



# ENGAGE

## “Leisure Destinations: The Covid Tourism Boom”

A voice of  
hope for the  
hotel industry

“2021 will see an  
unprecedented rise  
in the number of  
travellers looking  
for domestic  
wellness breaks:”

Secretary Tourism,  
Arvind Singh

Hotels in India adopt  
innovative strategies to  
welcome the new  
consumer in a  
changed world

By Biman Mukherji



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## From the President's Desk

Puneet Chhatwal, President, Hotel Association of India  
MD & CEO, The Indian Hotels Company Limited



It is just a little over 45 days when we released the first edition of HAI ENGAGE.

Post a tumultuous 2020, the hospitality and tourism sector saw a ray of hope during the first quarter of 2021, with business recovering gradually. The return of economic activity combined with leisure travel helped the sector see a rebound. Domestic tourism gained momentum and new trends like driving vacations, staycations in city hotels and holidays in off-beat locations became the industry's mainstay business. The needle was moving forward, and the sector was steadily finding its feet in this new normal.

But as I pen this note, the environment has completely transformed. There is fear and dismay across the country. The second wave has hit India in the most unprecedented and harsh manner. The loss of lives in the last two weeks; the daily

rise in the number of cases; the lack of critical care facilities has been devastating. We strongly believe it is one of those hours when the entire industry needs to come together. At HAI we once again stand united in our support to the Government and to the citizens of our country in alleviating some of the challenges being faced.

While the industry stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the Government around the same time last year, the challenges today are different. As an industry, we provided meals to the healthcare fraternity and migrant labour who were stranded following the lockdown in March 2020. The industry also came forward by dedicating infrastructure and rooms to provide relief and we offered many of our hotels as quarantine facilities; we provided rooms to healthcare frontline workers. Today, as the pandemic rages, we need to press the reset button once again, and re-prioritise. It is time to break the chain and focus our efforts in containing the spread of the virus.

The foremost task at hand is to protect our people by ensuring all our workforce is vaccinated over the next 30-45 days. The second priority is to support the

healthcare system. At IHCL, we have offered over 3000 rooms at our hotels to hospital partners across the country for quarantine facilities; 50% of these rooms are already operational while the rest will be operational soon. We are once again delivering meals to a few hospitals and we will keep expanding our efforts based on the dynamic needs of the situation. I am sure other member hotels will do the same to help ease some pressure on the healthcare infrastructure in the country. There is an urgent need for action to save the country from one of the biggest humanitarian crisis mankind has seen.

In these past few days, all of us must have been witness to bereavements; some of us have lost near and dear ones. I don't think anyone of us has remained untouched or outside the clutches of the virus. I only wish the situation improves and our fellow citizens across the socio-economic strata remain safe.

With hope and prayers for the safety and good health of all my fellow HAI members, their families, and the society at large; as an eternal optimistic, I am sure, this too shall pass.





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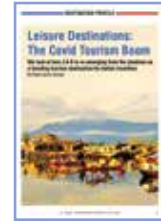
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# Tourism and Hospitality - Partnership for Revival

M P Bezbaruah, Secretary General, Hotel Association of India



“.....be still and wait without hope, for hope would be hope for the wrong thing;”

Perhaps this quote from T.S.Eliot is an apt description of the state in which the tourism and hospitality sector in India is—devastated by the pandemic and torn now between hope and disillusionment.

Still the industry dares to hope. What inspires this optimism? First, the massive vaccination programme bringing back the most important factor for revival—confidence—and a hope that the worst is behind us. The tourism secretary recently said as much. “All indicators are positive for calibrated reopening of international travel”—he said in relation to opening of international tourism. He was naturally cautious. It has to be gradual depending on the situation. With most of the source markets –USA, UK and Europe reeling under the new strands of virus, the opening up has to be carefully calibrated. The hope for tourism revival depends therefore on domestic tourism and short haul markets and regional tourism, perhaps to the east. To boost domestic tourism, government can, apart from many other things, help to make travel easier and cheaper. Air travel can be cheaper if aviation fuel costs, local taxes and ground handling costs are carefully examined and rationalized. Even the airlines which are under stress

will welcome any such pragmatic move to cut costs where possible. There should be incentives to prop up the demand side. LTC is only a fringe and the idea has to be fine tuned to make it beneficial to the tourism industry. Lowering of GST in hotels and restaurants even if temporarily will be a big step for revival. The cost-benefit analysis of such a revision may show that the gain to GDP may far outweigh the visible loss in revenue on the GST account.

Globally it is recognized that tourism and hospitality is one of the worst hit sectors. To provide relief to the beleaguered industry, considering its employment and income generating dimensions, many countries have come up with measures like payroll support, liquidity and credit guarantee for the MSME/SME sector lending. Even in the early stages of the pandemic when the devastation was looming large, one NITI Aayog presentation had also identified these as possible stimulus measures to consider for the Indian economy. At policy level, the tourism industry and HAI have steadfastly brought these to the attention of the policy makers.

Government's big economic recovery programmes unfortunately did not have anything directly for tourism industry. May be some of the investment benefits would trickle down to benefit the tourism sector. But that is at best a distant possibility. Therefore, the industry was eagerly looking forward to the budget for some immediate succor. Alas, there was none. None of the policy measures identified by NITI Aayog, nor the ground level measures pointed out by the industry were addressed. The consolation offered is – many of the infrastructure sector investments will indirectly benefit tourism also. Again, that is only a possibility and in the long run.

Tourism and hospitality industry striving for revival can only ruefully remember the famous saying of economist Keynes- “in the long run we are all dead”.

Still the industry latches on to HOPE—that irrespective of the budget, government can and will do something in the normal course of governance to mitigate some of the grievances soon. It can extend the benefits of industry to the tourism sector. Some states like Maharashtra, Karnataka, Telangana, Punjab have shown the way and government can make it uniform for the country. The benefits of social infrastructure provided earlier is now on hold. Government can renew this incentive, remove the time limit and increase the capital investment limit to Rs.200 crore to make visible dent in social infrastructure sector. Third, the incentives under SEIS, which are earned by the industry should be restored. Fourth, some of the very legitimate demands like deferment of statutory payments, license fees, GST deferment etc should be accepted. These are small steps for the government but are giant strides for the industry at this time of stress. Lastly it is necessary to harmonize all the health and safety SOPs across the country for hassle free growth of tourism.

The industry too will have to introspect and collaborate with the government on all the health and safety measures and put them in place effectively. It must bring in effective confidence building measures. It should focus on innovative measures to reduce costs for boosting demand.

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# Hotels in India adopt innovative strategies to welcome the new consumer in a changed world

By Biman Mukherji

**Albert Einstein once said that you can't solve a problem on the same level that it was created. You have to rise above it to the next level.**

With parts of India facing a second wave of infections, the Indian hospitality sector is facing an unprecedented crisis. Yet a number of hotels and service providers are seeing an opportunity during its darkest phase by embracing innovation. Even as travel trends and the patterns of stay undergo a paradigm shift, hotels are quickly adapting to welcome customers in a brave new world.

Among the several innovative methods, one of the most prominent trends that hoteliers are focusing on are those undertaking road trips for a change of scenery even as work-from home has become the norm. The Leisure Hotels Group launched a campaign called “Ghar se Ghar Tak” (From your doorstep and back) to make the entire journey completely safe for customers with end-to-end travel assistance. It has even tied up with a diagnostics centre in Delhi NCR to provide covid tests at homes.

“Since all our properties are located at drivable distances from major metros, our guests are not facing any challenge in reaching our resorts or going back,” said Vibhas Prasad, director at Leisure Hotels Group. Once the guest arrives, its entire services are being offered with minimal physical contact – contactless check in, e-newspapers and magazines, contactless payment and even dining.

## **Plethora of new services**

The Oberoi and Radisson Hotels group too have shifted focus to cater to road travel. While the Oberoi Group has been using its own fleet of cars to offer pick up and drop for guests, the Radisson group launched a pan-India campaign to offer curated road trips so that their guests could plan their travel and enjoy special staycation packages. Simultaneously, it sought to multiply the revenue heads by offering ancillary





streams including services such as laundry, disinfection and corporate lunch packs.

Hotel groups are not only revamping restaurants by making the dining experience contactless, but also changing their menu because of the current environment.

“We enhanced our food and beverage portfolio with special menu based on immunity-building ingredients,” says Harpreet Vohra, cluster general manager Delhi NCR at Radisson Hotel Group. The Oberoi Group too has introduced an immunity-building menu with a selection of right ingredients such as moringa, dates, giloy, mushrooms and broccoli.

Both the groups as well as other leading chains have also started a food delivery service that delivers directly to home. In fact some have even gone a step further where their Chefs and hotel crew are available for private catering.

Most hotels have reduced their dining space area to follow social distance protocols. The Lemon Tree Hotel group says that it has reduced seating capacities to half of earlier while making sure that all food orders are received online and delivers the order hygienically. “Once the guests have finished their meal, they can pay online with the link sent to their phones,” says Rattan Keswani, deputy managing director of the hotel group.

“Keeping the supply chain logistical constraints in mind, we have shortened our menus to include dishes, which are not only more popular, but also have ingredients that are readily available in the local market,” Keswani added.

While people are becoming tired of eating only home-cooked food, the LaLiT Group realized that there must be equal

emphasis on affordability. Therefore, instead of ordering single items from the menu card for home delivery, it has launched a bulk menu where you can order by the kilo. “Instead of ordering individual portions – such as one pizza and one burger – a home orders by the bulk. It really cuts down the expense by 20%-25% and sometimes even more,” said Rocky Kalra, head of operations at the LaLiT Group.

Kalra believes that innovation during covid times does not always mean doing things radically different, but taking a number of simple steps. It involves putting up your full menu digitally that can be accessed on your phone, keeping the food outside the room and the hotel staff wearing full body suits to minimize infections. The group also strictly follows government safety guidelines, whether it is the number of guests at a wedding or keeping the swimming pool closed.

“We communicate on social media on what is happening. At times, we have had the DJ at events make announcements for people to wear masks,” Kalra added.





## Treading off the beaten path

In all aspects of the hotels business, stricter hygiene standards have become the norm for the hotel industry. Tamara Leisure Experiences Pvt. Ltd, which has properties in Coorg, Kodai and Bangalore, has not only launched a “Raksha

Initiative” to provide a comprehensive safety and hygiene protocol to instill a sense of security, but has gone a step further to enhance the stay experience.

It launched products like the Sattva Immunity experience with personalized Ayurvedic treatments under the advice and consultation of in-house physicians among the picturesque landscapes like Coorg – famous for India’s native coffee.

The entire complement of service is being promoted under the banner of ‘Work from Paradise.’ In addition, the group crafted ‘Tamara Tales,’ which are bedtime stories to keep children well engaged.

“Only limited and small group gatherings are hosted at our F&B outlets in strict conformity of guidelines and precautions,” said Shruti Shibulal, CEO of the Tamara group.

One hospitality group has spotted a unique opportunity among the various government restrictions, which have affected guest arrivals. Instead of trying to fill lots of people into rooms, Small World of Below, a hospitality group, has turned to offering a few people an immersive experience of different world cultures including food albeit of longer periods of stay than prior to covid.

“At Small World, we realized the shift in the market from a short-term rentals trend to a medium and long-term stay. So we started offering deals to knowledge workers who were looking to work remotely,” says Saurav Arya, co-founder –Small World of Below.” During a pandemic, people avoided travel. There was only a bunch of them traveling, that too for work. We looked at it from a different lens and pivoted. In hindsight, “it has proved to be a great move,” says Arya.

They have been hosting ‘cultural immersion’ events online where they celebrate different world cultures online. “It worked for us like magic since many people were hungry for new experiences, especially during the lockdown. The idea of immersing themselves in different cultures right from the living room appealed to them,” Arya added.

Once guests confirm their bookings, they enter the premises by using a password for the electronic locks that are installed for rooms. The group offers boutique studio rooms themed from different countries where they get a taste of various cultures through not only design, but also music, books and food. The company was founded two years ago with a vision to bring the world to their property in Bangalore.

“We also facilitated online check-in formalities, so that guests don’t have to wait at the reception for their check-in.” Even the support such as housekeeping services are made available online for quick support.

# Enhancing authentic India

Chintan Bakshi, Chief Executive Officer at Startup Oasis and partner – incubation at CIIE. CO, told a meeting of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) that the pandemic has spawned a “fair bit of startup activity” in the hospitality sector though it has been among the worst hit as well.” Therefore, there is a very natural activity among startups which will renew and rejuvenate the sector as we open up and as vaccines become available.”

In many ways, the activity has been reinforced by a trend seen just prior to covid. In the last one-and-a-half years, there has been a significant increase in things Indian – whether it is yoga or Ayurveda, Bakshi says. He says

there is a clear trend in the sector of aggregating services and aggregating experiences. “In my opinion, the next wave of activity really needs to happen in a more hyperlocal environment. We are essentially looking at startups which are focusing on specific areas, specific niches and providing specific experiences.”

For example, he says there are a bunch of entrepreneurs who are providing experiential tours that focus on the food around Rajasthan capital Jaipur’s food offerings in the old part of the city. “Tourists who would come to India--and even domestic tourists--would like to go for experiences. We need hundreds if not thousands who are into collating these experiences,” he added.

Bakshi says the entire tourism sector needs to work together and bring alive these experiences which can be clubbed together and sold on online platforms

such as Makemytrip.com as an aggregation. However, he adds that there is a lack of innovative experiences, which give people a good understanding, and exposure of what Indian culture is really all about at grassroot level.

“Ultimately, a tourist will select India if he sees a USP and there are quite a few things out there,” he added. Bakshi believes that curated programs for such hyperlocal experiences are the need of the hour where everybody from the hotel industry to restaurants to local authorities needs to come together to create them.

Sabina Chopra, founder of Yatra.com said that the industry needed to create reasons for a tourist--whether domestic or international--to visit a particular place say Udaipur not once, twice but thrice by offering something new each time, whether its heritage, food or another aspect.





Clearly, time is ripe for such a shift. Many of the tourists are looking to book vacations or staycations in places, which are off the beaten track. Either it is because it's a secluded place with a unique landscape or it's the chance to experience local culture.

For example, in Rajasthan state, Mandawa is being showcased as the largest art gallery in the world because the area is replete with painted havelis (ancient mansion for the nobility). Tourists are being offered an immersive experience of the local culture through art workshops, music concerts, photography workshops and even a chance for foreigners to try their hand at the local cuisine

including making chai (sugary milk tea) and chapatis (Indian flat bread). The Art Village is also coming up with an eight-room property.

“Our idea is to offer an alternative choice to people who live in the village through creative economy,” says Amita D’Alessandro, French co-founder of Mandawa art village, together with Virendra Singh Shekhawat, director and founder of Delhi Photography Club, a photography club in Delhi. As part of the effort, even ex-Indian army men will get involved by recounting tales of valor to visitors.

“In addition to traveller preferences for taking the road less travelled, we expect the

workcation trend to prevail, as travellers harness the potential of ‘work from anywhere’ from the initial ‘work from home’ model,” says Ritu Mehrotra, regional manager—South Asia at Booking.com.” To break the monotony of working from home, travellers want to escape to a destination where they may easily blend business with leisure, resulting in demand for long stays.”

The need for innovating around this trend becomes clear as Booking.com data shows that 78% of Indian travellers are keen to have access to an app or website that recommends destinations where an increase in tourism, “would have a positive impact on the local community.”

## Out of the box will become the norm

Data from HVS Anarock hotels and hospitality report for 2020 that have been published recently shows that hotels have been forced to slash revenues per room so much that there has been a decline of 57%-59%, representing a loss of 900 billion rupees. But after reaching a record-low occupancy in April, the sector closed the year with an India-wide occupancy in the range of 33%-36%.

“We expect demand to improve considerably in 2021, driven by strong economic growth, corporate performance, and people making up for the lost time by giving in to their pent-up desire to travel. However, hygiene, cleanliness and safety will continue to remain top priorities in the post-covid world,” says the report, adding that the occupancy rates nationally are likely to improve to 56%-59% in 2021.

It adds that hoteliers are being forced to readjust their strategies post covid and think unconventionally to survive during the pandemic. The adoption to technology has been fast-tracked to such an extent that keyless check in and digital menus which would have once been considered as luxuries have now become necessities. Adapting to the new dynamic will require hotels to think out-of-the-box to improve their returns and cutting costs.

Many hotels are rising quickly to this challenge. WestBridge Hotels and Resorts, a hotel operator and developer, plans to announce a franchise brand under WB Inn by April wherein all hotels will operate with only four staff members by leveraging tech-based solutions. Each hotel under the brand will have only housekeeping as a department, which will help hotel owners to save at least INR 1.5 lakh per month on payroll cost.

Even service providers are remodeling business operations. Zorowar Kalra, founder and director of Massive Restaurants that run brands such as Farzi Café has entered into the cloud kitchen segment with the launch of Butter Delivery with a unique model – an online food delivery with only 10 dishes on its menu.

Currently, it is serving in Delhi NCR and the offering will soon be expanded into nine cities across the country.

Software solutions provider such as Petpooja has launched management solutions for restaurants to keep tabs on inventory as well as ease up delivery coordination. Similarly, other service partners are offering new products such as Sippiline to prevent contamination of glassware and other hygiene protocols.

“We know that people will again want to experience the world, as it becomes safe to do so, and it will be more important than ever before for brands to leverage technology to create a seamless, frictionless experience, perfectly tailored to each and every customer,” says Booking.com’s Mehrotra.



# 2021 will see an unprecedented rise in the number of travellers looking for domestic wellness breaks:

Secretary Tourism, Arvind Singh

**What are the government's plans for the hospitality and tourism industry to contribute towards an Atmanirbhar Bharat?**

During several rounds of discussions and brainstorming sessions, the Ministry of Tourism has examined representations regarding relief measures including financial relief which have been taken up with the concerned Ministries and Departments of Government of India including the Ministry of Finance. Similarly, the relief measures falling under the domain of the States/ UTs is being taken up with them on regular basis, at the highest level. The Government announced various fiscal and relief measures under the Atma Nirbhar Bharat Package which is expected to benefit the Tourism Industry.

The stimulus announced by the Government of India included Rs.3 lakh crore collateral free automatic loan which has been made available for MSMEs. The loan will have 4-year tenure and will have 12-month moratorium. Under this package the definition of MSME was revised by which the differentiation between manufacturing and services sector MSMEs has been removed. This will benefit the tourism sector, as 70%-80% of the units in this sector fall under MSME. The Government also waived off PF contribution for three months for organisations with less than 100 pax and 90% of their employees earn below Rs.15000. Under the package, PF contribution of both employer and employee has been reduced to 10% each from existing 12% each for all establishments covered by EPFO for the next three months i.e. up to September 2020.

Some of the other benefits include the deferment of TCS up to October 2020; deferment of filing



returns for three months with no penal interest for companies up to Rs.5 Crore, whereas for the rest penal interest has been kept at 9% penal. The Central government has also given relief from various regulatory compliances under Income Tax Act, companies Act and GST Act for varying period in the wake of COVID-19 crisis to ensure business continuity and survival. Similarly, the RBI has extended moratorium on term loans till 31st December 2020.

**How does the government plan to integrate local communities in small towns and villages in tourism and hospitality? Is the tourism ministry coordinating with other ministries towards this (For e.g. the aviation ministry's plans to launch 1000 new Udaan flights)?**

In order to promote domestic tourism, the Ministry has undertaken initiatives such as Dekho Apna Desh webinars; aerial Photography of key cities and cultural assets (Delhi, Chennai, Kolkata,

Mumbai, Bengaluru, Udupi, Aurangabad, Iconic Tourist sites) across the country during lockdown; regular consultations with industry stakeholders on issues related to opening up of the Tourism sector; handling of tourists, protocols of safety and security, service standards etc.; Domestic Tourism Promotion Campaign through Webinars, social media and other digital platforms.

Dekho Apna Desh Campaign has been the mainstay of Domestic Promotion. The main focus is to rebuild the trust of the domestic & international travelers in terms of India being the safe destination to travel in post Covid scenario.

Promoting affordability of regional air connectivity envisioned under RCS has always remained in the priority list of Ministry of Tourism. On the recommendation of Ministry of Tourism, 46 Tourism routes got included under RCS-UDAN 3.0 on the basis of importance for air connectivity of destinations having potential to attract tourist such as iconic sites, Buddhist sites, etc. Further to this, The Ministry of Civil Aviation has recently finalized 78 Routes under RCD UDAN-4 which largely aim at increasing air connectivity to and within the North Eastern Region.

**Is the government planning to offer any incentives or relief measures for the hospitality and tourism industry as many small and medium operators are on the brink of collapse? The recent budget did not offer much tax relief or incentives but is the government likely to revisit this mid-year considering that tourism is one of the biggest contributors to employment?**

The Ministry of Tourism has examined representations regarding relief measures including financial relief which have been taken up with the concerned Ministries and Departments of Government of India including the Ministry of Finance. Similarly, the relief measures falling under the domain of the States/UTs is being taken up with them on regular basis, at the highest level. The Government has further announced Atmanirbhar Bharat Package vide which Rs.3 lakh crore collateral free automatic loan has been made available for MSMEs.

**Is the government likely to accord tourism the status of an infrastructure sector soon?**

Infrastructure development has been one of the major thrust areas of the Government. The Government has launched National Infrastructure



Pipeline initiative to further sharpen the focus on infrastructure projects, ensuring time bound implementation of the projects by closely monitoring the same at the highest levels in the Government. Tourism has been included as one of the sectors in National Infrastructure Pipeline.

Further, in view of the thrust of the Government on creation of infrastructure including Tourism sector, the Ministry of Tourism has examined the issue of infrastructure status to the hotel industry and planning to put up a detailed proposal to broaden the definition of Harmonized Master List (HML) of Infrastructure Sub-Sectors as well as to get Convention Centres approved by Ministry of Tourism included in it.

**With the rollout of a Covid vaccine, it is expected that international flights will resume sooner than later. How is India gearing up to welcome international visitors to allay any safety concerns?**

In order to tap international tourists, the Ministry of Tourism through the India Tourism Offices overseas proposes to undertake various promotional activities which include participation in travel fairs and exhibitions; advertising in the local print, electronic, outdoor and digital media; organizing webinars to highlight success stories around COVID-19 in India to build confidence among foreign tour operators and travellers, organizing Road Shows, India Evenings, Know India Seminars; workshops; organizing and supporting Indian Food Festivals and cultural festivals; offering brochure support to tour operators, and joint advertising/joint promotions with airlines, tour operators and other organizations, joint promotions in collaboration with the Indian Missions abroad etc.

The rollout of the vaccination program has changed the attitude towards travelling and the trend has been encouraging in the domestic tourism segment. The same trend can be expected in case of international tourism also when the global travel restrictions are relaxed.

**How is India planning to portray the relatively low Covid casualties and its ancient repertoire of wellness programs such as yoga and Ayurveda so that it can emerge as a preferred destination?**

Holistic well-being, focused on nutrition and rejuvenation is being talked about more than ever.

The global hospitality industry has seen a renewed interest in wellness tourism. Travellers are seeking out health and wellness retreats to build their immunity. As things gradually get back to normalcy, it is predicted that wellness is going to be a priority for everyone and people will plan their vacations around it. In the months to come, we may well see wellness tourism taking centre-stage.

People will travel to places that offer health and wellness enhancing opportunities and tourism will shift from simple spa and leisure travel to health and wellness-focused travel. The anxiety and stress due to COVID-19 can be resolved with holidays in wellness-focused places which offer the essence of these holistic therapies and spirituality and well-being. Preventive healthcare is a good way to combat diseases. More people are favouring a wellness staycation, there are new demands for immunity boosting retreats, socially distanced wellness trips, private jet wellness journeys and working remotely on holiday; personal health and fitness are now top priority for travel.

2021 is going to see an unprecedented rise in the number of travellers looking for domestic wellness breaks. People are searching for holidays to improve their health and fitness without always having to go overseas.



*Photo Courtesy - Jared Rice@jaredrice\_unsplash.com*



# HAI urges FM to customise ECLGS scheme, extend moratorium period and reduce loan interest rate



The second wave of the pandemic has stopped in its tracks, the recovery of the hospitality and tourism sector. The hotels in India, shut for nearly 6-8 months reopened in a staggered manner and were recovering somewhat on the strength of domestic leisure tourism and intimate weddings/family get-togethers only to be impacted yet again on account of lockdowns in some states, night and weekend curfews, reduced limits on the number of guests allowed for functions and other restrictions.

Hotel Association of India (HAI) understands the compulsions of such restrictions and stands united with the Government in its efforts to curb the spread of the pandemic. However, it is also a fact that the curbs have impacted hospitality the most. For an already crippled industry, the setback caused by the recently imposed restrictions has affected the viability of most and survival of many hotels.

HAI has therefore made some submissions recently to the Finance Ministry. While conveying its deep gratitude for extending support to the Industry by extending the scope of Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme (ECLGS) through introduction of ECLGS 3.0 to cover business enterprises in Hospitality, Travel & Tourism, The Association has highlighted that the Scheme requires some

customisation. In addition to being highly capital intensive, hotels have a high percentage of fixed costs of operations that have become unsustainable owing to nil or negligible revenues. The recovery of hotels will also be long drawn as borders will be re-opened with extreme caution and traveller confidence will return over an extended period of time. The ECLGS 3.0 scheme for hotels, therefore, needs to factor in these aspects unique to the Industry.

Inclusion of State Financial Corporations, Asset Reconstructions Companies (ARCs) and Debt Funds, extension of moratorium, capping of interest rate at 8 percent, increasing of the delinquency period are some of the suggested customisations. In addition, the Association has requested that Hotels with no borrowings should also be eligible for ECLGS 3.0 as these too are facing a severe liquidity crunch. HAI has highlighted that while ECLGS 3.0 offers liquidity to pay interest obligations, it does not help businesses to survive. Interest subvention and a longer payback period can provide both liquidity and relief.

A simpler and quicker dispersal process will make for a better and more improved scheme. Allowing hotels to utilise the credit line for any business purpose, including repayment of loans and interest payment would provide additional support.

A complete or partial waiver of statutory expenses like property tax/lease rentals/license fee/excise fee payable by hotels to various government authorities and an Introduction of a plan/policy where hotels can renegotiate lease rentals/license fee in a manner that for the remaining term, the lessor/licensor can have incremental revenues, while the hotels are given the opportunity of recovering/recouping their losses due to this pandemic are other relief measures suggested by the Association for sympathetic consideration.

## India's SATTE 2021 draws 10,000 visitors with message of revival and reconnect

Informa Markets in India drew over 10,000 visitors to its three-day travel and tourism exchange between 24-26 March at SATTE's 28th edition at the India Expo Center, Greater Noida in Uttar Pradesh.

Inaugurated by Tourism Secretary Arvind Singh, the event brought together a cross-section of the region's travel, tourism and hospitality industry.

## World's first space hotel to open in 2027

Back in 2019, the Gateway Foundation released plans for a cruise ship-style hotel that could one day float above the Earth's atmosphere. Then called the Von Braun Station, this futuristic concept — comprised of 24 modules connected by elevator shafts that make up a rotating wheel orbiting the Earth — was scheduled to be fully operational by 2027, the CNN reported. Fast forward a couple years and the hotel has a new name — Voyager Station — and its set to be built by Orbital Assembly Corporation, a new construction company run by former pilot John Blincow, who also heads up the Gateway Foundation.



### Global Competition to accelerate rural development through tourism

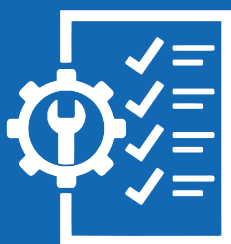
The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has launched a competition to identify the best ideas that will help rural communities recover from the pandemic. The Global Rural Tourism Startup Competition will also support the entrepreneurs and enterprises that can help rural communities seize the economic and social opportunities that will come as tourism restarts.

## Advancing Harmonized Travel Protocols and Financing Tourism's Survival

The ninth meeting of UNWTO's Crisis Committee advanced solutions to the biggest challenges to revival of international travel. Members discussed the Crisis Committee's recommendations, which focused on four core areas: the resumption of safe, cross-border travel; promoting safe travel at all points of the tourist journey; providing liquidity to tourism businesses and protecting jobs, and restoring confidence in travel. The virtual meeting was co-hosted by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

## Global discussion on business opportunities in India's Odisha

A digital discussion was held recently on the topic of "Explore the attractive incentives potential of Odisha for your Business." Hosted jointly by Indian Consulate in New York, Milan Cultural Association and Odisha Society of New England, the online meeting was meant to promote Odisha as the hub for doing easy business.



**Government must provide financial aid to restaurants and hotels: Industry**

**Maharashtra, home to India's financial capital Mumbai, has around 10,500 hotels and 210,000 restaurants.**

Industry body **Assocham** is working with the Maharashtra government to mitigate the economic impact of its 15-day curfew. It has also urged all states to bail out the most vulnerable sections of the hospitality industry following a second wave of covid outbreak. Assocham said it has approached all the states and the Centre to provide liberal regulatory and financial relief. It has asked that fixed charges like electricity dues, lease rentals, license fees and other levies should be waived to help businesses maintain continuity.

Meanwhile, the **Hotel and Restaurant Association of Western India (HRAWI)** echoed the concerns and said that the new 'Break the Chain' guidelines by Maharashtra state would lead to disaster for the hospitality industry unless the government compensated employees for the loss of income, and waived off statutory fees, taxes and utility bills for hotels and restaurants. The industry body said that the Maharashtra Government's latest 'Break the Chain' order is equivalent to another complete lockdown.

### M&A deals in hospitality to hit \$1 billion in 2021

Mergers and acquisitions in the hotel industry is expected to touch \$1-billion in 2021 due to financial stress, says HVS Anarock. Hotel conversions, particularly standalone hotels joining larger brands, will gain considerable momentum in the next couple of years to tide over the current downturn, it added. Hotel transaction volumes stood at \$332 million in 2020, down by nearly half from the previous year's \$690 million. But it was way higher than \$78 million seen in 2018.

### Govt Extends credit guarantee program, till June 30; Expands its scope

The government on Wednesday announced extension of the Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme (ECLGS) till June 30 and expanded its scope to cover enterprises in hospitality, travel and tourism, leisure and sporting sectors.

### Industry lauds Supreme Court order on waiver of compound interest on loans

The hospitality industry hailed a recent Supreme Court order that allowed waiver of compound interest on all loans and removed a previous government cap of rupees two crores. A highly capital-intensive business, a majority of loans by the hospitality industry are above rupees two crores.

### Tourist visas needed for Goa-Russia flights



A direct flight service between that has been introduced between Russia and Goa under a travel bubble agreement will serve no purpose unless the government opens up tourist visas as well, said the Travel and Tourism Association of Goa. Goa receives around 9 lakh international travelers annually. Nilesh Shah, the president of the Travel and Tourism Association of Goa said that clarity is also needed on the covid protocols that travelers and operators will have to follow.

# THE POWER OF TOGETHERNESS



**When we work together with the right intent, nothing is impossible to achieve!**

2020 saw PepsiCo India rising to the COVID-19 challenge and partnering with relevant stakeholders to bring the "Winning with Purpose" philosophy alive. The company continues to work relentlessly to lend a helping hand to those who need it most.



**#GIVEMEALS  
#GIVEHOPE**

10 million+ meals & 35,000 testing kits distributed

15,000 families benefited across the country



**#HYGIENEKIT  
#DISTRIBUTION**

Over 1 lakh hygiene kits distributed to farmers, truckers, retailers and many more unsung heroes across the country



**#PEPSISAVEOUR  
#RESTAURANTS**

2.5 million meals distributed to marginalized workers of the restaurant community

The ability to make a difference wouldn't have been possible without the support and encouragement of partners and stakeholders alike.

# A VOICE OF HOPE FOR THE HOTEL INDUSTRY



*HAI Engage was released by Shri Prahlad Singh Patel, Minister of State (Independent Charge), Ministry of Culture and Tourism*

Everybody agrees that India has enormous potential in hospitality and tourism, but pressing issues have often not been addressed adequately because it has lacked a strong voice. The Hotel Association of India (HAI), the apex body of hotels across the country, has launched the HAI ENGAGE magazine with a clear focus to raise the voice of hospitality industry and help it get recognition that it deserves.

The inaugural issue of HAI ENGAGE was released by Shri Prahlad Singh Patel, Minister of State (Independent Charge), Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Government of India, in the presence of Mr. K B Kachru, Vice President, Hotel Association of India and Chairman Emeritus & Principal Advisor-South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group,

Dr. Jyotsna Suri, Member-Executive Committee, Hotel Association of India and Chairperson and Managing Director, Bharat Hotels Ltd. (The Lalit Suri Hospitality Group), and Mr. M.P. Bezbaruah, Former Secretary, Ministry of Tourism and Secretary General, Hotel Association of India.

Mr. Puneet Chhatwal, President, Hotel Association of India and MD & CEO, The Indian Hotels Company Limited (IHCL), said, "Indian hospitality has been instrumental in building India's image globally as a country full of culture and rich heritage. It is now time to not just re-emphasise the importance and the role of the industry within the community but also be heard by decision makers across the country. HAI ENGAGE is a step in that direction to assert the industry's relevance as



*HAI presenting the copy of inaugural issue of HAI ENGAGE to Shri. Arvind Singh, Secretary-Tourism, Government of India*

well as showcase some of the rich work that the industry has been carrying out to further domestic tourism.”

On behalf of the industry during the recent BITB conclave-- attended by 150 delegates and senior leaders from Travel & Tourism industry-- the Hotel Association of India (HAI) called upon industry stakeholders to treat Tourism as a “Common Agenda” for all. The apex industry body also suggested that the private sector and state governments should work together for the revival of the tourism sector. The Association believes that granting industry status to the Indian hospitality sector will enable hotels across the country to avail benefits such as lower power tariffs, investment subsidies and tax holidays.

Meanwhile, the Hotel Association of India (HAI)

thanked the Karnataka Government for approving the proposal to accord industry status to classified hotels in the state. “Expanding its footprint further, HAI launched a West Bengal state chapter. It has also submitted a memorandum of industry demands to West Bengal Chief Minister, Smt. Mamata Banerjee and Finance Minister Dr. Amit Mitra, to seek industry status for the hospitality sector. HAI suggested that this will help in reducing costs and encourage re-investment while bringing greater transparency in the sector functioning.

HAI will primarily focus on issues and challenges for the hospitality industry with the West Bengal State Government. It has urged that the grant of the industry status will go a long way in fulfilling West Bengal’s true tourism potential – which has mountains, beaches and is home to the Royal Bengal tiger.



*Inaugural Issue handed over to Mr. Prabhu. N. Singh - District Magistrate Agra by Vishal Pathak, General Manager, Oberoi Amarvilas, Agra*



*Vincent Ramos, Area Director IHCL, Goa handing over HAI ENGAGE magazine to the Director of Tourism of Goa, Mr. Menino D’Souza*



*Mr. Somnath Mukherjee, Area Director, IHCL Karnataka presenting HAI ENGAGE Inaugural Issue to Mr. T.K. Anil Kumar, Principal Secretary, Tourism Department, Govt. of Karnataka*



# EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE 2020-21



**Patron-in-Chief**  
Hotel Association of India  
**Mr. P.R.S. Oberoi**  
Executive Chairman  
*EIH Limited*



**Mr. Puneet Chhatwal**  
*President*  
Hotel Association of India &  
Managing Director & C.E.O  
The Indian Hotels Company  
Limited



**Mr. Vikram Oberoi**  
*Immediate Past President*  
Hotel Association of India &  
Managing Director & Chief  
Executive Officer  
EIH Limited



**Mr. K.B Kachru**  
*Vice President*  
Hotel Association of India &  
Chairman Emeritus &  
Principal Advisor,  
South Asia  
Radisson Hotel Group



**Ms. Priya Paul**  
*Corporate Member*  
*Chairperson*  
Apeejay Surrendra Hotels  
Limited



**Mr. Nakul Anand**  
*Corporate Member*  
Executive Director ITC  
Limited



**Mr. Patu Keswani**  
*Corporate Member & Hony.*  
*Treasurer*  
Hotel Association of India &  
Chairman and Managing  
Director  
Lemon Tree Hotel Ltd.



**Dr. Jyotsna Suri**  
*Corporate Member*  
*Chairperson & MD*  
Bharat Hotels Limited



**Mr. Vivek Nair**  
*Corporate Member*  
*Chairman & Managing*  
*Director*  
Hotel Leela Venture Limited



**Mr. Anil Madhok**  
*Fellow Member*  
*Executive Chairman*  
Sarovar Hotels Pvt. Ltd.



**Mr. Rohit Khosla**  
*Member*  
*Executive Vice President*  
*(Operations)*  
IHC Limited



**Mr. J.K. Mohanty**  
*Hony. Secretary*  
*Hotel Association of India &*  
*Managing Director*  
Swosti Premium Limited



**Mr. Sanjay Sethi**  
*Member*  
Hotel Association of India &  
*Managing Director & Chief*  
*Executive Officer*  
Chalet Hotels Ltd.



**Mr. R. Shankar**  
*Member*  
Hotel Association of India &  
Head, Corporate Affairs, EIH Ltd.



**Mr. Samir M.C**  
*Member*  
*Managing Director*  
Fortune Park Hotels Ltd.



**Mr. M.P. Bezbaruah**  
*Secretary General*  
Hotel Association of India



# Challenges faced by hospitality industry in Maharashtra post COVID-19

By Sanjay Sethi

The outbreak of Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has acted as a massive restraint on the hospitality sector since March of 2020 as governments, globally, imposed restrictions on domestic and international travel limiting the need for services offered by these establishments. As the world gradually moves forward from the pandemic and businesses reopen, hoteliers foresee themselves in an opportune position with demand dynamics trending towards a recovery for both leisure and business. Despite the challenges and devastation caused by the coronavirus outbreak, the travel and hospitality industry in India has exhibited great resilience and competitiveness throughout the year in fighting against the turbulence caused across industries.

With continued border restrictions and extended international flight ban, inbound tourism is currently on pause. Internationally, countries are gearing up to open their borders – UK has announced May 18 for the easing of international border restrictions while US has confirmed that it will complete vaccination for all citizens by May. This augurs well for the travel and hospitality industry. However, under the current regulations across India, several states have made it mandatory to carry a negative RT-PCR report for inter-state travel between Maharashtra and other states. Adding to the woes is also the rise in the number of cases being reported in the state. Now, Maharashtra certainly doesn't want to earn the distinction of a topper in this case!



While the distribution of vaccine is picking up across the state, there is a sense of caution that has prompted people to re-evaluate their travel plans and opt for shorter, safer destinations. Where travelers in the new normal are seeking unique experiences with modernized services compared and prefer staying with brands that ensure the best health and safety standards; hotels on their part are making use of technologies that greatly transform the customer experience. Some technologies are leading to significant improvements and savings in the hospitality market. Hotels are using robots to deliver amenities to guest rooms as well as many other functional purposes. Similarly, Hotel operators are investing in systems and technologies that can automate processes and personalize the experience for guests.

In response, hoteliers are ensuring utmost safety and sanitization for guests and employee wellbeing to contain the spread of the virus. However, advancement of vaccination by enabling hotels to collaborate with medical teams to set-up camps for distribution will act like a roadmap to eliminate the threat of another lockdown as well as build a sense of safety and confidence amongst travelers. With recent support and initiatives by the state government to boost local destination travel, we foresee moderate to heavy movement of domestic travelers for b-leisure. Current trends impacting the business are focused on guests' safety and hygiene through enhanced modern age technology and digital contactless services. Moreover, the exposure to international brands and access to global standards has also helped several hotels, including ours, in implementing robust measures across the properties.

We benefit immensely from our global brand partners - Marriott and Accor - who have implemented the latest and superior solutions from across the world at our hotels. Hotels will need to move to a touchless experience that provides both assurance and delight to guests, and we are in the process of implementing keyless mobile check-in option at our Marriott-branded hotels along with modern-age software solutions that enable guests to sign the registration card and guest folio on touchscreen tablets, through our digital check-in facility. 'Touch less Hospitality' is one such change that we foresee becoming the norm.

As we move forward through this period of uncertainty, it will be crucial to adapt to the ever-changing landscape with digitalization of services across all aspects. For instance, offerings such as a mobile-app for room directory, TV guide, IRD, Spa bookings, laundry pickup, and hotel info, integrated with a digital payment platform could become an essential in the longer run. Similarly, all outlets that are open at hotels would feature digital menus accessible via QR Codes.

The situation right now is dynamic and as an industry, it is important for us to be agile and adapt with the times. Over the last 12 months we have also seen a fabulous convergence of concerted efforts by industry stalwarts and industry bodies collaborating to mobilize relief for the industry, as well as working with Central and State governments to reframe policy for the industry in line with the truth of today. Bodies such as HAI, FAITH and FHRAI have all worked in tandem with each other in a never-before-seen spirit of singular purpose.

We are hopeful to see a tailwind for the sector, as hotel occupancies re-set on a path to recovery in the next few quarters.

*The author is MD & CEO of Chalet Hotels Ltd. which is an owner, developer and asset manager of high-end hotels branded with globally recognized brands, such as JW Marriott, Westin, Marriott, Marriott Executive Apartments, Renaissance, Four Points by Sheraton and Novotel.*



# Prama Hikvision's Smart Hospitality Solutions Help to Ensure Seamless Security Experience for Guests and Staff

The prolonged pandemic scenario has prompted the hospitality sector to enhance the security to the next level. Prama Hikvision offers Smart Hospitality Security Solutions to ensure a seamless security experience for guests and staff.



## Integrated Security Solutions:

The Integrated Security Solutions include advanced systems in Video Surveillance, Access Control, Intrusion Alarm, and Perimeter Security. When these solutions are integrated with a Command and Control Center, they provide a better outcome in terms of proactive security management. Products: IP Video Security Cameras (CourVu and AcuSense), Video Walls, Access Control: Time and Attendance Systems, Facial Recognition Terminals, Intrusion Alarm (AX-Hub Kit), Perimeter Security Solution, X-ray Baggage Scanners, Smart Pole, Emergency Call Box, Door Frame Metal Detector, etc.

## Temperature Screening Solution:

Hikvision Temperature Screening Solution, with multiple product types and wide range of applications, is designed for the detection of skin-surface temperatures so as to achieve rapid and safe preliminary screening with high efficiency. AI technology ensures Thermographic Cameras only detect human skin-surface temperature to reduce false alarms of other heat sources. Products: Thermal Cameras, Hand Held Thermal Cameras, Facial Recognition Terminal with Temperature Screening, Metal Detector Door etc.

## Artificial Intelligence Applications:

Many successful deployment of Artificial Intelligence (AI) applications across the hospitality industry. AI enabled Facial Recognition Technology is driving innovations like VIP Guest Alerts and Personalised Greetings, etc. Products: Face Recognition Camera Technology

**Broadcasting Solutions:** For Special Events and Conferences

**People Counting Solutions:** Hikvision Dual Lens Cameras

**Hotel Lobby –Hallway–Corridor:** Hikvision Fish Eye Cameras

**Conference Hall:** Hikvision Fish Eye Cameras

## Restricted Entry:

Facilitating the entry of RSVP confirmed guests by instant face recognition, identifying the unconfirmed guests, and also keeping a tab on the uninvited guests. Products: High Speed Entrance Solutions with Face Recognition Terminals

## Perimeter Security:

Protecting the periphery of a hotel ground with the help of sophisticated Perimeter Protection Cameras, which come equipped with a Strobe Light and an audio output which get activated when an intruder comes within its range.

## The Wireless Bridge Solution:

An ideal solution in an escalator environment - which acts as a communication agent to relay the feeds of the camera inside the lift to the router placed at the top of the building - leading to enormous savings in Cabling Costs, Maintenance Costs and Replacement Costs.

## Alarm Systems:

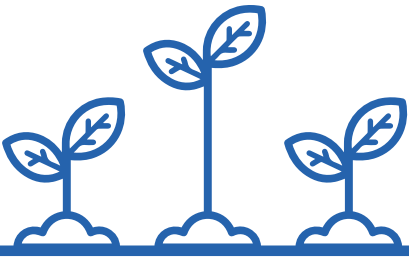
Sophisticated Alarm Systems, which come in the form of mini call boxes and come equipped with a three-in-one mechanism - a call switch, a two-way communication, and a camera. Ideal for an emergency in cases of theft, fire or accidents. Product: Ax-Hub Kit and Smart Pole, Emergency Call Box, Panic Switch

## Under-Vehicle Surveillance Solution (UVSS):

An information management system that integrates an automatic collection of underlying vehicle image, display, and storage functions, and eliminates the need for the manual and imperfect stick-and-mirror exercise. Product: Hikvision UVSS Solution

## ANPR Solution:

Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) Camera Technology that uses intelligent systems to read and verify vehicle registration plates against a database, and marks the entry of any unregistered vehicles. Together with Barriers and Bollards, it works as an effective measure to ward off unwanted intruders. Product: Hikvision ANPR Camera



## Emerging as a beacon of hope

One of the worst-hit segments by the covid outbreak, the hotel sector has not let its own woes stand in the way of reaching out to the most vulnerable sections of society during this crisis.

Even as parts of India are grappling with a second wave of covid and partial lockdowns, the hotels sector has embarked on food distribution, providing emergency staples and even transporting people facing medical emergencies.

**Oberoi Hotels and Resorts** came forward to feed the needy during the pandemic. It distributed healthy, packed meals every day across cities through various government agencies, NGOs and local authorities. It also provided food to people struggling for survival as well as frontline covid workers like medical professionals.

In Mumbai, Trident, Nariman Point offered accommodation for on-duty doctors aof Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation. Throughout, the hotel's housekeeping staff abided strictly with the hygiene and safety protocols.

Another Trident hotel in the city's Bandra Kurla suburban complex, made a major contribution to NGO Shanti Avedna Sadan. Throughout the lockdown, the hotel also

regularly provided dry rations and arranged meals for poor housing societies.

Similarly, The Oberoi, New Delhi and The Oberoi, Gurgaon, organised packed meals every day, to the local district office and Delhi disaster authority, which were further distributed to people.

The Oberoi, Bengaluru supported the medical fraternity by giving packed meals to St. Philomena's Hospital staff. The hospital fed over 20,000 in-patients and 1,60,000 out-patients besides the poor.

The Oberoi Grand, Kolkata offered meals to the underprivileged daily, through the Missionaries of Charity. Clarkes Hotel, Shimla was helping the differently-abled people who were struggling to access essential utilities.

Oberoi Flight Services in both Delhi and Mumbai provided packed meals to those working round the clock during this pandemic, the local police.

During these trying times, The Marriott under a program called Marriott's Serve 360 came forward to help the local community by providing packed hygienic meals to the underprivileged. Mars chocolate also joined the group in this initiative to distribute Bounty by Mars along with the meals.

The group was able to deliver 500+ meals each day under constant hygienic monitoring. These meals were prepared by the Chefs using the best ingredients and were then packaged and distributed by the Loss Prevention team in protective gears in Delhi NCR for more than 6 months.



*Community Building Initiative -  
The Oberoi Hotels & Resorts*



*JWM Delhi team providing  
meals to the underprivileged*

# Leisure Destinations: The Covid Tourism Boom

**We look at how J & K is re-emerging from the shadows as a trending tourism destination for Indian travellers**

By Riaan Jacob George



## DESTINATION PROFILE

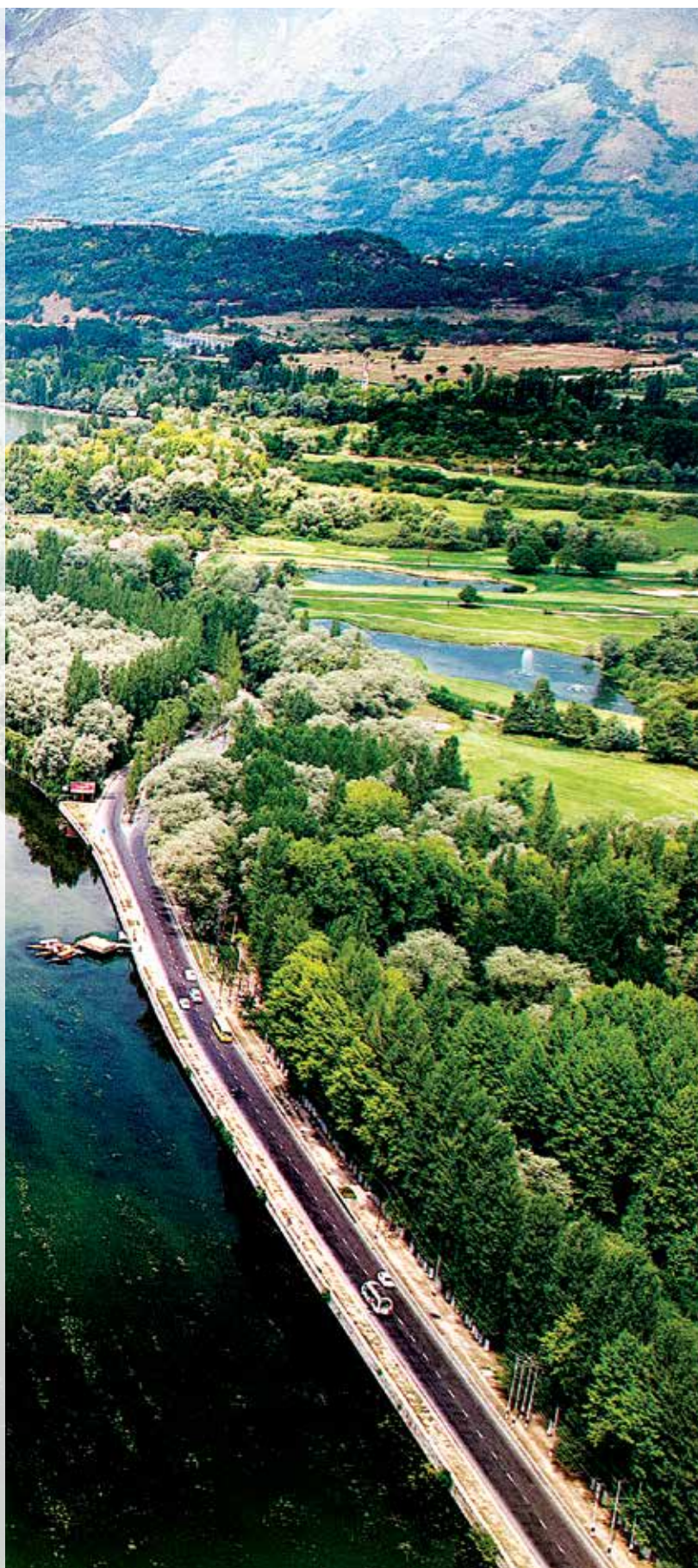


Kashmir, re-emerged as India's Switzerland, when earlier this year our Instagram feeds were flooded with stylish city slickers flocking the slopes of Gulmarg for ski vacations or people walking through the recently reopened Tulip Garden in Srinagar, overlooking the Dal Lake, or at the perfectly Instagrammable Mughal-era gardens like Shalimar Bagh and Nishat Bagh. In the midst of the pandemic, all of a sudden, Indian domestic travellers, starved for leisure destinations, had rediscovered Gulmarg this year. Kashmir's longstanding reputation as a vacation spot par excellence needs no introduction. Known for the outstanding warmth and hospitality of its people, magnificent landscapes and great food. But that's not all, Kashmir is also emerging as a hotspot for adventure tourism — mountaineering, river rafting, paragliding, trout fishing — as well as niche experiences like golfing, with some stunning mountain golf courses like the Royal Springs Golf Course, said to be the highest in India.

We got chatting with some of the hotel industry insiders to get some inputs on this year's tourism success story. "Snowfall in Kashmir has been the biggest tourist pull, and more and more guests are opting for Kashmir as a holiday destination," says Satyajeeet Gopal, General Manager, Radisson Srinagar. Interestingly, he highlights that Q1 has been particularly rewarding for the hotel in terms of occupancy rates. "Since the onset of snowfall, the tourist influx in Jammu and Kashmir, we have been able to maintain a 63 per cent occupancy and our ADRs also witnessed a gradual uptick starting January 2021," says the hotelier. That the Radisson Hotels Group has committed eight hotels to Jammu & Kashmir, three of which have started operations already, with the rest scheduled for opening within the next 4-6 months is indicative

of a general rise in the tourism profile of the state. Another hotelier, Vinit Chhabra, General Manager of The Khyber Himalayan Resort & Spa told us in February, “we are effectively sold out till the month of April, and there is a huge demand for premium segment travellers who are willing to pay high prices for exclusivity and experiential luxury.” Another popular luxury property is the Vivanta Dal View Srinagar, which not only attracts a huge leisure segment but has also tapped into the business travel segment as well, creating an increased supply of high-end offerings in the state.

We got a bit of local context and perspective from K. B. Kachru, Vice President, Hotel Association of India and Chairman Emeritus and Principal Advisor South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group. He says, “Jammu and Kashmir is among the major tourist destinations in India and attracts a huge number of tourists every year. With the relaxations in travel norms, we are witnessing a steady increase in the overall hotel bookings over the last couple of months. Srinagar and Gulmarg have shown tremendous growth in occupancies, while Sonamarg and Pahalgam are expected to pick up pace this spring and summer season. The holy shrine of Vaishno Devi is also seeing a rising number of visitors and this has brought relief for the tourism industry in the region.” Even online platforms, which aggregate hotels and deals are seeing an uptake of Kashmir as a destination, “Kashmir is the quintessential year-round destination with lush, sweeping meadows in the summer and ski slopes in the winters. Search results for Kashmiri destinations like Gulmarg have almost tripled since November last year, so maybe 2021 is the year we finally unlock its true potential” says Arun Ashok, Regional Head, India and Middle East, of Luxury Escapes India.





### What's Trending

According to a survey conducted by YouGov and Airbnb, 77 per cent of Indian travellers want something off the beaten path, 44 per cent want to be close to nature and 24 per cent of respondents said that they would like to travel to a place in the hills — read Kashmir.

What, then, are the trending destinations for travellers to Kashmir. Is it just the shikara experience in Srinagar, the ski slopes of Gulmarg or the temple trail of Vaishno Devi. “We are seeing a huge number of tourists going to Pahalgam and Sonamarg also, these days. And these are definitely destinations to watch out for,” says Mushtaq Ahmed Chaya, Chairman of the Jammu and Kashmir Hoteliers’ Club, who explains that the sheer diversity of accommodation options in Kashmir is making it super attractive for tourists. “From home stays and

houseboats, all the way to luxury hotels, there are so many options for all budget segments of tourists, that we can truly welcome anyone here. What’s most important to note is that here, we are a destination for both summer and winter, and the offerings are completely different for both.”

HAI’s Kachru concludes, “Occupancy has started improving but we are hoping that the situation will further improve with the rolling out of Covid vaccinations. This will also go a long way to shore up the Valley’s battered economy.” It is oft said of Kashmir ‘If there is a paradise on earth, it is here’. The state is poised to become India’s tourism leader, with large numbers of discerning travellers flocking here to seek solace under its chinaar trees, sip cups of kahwa, take on the ski slopes, and enjoy some of the most unique local experiences in the country.







## Five Things to Do in Kashmir

**Dal Lake:** While this is the most predictable item on any Kashmir tourist itinerary, it certainly is highly recommended, especially with magnificent landscapes all around. Enjoy the lake from a traditional shikara, book a houseboat experience or explore the area around the lake with its magnificent Mughal-era gardens and parks.

**Jammu:** The winter capital of Jammu and Kashmir, Jammu is a city that packs in a lot of architectural heritage. Whether it is the Mubarak Mandi Heritage complex, the Dogra Art Museum, the Raghunath Mandir, there is lots to discover in this culturally rich city, with a great vibe.

**Gulmarg:** Besides the ski slopes of Gulmarg, there is lots to explore. The Gulmarg Gondola, at 13,000 ft, is great for some sweeping panorama shots, while the Gulmarg Biosphere Reserve is ideal to discover the local flora and fauna. Check out other spots like the Alpathar Lake, the Shiva Temple and the streams of Ningle Nallah and Ferozpur Nallah.

**Pahalgam:** The stunning vistas that Pahalgam offers are unparalleled. Among Kashmir's emerging

destinations, Pahalgam boasts many beautiful spots to trek and picnic, like the Aru Valley, located 11km away and the Betaab Valley, 6 km away. You can even make a day trip to spot the breathtaking Kolahoi Glacier.

**Sonamarg:** Another area that is a must-visit, Sonamarg is a pretty hill station where you can enjoy the most off-the-cuff travel experiences and, of course, great views. Don't forget to picnic or trek by the Gadsar Lake. Make it a point, also, to visit the Zoji La Pass, 9km from Sonamarg, which is the gateway to Ladakh. Sonamarg is also a starting point for trips to Ladakh or for camping trips to Baltal Valley.

**Valley Treks:** While the towns of Kashmir are truly charming, if you are the outdoorsy sorts, do factor in some treks and camps to some of the beautiful valleys here. The Nubhra Valley known for its semi desert-like landscapes, the Aru Valley for its great picnic spots or the Betaab Valley, famous for its beautiful flora and fauna. A host of local tour operators will help you plan day trips or overnight camps to these valleys.



**Handicraft Hub:** Needless to state that shopping for traditional artefacts is a must-do in Kashmir, given the level of craftsmanship here. Shop for traditional shawls like Kashmiri shawls and pashminas, discover the myriad of carpet styles here, and check out the famous Kashmir crewel embroidery style. In addition to this, stock up on some papier maché artefacts or local produce like apples and walnuts.

## “ Kashmir In Five Addresses ”

**Traditional Houseboat:** Don't forget a houseboat and shikara experience in Srinagar. Houseboat Altaf is one such choice on Dal Lake and offers cosy rooms, a beautiful terrace and exquisite food. Couple this with a leisurely afternoon on a traditional Kashmiri shikara, on the lake, as you enjoy the magnificent climate and views.

**Luxury:** The Khyber Himalayan Resort is the most luxurious address in Gulmarg, tucked away from the tourist trail and offering Uber-luxe accommodation and breathtaking views.

**Heritage:** Relive a historic era gone by at The LaLit Grand Srinagar, housed in a magnificent palace in the midst of lush greenery. Enjoy some great culinary experiences and a wide variety of accommodation choices.

**Family friendly:** The stylish Radisson Blu Jammu is great for business and leisure travellers alike. Situated in a charming part of Jammu, this luxury hotel has all the frills of a family-friendly resort, with exceptional service, food and even MICE options.

**Homestay:** Icicle Stay is a rustic two-bedroom home stay located in the Bandi Bala Village, 20 minutes from Gulmarg. A great and unpretentious way to experience local life, Icicle Stay is listed on Airbnb.



Images courtesy: Travel Agents Association of Kashmir (TAAK)



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