



ENGAGE

March-April 2024 | Volume 4 | Issue 2



Spiritual TOURISM

India's spiritual heritage with diverse destinations is driving a surge in tourism, prompting investments in premium facilities at historically religious sites.

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From the President's Desk



KB Kachru
President, Hotel Association of India
Chairman - South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group

As India charts its course through the Amrit Kaal of economic growth, the hospitality sector is seen as a beacon of resilience, driven by shifting consumer preferences post-Covid-19. The pandemic-induced recalibration of spending patterns has notably tilted the scales in favour of travel, boding well for the Hospitality & Tourism industry, that contribute to around 10% employment in the country, and around 8% to GDP growth.

It is to be noted that India's ascent as a global economic powerhouse is accompanied by unique challenges, including the need to move from a middle-income country to a high-income country. Amidst this backdrop, the imperative lies in fostering sustainable growth that generates sustainable jobs in the country. The Hotel industry generates employment to millions of skilled and semi-skilled workers, crafts, artisans, cleaners, gig workers, and so on. When the hotel industry thrives, the economy also thrives, since Hospitality propels inclusive growth. Today, India is one of the youngest country in the world with more than 62% of the population in the working age group (15-59 years). That is why Hospitality is a vital cog in the economy. You open any Hotel in an area, and instantly, local job opportunities open up.

Of late, there has been a deepening of the digital in all sectors. The buildup of phygital, coupled with demand and demography (we are the most populous nation in the world), is expected to give India a 5-6% growth rate at a time when the global economy is at 1-2%.

In this backdrop, we focus in this Issue, religious tourism in India, that has seen an uptick, projecting a CAGR of over 16% between 2023 and 2030. Post Covid-19, the religious and spiritual inclination of Indians has become stronger. Industry reports indicate a significant rise in overnight journeys for pilgrimage sites.

According to Ministry of Tourism data, the religious and spiritual tourism sector is expected to generate a revenue of US\$59 billion by 2028, creating 140 million temporary & permanent jobs by 2030. Moreover, the boom in this sector is expected to spur the growth of small enterprises in travel, tourism, hospitality, and related industries, paving the way for huge opportunities across the country.

Just as in a camera, both aperture and shutter speed are important, we have a huge opportunity window, but we need to speed up the supply side. According to estimates by Hotelivate, the supply of branded rooms in India will grow at a compounded annual growth rate of 5-6 per cent over the next five years to 220,000 rooms by FY28. In contrast, demand is expected to rise about 8-10 per cent compounded annual growth rate over 2023-2028.

At HAI Engage, my endeavour will be to spotlight some issues that involve us all.

May the good times reside with all of us always! **HAI**

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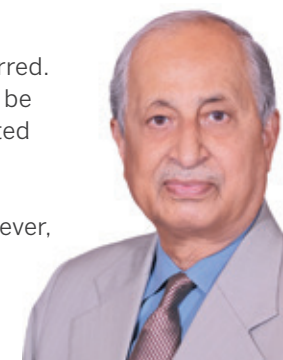


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The 'spirit' of Spiritual Tourism

Often, the borders between spiritual tourism, pilgrimage tourism, and religion get blurred. Spiritual tourism could even be secular explorations motivated by a desire to know, see and experience the 'differences', fostering sustainability. However, modern management of religious destinations must prioritize safety, health, and related issues.



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Dr Mohanty Honored with the Legendary Business Entrepreneur Award



Dr J.K. Mohanty, a distinguished luminary, recently received the prestigious ‘Legendary Business Entrepreneur Award’ at the BNI Bizpro event. As a Member and Honorary Secretary of HAI and the Managing Director of Swosti Premium Ltd, Dr Mohanty has left an indelible mark on the business landscape. Renowned for his innovative spirit, exemplary leadership, and unwavering resilience, he has founded multiple successful ventures spanning hospitality and education, shaping various sectors along the way. Beyond his professional achievements, Dr Mohanty’s commitment to social responsibility and philanthropy is commendable, as he tirelessly champions initiatives for marginalized communities and sustainable development. The accolade serves as a fitting tribute to Dr Mohanty’s profound impact on the business world and society, inspiring future generations of entrepreneurs to embrace innovation and drive positive change.

Chalet Hotels acquires Courtyard by Marriott Aravali Resort, NCR

Chalet Hotels, part of K Raheja Corp group, has acquired Courtyard by Marriott Aravali Resort, NCR for ₹315 crore. This 158-room property spread over eight acres had been on the market for about a year now. Sanjay Sethi, managing director and chief executive Chalet Hotels, mentioned that the company was looking to add about 800 rooms to its offerings for which it has earmarked ₹2,000 crore as current capital work-in-progress. The company intends to have about 5,000 rooms in the next three to four years in its entire portfolio.



IHCL marks Eight Consecutive Quarters of Record Performance

Commenting on the full year performance, Mr. Puneet Chhatwal, Managing Director & CEO, IHCL, said, “IHCL achieves its key goals under Ahvaan 2025 well ahead of time with a full year consolidated EBITDA margin of 33.7%, a portfolio of 300+ hotels and a cash position of INR 2,206 crores. Q4 FY24 marked eight consecutive quarters of record financial performance driven by double-digit revenue growth in same store hotels, incremental revenue from not like for like hotels and scaling of new businesses. With 53 signings in FY2024 IHCL achieved a portfolio of 310 hotels, enabled by attaining scale in each of our brands and forming strategic alliances in new market segments.

Revenue ↑ 18%	EBITDA ↑ 25%	EBITDA % ↑ 2.0pp	PAT ↑ 27%
₹ 1,951 Cr	₹ 706 Cr	36.2%	₹ 418 Cr
FULL YEAR ENDED 31 ST MARCH 2024 - YoY PERFORMANCE			
Revenue ↑ 17%	EBITDA ↑ 20%	EBITDA % ↑ 1.0 pp	PAT ↑ 26%
₹ 6,952 Cr	₹ 2,340 Cr	33.7 %	₹ 1,259 Cr

Minor Hotels lines up expansion plans

Global hotel chain Minor Hotels, boasting over 540 properties across 56 countries, is poised to expand its footprint in India’s hospitality market with plans for 50 new openings over the next decade. With a strategic focus on the luxury segment, the group anticipates strong interest from property owners for its renowned Anantara, Avani, and NH Collection brands. Additionally, it sees promising potential for the upscale NH Hotels & Resorts, especially in burgeoning tier-two cities and airport locales. While Minor Hotels has been present in India since 2017 with the launch of Oaks

Bodhgaya in Bihar, a significant milestone awaits later this year with the inauguration of Anantara Jaipur Hotel, marking the debut of its flagship luxury brand in the country. To bolster its expansion efforts, the group has established a new office in Bengaluru, signaling its long-term commitment to the Indian market. Vijay Krishnan’s appointment as Vice President of Operations for India underscores the growing team’s leadership on the ground. By strategically positioning itself in Bengaluru, Minor Hotels aims to capitalize on emerging opportunities in south India.

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IHCL's Ekyam launch

Ekyam, a new marketing platform was announced by IHCL, which operates the Taj Group of hotels. Ekyam will primarily manage properties across destinations that offer adventure experiences across the Indian Ocean, Greater Himalayan regions and wildlife escapes, and will club IHCL's 11 existing and seven upcoming properties

owned by its long-time partner CG Hospitality. Puneet Chhatwal MD and CEO, IHCL said: "This is a marketing platform, which will house our owned and managed properties with CG Hospitality and their upcoming properties. It will bring in more transparency and build on the already existing two-decade-old partnership that we have with them."

Chalet Hotels registers 52% growth in PAT

Chalet Hotels Limited, has disclosed its financial performance for the fourth quarter of the fiscal year 2024, along with the consolidated results for the entire fiscal year. According to the official announcement, the company achieved its highest Profit After Tax (PAT) in FY24, marking a substantial increase of 52%. Additionally, it reported its highest hospitality revenue of Rs 3.8 billion in Q4FY24, representing a noteworthy year-on-year growth of 24%.



ITC's Sanjiv Puri takes over as President CII



Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) has elected Sanjiv Puri, chairman & MD of ITC as its president for 2024-25. Puri takes over from R Dinesh, chairman of TVS Supply Chain Solutions. He heads ITC, a conglomerate with businesses in FMCG, hotels, paper boards & packaging, agri business and IT.

Royal Orchid forays in Surat

Following the signing of the agreement with Hindva Hospitality, LLP, Royal Orchid Hotels Ltd (ROHL) announced the launch of 'The World', the largest All-Suite 5-star hotel in Gujarat, and debut hotel by ROHL in Surat.

Located near the Surat Diamond Bourse, the upcoming Bullet Train Station and the Textile belt, this hotel is suited to serve business as well as leisure travellers. Decked with carefully



crafted art pieces, tasteful décor and opulent suites that can accommodate up to six comfortably, the hotel is a true amalgamation of a bouquet of innovative services and facilities, including large banqueting rooms, sprawling lawns, meeting facilities and a signature Spa with extensive wellness and yoga experiences, clubbed with an in-house co-working space and a gaming zone.

Chander K Baljee, Chairman and Managing Director of Royal Orchid Hotels Ltd, said: "We are excited to announce our very first hotel in Surat in partnership with Hindva. 'The World' is our contribution to PM Modi's vision to transforming Surat and bringing it at the forefront of the world's diamond trading business. The hotel is certain to transform the city's skyline and create new benchmarks for hospitality in the city."



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President
Hotel Association of India
Chairman - South Asia
Radisson Hotel Group



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Member
Hotel Association of India
General Manager
IHCL SeleQtions



Mr. M.P. Bezbaruah
Member (Ex-officio)
Secretary General
Hotel Association of India

Chatterati



WOMEN POWER: RANJU ALEX

The journey of Ranju Alex, Area Vice President South Asia, Marriott International, is inspiring. She seamlessly integrates her passion for culinary arts, crafting delectable dishes that rival those of top chefs. She is also dedicated to physical and mental fitness. Her adeptness at balancing all facets of her life reflects disciplined focus.

Ranju's commitment to gender diversity and empowerment further cements her status as a trailblazer, setting a high standard for inclusivity and progress in the sector. Her steadfast belief in the inherent grace and warmth of women positions her as a mentor, particularly for women in the hospitality field. By prioritizing both professional success and personal well-being, she exemplifies how to achieve balance in life, while making significant contributions to the industry and society at large.

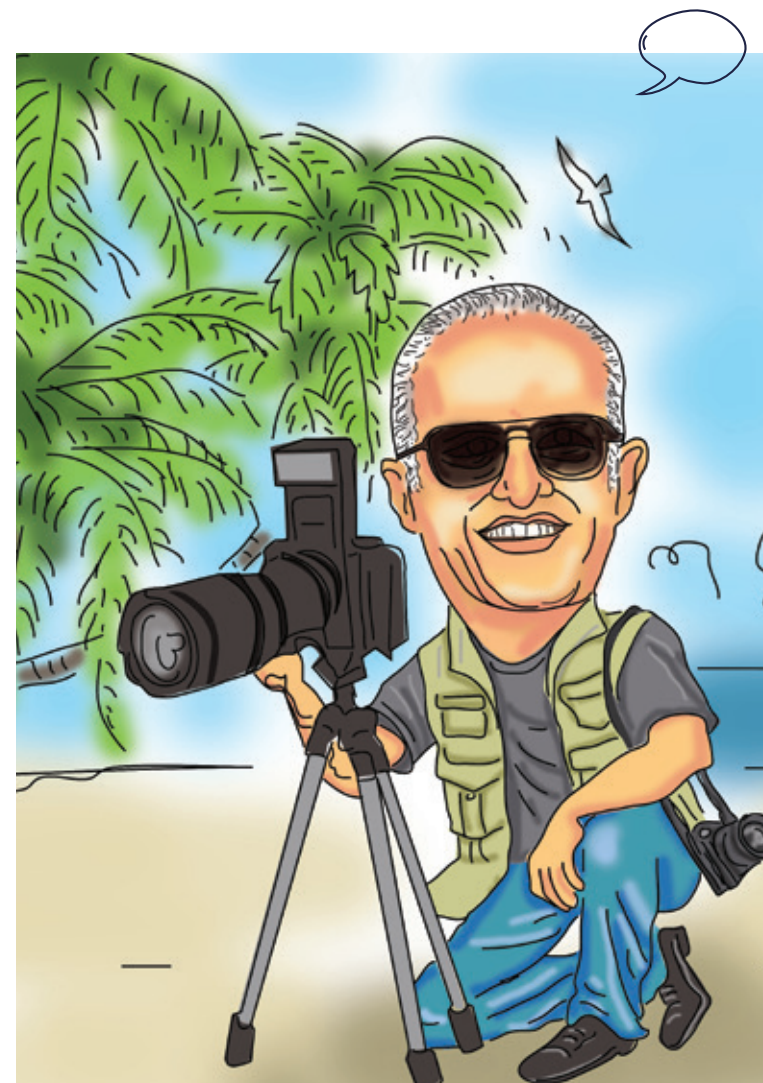
Caricature by Anthony Lawrence

India ranks at the 39th Position in WEF index for travel, tourism development

India ranks at the 39th position in the World Economic Forum's "Travel & Tourism Development Index 2024", as travel improves after the pandemic. While the United States (US) led the rankings, India was the top performer in South Asia.

LENS & WANDERLUST: MICHAEL DOMINIC

For Michael Dominic, Managing Director & CEO, CGH Earth, the expanding horizons of CGH Earth bestows on him the privilege of exploring new destinations, each offering a profound insight into nature, culture, and heritage. As an avid traveller, he enjoys engaging in outdoor activities and being immersed in the essence of these narratives. With his camera as a constant companion, he says he embarks on journeys that go beyond mere sightseeing, aiming to capture and preserve fleeting moments. His passion runs deep for wildlife photography, and he is equally enthralled by the diverse tapestry of cultures and heritage that adorn our planet. Photography, for him, is a lifelong pursuit, to unravel the intricate connections that unite us all.



LEADING BY EXAMPLE: ANIL CHADHA

In the realm of hospitality, actions often speak louder than words. Shaariq Akhtar, General Manager at ITC Grand Chola, shares a heart-warming insight of Anil Chadha, Chief Executive of ITC Hotels. Reflecting on a memorable incident from 2009, Akhtar recounts how Chadha's simple act of kindness left a lasting impression. During a busy evening at the Royal Afghan restaurant at ITC Windsor, Chadha, while on his evening rounds, noticed an empty glass at a nearby table. Despite the demands of his position and knowing his colleagues were already busy attending to other guests, Chadha approached the table, poured a glass of wine for the guest, and enquired about his comfort before moving on. This display of humility and attentiveness resonated deeply with the guest, leaving a memorable mark on his dining experience. It is forever a reminder of leadership beyond the boardroom.

India's Tourism: Incredible in all aspects

The Ministry of Tourism has undertaken the development of tourism infrastructure and amenities across the country through its various schemes such as Swadesh Darshan and PRASHAD to provide tourists with an enhanced tourism experience.

By Manisha Saxena, Director General, Tourism, Government of India

As India strides towards the path of economic growth, the tourism industry emerges as a pivotal player, contributing significantly to GDP and foreign exchange earnings, while being one of the biggest employment generators. Last year's G20 meetings, showcasing the country's length and breadth, will further propel global tourist inflows to India.

Intertwined with its vibrant heritage, India's cultural mosaic serves as a magnet for travellers seeking immersive experiences. The ongoing infrastructure enhancements, particularly the expansion of airport networks and advancements in digital connectivity, have bolstered accessibility, making India an alluring destination for both domestic and international tourists.

Government schemes such as PM Gatishakti National Master Plan (NMP), Startup India Initiative, and Make in India have infused dynamism into various sectors including tourism, fostering growth and innovation. The Ministry of Tourism, on its part, has undertaken the development of tourism infrastructure and amenities across the country through its various schemes such as Swadesh Darshan and PRASHAD (Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual, Heritage Augmentation Drive), to provide tourists with an

GatiShakti



MANISHA SAXENA
Director General, Tourism,
Government of India



Anadubi Rural Tourism Village

Incredible India

enhanced tourism experience. The robust infrastructure development has catalyzed the transformation of smaller cities and towns into tourism hubs, unleashing a wave of opportunities for inclusive growth.

The Indian landscape is adorned with tourism hotspots, each offering a unique narrative to travellers. The Ministry of Tourism has undertaken several initiatives and programs to highlight India's diverse cultural heritage to attract foreign tourists and promote domestic tourism. The Ministry of Tourism is promoting a diverse array of niche tourism products, from adventure activities to wellness retreats, catering to every discerning traveller. India's narrative of resilience, diversity, and technological prowess resonates with travellers worldwide, beckoning them to embark on a transformative journey of discovery to India.

Standardization, safety, and connectivity emerge as imperative facets in enhancing the tourism landscape. The nation's ascent in



Kuttanadu Backwaters Alappuzha, Kerala

the World Economic Forum's Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index reflects its unwavering commitment to excellence, positioning it as a premier global tourism destination.

Enjoy summers in India

The Ministry of Tourism recently launched the Cool Summers of India campaign at the Arabian Travel Mart in Dubai. From the misty magic of Yercaud to the serene strolls in Nubra Valley, India offers diverse experiences. Sip your way to cool off with regional delights. From the tangy Aam Panna to the sweet Panakam, each drink boasts of unique flavours that will quench your thirst and keep you energized. From misty retreats to culinary delights, India promises an enriching escape for every traveller, epitomizing the essence of Incredible India.

MICE sector growth

The Ministry of Tourism has launched a dedicated 'Meet in India' brand to promote India as a premier MICE destination. Collaborative campaigns are being undertaken on social media platforms, in partnership with the States and Industry, highlighting MICE infrastructure.

The robust infrastructure development has catalyzed the transformation of smaller cities and towns into tourism hubs, unleashing a wave of opportunities for inclusive growth

India as a wedding destination

Wed in India is another focus program to invite tourism. The Ministry launched 'Wed in India' campaign under the Incredible India brand with the goal to position India as a globally preferred wedding destination. The campaign focuses on showcasing the rich and diverse destinations across India for weddings. Already Udaipur, Jaipur, Goa and Kerala have made a mark as favoured destinations for weddings.

Religious & spiritual tourism

Recognizing that millions of tourists both domestic and international visit India to experience its spiritual prowess and Indian heritage, the Ministry of Tourism has taken steps to augment tourism infrastructure at the identified religious/spiritual places.



Kamakhya Temple, (Guwahati), Assam



Karma Dance

The Ministry of Tourism, under the 'Swadesh Darshan' Scheme, has developed tourist circuits covering the Buddhist Circuit, Krishna Circuit, Ramayana Circuit, Spiritual Circuit & Tirthankara Circuit. A total of 23 projects have been sanctioned for an amount of Rs 1,350+ crore under the aforementioned themes of the Swadesh Darshan Scheme.



Further, the Ministry of Tourism has revamped its Swadesh Darshan Scheme in the form of Swadesh Darshan 2.0 with the mission to create a robust framework for integrated development of tourism destinations in partnership with the States/UTs and local governments for promoting sustainable and responsible tourism. The Ministry has sanctioned 3 projects for an amount of Rs 61 crore under the Spiritual Theme at Naimisaranya, Chitrakoot and Bundi (Keshoraipatan) destinations.

In addition, the Ministry of Tourism, under the PRASHAD scheme, has sanctioned a total of 46 projects for Rs 1,600+ crore to provide better facilities and amenities at identified religious and spiritual sites.

Rural tourism

Rural tourism emerges as a transformative force, offering an authentic and immersive experience that celebrates India's grassroots culture and traditions. People like farm-to-fork concepts, and what better way to savour that than to discover the teeming villages of India, and sit down over a meal, enjoying the simple way of life. India's rural tourism potential lies in its diverse and vibrant culture, handicrafts, folk arts, festivals, and fairs. The Ministry of Tourism conducted the National Best Tourism Village Competition (2023) to disseminate best practices and to preserve and promote the local art, culture and lifestyle of the villages. Best Rural Homestay Competition (2024) was launched for promoting Rural Homestays as an experiential alternative.

Sustainable tourism

The 'Travel for LiFE' initiative was launched during the third Tourism Working Group (TWG) meeting held in Srinagar, J&K. Travel for LiFE has been formulated on the philosophy of Mission Lifestyle for Environment (LiFE), a global mass movement against climate change, launched by the Hon'ble Prime Minister. Travel for LiFE aims to promote sustainable

tourism in convergence with the National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism, through mindful and deliberate actions mobilized toward tourists and tourism businesses in the consumption of tourism resources.

The Ministry of Tourism in collaboration with the Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change (MoEFCC) launched an Alternative Livelihood Programme under the Amrit Dharohar Capacity Building Scheme. Under this initiative, MoT has taken up 5 Ramsar sites as a pilot project for skill development. The Alternative Livelihood Programme (ALP) has been completed in Sultanpur National Park (Haryana), Yashwant Sagar (Madhya Pradesh), Sirpur (Madhya Pradesh), Bhitarkanika National Park (Odisha) and Chilika Wetland (Odisha). A total of 150 candidates (30 at each site) have been trained.

As we chart a course towards a brighter future in the Amrit Kaal period of high growth, guided by the principles of inclusivity and sustainability, the travel and tourism sector's growth is a testament to the nation's indomitable spirit and enduring legacy. **HAI**



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SPIRITUAL TOURISM: Ascending Appeal

The urge to seek solace is as old as mankind. Wars have been fought, and kingdoms lost in the name of religion. Post Covid-19, there has been a spotlight on the desire for quiet moments, to heal and to introspect. The lines of religious tourism and spiritual tourism often get blurred, because wellness is part of both. In this Issue, we look at the broader trend of spiritual tourism, especially religious sites, and the recent boom in religious travel. With the government's recent refurbishment efforts in Ayodhya and Varanasi, besides many others, 'Praycation' is an attractive revenue stream for the Hospitality industry. A close look

Team HAI Engage





Park Inn by Radisson Ayodhya



Ramada by Wyndham Varanasi Katesar

adapting their offerings to cater to this demand, capitalizing on the cities' unique culinary offerings and historical narratives to engage visitors and provide them with memorable experiences.

While religious tourism traditionally refers to visits to sites of religious importance, spiritual tourism is a broader wellness category that includes religious sites as well. A natural partnership has developed between wellness centres and hospitality brands to meet the needs of spiritual and religious travellers. Government initiatives aimed at promoting tourism and improving connectivity between

There is a notable shift in tourist preferences, with travellers increasingly seeking transformative experiences. Urban spiritual tourism has emerged as a significant trend, drawing visitors to cities renowned for their deep religious and spiritual significance. Destinations such as Ajmer, Amritsar, Ayodhya, Bodh Gaya, Dwarka, Guruvayur, Katra, Madurai, Mathura, Puri, Shirdi, Tirupati, and Varanasi are among the key cities witnessing a surge in this type of tourism. In a landmark decision recently, the government of Jammu and Kashmir has cleared the decks for the restoration of the Martand Sun Temple, a revered Hindu religious site dating back to the 8th century. Culture, history, the desire to seek knowledge and solace, all combine to enhance the appeal of spiritual journeys. Hospitality brands are



Ganga Aarti, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh

SPIRITUAL BOOM

RELIGIOUS TOURISM

Year
2022

1,439
million
visits

RELIGIOUS TOURISM EARNED

Year
2022

US\$16
billion

EXPECTED TO GENERATE REVENUE

Year
2028

US\$59
billion

CREATING JOBS

Year
2030

140
million

Source: Ministry of Tourism



pilgrimage sites are further fuelling the growth of this vertical.

Putting it in perspective **Ajay Bakaya**, Managing Director, Sarovar Hotels and Resorts, says that when we are catering to the religious traveller, we might be looking at mass travel. Hotels at religious sites cater for vegetarian food, respect the fervour of the guests, go in for sober, not too ostentatious or opulent design, and so on. Religious traffic includes the mid-market segment while spiritual tourism or people looking for a yoga or wellness retreat, or a remote hill stay, may be lavished with more experiential design and offerings, and such travellers may be opting for longer stays. He points out that Chhappan Bhog at their Vrindavan resort is one example of how they cater to tourists travelling with religious fervour. Bakaya also adds that religious tourism is not a recent phenomenon as people since time immemorial have come seeking religious sites.



Nidhivan Sarovar Portico, Vrindavan

When we are catering to the religious traveller, we might be looking at mass travel. Hotels at religious sites cater to vegetarian food, respect the fervour of the guest, go in for more sober, not too ostentatious or opulent design. A spiritual traveller, on the other hand, might be looking for an experiential, longer breaks, like a wellness retreat, or a site away from the din and noise

AJAY BAKAYA
Managing Director,
Sarovar Hotels and Resorts

Says **Parveen Chander**, Executive Vice President, Sales & Marketing, IHCL, “The growing demand for spiritual tourism accounts for 60% of the total domestic tourism in India. Spiritual tourism has gained significance throughout the world. This is an important segment for IHCL. We have presence in over 50 destinations in India with spiritual significance and see heavy footfall throughout the year. We are looking to strengthen our footprint in this segment further, and have recently signed three hotels in Ayodhya and one each in Vrindavan and Sarnath.”

He observes that religious tourism has gained an increasing role worldwide. “It is certain that part of this position is due to the explosion of the overall tourism phenomenon, supported by an increase in incomes, technology, promotional activities. However, religious tourism is growing in direct relation with people's thirst for knowledge, and even for understanding other religions than theirs. The rise in such tourism presents



The growing demand for spiritual tourism accounts for 60% of the total domestic tourism in India.

PARVEEN CHANDER
Executive Vice President,
Sales & Marketing, IHCL



Akshardham Temple , Gandhinagar, Gujarat



Giant Buddha Statue, Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh



Beach House Madh Island, Mumbai - amā Stays & Trails



Recognising the importance of solitude, establishments are designating silent retreat spaces for personal reflection and meditation. These spaces provide a sanctuary for guests to retreat from the hustle and bustle of everyday life and reconnect with themselves.

DIMITRIS MANIKIS
President EMEA, Wyndham
Hotels & Resorts

a wealth of opportunities for hotels. With a growing number of travellers seeking spiritual experiences. Our hotels in prime locations near pilgrimage destinations see consistent demand.”

Hotels under the IHCL umbrella offer several opportunities to guests for spiritual experiences. Adoption of immersive, time-honoured practices like yoga, meditation, and wellness therapies create a holistic and spiritually enriching environment for the guests. Spiritual travellers often stay for extended periods, allowing for hotels to offer special packages and experiences like IHCL’s Divinity Trails. He adds that promoting spiritual tourism empowers local communities by creating opportunities for them to participate in the tourism economy. Demand continues to outpace supply in this segment, he says.

Says **Dimitris Manikis**, President EMEA, Wyndham Hotels & Resorts, “Spiritual travel in India plays a pivotal role in the



Ramada by Wyndham Katra

nation’s cultural heritage and tourism sector, attracting millions of pilgrims and travellers from around the world. The increasing trend of tourists visiting spiritual sites is influenced by several factors. First, there’s a growing interest in wellness and mindfulness, leading people to seek spiritual experiences for



Kanyakumari Beach

inner peace and balance. Second, globalisation has made it easier for people to travel to distant destinations, including spiritual sites. Third, social media plays a significant role in promoting these destinations, making them more accessible and appealing to a broader audience. For our hotels business strategy, this trend presents exciting opportunities. Hotels can develop packages and services tailored to spiritual tourists, such as meditation classes, wellness retreats, or partnerships with local spiritual guides. They can also focus on providing a tranquil and rejuvenating atmosphere. Moreover, investing in eco-friendly practices and promoting sustainable tourism aligns with the values often associated with spiritual journeys, appealing to this demographic even more.”

Hotels near holy sites enjoy several benefits. First, they attract visitors seeking accommodation close to the



Sarayu River night view, Ayodhya

site, boosting the hotel's occupancy. Second, these guests might stay longer, exploring both the spiritual site and the nearby attractions, leading to increased revenue from bookings. Furthermore, positive associations with the spiritual site can enhance the hotel's reputation, attracting more guests in the long term.

He adds, "Catering to spiritual tourists differs from serving other types of travellers as the emphasis is on tranquillity and enrichment. It's more about fostering a mindful environment and offering experiences that nourish the soul. Hotels are collaborating with local tour operators to curate mindful travel experiences such as guides to spiritual sites, nature walks, and cultural immersions. These experiences allow tourists to connect with their surroundings on a deeper level. Recognizing the importance of solitude, establishments are designating silent retreat spaces for personal reflection



Radisson Nathdwara, F&B

and meditation. These zones foster a mindful environment where guests can focus on being present with the moment, and engage with their surroundings. Spiritual concierge services are another amenity offered to accommodate the needs of spiritual tourists. These services provide expert guidance on local traditions, spiritual practices, and nearby attractions."



Golden Temple, Amritsar



There is a year-on-year increase in the number of tourists visiting religious sites in India, which can be attributed to a combination of cultural, and historical significance attached to each location.

NIKHIL SHARMA
Managing Director and Area Senior Vice President, South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group

Wyndham provides accommodation in key spiritual sites like Amritsar, Katra, Varanasi, Ayodhya, Bodh Gaya, and many more. "To ensure our hotels align with the expectations of spiritual tourists and provide a conducive environment, we prioritize infusing holistic and tranquil elements into our services. We focus on creating serene accommodations that serve as a sanctuary for our guests. Select accommodations are equipped with meditation spaces and yoga facilities, allowing travellers to engage in practices that promote inner peace and self-reflection. We also understand the importance of dietary choices for spiritual travellers, which is why our hotels offer vegetarian and vegan dining options where possible. Hotels can collaborate with local spiritual guides and wellness experts to organize tailored programs. By adopting a tailored approach, we demonstrate our commitment to providing a harmonious environment that complements the spiritual journey of our guests."

Nikhil Sharma, Managing Director and Area Senior Vice President, South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group, says, "There is a year-on-year increase in the number of tourists visiting religious sites in India, which can be attributed to a combination of cultural, and historical significance attached to each location. India has a rich cultural heritage deeply rooted in spirituality and religion. Spiritual sites in India are often associated with ancient traditions, rituals, and practices that attract tourists interested in experiencing these cultural aspects first-hand."

The central government and various state tourism boards actively promote spiritual tourism by highlighting the



ITC Grand Chola

country’s spiritual heritage. “Acknowledging this uptick in demand, the spiritual market segment holds significant importance for us, aligning perfectly with our vision to expand into tier 2/3 cities like Varanasi, Nathdwara, Katra, and Ayodhya, where we have attained the first-mover advantage and an early presence,” he adds.

He says, “Catering to spiritual tourists involves a deep understanding of their unique preferences and the provision of tailored experiences. Personalized services, carefully curated spiritual activities, and a selection of healthy dining options hold immense value for spiritual travellers. Moreover, promoting spiritual tourism enhances the overall tourism ecosystem of a region by fostering economic growth, preserving cultural heritage, promoting sustainability, and encouraging cultural exchange. Our hotels across key pilgrim locations play a pivotal role in this ecosystem.”



Ajmer Sharif

He observes that the Union Budget 2023-24 played a significant role in boosting domestic tourism through mission mode, focusing on infrastructure development. However, it is crucial to maintain this momentum through policies that support the resilience of the sector and facilitate the expansion of hotels to meet the growing demand. The



Vellankani, Tamil Nadu




ITC Grand Chola is redolent of the Chola empire, from its architecture to the décor. Evening rituals add to the grace of the destination, which serves as the perfect backdrop and ambience for guests who are invested in the history, culture and legacy of Tamil Nadu, a state renowned for its temples, architecture, and spirituality.

SHAARIQ AKHTAR
General Manager, ITC Grand Chola

advancement in infrastructure also contributes to the overall growth and diversification of the tourism sector, catering to a broader spectrum of travellers, he says.

Shaariq Akhtar, General Manager, ITC Grand Chola, talks about the possibilities in Chennai, “Chennai is steeped in history and culture, with roots going back to ancient times. As the capital of Tamil Nadu, it is renowned for its deep-seated religious fervour and devotion. The city is a melting pot of diverse faiths, including Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and others, each leaving an indelible mark on its landscape. Moreover, Chennai serves as a gateway to the spiritual wonders of Tamil Nadu, with nearby destinations such as Mahabalipuram, Kanchipuram, Vellankani, and Tiruvannamalai, offering a treasure trove of ancient temples, ashrams, churches, and spiritual retreats. ITC Grand Chola is redolent of the Chola empire, from its architecture to the décor. Evening rituals add to the grace of the destination, which serves as the perfect backdrop and ambience for guests who are invested in the history, culture, and legacy of Tamil Nadu, a state renowned for its temples, architecture, and spirituality.”

The innate human desire to seek meaning and purpose in life is universally acknowledged. Now, the spiritual quest for peace and redemption among average Indians finds new companions: travel planners and hoteliers eager to facilitate this transformative journey. With such abundant opportunities, the Hospitality sector is set for growth in this vital tourism revenue stream. 

In Pursuit of Calm and Peace

Travel is at an all-time high. And spiritual tourism, or travel motivated by spiritual or religious reasons, is growing rapidly.

Post Covid-19, the innate desire to seek solace has significantly boosted the spiritual tourism sector. According to EMR's 'India Religious and Spiritual Market Report and Forecast 2024-2032', the Indian religious and spiritual market size reached approximately \$58.56 billion in 2023. The market is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 10% during the forecast period from 2024 to 2032.

While religion-based tourism has traditionally been popular among the aged and senior citizens, young people between

the ages of 18 and 35 are increasingly favouring religious travel. This surge in interest has led to the transformation of many religious centers into spiritual hubs that promote wellness. Hotels in these areas are enhancing their offerings with features like yoga and Ayurvedic massages, healthy food options, therapy sessions, and more.

Spiritual tourism holds significant importance for several reasons:

Helps in Seeking Meaning and Purpose

Tourists of all generations are on a quest for meaning and purpose in their lives. Spiritual tourism offers them an opportunity to explore different belief systems, practices, and cultures, helping them find a sense of purpose and connection to something greater than themselves.

Where India Travels



Number of people taking more than 3 trips per year has grown by 25% in 2023 as compared to 2019.



Tier - 2 and tier -3 cities are embracing spiritual journeys, with searches for destinations with or around religious spots growing 97% in the last two years.



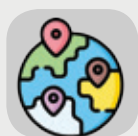
Searches for Ayodhya grew by 585%, Ujjain by 359% and Badrinath by 343 % in 2023 as compared to 2022.



Weekend getaways continue to curry favour with Indian travellers - Searches for Jim Corbett grew by 131% in 2023 as compared to 2022; Ooty and Munnar are other favourites in this context.



30% all international travel searches from India are for Dubai, Bangkok and Singapore while London, Toronto and New York are the most searched long-haul destinations.



Searches for emerging international destinations grew multi-fold in 2023 - hot favourites include Hong Kong, Almaty, Paro, Baku, Da Nang and Tbilisi.



Family vs Solo - Family travel bookings surged by 64% in 2023 as compared to 2022, followed by solo traveller booking growth at 23% for the same comparative period.

Source: India Travel Trends Report, MakeMyTrip

Primary Drivers for Spiritual Tourism

Specific Drivers

Wellness and Healing
Personal Development
Personal Quest
Socialisation
Journeying
Recreation/Leisure

Specific Drivers

Religious Observance
Ritualised Practice
Special Occasion
Socialisation
Identity
Cultural Practice

Secular

Hybrid

Religious

Focus on Self

Spirituality
Commodified

Discursive Shift

Religiosity
Institutionalised

Focus on Institution

Source: ScienceDirect.com

Self-Discovery and Personal Growth

Many individuals are interested in self-discovery and personal growth. Spiritual tourism allows them to embark on journeys of introspection and self-exploration, often leading to personal transformation and development.

Mindfulness and Well-being

With an increase in mental health consciousness and well-being, spiritual tourism involves practices such as meditation, yoga, and mindfulness, which can promote relaxation, help in stress reduction, and overall mental and emotional well-being.

Cultural Exploration and Diversity

With appreciation of diversity and inclusivity at an all-time high, spiritual tourism provides an opportunity to explore diverse cultures, traditions, and belief systems, fostering a greater understanding and appreciation of the world's cultural richness.

Connection to Nature and Sustainability

Many spiritual tourism experiences involve being in natural settings such as the mountains, forests, or sacred sites. Concern for the environment and sustainability may find solace and inspiration in connecting with nature through these spiritual journeys.

Social Connection and Community Building

Spiritual tourism often involves group experiences, retreats, or pilgrimages where individuals can connect with like-minded people and form meaningful relationships. This sense of community can be particularly appealing.

Ethical and Responsible Travel

The new traveller tends to prioritise ethical and responsible consumption. Spiritual tourism, when practiced mindfully, often aligns with these values by supporting local communities, respecting sacred sites, and promoting sustainable tourism practices.

Spiritual Exploration in the Digital Age

Despite the digital age, many travellers are drawn to spirituality and mindfulness as a means of finding balance and meaning in a technology-driven world. Spiritual tourism offers them a tangible and experiential way to explore these aspects of life beyond screens and devices.

Overall, spiritual tourism reflects a multifaceted pursuit of meaning, connection, personal growth, and cultural exploration in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. **HAI**

CRADLED IN THE HILLS: FOCUS HIMACHAL PRADESH

One of India's beloved tourist regions, the hill state packs in so much punch in terms of experiences and culture.

BY RIAAN JACOB GEORGE

The very mention of Himachal Pradesh conjures up myriad images of snow peaks, verdant valleys, and charming hill stations. However, underneath its picturesque landscapes, you will find profound diversity, and a rich tapestry of spiritual traditions that appeal to travellers from across the globe. Today, spiritual tourism is a big draw for the region, contributing to tourism and hospitality. In fact, luxury resorts nestled near the major spiritual hubs have also started putting together excursions to showcase the destinations beyond their plush accommodations. Imagine waking up to the chanting of monks at the Gyuto Monastery in Dharamshala, or participating in a traditional prayer ceremony at the



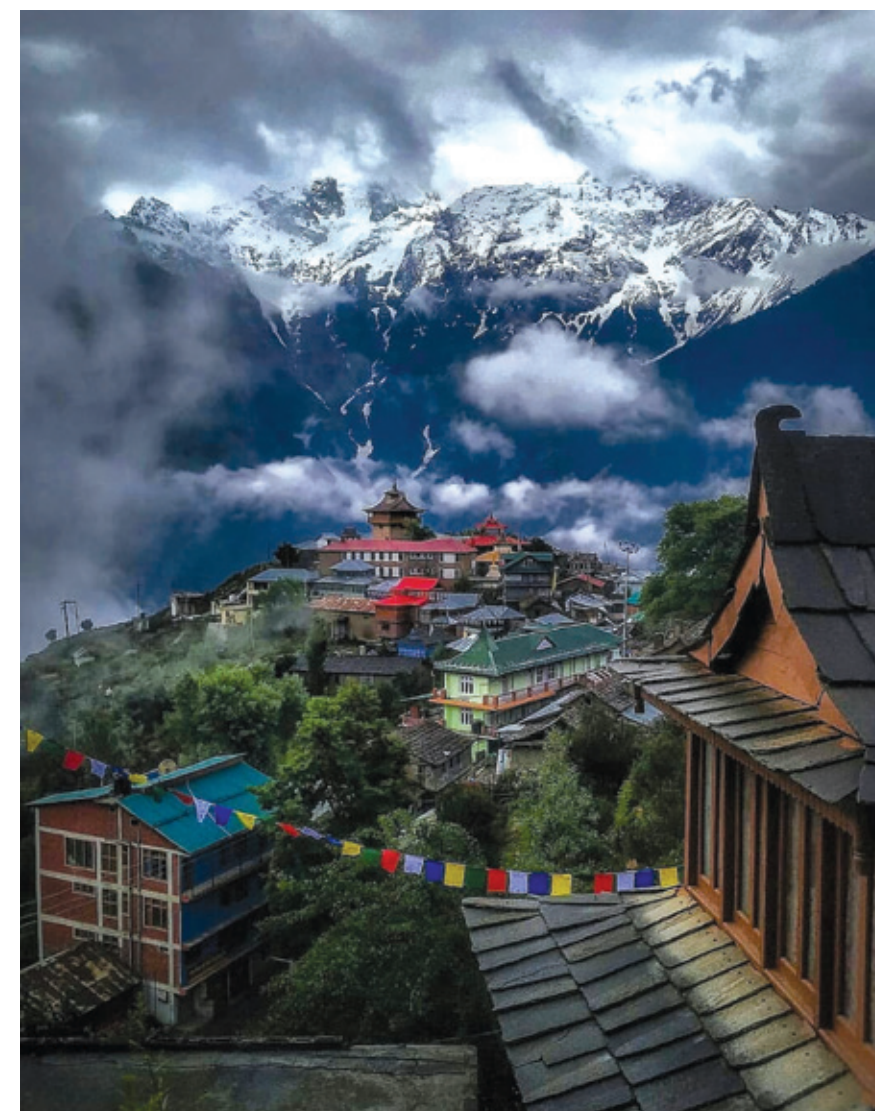
Spiti Valley



Parvati River in Himachal Pradesh



Dhankar Monastery



Kinnaur, Kailash Range

Underneath its picturesque landscapes, you will find profound diversity, and a rich tapestry of spiritual traditions that appeal to travellers from across the globe

revered Hidimba Devi Temple in Manali. Alternatively, you can start your day with yoga, just about anywhere overlooking the Himalayas, followed by an adrenaline-pumping trek through ancient trails, only to return to a nourishing Dham feast (a celebratory meal in Himachal), a traditional multi-course vegetarian or non-vegetarian meal that includes dishes like dal, rajma, rice, curd, boor ki kadi, and is complemented with gur (jaggery).



Dham Thali

Adventure tourism hub

Himachal Pradesh is a hub for adventure travel. Through the year, outdoorsy travellers flock here to enjoy a multitude of experiences. These adventure activities could include white-water rafting on the Beas River in Kullu or a charming trek through the dramatic Spiti Valley, which gives you a sense of achievement. You can even indulge in paragliding over the expansive valleys of Dalhousie.

Adventure activities like white-water rafting on the Beas River in Kullu or trekking through the mystical Spiti Valley can become metaphors for overcoming inner challenges and achieving a sense of calm. Picture yourself paragliding over the emerald valleys of Dalhousie, the wind carrying away your worries as you soar closer to the heavens.

Trekking is best enjoyed in Spiti Valley (June-September), Parvati Valley (April-June) and Chandratul Lake (June-September). You may go river rafting on the Beas river in Kullu and Manali, Shimla's Sutlej and Chamba's Ravi river. It is best to check the seasonality of these sports activities before going as they are all season-specific. The quintessential Himachali outdoor experience would include a camp and this is best enjoyed in Manali, Solang Valley or by the pristine shores of Lake Parashar in Kullu. If rock climbing and rappelling is your cup of tea there are many options in Manali, McLeod Ganj and Spiti Valley, where trained instructors will teach and guide you. Other activities include jeep safaris, mountain biking, angling, hiking and zorbing.

Needless to say, winter sports are a big draw here, from skiing on the slopes of Manali's Solang Valley to ice skating in Shimla's natural ice rinks, there are many options.



Trekking Barot Valley



Shepherd Trail Gaddi Trek



Parvati River, Kasol



Manali

Destination highlights

Shimla, the former summer capital of the British Raj needs no introduction. If you love history and heritage, there's much to see. You might want to stay at Clarke's Hotel Shimla, housed in an 1840 building. Guests will love its charming decor and impeccable service. You may walk down to the famous Jakhu Temple, which is the highest Hanuman temple in India, for some sweeping views of the region. Step into Christ Church for a slice of colonial charm, while the historic Kali Bari Temple is a haven of peace and tranquility.

Christ Church

The quintessential Himachali outdoor experience would include a camp and this is best enjoyed in Manali, Solang Valley or by the pristine shores of Lake Parashar in Kullu

Understanding culture

Today, boutique hotels in Himachal Pradesh are strongly integrating culture into the hospitality experience. Addresses in Shimla and Kasauli are now starting to work together with local artisans to offer master classes on traditional handicrafts. Hotels are offering guided tours to lesser-known temples and shrines to spark off better conversations and provide a sense of connection with the land.



Kullu Dussehra An International Festival



Viceregal Lodge



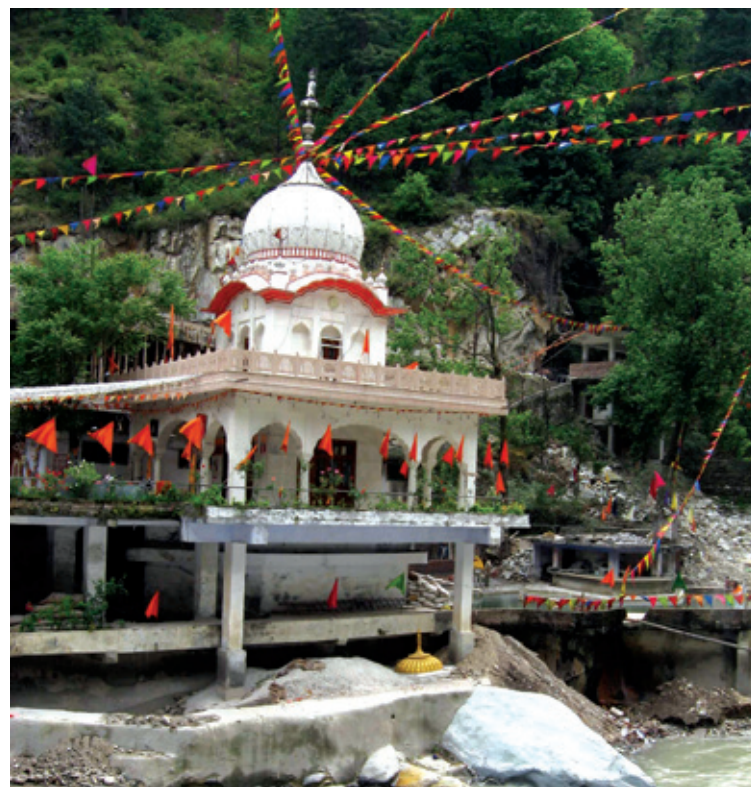


McLeod Ganj, Tsuglagkhang Temple

Dharamshala is perched amidst the majestic Dhauladhar range and is a hub of Tibetan culture and heritage. His Holiness the Dalai Lama's presence here draws a lot of spiritual tourism

Adventure seekers will find many things to do in Manali, nestled in the verdant Beas Valley. Some of the destination highlights include the Hidimba Devi Temple, a cave temple dedicated to a Pandava wife from the Hindu epic Mahabharata that draws devotees throughout the year, the Vashisht Temple with its natural hot springs and the Vashisht Van Vihar, a sacred grove. Dharamshala is perched amidst the majestic Dhauladhar range and is a hub of Tibetan culture and heritage. His Holiness the Dalai Lama's presence here draws a lot of spiritual tourism. Don't forget to spend enough time at the Dalai Lama Temple Complex, the spiritual heart of Tibetan Buddhism in India. You will be mesmerized by the intricate architecture, the art, vibrant prayer flags and genteel monks that dot the space. To learn more about Tibetan art and culture, you can step into the Norbulingka Institute. Stay at Rakkh Resort, a short drive away, a concept hospitality space, which promotes sustainable tourism and immersive cultural experience. Here, guests may go on treks, village walks, traditional cooking classes, enjoy farming experiences and even engage

with local village folk during excursions. Spiti valley is remote and breathtaking and is known as Little Tibet for its strong Buddhist ties. Besides the gorgeous Kye Monasteries, this region is great for a road trip because the landscapes are stark and breathtaking. The Spiti Ecosphere, a sustainable lodge committed to cultural immersion, offers programs that involve interacting with monks, learning about Buddhist traditions, and participating in prayer ceremonies, providing a truly enriching spiritual experience. The seat of the Tibetan government in exile, McLeod Ganj is lined with cafes and traditional artisanal shops selling momos and prayer wheels. Of course, you cannot miss Kulu Valley, famed for its fruit orchards and dramatic sceneries. You may like to stop at the sacred Manikaran Sahib Gurudwara, an important site for Sikh pilgrims, known for



Manikaran Sahib Gurudwara

its healing hot springs and delicious langar. Himachal Pradesh's popularity in the tourism space is all thanks to its impressive offerings and a range of diverse activities. Spiritual tourism is also a big factor and the regional economy stands to benefit from it. **HAI**



The 'spirit' of Spiritual Tourism

Often, the borders between spiritual tourism, pilgrimage tourism, and religion get blurred. Spiritual tourism could even be secular explorations motivated by a desire to know, see and experience the 'differences', fostering sustainability. However, modern management of religious destinations must prioritize safety, health, and related issues.

By MP BEZBARUAH
Secretary General, Hotel Association of India



Spirituality is a term difficult to define. The Oxford dictionary defines it as the quality of being concerned with the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things. Academically there has been much interest in the subject and one study has pointed out that during 2015-19 more than 200 major journal papers were published on the subject. However, the approach is generally fragmented and a holistic view on spiritual tourism is often missing. That happens because the term spirituality is used in a very wide range of meanings and connotations. P McCarroll, Thomas O'Connor and E. Meakes, in an essay on "Assessing plurality in Spirituality Definitions" survey the various reviews and researches on the subject each dealing with the topic of spirituality, and gave 27 explicit definitions among which "there was little agreement". The term has been used as differently as an individual's inner and outward search for ultimate or sacred meaning in life, search for subjective experiences of religious nature, belief in a supernatural realm or afterlife, and so on. Way back in 2013, UNWTO organized the first International Conference on Spiritual Tourism in Vietnam. The summit tried to link spiritual tourism to concern for sustainable development.

It concluded that, cultural exchange and dialogue evoked by spiritual tourism are the very cornerstones of mutual understanding, tolerance and respect, the fundamental building blocks of sustainability". The conference put

Way back in 2013, UNWTO organized the first International Conference on Spiritual Tourism in Vietnam. The summit tried to link spiritual tourism to concern for sustainable development

economic context to spiritual tourism in the following words, "the responsible and sustainable use of natural and cultural assets in the development of spiritual tourism can create employment opportunities, generate income, alleviate poverty, curb rural flight migration, prompt product diversification, and nurture a sense of pride among communities and destinations." Researchers have found in general that expansion of spiritual tourism is characterized by the fact that travel to holy places is ideal to seek and find spirituality, in a way that is not always available in daily life. In most cases such search is driven by religious conviction or faith. Such religion-driven spiritual tourism is prominent in India and it is linked to religious observance, rituals practices and even search for cultural identity. At the same time spiritual tourism could even be secular explorations primarily motivated by a desire to know, see and experience the differences. In India a very large number of such tourists travel for wellness, of mind and spirit, seeking retreats for self-improvement or as is being increasingly popular, practising Yoga. Such journeys are similar to innumerable ones of seekers like Paul Brunton of the, "A Search In Secret India" fame. Such secular spiritual tourism seeks to understand the gurus, mystics, teachers and practitioners. Considering the difficulties in definition it is not surprising that often the borderline between spiritual tourism, pilgrimage, religion gets blurred. UNWTO followed up with the First International Congress on Tourism and Pilgrimages in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, in 2014, to highlight the positive contributions of pilgrimages and spiritual routes to sustainable and responsible tourism, as well as the contribution of tourism to cultural understanding. This was followed by several such international conferences on religious tourism, pilgrimage etc. All these extensive discussions have established that spiritual tourism can:

- be one of the most effective tools to foster inclusive and



As per a report, the expected footfall in the new temple in Ayodhya will be much higher than the annual numbers for the Taj Mahal (6.5 million), Rome's Vatican City (9 million) and the Mecca in Saudi Arabia (20 million), apart from other religious sights in India such as the Tirupati Temple (25 million) and the Vaishno Devi Temple (8 million)

sustainable development

- can raise awareness about heritage and facilitate preservation
- can contribute to local development
- builds cultural understanding.

At the same time, the UNWTO highlighted some 'crucial challenges' which include:

- * The preservation of religious sites and monuments
- * Upholding respect for local traditions and religious practices
- * Inclusive development of local communities.

In a sense, if spiritual tourism were to provide such benefits government must "manage" the challenges effectively and direct the tourism development in a way that it does in fact lead to sustainable development. Such management should also include the economic potential of spiritual tourism. In India, as the Yatras (Amarnath, etc.) and Melas (Kumbh, etc.) exemplify, the largest mass is moved by pure religious urges. Religious tourism is still the biggest segment of domestic tourism in India. A recent report states that expected footfall in the new temple in Ayodhya will be much higher than the annual numbers for the Taj Mahal (6.5 million), Rome's Vatican City (9 million) and the Mecca in Saudi Arabia (20 million), apart from other religious sights in India such as the Tirupati Temple (25 million) and the Vaishno Devi Temple (8 million).

The management of spiritual tourism covers a very wide canvas, but some broad and basic parameters can be mentioned. Fortunately, the management of Vaishno Devi Temple, Tirupati, and recently Varanasi and Ayodhya, provide very useful and relevant models. The government may consider such modules to be adopted by all states for

In India, as the Yatras (Amarnath, etc.) Melas (Kumbh, etc.) exemplify, the largest mass is moved by pure religious urges. Religious tourism is still the biggest segment of domestic tourism in India

at least the major sites of spiritual tourism.

Overall, the management of spiritual tourism is a problem of professional destination management, with active participation of local communities. The draft Tourism Policy had indicated the framework of such a professional destination management. Even pending the adoption of the policy, it would be appropriate to adopt the framework for spiritual tourism destinations. Within that broad framework some specifics merit attention.

First, is the ease of approach to such destinations. Often the hazards of travel are taken as part of the rituals by the believers. Quite often such travels have encountered disasters. Modern management must prioritize safety, health and related issues.

Second is cleanliness. The message of "cleanliness is next to godliness" should form part of the message to be conveyed—in fact, should be part of everyday ritual in the spiritual sites.

Third, international tourists travelling to India for spiritual pursuits would look for the "spiritual ambience", like calmness and serenity, not overwhelmed by rituals and commercial transactions.

Fourth, the spiritual experience should be the testing ground for the message of LiFE —lifestyle for environment. A spiritual message, blended with the religious teachings can go a long way in spreading the message.

Various studies have shown that there is immense potential for developing regional tourism based on spiritual tourism strength of India. The SASEC (South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation) Tourism Development Plan points out that the Buddhist Circuit stands out as the most attractive and easily implementable regional circuit. For around 500 million Buddhist population of the world comprising about 10% of the population, the SASEC Subregion is immensely attractive for pilgrimage or even to enjoy the culture and heritage of Buddhism. The SASEC Tourism Development Plan grouped the attractions into three categories—Footsteps of the Buddha (places directly associated with the Buddha's life), Living Buddhism (places where Buddhism is practiced as a way of life by the majority of people) and Buddhist Art, Culture and Heritage. Development of the circuit linking India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Thailand and Myanmar has tremendous possibilities of international spiritual tourism benefitting India. SASEC has also mentioned the possibility of a Mythology circuit linking the Ramayana sites of India, Nepal and Sri Lanka.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "other countries, I may go as a tourist, but to India, I come as a pilgrim." It is now time for a holistic, professional development exploiting the spiritual, economic and sustainable benefits of spiritual tourism, making travel a pilgrimage of pure bliss. **HAI**

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