is unrealistic due to the scale and diversity of exhibits. The time you will need to explore VDNH depends on how much you want to see and do. The site showcases Russia's achievements through multiple pavilions, including thematic representations of countries like Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia, etc.

During our visit, we explored fascinating attractions like a contemporary art gallery, Moscow's largest ice-skating rink, and the spellbinding ATOM Museum, featuring a model of the Tsar Bomba (Big Ivan), the largest nuclear bomb ever tested in 1961. A highlight was the Cosmos Pavilion, where we marvelled at models of cosmonauts, rockets, spacecraft like Vostok, space equipment, and the full-scale model of the Mir orbital complex. The scale and historical significance of these exhibits were truly impressive.

Beyond the pavilions and exhibitions, VDNH offers beautiful fountains, parks, and ponds with stunning landscaping. For dining, Ottepel is a trendy spot offering a mix of Russian and European dishes in a modern setting. VDNH is a blend of old and new, a cultural treasure trove that continues to reveal new layers of Russia's history, art, science, and innovation with every visit.



More to Explore in Moscow

Do not miss the Moscow Planetarium, Russia's oldest planetarium. It is a truly immersive experience, with much attention given to making the universe accessible and engaging for all ages. The planetarium's main dome features a state-of-the-art projection system that brings the night sky to life.

The cable car ride over the Moscow River is also a unique and scenic experience, offering spectacular city views. Also, take a ride to the Moscow City region to witness the ultramodern architectural complex of skyscrapers made of glass and concrete with a height from 27 to 96 floors. One of the main attractions of the complex is the Panorama 360 observation deck—the highest observation deck in Moscow and Europe, located on the 89th floor of one of the skyscrapers. At night, the experience was mesmerising.

In the snow, visiting the Tourist Information Centre (TIC) was a great experience. Guests can get advice in English and other languages, learn about attractions, events, and routes, and access interactive apps and printed maps to explore the city.

Unforgettable Luxury and Dining Experiences

The luxurious LOTTE Hotel Moscow, where we stayed, has earned numerous prestigious international awards and worldwide recognition from travellers. As a part of The Leading Hotels of the World, LOTTE Hotel Moscow offers an exceptional stay experience. In addition to the hotel, our dining experiences were remarkable. We explored a variety of fine dining spots, including Heritage, Nikki, Pushkin, Sattva, Taj Mahal, and Tramplin Ambassadori. A standout was the Delhi-Moscow restaurant, where the

atmosphere is cosy and simple, offering an authentic traditional Indian experience with pure vegetarian thalis that truly stood out.

Leisure or MICE! It is Time for Moscow

Moscow in the winter has an unforgettable charm, with its grandeur and beauty leaving a lasting impression on us. As I imagine the city in the summer, with its vibrant energy, I can only look forward to experiencing yet another side of this captivating metropolis. For me, Moscow has emerged as a standout destination for leisure and MICE travel. With the best of Asia and Europe, it offers a unique blend of modern comfort, affordable luxury, and authentic experiences. Considering the visa challenges associated with European countries for Indians, Moscow stands out as an ideal alternative, combining rich and unique history with contemporary elegance for a memorable experience.



Moscow Set to Become a Global Hub for Indian MICE Events

TTJ engaged with a few Moscow MICE Ambassadors from India during the second edition of the Meet Global MICE Congress: BRICS Edition, held in Moscow in December 2024. These ambassadors provided valuable insights into Moscow's growing stature as a premier MICE destination, emphasizing its seamless integration of modern infrastructure, rich cultural heritage, and strong business ties with India. Their perspectives underscored Moscow's rising appeal for hosting high-profile MICE events.

Prashant Nayak

In November 2024, the second batch of the online certification programme for Moscow MICE Ambassadors concluded with over 200 professionals from India's MICE industry graduating. Selected graduates were invited to participate in the prestigious Meet Global MICE Congress, where they had the opportunity to explore Moscow's vast MICE potential. The programme allowed them to visit world-class venues, evaluate accommodation options, ensure service quality, and experience Moscow's cultural offerings firsthand.

The Moscow MICE Ambassadors programme equips Indian MICE professionals with comprehensive knowledge of Moscow's diverse event-hosting capabilities. Covering all aspects of trip planning, the programme empowers ambassadors to curate exceptional experiences that cater to even the most discerning clientele. Graduates acquire a competitive edge by expanding their expertise and business opportunities. Inspired by the programme's success, Evgeny Kozlov, Chairman of the Moscow City Tourism Committee, is committed to increasing the number of MICE Ambassadors from India.



Anupam Vohra, Managing Director, The Deluxe Events and Fine Catering

The BRICS Convention provided an excellent platform for MICE industry leaders to discuss current trends and the future of the sector. Key takeaways included the growing importance of sustainability, the circular economy in tourism, and the need for skilling to improve customer satisfaction and generate employment. As AI and Industry 5.0 reshape the workforce, businesses must focus on delivering unique and satisfying experiences to stand out.

Moscow stands out as an ideal destination for high-profile Indian MICE events, with its rich historical and cultural connections to India. Offering a range of luxury hotels, cutting-edge venues, and exclusive cultural experiences, such as at The Bolshoi Theatre and Petroff Palace Hotel, Moscow is an attractive and economical alternative to Western Europe and the US. With world-class venues alongside sports venues like the VTB Arena and VDNH Ice Skating Rink, it is perfectly equipped to host a variety of MICE events.



Siddharth Shah, CEO, FastTreck Travels

The Moscow BRICS MICE Convention highlighted how these countries can strengthen their ties in both business and tourism. I also appreciated the emphasis on sustainable event practices, aligning perfectly with global trends in the MICE industry.

With its impressive infrastructure, Moscow blends modernity and history, making it a standout destination. Our site inspections at world-class venues such as Lotte Hotel Moscow, Ararat Park Hotel, VTB Arena, and Hyatt Regency Moscow Petrovsky Park demonstrated the city's exceptional readiness to host global-scale events. Moscow is well-connected internationally, and its easy navigation makes it a convenient location for large-scale gatherings. Iconic landmarks like the Kremlin and Red Square add to the city's charm, while a wide variety of cuisines and cultural activities make it a memorable experience for all attendees. The city offers top-tier services or affordable luxury at competitive prices and a mix of cultural and modern offerings that ensure a balanced, engaging experience. Streamlined visa procedures also make travel easier for Indian visitors.

Ajay Sharma, Delight Holidays

Moscow's unique blend of modern infrastructure, rich cultural heritage, and innovative hospitality offerings makes it an increasingly prominent MICE destination. The city boasts state-of-the-art MICE infrastructure, efficient connectivity, and a vibrant cultural and historical scene. Its vibrant nightlife and culinary offerings further enhance its appeal, positioning Moscow as an ideal host for high-profile events like the BRICS MICE Convention and a benchmark destination for the global MICE industry.

Additionally, Moscow's affordability, strategic location, and cultural alignment with Indian values make it a perfect choice for Indian businesses hosting high-profile MICE events. It not only ensures the seamless execution of business objectives but also offers an enriching cultural experience for participants, making the event both memorable and impactful. Russian authorities have simplified visa processes for Indian citizens, especially business travellers, facilitating the attendance of large delegations at such events.



PROGRESS FOR INDIA'S TOURISM SECTOR YET FULL POTENTIAL REMAINS UNTAPPED

The Union Budget 2025-26 outlines significant reforms aimed at boosting India's tourism sector. While some demands remain unmet, the budget's provisions reflect optimism for the dynamic tourism industry, aimed at fostering employment-led growth and increased opportunities for Indian businesses and international visitors.

Prashant Nayak

Presenting the Union Budget 2025-26 in Parliament on February 01, 2025, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman outlined several initiatives to boost tourism through investment-led growth and employment generation.

and Heal in India will be promoted in partnership with the private sector. The initiative will focus on capacity building and relaxed visa norms to attract more international patients seeking medical treatment in India.

Tax Slab Revisions: A Boost for the Middle Class

A significant highlight of the Union Budget 2025-26 is the revision of tax slabs, specifically under the new tax regime. Sitharaman announced that individuals earning up to Rs 12 lakh annually will now be exempt from paying taxes, a significant increase from the previous Rs 7 lakh threshold. A Rs 75,000 standard deduction has been introduced for the salaried class. Sitharaman emphasised that these changes will "substantially reduce the tax burden on the middle class and leave more money in their hands." This move is expected to stimulate household consumption, savings, and investment. For middle-class Indians, a key demographic for the travel industry, this could provide a significant boost, making travel more accessible and encouraging increased spending on travel.

Strengthening Regional Air Connectivity

The finance minister highlighted that the UDAN scheme has already enabled 1.5 crore middle-class citizens to fulfil their aspirations for quicker and affordable travel. Building on this success, a modified version of the UDAN scheme will be launched to improve regional connectivity, targeting 120 new destinations and an expected four crore passengers over the next decade. The updated scheme will also support the development of helipads and smaller airports in hilly, aspirational, and North-East regions.

Furthermore, expanding Patna Airport and developing a greenfield airport will strengthen the country's aviation infrastructure. Additionally, a brownfield airport will be constructed at Bihta, further boosting connectivity.

Key Measures to Drive India's Tourism Sector

The Union Budget 2025-26 has identified tourism as a sector for employment-led growth. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said that facilitating employment-led growth includes organising intensive skill-development programmes for youth, including hospitality management, MUDRA (Micro Units Development and Refinance Agency) loans for homestays, improving ease of travel and connectivity to tourist destinations, introducing streamlined e-visa facilities, and providing performance-linked incentives to states to improve tourist amenities, cleanliness, and marketing efforts.

She said that the country's top 50 tourist destination sites will be developed in partnership with states through a challenge mode. The budget added that states will have to provide land for building key infrastructure, including hotels, and hotels in those destinations will be included in the infrastructure HML (Harmonised Master List). The minister said that emphasis will be given to places of spiritual and religious significance, and there will be a special focus on destinations related to the life and times of Lord Buddha.

The minister further announced that the government would streamline e-visa facilities and introduce visa-fee waivers for certain tourist groups to attract more international visitors. Simplifying the visa process should encourage more international visitors, boost tourism, and further contribute to the economy. In her speech, Sitharaman also said that medical tourism

A Relief with Revised TCS Limits

Another positive development is that the Union Budget 2025 -26 has introduced key changes to the Liberalised Remittance Scheme (LRS), significantly relieving Indian travellers, students, and medical tourists. One of the most notable updates is the Tax Collected at Source (TCS) threshold increase under LRS, which has been raised from Rs seven lakh to Rs 10 lakh. Previously, a 5 per cent TCS applied to international remittances exceeding Rs seven lakh. With this change, the threshold is now Rs 10 lakh, easing the tax burden on outbound remittances. This adjustment makes outbound tourism more affordable, allowing travellers to spend more abroad without additional taxes. Students studying overseas and patients seeking medical treatment abroad will benefit from reduced tax outflows on tuition and medical expenses. Indian businesses making overseas payments for services or investments will also enjoy a higher limit before applying TCS.

Tourism Sector Awaits Key Reforms

While certain segments of the tourism sector have gained, the international marketing budget for tourism has yet to see any significant increase. Despite ongoing efforts from industry players, the long-pending demand for official "industry status" remains unaddressed. Furthermore, the GST framework for the sector remains unchanged despite continued requests from travel and hospitality industry stakeholders. Though there is a mixed reaction, the travel and tourism industry has responded with a blend of optimism, perhaps anticipating further progress in the next budget.



Sunil Kumar, President, TAAI

Thanks to the Union Minister, the budget gifts relief to middle-income earners on several fronts. An excellent gesture is to exempt from tax, earnings up to Rs 12.75 Lakhs, excluding Capital Gains. On Travel and Tourism, the much-awaited “Industry Status” continues to evade the stakeholders.

The various measures announced in Tourism reflect that the Government is finally focusing on higher revenue streams from Tourism. However, the GST and TCS challenges the agencies are currently facing, will unfortunately continue. The only relief in TCS is the increase of the threshold from Rs 7 Lakhs to 10 Lakhs. The special attention to destinations related to Lord Buddha; and incentives to states for effective destination management indicate the Government’s desire to focus on more Inbound and Domestic Tourism. This is a welcome budget, with adequate attention focused on the Tourism Sector.



K.B. Kachru, Chairman, Radisson Hotel Group, South Asia and President—Hotel Association of India (HAI)

The budget is progressive, especially focusing on tourism and job creation. The government’s commitment to developing 50 new destinations and improving infrastructure is promising. This year’s budget highlights the importance of promoting spiritual and medical tourism with neighbouring countries and simplifying visa processes to enhance international travel. Overall, the initiatives taken by the government in this year’s budget are steps in the right direction for the industry.



Vasudha Sondhi, MD, Outbound Marketing India

It is encouraging to see that, for the first time, our national budget formally recognizes tourism as a key driver of employment. Some of my expectations have been met, including initiatives for homestays and cleanliness without explicitly addressing waste management. The expansion of the UDAN regional connectivity scheme will play a crucial role in unlocking new travel destinations. Meanwhile, the Ayush visa, introduced two years ago, seems to have lost momentum; I am hopeful that the “Heal in India” initiative will gain traction and deliver the intended benefits.



Karan Agarwal, Director, Cox & Kings

The Union Budget 2025 takes a well-rounded approach to tourism, recognising its potential as a key driver of economic growth and employment. The focus on public-private collaboration in developing the top destinations is particularly encouraging. It signals a shift towards structured, long-term growth rather than short-term measures. With the proper execution, these initiatives can strengthen India’s position as a leading global tourism destination while creating significant employment opportunities across the sector.



Aditya Pande, Group Chief Executive Officer, InterGlobe Enterprises

This budget outlines a compelling roadmap for a Viksit Bharat. The focus on boosting consumption through targeted tax relief for the middle class, coupled with the government’s commitment to streamlining tax procedures, will significantly improve the ease of doing business and unlock further economic potential. At InterGlobe Enterprises, we are particularly encouraged by the strategic investments and vision for strengthening the holistic tourism ecosystem in the country with the development of infrastructure and focus on a skilled workforce. These initiatives lay a solid foundation for sustained economic progress and a brighter future for the country.



Hussain Patel, Director, TripJack

The Union Budget 2025 reaffirms the government’s strategic vision to position India as a world-class tourism destination while fostering employment-led growth. The initiatives outlined will significantly enhance the country’s hospitality ecosystem, empower local communities and entrepreneurs, create sustainable employment opportunities, and ensure a superior travel experience for visitors, giving a significant boost to India’s tourism sector. Also, the continued emphasis on spiritual and religious tourism aligns with India’s rich cultural and heritage-driven tourism potential.



TAFI 2025 Convention ignites powerful conversations on sustainability and responsible tourism

TAFI 2025 Convention was instrumental in sending a powerful message advocating for sustainability and responsible tourism. Through thought-provoking discussions, strategic collaborations, and eco-conscious excursions, the convention reinforced the collective responsibility of the tourism industry to build a sustainable future. The convention also served as a platform to promote cultural exchange and strengthen tourism ties between India and Vietnam.

Ravi Sharma

The Travel Agents Federation of India's (TAFI) annual convention in 2025, held from January 17 to 19 at the Legend Hotel in Ninh Binh, Vietnam, not only provided a key platform for fostering relationships and exploring new opportunities in the travel and tourism sector but also focused on sustainability and responsible travel. The event brought together over 350 Indian travel agents, tour operators, and 300 Vietnamese counterparts to promote sustainable tourism and strengthen ties between India and Vietnam. This collaboration marked a significant step in advancing cultural exchange and unlocking the potential of the Indian tourism market in Vietnam.

Spotlight on Ninh Binh

Vietnam has been gaining increasing popularity among Indian travellers in recent years, and Ninh Binh, located just three hours from Hanoi, is no exception. The breathtaking beauty of Ninh Binh provided an enchanting backdrop for the event. Despite its allure, the region remains relatively unexplored by Indian tourists. Ajay Prakash, President, TAFI, stated, "TAFI aims to introduce our members to lesser-known destinations, reinforcing our belief that tourism should extend beyond popular spots. We choose unconventional locations for our conventions, and Ninh Binh is a hidden gem waiting to be discovered." He also highlighted the success of previous conventions in

attracting Indian tourists to destinations like Kuching in Sarawak, Malaysia. The TAFI 2025 Convention was a valuable opportunity to elevate Ninh Binh's profile on the global tourism map.

Highlights of the Convention

The convention officially began with a warm welcome from Pham Quang Ngoc, Chairman of the Provincial People's Committee of Ninh Binh, and the Department of Tourism, who extended their hospitality and support. The opening day featured a vibrant showcase of Vietnamese culture, setting the tone for the event.

Later at the awards night, VFS Global was





honoured with the prestigious "Game-changer in Global Travel and Mobility Award" for its significant contributions to the industry. Bui Van Manh, Director, the Ninh Binh Province People's Committee, Department of Tourism, presented the award, which Zubin Karkaria, Founder and CEO, VFS Global accepted. The company also received a second award for "Excellence in Sustainability," recognising its efforts to integrate sustainability into its core business operations.

Sham Nijhawan, Chairman, Nijhawan Group, and Anil Kalsi, Vice President, TAFI, were inducted into the Hall of Fame in recognition of their lasting contributions to the travel industry. Their groundbreaking ideas have driven progress and transformation in the sector. Additionally, Dev Karvat, Founder and CEO, Asego, was celebrated for 25 years of exceptional service, highlighting Asego's role in revolutionising travel insurance and ensuring the safety of global travellers. Bjorn DeNiese, Managing Director, Mayfair Elixir, received the "Leadership in Hospitality, Design, and Innovation Award" for redefining hospitality with innovative, sustainable designs.

Focus on Business with Sustainability

The theme of the convention, "Tourism for Tomorrow: Protecting the Planet," emphasised the critical role of sustainability in the travel industry. Ajay Prakash highlighted the sector's responsibility, stating, "Our industry thrives on the natural beauty and diversity of the world, but we also have a duty to protect it. TAFI is committed to sensitising its members, who in turn can educate their clients on responsible tourism practices."

The awards night featured a series of

inspiring speeches that underscored the growing significance of responsible tourism in safeguarding the environment, empowering local communities, and fostering economic growth in tourism-dependent regions. Multiple sessions, panel discussions, and case studies at the convention underscored the significance of minimising carbon footprints, promoting inclusivity in tourism, and ensuring that its benefits extend beyond travellers to the host communities.

The convention provided extensive networking and business sessions on eco-tourism, digital transformation (NDC and AI), and revenue generation. Industry experts shared insights on sustainable practices, green technologies, and business models. A key highlight was the B2B session with over 50 Vietnamese travel companies, fostering new collaborations.

The FAM Fun

TAFI collaborated with DMCs like Threeland Travel and Vietravel to showcase Vietnam's hidden gems and manage the essential logistical arrangements. The outings began in Hanoi, Vietnam's vibrant capital, where delegates enjoyed a walking tour of historical landmarks such as the Opera House, Metropole Hotel, Indira Gandhi Park, and Independence Square. In Ninh Binh,

renowned for its stunning limestone karsts and lush landscapes, delegates explored the region's natural beauty and cultural heritage. Attendees also participated in eco-friendly excursions, including boat tours through Trang An's UNESCO World Heritage Site. The region's community-based ecotourism projects gave attendees a firsthand experience of how local communities thrive through tourism while preserving their cultural heritage.

The delegates were also introduced to destinations like Halong Bay, Da Nang, and Hoi An, offering immersive experiences in Vietnam's rich natural beauty and cultural richness. A key highlight was the gala dinner hosted by Threeland Travel at the elegant Vesak Ballroom in the Tam Chuc Pagoda Complex, the largest pagoda complex in Vietnam. Surrounded by serene lakes, mountains, and forests, the venue provided a breathtaking atmosphere for the evening.

A Call for Collaboration and a Sustainable Future in Tourism

The convention concluded with TAFI's strong call to action, urging continued collaboration among tourism professionals, government agencies, and local communities. Ajay Prakash reaffirmed TAFI's commitment to pioneering sustainable solutions that will guide the travel industry toward a greener future.



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PRESENTS

MEET & GREET 2025



First Edition of TTJ Konnect Ushers in a New Trend in Business Networking

The inaugural edition of TTJ Konnect, held in association with TBO.com, made a grand debut at The Imperial Club, New Delhi. The event marked the latest initiative by Sampan Media Group, the publishers of Travel Trade Journal (TTJ), a leading B2B travel publication since 2010.

With TTJ TRAVMART successfully running in its eighth edition, the TRAVMART Marketplace initiative, introduced in 2024, has paved the way for TTJ Konnect, the newest addition to the Sampan portfolio. The event was attended by over 250 travel professionals, including travel agents, tour operators, cruise specialists, hoteliers, airlines, tourism boards, and trade associations, represented by senior officials.

The event was graced by travel industry stalwarts, including Sham Nijhawan, Subhash Goyal, Sunil Kumar, Rajiv Mehra, Anil Kalsi, Kanwarjit Singh Sawhney, Rajan Sehgal, Neeraj Malhotra, P.P. Khanna, Ved Khanna, Gajesh Girdhar, Jagdeep Bhagat, and Kushvinder Sarna. Their presence underscored the significance of TTJ Konnect as a premier networking platform in the travel industry.

The success of TTJ Konnect was backed by prominent industry sponsors. Tbo.com served as the title sponsor, while Global Connect sponsored the drinks. EGYPTAIR was the supporting airline, and Yorker Holidays sponsored the photo booth. The interactive adwalls were sponsored by KAZIN DMC and 1Above, with Cruise Carrot providing entertainment. Aeroprime – Vietnam Airlines sponsored the event badges and lanyards.

Additional support came from Airwings Tours and Travels, Bali Trip, Centara Hotels and Resorts, Youngistan Travellers, SR Destinations, Inland Tourways, Fly 24Hrs, Aamaghathi Resort, Woods at Sasan Gir, Indana Palace Jodhpur, The Raviz, The Serai, Barefoot Resorts, and Araiya, all of whom contributed to making the event a resounding success.

TTJ Konnect set the tone for 2025 by fostering industry relationships in a relaxed yet impactful setting. The two-hour networking session allowed industry professionals to connect and exchange ideas, followed by presentations from sponsors that highlighted new opportunities and offerings.





Excitement peaked with a series of lucky draws. Bali Trip and Try Gulf Holidays offered land packages and hotel stays, while EGYPTAIR sponsored an economy class air ticket. The winners were announced by Sham Nijhawan, in the presence of Amr Ali, Country Manager – EGYPTAIR, and his team. Lords Travel, represented by B.S. Arora, delighted one lucky attendee with a Sound Bar giveaway.

successful debut, TTJ Konnect is set to become an essential networking event for travel professionals, offering a space for meaningful collaborations and industry growth.

The evening concluded on a high note with a mesmerizing Sufi band performance, setting a festive and celebratory atmosphere during cocktails and dinner.

The New Delhi edition of TTJ Konnect is just the beginning. With more editions planned throughout 2025, the platform aims to foster deeper industry connections and create new business opportunities. Given its







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EVENT CALENDAR



2025



MARCH

08

RAIPUR

MARCH

26-27

WEST INDIA
(PUNE)

APRIL

17

LUCKNOW

JULY

09

CHANDIGARH

AUGUST

22-23

SOUTH INDIA
(CHENNAI/HYDERABAD)

SEPTEMBER

12-13

NORTH INDIA
(DELHI)

OCTOBER

30-31

EAST INDIA
(KOLKATA)

NOVEMBER

19

SURAT

DECEMBER

17

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The above schedule may change due to unforeseen or unavoidable circumstances.
If there are any changes, they will be communicated 30 days prior to the event.

New Zealand eases visa rules for digital nomads



The New Zealand Government has announced a major relaxation of visitor visa rules, allowing tourists to work remotely while exploring the country. Effective January 27, 2025, the policy aims to attract digital nomads and boost tourism-driven economic growth.

Economic Growth Minister Nicola Willis emphasised that tourism is New Zealand’s second-largest export earner, generating \$11 billion and supporting 200,000 jobs. By welcoming digital nomads, the government seeks to enhance New Zealand’s appeal as a remote work destination.

Under the new rules, visitors on tourist visas, family visit visas, or the NZeTA can work remotely for overseas employers or clients while holidaying. However, they cannot work for New Zealand businesses, provide local services, or engage in physically present work. Immigration Minister Erica Stanford highlighted that longer stays by remote workers will increase tourism revenue, though tax implications apply beyond 92 days.

Tourism Minister Louise Upston stressed the importance of keeping pace with global digital nomad trends, noting that remote workers spend more time and money, particularly in the shoulder season.

Leading Indian travel agents experience Globus’ Scottish escape firsthand



With 97 years of excellence, Globus remains a leader in global travel, offering meticulously crafted tours across 70+ countries. As part of the Globus family of brands, including Globus®, Cosmos®, and Avalon Waterways®, the company is renowned for premium accommodations, expert tour directors, and immersive itineraries blending must-see attractions with authentic local experiences.

A standout offering, Globus Escapes®, provides off-season tours with up to 40 per cent savings compared to peak travel periods. These tours allow travellers to explore iconic destinations with fewer crowds, shorter queues, and milder weather, ensuring an intimate, high-value travel experience.

Recently, top Indian travel professionals from Thomas Cook, SOTC, Otila, TBO, and Holidays at Leisure embarked on a Scottish Escape familiarisation tour. Accompanied by Priyanka Pawar Kulkarni, Business Development Manager, West India for the Globus family of brands. The agents explored Edinburgh’s Royal Mile, Loch Ness, and Scotland’s rich heritage, experiencing Globus’ signature service, seamless logistics, and expert storytelling.

Vietnam Airlines upgrades Mumbai-Hanoi Route with wide-body aircraft from May 2025

Vietnam Airlines has announced a major upgrade to its Mumbai-Hanoi route, introducing Boeing 787 and Airbus A350 aircraft from May 1, 2025. Operating four weekly flights, these state-of-the-art wide-body aircraft offer enhanced passenger comfort, advanced in-flight entertainment, and superior cabin space, reinforcing the airline’s commitment to seamless air connectivity.

Passengers can enjoy extra legroom in economy, full-flat bed seats in business class, and a specially curated Indian menu. Speaking on the upgrade, Nguyen Trung Hieu, Country Manager India, highlighted the overwhelming response to daily A350 flights from Delhi and expressed confidence that the Mumbai expansion would further enhance travel convenience for Indian passengers.

With 14 weekly flights from Delhi and Mumbai to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam Airlines continues to be a preferred choice for Indian travellers, offering comfort, reliability, and renowned Vietnamese hospitality.



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Nationalities



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Moscow City Tourism Committee hosts grand gala night in Mumbai



The Moscow City Tourism Committee hosted a prestigious gala dinner, bringing together over 170 key partners, including prominent associations like OTOAI, NIMA, MICE, TIA, travel agents, government officials, and media. The event celebrated the strengthening of tourism and business ties between India and Moscow, aligning with the city's focus on the MICE sector.

Guests enjoyed the unique “Moscow Tea Time” and performances by the ‘Rusy’ dance troupe, showcasing Moscow’s cultural heritage. Distinguished speakers, including Ivan Fetisov and Evgeny Kozlov, highlighted the rising Indian interest in Moscow, with e-visa applications increasing 1.4 times in 2024.

Kozlov emphasised Moscow’s appeal as a business tourism hub, featuring world-class infrastructure, 22,000 dining establishments, and advanced services. The committee reaffirmed its commitment to growing India’s MICE industry and strengthening bilateral relations through continued partnerships. The evening featured elaborate cuisine and exciting prizes, further enhancing Moscow’s engagement with India’s outbound tourism market.

Rayna Tours unveils ‘Spotlight Pick,’ exclusive monthly deals



Rayna Tours has launched Rayna’s Spotlight Pick, a monthly campaign offering exclusive travel deals on carefully curated activities, hotels, cruises, airlines, and packages. This initiative aims to provide unbeatable prices and premium experiences, making travel more accessible to adventurers and leisure seekers alike.

The inaugural offer features a 6-Day Dubai Package with fixed departures every Friday, allowing travellers to explore the city’s iconic landmarks such as Burj Khalifa, exhilarating desert safaris, and luxurious accommodations at an exceptional value. Each month’s selection will highlight the best travel experiences, ensuring travellers have access to new product launches, increased visibility, and unmatched savings without compromising quality.

Senthil Velan, CEO, Rayna Tours, emphasised that Rayna Tours is committed to revolutionising travel by making premium experiences both affordable and inspiring. Rayna’s Spotlight Pick will combine exclusivity with value, encouraging travellers to explore new destinations while creating lasting memories. With deals changing monthly, travellers are encouraged to stay updated and book early before these limited-time offers sell out.

Karnataka Tourism to host second edition of ‘Karnataka International Travel Expo’ February 26 – 28

The Karnataka International Travel Expo (KITE) returns for its second edition from February 26-28, 2025, positioning Karnataka as a global tourism hub. Organised by the Department of Tourism, Government of Karnataka, in collaboration with the Karnataka Tourism Society, KITE 2025 aims to foster partnerships and showcase the state's rich cultural, heritage, adventure, and wellness tourism.

The event will feature extensive B2B networking, with over 400 hosted buyers from India and abroad, and 150 Karnataka stakeholders. Key industry associations, including FHRAI, ADTOI, IATO, and TAAI, are supporting the expo. Dedicated pavilions will highlight Karnataka’s tourism circuits and sustainability initiatives, while cultural performances will celebrate its vibrant traditions.

KITE 2025 will promote lesser-known destinations, attract investments, and facilitate over 10,000 B2B meetings. Pre- and post-event tours will cover iconic locations like Hampi, Coorg, and Mysore. The event is expected to enhance Karnataka’s global visibility and boost tourism-driven economic growth.



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