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VOL 16 | ISSUE 4 | PAGES 24

SEPTEMBER, 2022

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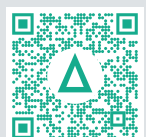
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## Centre sets target to make tourism a USD 1 trillion industry by 2047

### Mulls setting up Advisory Board for tourism promotion

Prasenjit Chakraborty | Mumbai

The government is contemplating setting up a new Advisory Board to promote India as a major tourism destination. In this direction, there will be renewed focus on enhancing the

said Arvind Singh, Secretary, Ministry of Tourism, at an event in New Delhi.

The new policy will stress on creating jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities. Singh also said that tourism will offer employment opportunity to the areas or regions where manufacturing

The draft policy has identified five missions to be implemented over the next decade to lay a roadmap for improving the framework for tourism development.



**ARVIND SINGH**  
Secretary, Ministry of Tourism, New Delhi

According to the draft, the National Green Tourism Mission will mainstream sustainability and align tourism development with the sustainable development goals of 2030. It will enable smart tourism destinations and IT applications. Besides, it is considering setting up a destination management organisation, which will focus on maintaining and marketing tourist destinations to make them more attractive for foreign tourists. "It's time...we give jobs to local people especially in locations where people were without jobs for the last two years and have a policy with a more destination centric approach," Singh added.

Commenting on the development, Jyoti Mayal, President, TAAI, said, "It seems that TAAI's suggestions have been incorporated into the policy. Not taking the entire credit, I wish to say that we have been advocating the need of adopting sustainable tourism practices. Most of our members have been the front runners in implementing tech-based solutions, keeping the service fee at the bare minimum. We have managed to make a deep connection with travellers, as we think and act emphatically. Hygiene and Safety are our utmost priority, which is the future of sustainable tourism practices across the globe."

Hailing the initiative to make tourism a USD 1 trillion economy, Mayal said, "Yes, we are with the Ministry's mission to make tourism a 1 trillion economy. And, to support that, I am delighted to share the outcome of our 66th Cruising Convention. We not only reiterated and emphasised the need of making our great nation a regional tourism hub; in addition, we introduced travel trade to promote cruising in India. A form of tourism which has a place for all, cruising will surely bring multiple benefits to India. Be it the shipping industry, the development of ports, and the introduction of new sea routes for tourists both Inbound and outbound." ♦

### TravelBiz Monitor View

To reach the 1 trillion dollar-mark for the tourism economy of India seems quite farfetched right now, but certainly not impossible. If the plans that have been put in place in the Vision 2050 are actually implemented, and tourism development continues at its current pace, this figure will certainly start seeming more of a reality. However, in the light of many of the overseas Indian tourist offices being shut down, and more such closures in the pipeline, it seems to be not in sync with the overall vision. Perhaps, post-Independence this is the first government that has ventured to make such a proclamation. Not just the industry stakeholders, but every citizen of India should welcome the news. However, in the entire process, one can only hope that environment consciousness and sustainability is looked at as important issues that will face the industry, while achieving this ambitious target.

contribution of tourism to India's economy by increasing visitation, stay and spending, and making India a year-around tourist destination. "The government has already drafted a policy which will be presented to the Cabinet soon,"

and agriculture cannot reach. According to Singh, the government is internally working on a projection for the next 25 years. "Our vision is to make tourism a USD 1 trillion industry in India by 2047," Singh said.

## TAFI Convention kicks off in Kuching, Malaysia

TBM Staff | Mumbai

The TAFI (Travel Agents Federation of India) Convention kicks off on 20th September, 2022 in Kuching, Sarawak in Malaysia. With this Convention, TAFI is returning to Malaysia for the third time. TAFI has organised their Convention in Malaysia, in 1999 at Kuala Lumpur and in 2007 at Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. The theme of the Convention 2022 is 'Build, Back, Better' that emphasises on the need to reorient business strategies.

The highlight of this Convention is the return of the **TAFI-TravelBiz Monitor Awards** after a gap of a few years.

Commenting on the Convention and its theme, Ajay Prakash, President, TAFI, said, "As we seek recovery post-COVID, it is vital that the tourism industry does not forget the lessons of the Pandemic. As one of the biggest Global Industries, the power of Tourism to shape the world is phenomenal. It can be a powerful force for doing good not only for the stakeholders, but for the entire world. Build Back Better encapsulates the resolve to rebuild Tourism in a more responsible and sustainable manner."

Prakash went on to add, "It is high time for the Indian travel & tourism industry to realise the potential of the industry and make an effort for its growth. Sarawak is a relatively unexplored destination for the Indian traveller. Also the destination promotes conservation and sustainable development." ♦



KUCHING, SARAWAK  
20th-23rd September 2022

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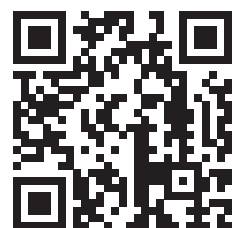
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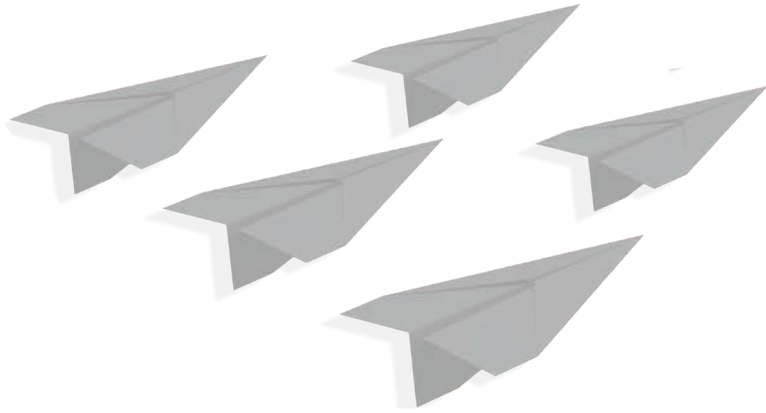
**65** CLIENT GOVERNMENTS

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# VFS Global: A 'Made in India' disruptive innovation, now a global leader



By revolutionising visa processing, this 'Made in India' company is today the trusted partner of 65 governments across 144 countries aiding cross-border mobility and empowering governments to provide secure, seamless and smart solutions to travellers and citizens.

Outbound travel from India exploded over the past two decades and VFS Global, the world's largest outsourcing and technology services specialist for governments and diplomatic missions was the pioneer and driving force behind the outsourced visa services industry. Starting with a pilot project for the US Consulate in Mumbai in 2001, VFS Global manages the non-judgmental and administrative tasks related to applications for visas, passports, and consular services for governments of **65 countries** worldwide. Consistent and continuous investment in technology and human capital development, and a deep-rooted commitment to customer service and business excellence charted an unparalleled growth story for one of India's earliest unicorns, operating a global network of more than **3,500 visa application centres** across **144 countries**. Founded in 2001 by Mumbai-based entrepreneur, Zubin Karkaria, the company has processed over **246 million applications** since its inception and over **108 million biometric** enrolments since 2007. Its global operations are supported via 59 contact centres, providing relevant information in **52 languages** and **1670 websites maintained in 57 languages**.

#### India connection

VFS Global's India connection goes much beyond its Make in India roots. VFS Global's journey started at a time when international travel was waiting to boom in India post its economic liberalisation. Getting visas had become a major impediment with consulates and embassies unable to cope with the surge in demand. This is

when Zubin Karkaria had a visionary idea, and a new industry of outsourced visa services was born. Currently, the company manages visa application processing services for governments of more than **50 countries** in India with a presence across **19 cities**. Since 2001, the company has processed more than **52 million visa applications in India**. The company has been a trusted partner of the Government of India since 2015 providing visas, passports and consular services across 12 countries globally.

#### Focus on customer-centricity

Customer orientation has been the hallmark of VFS Global's journey. All its service innovations revolved around keeping pace with evolving needs for convenience, personalisation, reliability, and security. Two decades ago, VFS Global services were offered on a first-come, first-served basis, but with the growing demand for convenience, Appointment Management System was introduced enabling visa applicants to find their preferred VAC, visiting time, and services.

Driven by customer needs, more customised and personalised services such as **Premium Lounges, Visa At Your Doorstep (VAYD)**, etc were rolled out. The introduction of biometrics enrolment capabilities was the real game-changer, which led to the evolution of new-age VACs.

#### Innovation the growth-driver catalyst

Technology, a key business-enabler at VFS Global has now become a business-driver. The company's

achievements in process efficiency, managing global operations, business excellence and continuously enhancing its services would simply have not been possible without the use of technology. Over the years it has heavily invested in the R&D of new technology-driven products and solutions catering to applicant and the sovereign governments it serves. The company's mobile biometrics solutions portfolio is a very good example of this.

#### Learnings from the pandemic

Given our focus on agility and adaptability, by December 2020, we were able to resume operations in 1600 Visa Application Centres (more than half our global network), catering to governments of more than 50 nations across 129 countries. And as of today, 2272 of our VACs are operational globally. We also used this time of introspection in introducing digital solutions and empowered our workforce through strategic learning and development modules.

#### Travel fraternity

VFS Global is where it is today to a large extent thanks to the Indian travel industry that was very supportive of us, especially in the early days of the company and continues to be. Being part of one of the world's leading travel companies, we at VFS Global understand the significant role played by the travel agents' fraternity and key industry forums such as the Travel Agents Federation of India (TAFI) in enhancing stakeholder relations and bettering end-users' travel experience.

#### Personalised premium Services

VFS Global has constantly evolved its innovative service offerings to make your visa application process smooth and easy. Our premium services such as Premium Lounge, Visa At Your Doorstep, Form filling assistance, Prime Time and Courier Service among others are designed to provide applicants with convenience, comfort and personalised attention, throughout your visa application process. Curated for a discerning set of travellers these services are always optional.

#### Market leadership and growth strategy

Given its niche business premise that primarily provides services on behalf of governments, security, reliability and innovation were imperative to fine-tune efficiencies, tighten controls and consistently deliver unique value propositions to end-users while maintaining razor-sharp security standards. This unwavering commitment and consistency in business excellence ensured the company's market leadership over the past several years.

Going forward, the company's focus will be on further strengthening its position in outsourced visa services, while simultaneously focusing on diversification opportunities in high-growth potential businesses such as outsourced Passport services and eVisa services. The company's larger purpose is to make cross-border mobility more seamless and create deep brand affection amongst its customers, peers, investors and communities.

# DreamFolks makes successful IPO debut

TBM Staff | Mumbai

Airport service aggregator platform DreamFolks Services listed on the bourses with a strong 56 per cent gains on September 6, which was better than analysts' expectations and grey market premium of 30-40 per cent.

Healthy initial public offering (IPO) subscription, positive market conditions, leadership in airport lounge aggregation industry, and asset light business model boosted investor confidence about the company.

The INR 562-crore IPO had received strong response from investors, getting subscribed 56.68 before its launch. It was entirely an offer for sale by shareholders.

Commenting on the IPO, DreamFolks CMD, Liberatha Peter Kallat said that the market has liked its unique business model, which is also the first of its kind in India, the world's



**LIBERATHA PETER KALLAT**  
Chairperson and MD,  
DreamFolks

third largest domestic aviation market. Many weren't wholly aware of the model when the company first started interacting with potential investors.

"Today, 60 million cards

have the eligibility of accessing lounge facilities. When we started, the lounge penetration by cardholders was less than 1 per cent but today it has grown to 8 per cent," she said.

Kallat asserted that with an increased credit card penetration happening in India, awareness regarding the benefits accruing from credit cards was also growing. The second driver in the Indian market was the coming up of new airports.

"Airports too have understood the benefits of the lounge business' contribution to their revenues. And not only that, the other end-to-end services that we have added in our portfolio, starting from baggage transfers, meet-and-assist, airport transit and spas, would be the reason for the growth in coming years," Kallat added.

Talking to TravelBiz Monitor in April this year, DreamFolks CMD, Liberatha Peter Kallat had said that the overall Indian

lounge market which includes passengers accessing both domestic and international lounges is estimated at around INR 817.5 crore (FY 2020). This is forecasted to reach INR 5,861.9 crore by FY2030, which is a huge opportunity.

"Dreamfolks is the solution that we have built. We also have exclusive lounge contracts and strong relationships built over the past nine years. There's a complete moat!"

Kallat added, "We have expanded our client portfolio from card networks/issuers to include airlines, OTAs, corporates thus making our services accessible to not just the business travellers but also families, leisure travel and the MICE segment. Our product suite is now being leveraged for a variety of consumer engagement and employee engagement programmes. We facilitate end-to-end assistance to the consumers at the airport." ♦

# Shekhar Divadkar takes charge as President of Skal Club of Goa for 2022-24 term

TBM Staff | Mumbai

Shekhar Divadkar has taken charge as the new President of Skal Club of Goa, for the term 2022 – 24, at a glittering ceremony held during the AGM recently at Alila Diwa – Goa, Majorda – Goa, which was well attended by members, invited dignitaries and the press.

Goa Minister for Transport, Industries, Panchayat Raj & Protocol, Mauvin Godinho was the Chief Guest for the event, while Director of Tourism and CEO of the new formed Goa Tourism Board, Nikhil Desai was the Guest of Honour. Curtorim MLA & GIDC Chairman, Alexio Reginaldo Lorenzo & Benaulim MLA, Captain Venzy Viegas also graced the occasion. Director of Transport Rajan Satardekar attended the event too.

Divadkar, a member of SKAL since 2007 held various key posts during his 15 years with SKAL, he was earlier Treasurer, Secretary, Vice President with Skal Goa, National Secretary for Skal International India and presently is Secretary for Skal International Asia, he is also member of the



Skal International President's Committee for Statutes and By-laws.

While continuing the tempo which was set by the past President Sk. Ernest Dias, Sk. Shekhar and his Skal Goa Board Members have a vision of creating a niche for the club

in the areas of Conservation Of Environment, CSR, Social Causes concerning our Industry – Hospitality & Travel, to archive the history of Skal Goa to follow statutory requirements and above all giving Skal Goa a voice in India, in Asia and the World. ♦

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## BEYOND 'WISTFUL' VISTAS

**For the government to ensure a new tourism attitude it will need much more than bricks and mortar.**

There is a buzz that new tourist icons need to be created to market destinations for tourism to a totally brand new generation. For the new traveller the pivot ultimately is 'experience'.

That new structures need to be built and introduced remains a requisite, but monitoring the 'experience quality' is equally significant. This is in the context of the just opened phase 1 of the Central Vista project in the capital.

The primary reason for developing this entire power centre and iconic area of India's power edifice wasn't tourism by a far cry. It was needed to upgrade, update, refurbish, improve and expand the many government and state buildings and esplanade in the seat of India's governance sites. It was a long pending demand and need. Now that the entire project will be reaching its finale in a few months, a side observation must be made.

The India Gate lawns, the Vijay Chowk and the entire 3 odd kilometre stretch there has always been a favourite spot for locals and curious tourists. From a casual ice cream to a day picnic to even a long stroll- this area has attracted crowds on any day, climaxing on national days like republic parade and the like.

This is the reason the central vista could set the tone for future upgradation or improvement of other more tourism related sites. Creating material surrounding is less than half the job. Ensuring its maintenance and regulating public attitude towards that end is the greater concern.

Whether it is the state expressways, the ticket window at the Taj Mahal, the crowded and often encroached fronts of rail stations or public indifference towards sanitation almost everywhere- the tourists' experience dwells on these salient factors.

As India unveils a new and modern look in the capital, how it handles the new ambience will be something to follow keenly. It will be a precursor to what Indian tourism will do to itself in the next two and a half decades – the period called 'Amrit kaal', when the republic turns 100.

Anurag Yadav  
Industry Expert

Anurag Yadav is a travel author and columnist, writing on hospitality and design. An avid traveller, he has published five books and divides his time equally between Delhi and London.

The views expressed in the column are of the author, and may or may not be endorsed by the publication.

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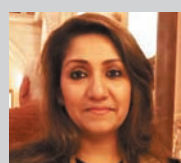
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- Around 800 Caves
- Over 400 Forts
- Around 90 Pristine beaches
- 51 Wildlife sanctuaries
- Over 20 Hill stations
- 1000 years old temples & pilgrimage sites
- Over 500 Wellness centres
- Over 500 Agro tourism centres
- Multiple adventure activities (land, water & air)



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## ‘Our new 90-year lease policy has attracted reputed hospitality/realty players’

Earlier there were 72 permissions required to set up a hotel or a restaurant in Maharashtra. Now we have brought down this requirement to just 9 which is a big boost to the tourism sector because it will reduce operational costs, says **Valsa Nair Singh, IAS-Principal Secretary, Tourism, Excise & Civil Aviation, Govt of Maharashtra** in an exclusive interview with **Prasenjit Chakraborty**.

**Q During the pandemic, Maharashtra Tourism came out with new tourism policies to boost the sector. How are such policies facilitating in bringing investment to the state?**

We took a decision to undertake public private partnerships with major players for some of the best properties in Maharashtra. MTDC owns some of the best properties be it Matheran or Mahabaleshwar. Our aim is to get partners who have earned a reputation in successfully operating properties in the hospitality industry. This is because, we believe they will run these hotels with more professionalism, and will also bring in marketing strength and brand image. This is a win-win situation for both the MTDC and our partners. This was the first step on the PPP front.

We were doing it for some time, but the lease was for 10-30 years. Now, for the first time, we extended the lease period to 90 years. As a result, big groups and real estate players are approaching us. We have identified seven properties (both brown and greenfield) of the MTDC and invited private participation bids. And the response is fantastic.

Our second decision was to give industry status to the hospitality sector, and by doing so we emerged as the first state in the country to

do so. It offers industry tariff to hotels, industry tariff for water, property tax etc. In this regard, the first circular came out in 1999 but was not implemented.

Our third step was ease of doing business. Earlier, for setting up a hotel or restaurant in the state it was imperative to have 72 permissions. We discussed and deliberated on this, and realised that some policies had become redundant with time. We kept only the important ones. That's how we brought it from 72 to just 9. It's a big boost to the sector because it will reduce operational costs. For any investor, we have a single liaison officer who would

be assisting with the whole investment process.

In the recent past, we have infused a lot of life to the sector, so that whenever the sector opens up we can grab the opportunity. For example, we stressed on skill development during the pandemic and undertook online guide courses for young qualified people. This is a Ministry of Tourism programme, but we reimbursed the entire fee for people who have qualified from Maharashtra.

**Q After having received encouraging response to your hotel initiative, what next?**

After the success of our first initiative or you can call it a pilot project, we have come up with a second tranche having identified 30 properties. Among these, some properties are really enviable for tourism potential. Some of the hotels are located on open lands near Mumbai, and can become a popular weekend getaway. Our strength is our location. I am sure our second phase will also be successful and, will be a turning point for the tourism sector in Maharashtra, especially for investment in the hospitality sector.

Apart from PPP, we also have taken forward our commitment with Indian Hotels Company Ltd that wants to develop a five-

star resort in Shiroda of the Sindhudurg district. We have leased the land and now the joint measurement is on.

Other major groups are also looking for investment in Sindhudurg and other properties.

**Q What about the connectivity to these destinations?**

Along with this, we are also developing connectivity to these destinations. Now, we have daily flights from Mumbai to Sindhudurg, and flights to Gondia, and Amravati are also operational.

**Q Are you looking for any new investment in Aurangabad which attracts tourists both from domestic and international markets?**

Yes, we are looking for investment in and around Aurangabad, because Ajanta and Ellora have always been our flagship destinations. Besides this, we are also looking for investment in our forts. Forts are our biggest USP. Our sea forts are really unique. We are coming with some tourism infrastructure (not necessarily hospitality) in and around these forts to make it more convenient for tourists to visit the forts.

**Q Enlighten us about the prospects of Caravan tourism in Maharashtra.**

There are many scenic places in Maharashtra which fall under CRZ (Coastal Regulatory Zone), forest or forest buffer area or irrigation zone (near dam) where construction is not allowed. However, in such destinations parking of Caravan is allowed and here comes in our Caravan Policy playing a great role. We are helping the caravan players to tie up with hotel groups. Caravan tourism has tremendous potential in Maharashtra, as the state has very good roads. Not only that, good law and order situation also offers huge scope for Caravan tourism. Mumbai to Goa is one of the best road trips in the world. Besides this, Mumbai-Pune, Mumbai-Nashik, etc. also offer huge scope for development of Caravan tourism. ♦

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# Maharashtra, Land of Possibilities

In order to boost the tourism sector, the Government of Maharashtra has introduced several interesting policies and initiatives recently. Besides giving impetus to the sector, such policies will also help facilitate bringing investment into the state.

the International Airport Authority/ Airports Authority of India, and three by the Ministry of Defence. Maharashtra has air connectivity with 10 cities, the main airports being Mumbai, Pune, Nagpur and Nashik. Mumbai is India's busiest airport.

## Initiatives during pandemic times

During the pandemic, the state has introduced several important policies to boost the tourism sector.

One such Policy is Adventure Tourism policy.

The state is best suited for trekking after the Himalayas, hence the government launched the Adventure Tourism Policy. The state has registered many adventure tour operators.

The Beach Shack Policy is another important initiative where the Tourism Department will be issuing special permits for the temporary construction of shacks. The construction has to be compliant with environmental regulations to ensure the ecosystems of the beaches are not harmed. On a pilot project basis, the state has taken it up on eight beaches in the four coastal districts. But currently, the state is awaiting the new Coastal Zone Management Plan (CZMP), because it is a permissible activity only in the CZMP. In the current CZMP, the beach shack is not permissible. So, it is expected to start from next season.

Caravan Tourism has become increasingly popular in India post-pandemic. Travellers now want accommodation that is beyond traditional especially for remote areas where finding places to stay is a bit difficult. Taking due cognisance, the Government of Maharashtra has formulated the 'Caravan Tourism' Policy which has provisions for the Tourism Department to formulate strategies and boost caravan-related activities in the public and private sectors and on PPP basis. Caravan operators will be given incentives such as exemption in stamp duty and electricity duty, refund in GST, etc.

**M**aharashtra is situated in the western region of the country. It is the most industrialised state in India and has maintained its leading position in the industrial sector in the country. Like manufacturing, the service sector in the state, too, has flourished leaps and bounds. One of the leading sectors of service is tourism. Maharashtra is a high potential destination with a wide variety of genres, including wildlife, adventure, nature and pilgrimage, and tourism.

The state is also making its presence felt with attractive marketing campaigns, new initiatives and participation across domestic and global tourism events.

Maharashtra is one of the few states in the world which offers multiple types of destinations for its tourists. It has long coastline of 720 kilometers along the lush green Konkan region.

## Few highlights of Maharashtra Tourism Policy

- Achieve sector growth of 10% per annum and share of 15% in GSDP through tourism and tourism related activities
- Generate fresh investments in the tourism sector to the tune of INR 30,000 crore by 2025
- Create 1 million additional jobs in the tourism sector by 2025
- Strengthening of tourism infrastructure, especially in the form of PPP model, special tourism infrastructure, Tourism Infrastructure Development Fund, CSR, etc., are defined in this policy.

## Infrastructure

The state is well-connected by roadways, railways, waterways and airways. The power supply in the state is one of the most stable and reliable in the country. Maharashtra has also an excellent telecommunication network. All these services help to link the state effectively with the rest of the country and with the world-cities. As a result, the Government of Maharashtra has been undertaking several infrastructural projects, from time to time, in order to attract large investments into the state.

Maharashtra has the largest road network in the country with a total road length of over 235,595 km consisting of 4,367 km of National Highways; 33,406 km of State Highways and 48,824 km of major district roads. Five national highways connect the state with Delhi, Kolkata, Allahabad, Hyderabad, and Bengaluru.

The state has a total of 24 airfields/airports. Of these, 17 are under the control of the state government; four are managed and controlled by



Single window clearance policy is an important one. Under this policy, the Department of Tourism has introduced a common online application portal that will streamline the process of seeking licenses, permissions for setting up a hospitality unit in the state. The aim is to condense the previous cumbersome mechanism of hoteliers having to seek permissions from multiple bodies into a hassle-free process in an online portal. This will reduce delays, enhance efficiency in the processing of applications, eliminate redundancies and information duplication. ♦



# Sojourn in Sarawak

**S**arawak is Malaysia's largest state. It lies in East Malaysia and shares the island of Borneo with the eastern state of Sabah, the separate country of Brunei and the Indonesian provinces of Kalimantan.

Sarawak makes access to Borneo's natural wonders and cultural riches a breeze. Kuching, which is the official capital city of Sarawak, means cat in Malay language. Legend has it that Kuching got its name when James Brooke – the first White Rajah of Sarawak – pointed to a location in the year 1839 and asked where it was. Kuching was the reply as the locals mistakenly thought Brooke was referring to a cat that was passing by.

Kuching, as its name implies, is home to many cats but a few stand out from the rest. Cat

statues are located all across town, each with their own significant story and history. It is indeed island's most dynamic city, pristine rainforests – where one can spot orangutans, proboscis monkeys, crocodiles and the world's largest flower, the rafflesia – can be visited on day trips, with time in the evening for a tasty meal and a drink by the waterfront. More adventurous travellers can take a 'flying coffin' riverboat up the 'Amazon of Borneo', the Batang Rejang, on their way east to hike from longhouse to longhouse in the cool environs of the Kelabit Highlands, or to the spectacular bat caves and extraordinary rock formations of Gunung Mulu National Park. For the best chance of seeing an orangutan in the wild, venture to the Batang Ai region.



## Top Sightseeing Spots In Kuching

### Chinese History Museum

Housed in the century-old Chinese Court building, this museum provides an excellent introduction to the nine major Chinese communities – each with its own dialect, cuisine and temples – who began settling in Sarawak around 1830. Highlights include ceramics, musical instruments, historic photographs and some fearsome dragon- and lion-dance costumes.

### Astana

Built by Charles Brooke in 1869, the Astana (a local word meaning 'palace') – conveniently labelled in giant white letters – and its manicured gardens still serve as the home of the governor of Sarawak. The best views of the complex are actually from the south (city centre) bank of

the river, so it's not really worth taking a tambang across or using the Darul Hana Bridge.

### Fort Margherita

Built by Charles Brooke in 1879 and named after his wife, Ranee Margaret, this hilltop fortress long protected Kuching against surprise attack by pirates. Inside, the Brooke Gallery illustrates the remarkable story of the white rajahs of Sarawak with fascinating artefacts and story boards.

### Waterfront Promenade

The south bank of Sungai Sarawak along Main Bazaar and Jln Gambier is a lovely tree-shaded promenade, with walkways, lawns and food stalls. It's a fine place for a stroll any time a cool breeze blows off the river, especially at sunset.

### Darul Hana Bridge

Linking the northern and southern parts of Kuching, the city's spectacular pedestrian bridge (335m) is constructed to resemble the letter 'S' (for Sarawak), and the two towers are designed to look like the hornbill-inspired structures of traditional Bidayuh bamboo bridges. Two spacious viewing decks provide the best locations for taking in sprawling riverfront views.

### Art Museum

This museum featured an exhibit called Urang Sarawak, which deftly and succinctly describes the people and culture of the region, especially indigenous lifestyles and traditional mythology, historical periods such as the Brooke era and WWII, as well as contemporary Sarawak. ♦





forthcoming with their support. With them, we have the support of Sarawak Tourism Board, Business Events Sarawak and the flag carrier, Malaysia Airlines. So putting all this together made the Convention extremely viable, therefore we choose Kuching which is relatively unexplored by the Indian travel trade. We have hosted a Convention in Malaysian Borneo in the province of Sabah in the past. Considering that we have always looked for new destinations, and give our members an opportunity to experience a destination themselves which then equips better to come back and sell it.

indirectly. An industry of this size has clout; the other industries of such size or even smaller have come together and leveraged that strength. The tourism industry, unfortunately hasn't. The industry needs to rethink, refocus and reengineer of how we are going to do business. The three R's of environment concerns –Reduce, Recycle and Reuse all are important and each one of us has to make the effort. People tend to think, what can I do? However, we shouldn't underestimate the power of one.

**Q How do you think this Convention will help boost regional tourism?**

A regional visa is a long cherished dream, but if it can be achieved there will be enormous aid to boost tourism in the region. We have seen that 70-80% tourist movement intra region, and the long-haul travel is a smaller percentage. Therefore, we need to make tourism easier within the region, and with the visa delays for US, Canada and Europe, and soaring airfares, regional tourism makes more sense. Also, there is a certain commonality of cultures and food in the region. So we should be looking at greater opportunities for aiding travel within the region.

**Q Throw some light on the speakers' profile at this Convention.**

We have to try and devise a methodology that makes Sustainable and Responsible Tourism measurable. These have been buzz words for long, but now we need to act. We are going to be talking about small things and practises of daily life that have an impact on the environment, along with ESG and governance. The impact of tourism is multi-fold. There is a social, environmental, cultural and economic impact. We will have speakers who have practised ESG and achieved certain degree of success, and come back informed from this Convention with greater awareness of the responsibility that the tourism industry has. Climate change is for real, and if our destinations continue to degrade, the loss is of the industry in direct along with humanity. ♦

*disha.shah@saffronsynergies.in*

## 'We have to devise a strategy to make Sustainable Tourism measurable'

Close on the heels of the Travel Agents Federation of India (TAFI) returning to Malaysia for the third time to host its Convention, President **Ajay Prakash** speaks to **Disha Shah Ghosh** about making environment-conscious choices a daily practise for destinations to survive and businesses to flourish, especially in the post pandemic world.

**Q What made TAFI select Malaysia as a destination for its Convention over Indian states, especially since the pandemic brought domestic tourism into spotlight?**

The Convention is being organised after a gap of four years, and there is a lot of excitement. We have had a tremendous response from our members, having set a target of 500 attendees, and we closed our registration pretty much to that figure. Now it's a question of putting it all together intelligently, effectively and in a fun way.

We had wanted to hold a Convention in India for a while. Perhaps it's the boom in domestic tourism segment that is the reason that we didn't get the kind of support we anticipated from the Indian states. Domestic tourism has done very well; for e.g. Kashmir has had an unprecedented summer season, and all the other hill stations have done really well and so has resort destinations. Therefore, it seems that there is no immediate hunger in Indian states for getting a Convention being hosted.

On the other hand, the world is wooing the Indian tourist, with China having pretty much still closed for tourism, and therefore the second choice is India. The Indian tourist is a spender and the world has recognised that. We received tremendous amount support from Tourism Malaysia who was very

Kuching is also a destination that abounds with a rainforest and one of the few destinations that have a rainforest still surviving.

**Q What is the underlying theme and the agenda of this Convention?**

The theme of the Convention is 'Build, Back, Better' that emphasises on the need to reorient our business strategies. Tourism thrives on the beauty of the planet, diversity and the excitement that different cultures and, regions offer. Tourism also has a negative impact in terms of degrading the environment it thrives on. Some of the lessons we have to learn from the pandemic that is you cannot abuse the nature indefinitely, as she has a way of striking back. We have seen that for two years, the world came to a grinding halt, and none of us want such a situation to repeat. Therefore, we are more mindful, responsible and sensitive to get business on track. The purpose of business is to make profit but it must be done in a sustainable manner. If the destination doesn't survive, the local culture doesn't exist what are we going to sell? We are a very large industry; accounting for close to 10% of global GDP, and in the island states, tourism accounts for as high as 14-15% of the GDP. Globally, we account for 10% of employment directly and



# Start-Up Forum

## Bringing Innovations to the Forefront

### Travvolt

By TBM Staff | Mumbai

**A**nticipating the impact of technology, 16 years ago, **TravelBiz Monitor** introduced an industry-first live news portal, with hourly online reporting on travel, tourism, aviation and hospitality industries. Since then, we have created a niche for ourselves by providing analytical stories and statistical information to the travel trade on a regular basis. To keep this momentum going, the Editorial team has decided to showcase new-age technology products and services every month that have the potential to disrupt the market further. Moreover, the time now is also appropriate as the on-going pandemic has further widened the scope of using technology.

For this unique initiative, TravelBiz Monitor has partnered with 'Start-up Mentor Board', a visionary platform with credentials in business, technology, e-commerce, digital market place, payment solutions and IT infrastructure, to highlight the stories of new-age technology ideas. Start-up Mentor Board has been set-up as an initiative to mentor and guide the travel technology driven start-ups and facilitate collaboration in the larger travel ecosystem.

Website – <https://startupmentorboard.vgmrtechsolutions.com>

The Board is spearheaded by well-known thought leader Ashish Kumar, who is also the Co-Chairman of FICCI Travel Technology Committee. It comprises Bharti Maan, who has led start-ups to scale rapidly; Patrick Richards, an experienced travel industry leader in the UK; Chetan Kapoor, an analyst with deep understanding of the travel and tourism business and trends; Kartik Sharma, an artificial intelligence practitioner; Karthik Venkataraman, a digital transformation & an e-commerce visionary; Jure Bratkic, who led innovative solutions in the USA and Kyasha Bhoola, with expertise and advanced insight into the travel industry across Africa.

\*One can register for the SMB Program at

<https://startupmentorboard.vgmrtechsolutions.com/form.htmla>.

**Startup Name:** Travvolt

**Core Team:** Janki Asher  
Ashish Thakur

**Founding year:** 2021

**Company Website:** <http://travvolt.com/login>

**Description:** Travvolt was formed with an aim to provide all travel related solution under one roof – from cheap flight tickets to series fares and experiential tour packages on a single website. Our focus is to provide experience while travelling and not just standard holiday packages. Our core team is always busy creating itineraries of various destination, which will provide a different experience each time you travel to a new place. Our purpose is to provide all travel related solution like visa assistance, flights, holidays, insurance under one roof so you do not have to worry about your trip and sit back and wait for our team to do everything on your behalf. We are catering B2C market right now and plan to continue the same.

[https://youtu.be/K46gbpl\\_Tmwc](https://youtu.be/K46gbpl_Tmwc).



**Q What are the benefits offered by Asego to travellers attending the TAFI convention in Malaysia?**

Ensuring a safe trip for travellers, be it on land, air or sea, has always been our foremost priority. Being TAFI's preferred travel protection partner for over a decade, Asego is offering complimentary global assistance with insurance to all delegates attending the upcoming convention in Malaysia.

With our exclusively curated protection cover, all delegates can avail of benefits such as medical emergency cover including COVID-19, emergency medical evacuation, protection against loss of valuables like passport and baggage along with relevant assistance services including doctor-on-call, medical services provider referral and much more.

**Q Could you elaborate on the vision that drives Asego?**

Right from the inception of Asego, our vision has been to bridge the gap between static offerings available in the market and the traveller's true needs. We have always worked towards being a dynamic travel ancillary solutions provider not only to customers but also to our clients with a strong focus on their business growth. We aspire to lead product innovations beyond insurance and our experience in the global markets has been instrumental in achieving this for an emerging market like India. Moreover, we are constantly moving towards upgraded technology to empower our customers with dynamic offerings. We are also constantly enhancing medical assistance capabilities, which are at the heart of our business.

**Q What do you think are the major risks today's travellers are facing, and what role does Asego play in mitigating those?**

Recent travel volumes have skyrocketed with the gradual dissipation of COVID-19 around the globe, and so has travel related risks. Eventualities such as missed/delayed flights and hotel/flight cancellations are inevitable when it comes to travel. However, we have recently witnessed a

huge spike in newer travel risks such as loss and damage of gadgets, cyber security issues, identity theft, credit/debit card fraud, etc. amongst travellers.

Asego has been working tirelessly to identify and mitigate these risks with comprehensive travel assistance and insurance solutions. Our bouquet of offerings not only takes care of medical emergencies and other travel-related inconveniences but also ensures that travellers are protected against the aforementioned travel risks. Further, our carefully curated standalone products offer travellers an opportunity to

customise their protection plans as per their needs and preferences, rather than opting for a plain vanilla travel insurance product.

**Q What are the factors that differentiate Asego's offerings from other players in the market?**

Asego has always strived for customer delight. And to achieve that, it is imperative to understand the travellers' needs and provide them with tailor-made solutions to ensure a hassle-free trip. Some factors that differentiate Asego from the rest are:

**Fast track claims support:** Our travel assistance and insurance products are powered by 24/7 fast track claims support and expert teams present across the globe ensure that the travellers are fully protected, no matter where they are.

**Customisable protection plans:** Our bouquet of travel assistance services and new-age bundled products have always been customer favourites. Nevertheless, we realised that tailoring offerings at a micro level are the need of the hour. We are now offering an array of relevant standalone products, such as emergency OPD expenses, quarantine cancellations, cruise cover, and flight delay/interruption covers, pertinent to the current scenario.

**Cutting-edge technology**



## 'We aspire to lead product innovations beyond insurance'

**platform:** As we all know, AI and machine learning are key to the ever-evolving Insurtech market. Asego has been leveraging these tech capabilities to create a specialised system which helps us understand our customers more deeply and creates a customised user experience, helping them choose the right plan for their needs.

**Q What are the various global assistance services that Asego offers its customers?**

We are one of India's leading global assistance and travel insurance providers. Asego's services are not just limited to facilitating claims processes, but also provide real-time assistance services to travellers. Our services include 24X7 global medical assistance, roadside assistance, family protection and concierge assistance, along with insurance. During these unprecedented times, we also provide doctor-on-call services, support during baggage loss, missed flights, advice on COVID-19 protocols in different countries and other related services.

Furthermore, we provide medical service-related referrals to customers requiring hospitals, clinics, chemists, diagnostic centres, etc. This is not just for the traveller but also for their family back home. ♦

**Dev Karvat,  
Founder &  
CEO, Asego** in a conversation with **TravelBiz Monitor** sheds light on their vision, and also the association with TAFI as their preferred travel insurance partner.



## TAAI's 66th Cruising Convention

# Bridging the Gap for Regional Tourism

The first ever cruising convention by any Indian travel trade association outside the country witnessed the presence of 300 plus delegates and also discussed important topics like Regional Tourism, Connected Traveler, and Relevance of Technology etc.

### TBM Staff | Mumbai

TAAI successfully conducted its 66th convention on the Royal Caribbean International's Spectrum of the Seas vessel which sailed from Singapore to Penang and back. The three-day cruising convention saw more than 300 delegates that included media professionals and representatives of tourism boards Asian countries and airlines attended the event.

The newest cruise ship on the sailing of 3 days itinerary with a stopover at Penang, provided the right itinerary to go with the theme of Regional Tourism for the Convention. The event was also attended by key representatives from Nepal Tourism Board, Sri Lanka Tourism, Kazhak Tourism and a meeting with key stakeholders from Penang was also arranged during the Cocktail dinner hosted by Penang Convention & Exhibition Bureau. This is the first ever cruising convention by any Indian travel trade association outside the country.

To flag off the Cruising Convention, P Kumaran, High Commissioner of India

to Singapore attended the pre-departure inaugural event as the Guest of Honour. He congratulated TAAI for organizing the convention and highlighted the importance of regional tourism and the importance of

developing India as a tourism hub to travel to countries in South-East and East Asia.

Discussion topics ranged from War, Peace and Tourism to Regional Tourism and Connected Traveler. Moreover, the situation update from Sri Lanka Tourism let the audience be aware of the fact that Sri Lanka is ready to welcome tourists again. Nepal Tourism Board attended the event with a powerful delegation of tourism stakeholders to connect with the travel fraternity from India. A Presentation from Singapore Airlines showcased the various offerings for the trade and special benefits for MICE groups.

Day one witnessed the presence of dignitaries like the Ambassador (Retd.) Anil Wadhwa







Ambassador; (Retd.) Deepa Gopalan Wadhwa; and Sandeep Dayal. During the session on "War, Peace & Tourism" experts shared their views and opinions. Topics such as visa delays, limited travel capacity, and other important points were dwelled upon. The session was moderated by Aashish Gupta, Consulting CEO, FAITH.

Delivering the Welcome Address, Jyoti Mayal, President TAAI President emphasized the need for it because it has immense potential and if tapped fully may offer multiple and numerous business opportunities for the travel trade. Tourism should be beyond borders and only if we promote India as a hub, we can reap the benefits. She emphasized the need of having one tourism policy and one tax structure for the tourism sector across the region.

Various other sessions were organized during the convention. The second session which was based on the theme of Connected Traveler had the participation of IATA, TIRUN, Suryaa Hotel and IndiGo. Stalwarts of the Trade such as Rodney D'Cruz, Assistant Director,



Passenger and Cargo Services, India, Nepal & Bhutan, IATA, Ratna Chadha, CEO, TIRUN, Greesh Bindra, Vice President Operations,

The Suryaa and Vinay Malhotra, Head of Global Sales, IndiGo shared their views and perspectives. The entire trade acknowledged the value of technology and its contribution to making the customer experience hassle-free. The session was moderated by Reema Lokesh, Journalist. Before the session, a representative of Singapore Airlines made a presentation and interacted with the attendees.

After the sessions, the Cruising Convention paused in Penang wherein the Penang Convention and Exhibition Bureau (PCEB) hosted dinner for the delegates.

Day two started with a unique and out-of-the-box idea of discussing the 'Waves of Change'. In session one, Partnerships Beyond Borders, TAAI invited the representatives of India's regional nations. Sharing their point of view, dignitaries highlighted their efforts and shared strategies to promote regional tourism. Suggestions from Sri Lanka, Nepal and Kazakhstan were welcomed by the TAAI members. The session was followed by a presentation from the VFS Global team.

Continuing the discussions, Gupta introduced the speakers of the next session on the Evolved Traveler. All the respected dignitaries from companies like MakeMyTrip, Travelport, Amadeus and ITC shared their views regarding the future of travel. Coming from different backgrounds and versatile experiences; speakers like Richard Roberts, Vice President - Strategic Solutions and Partnerships APAC, Travelport, Amit Shukla, Vice President - B2B & Affiliates, MakeMyTrip, Rakesh Bansal, CEO, Amadeus India and B Hariharan, Vice President, ITC Hotels, enriched the quality of the deliberations. Their innovative approach was warmly received by the members.

Sharing the future of travel trade, Jyoti Mayal, in the Road Ahead session said that technology is the key to success. She said that the traveller is looking for experiences, and is not only looking for the run-of-the-mill that the travel agent has been used to doing. "To improve our services and create an experience for travellers, we must equip ourselves with new technology. The pandemic on one hand closed various avenues; however, it has opened up new sectors/ verticals which can provide a plethora of opportunities," Mayal pointed out.

Referring to the example of Cruise tourism, Mayal said that not even 1 percent of the Cruising has been utilized yet. "7000 km of India's coastline is untouched and unexplored. If we the travel agents focus on adding Cruise tourism to the basket of services, we can do fairly well, especially in recovery from the havoc created by the pandemic," she exhorted.

The three-day Cruising Convention ended with a power-packed session by Nikhil Desai, Motivational Speaker. ♦





## ‘India is one of our key markets’

**René D. Egle, Area General Manager, Shangri-La Al Husn, Muscat and Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah, Muscat** believes that Oman has a vast unexplored tourism potential which can work magic in the Indian market. In a conversation with **TravelBiz Monitor** Egle reveals his plans and strategies for the market.

### Q What is your strategy to target the Indian market?

India has great potential not only for Shangri-la but Oman as a destination, and this is why we have identified India as a key market of opportunity for us.

Our strategy to target the Indian market is two-fold. The first one is to drive awareness for Oman which is still a surprise as to how little the Indian market knows about the destination given the proximity and the fact that there are numerous direct flights to Mumbai and New Delhi daily.

The second strategy is through direct engagements with B2B MICE and Wedding organisers that include visiting India with product and information workshops about Oman as a destination and very importantly an invitation to visit the property first-hand.

### Q How different will be your outreach activities for B2B vis-à-vis consumers?

There are certain aspects and challenges that are the same for B2B customers and FIT customers when it comes to the Indian market such as the lack of awareness of Oman as a destination, the proximity to India and the great flight connectivity that exists. Therefore, the overall objectives are the same but the approaches are slightly different for our B2B partners. We start engaging with

them by introducing ourselves either directly or through an introduction via a partner, such as our recent client event with Purple Oman, Island Group and EXP.

Since many of the B2B partners in India are new to the destination therefore we prefer to meet and engage with them personally through sales missions to the country by senior management to introduce the properties and extend an invitation to visit. Our activities for B2B partners are designed for them to personally experience the resort, its varied venues and its facilities which will enable them to share the experience in the resort rather than trying to ‘sell’.

### Q What are your major revenue streams and how have they grown?

The major revenue streams of the hotel are rooms, events and F&B.

We did have healthy growth in 2019 for most of our key revenue streams based on the prevailing sales strategies but of course, all this eroded during Covid. The growth since the reopening of the country has been slow with flight connectivity still far down on what we had in 2019. Therefore, we are focusing on diversifying our market segmentation to drive the opening of new markets with growth potential such as India

### Q You have recently introduced the LUBAN spa at your property. How have guests responded to that proposition?

“ India has great potential not only for Shangri-la but Oman as a destination, and this is why we have identified India as a key market of opportunity for us. Our strategy to target the Indian market is two-fold. ”

We are confident that we have a very unique offering for the Indian market, something new and experiential that one wouldn't find in other popular destinations.

### Q What number of Indian guests do you receive every year and what are your plans for India?

We had a healthy increase in guests from India, mainly Weddings and MICE groups from 2018 to 2019 by over 500 room nights.

As India is one of our key markets we continue to focus on India as it has immense potential for us.

### Q Which segment of travellers are your key areas of focus in India?

At the moment we are focusing on Weddings, MICE (stopovers on the way to and from UK & Europe) and Luxury FITs.

Luban is Arabic and means ‘Frankincense’ and the Luban Spa that we have opened is only one part of a brand-new set of luxury experiences that we offer for guests to learn more about the Omani Culture. We have received fantastic feedback on the spa, fragrances, methodology of treatments and most of all the history. We are now in the process of changing our L'Occitane bathroom amenities in Al Husn to Luban.

These luxury experiences fall under our Project Turath which means ‘heritage’ and includes Omani art, culture and heritage. The focus on Frankincense is part of this and will cover all possible experiences such as Frankincense Plantation in cooperation with Luban, Frankincense Butler, Frankincense – Health & Beauty, Frankincense – Culinary & Beverage, Frankincense – Heritage & History and Frankincense – Retail. ♦

# RDTM 2022 hosts more than 9000 B2B meetings

## Over 300 tourism buyers come to shop at Rajasthan's biggest domestic showcase

Shayan Mallick | New Delhi

The two-day second edition of Rajasthan Domestic Travel Mart (RDTM) 2022 was recently over 550 buyers and suppliers and concluded with more than 9,000 B2B meetings during the event that was organised at Jaipur's BM Birla Auditorium. The event kicked off with the inaugural function that was organised at the Brij Convention Center at Jaipur's iconic Clarks Amer hotel on the evening of Friday, July 22nd followed by two days of exhibition and B2B meetings at the BM Birla Auditorium. The event was conceptualized as an annual event and first organised in July 2018. However, after found to be missing from the 2019 calendar of events any subsequent edition could not happen because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Speaking at the event, Gayatri Rathore, Principal Secretary – Tourism, Government of Rajasthan, said, "We are able to organise the mart after a gap of four years. More than 550 buyers and sellers are attending the show. Tourism was the worst affected sector because of Covid-19 pandemic and the state government has done everything possible to help revive the industry. Not only the government has announced several inclusive, comprehensive and far-sighted schemes and policies but also effected them in concrete actions resulting in benefits to the tourism sector. Giving tourism 'industry status' is a key step in this direction along with the guest house scheme, paying guest scheme, among others. We will also soon launch Rural tourism and adventure tourism schemes in the coming days," said Rathore while pointing that coming together with the private sector of the state to organise RDTM 2022 is part of the close industry collaboration that the state tourism department follows in order to boost Rajasthan's tourism profile for tourists.

"Buyers in such great numbers from Gujarat, Maharashtra, Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Haryana, Delhi,



Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Punjab and other states is a testimony that Rajasthan is a one of the favourite tourist destinations," she further added.

According to FHTR President Apurv Kumar, when the pandemic was entering the endemic stage and there were efforts to revive tourism in Rajasthan, the private sector was quick to back the state's effort at reviving tourism through events like Jaipur Literature Festival 2022 and later the Rajasthan Diwas Celebration in March which was also the state's showcase event to the world.

"Through these events we were able to deliver the message across the world that Rajasthan is a safe destination, tourism ready and ready to host large scale events and conventions. Continuing on this journey of promoting Rajasthan we now have Rajasthan Domestic Travel Mart 2022. This is a great show of public and private sector partnership and has support from the all the major state and national travel and hospitality industry associations. RDTM 2022 is the initiative of FHTR, an organization that celebrates all aspects of Rajasthan and will work towards marketing the state and interact with various bodies and policy makers."

Kumar also used the occasion to highlight state's recent effort at growing tourism in the state backed by a strong budget and by giving the tourism sector 'industry status' which he

said will greatly help boost investment in the sector and generate more employment.

RDTM has been planned in the pre-fixed B2B meetings format between buyers who are hosted from across India and suppliers from Rajasthan. RDTM is organised by Federation of Hospitality and Tourism of Rajasthan (FHTR). FHTR is a consortium of leading industry bodies of Rajasthan represented by Indian Heritage Hotels Association (IHHA), Hotels & Restaurants Association of Rajasthan (HRAR) and Rajasthan Association of Tour Operators (RATO).

Organised after a gap of four years, the second edition has recorded noticeable growth over the first edition with the number of buyers increasing from 210 in 2018 to over 300 this year, growing by almost 50 per cent in the current edition. The number of suppliers have also grown from 160 the last time to over 200 this year, an impressive 25 per cent growth.

With the domestic tourism market being the tourism mainstay in post-Covid recovery, Rajasthan is looking at RDTM to help boost state's effort at tourism recovery. FHTR had also hosted five pre-event roadshows in Jaipur, Mandawa, Jodhpur, Bharatpur and Udaipur.

Film tourism promotion policy launched

In a critical step forward towards boosting state's appeal for production houses to shoot in the state, Rajasthan Tourism also launched its Film Tourism Promotion Policy at the RDTM 2022 inaugural function. The policy is envisioned at making Rajasthan attractive to production companies for their films and movies which in turn will result in widespread publicity for the destination and attract incremental tourists.

Commenting on the film tourism policy Rathore said that the policy is very forward looking and is better in every respect than any other such existing policies of other states and hoped that with the launch of the policy, it will help attract not only new Bollywood or regional movies but also international movies to shoot in Rajasthan. ♦



# India – Incredibly Incredible!

By **Hector Dsouza**, Founder, L'orient Travels & Brand Builder

**W**hat does India mean to me? Is it just a country I live & wander in? Is it a land that offers me endless opportunities to eke out an acceptable lifestyle? Is it because I feel there is a great connection between me & one of the oldest civilisations? Having a collection of pictures & travel memories of this intriguing country dating back to over three decades, in many ways drives up the excitement & enthusiasm.

Me, not standing out in front of Buland Darwaza (Victory Door) at Fatehpur Sikri one rainy afternoon in July 1988 didn't bring me regrets; instead me



along with a group of Spanish Clients stood under a covered shelter listening in rapt silence to the guide describe the finer & lesser known details about this enchanting 'ghost' city. And all of this transpired more than three decades ago. Many years later (2018) when I stood at the Victory Door, it was bright & sunny & our group basked in the morning sun. Bright & chirpy, or should I say – the Sun brought out the best in us!!

That's what I miss most when I travelled & lived in a few other places in the world. The sun was not showing up, when it was supposed to. Sunshine apart, it's the variety of the seventh

largest country in the world that shakes me out of my stupor. Should I meander to this part of India where unending spires reach the sky or should I simply wander to the mountains & hill slopes & finally uncover all the sheaths that made me the person I am? It's said & there is some truth in it – mountains make you super fit, empties the mind & creates space to absorb more. It entails some planning.

At times, I choose the easy way out heading where else but to the beaches of Goa? Mornings are spent practising yoga, taking long walks on pristine sand, going for a swim or watching fishermen tug their boats in. Am back during sunset when the colours of Nature play out an enchanting unreplaceable drama. The changing hues in the sky & over the horizon from distinct bright yellow to a shade of luminescent orange at twilight, followed by fading crimson until the sky turns dark & night falls. Yes, I am back again the following day.

Tigers too have a habit of returning back once every other day to mark their territories. It's more like a long walk the tiger takes during the morning hours when it covers its area, squirting urine on trees that mark its boundaries. It's called – 'initialling one's area'!! Where else but at India's many famous Wildlife Tiger Reserves you could watch this spectacle unfold.

It's the entire forest that baffles – enchanting trees & their canopies that guarantee shade & protection from the blistering sun, the roaming attentive alert eyes of Spotted Deer on the look for prowling carnivore, ant hills that are almost a man's height, wild dogs decimating carcass for bone marrow & langurs constantly feeding deer & chital by dropping berries & fresh leaves from treetops.

They even go a step further, letting out a distinct alarm call each time a predator is in the vicinity. Monkeys lengthen a deer's life, first, by feeding & then warning them!!

Be guided then, that India is much more than its valued & most photographed monument in the world– The Taj Mahal. I myself have never let my eyes off this glistening mausoleum, whenever I am there. As

though losing momentary sight means missing something special! Special also are sparkling temples across our sub-continent with facts woven around it & about how they came into being. A class apart, their magnificence can be truly appreciated by the curious traveller. I tried learning about temple styles, their forms & significance over the decades. Any favourites for me? Plenty – Meenakshi, Srirangam, Khajuraho, Birla Temple, Modhera, Konarak, Brihadeshwara, Kapaleeswar & Gangaikondachalam Temple. Last name is a tongue twister!!

Twists, hairpin bends & long hours on mountain roads brought me face-to-face with our spectacular mountain peaks: Himalayan, Karokoram, Shivalik & Dhauldhara. Inspiring sunrises, sight of snow kissed mountains at hand shaking distance, trekking in clear mountain air, non-stop banter with locals, shimmering monasteries on craggy hill tops & never ending changing colours, sizes and shapes of mountains, especially in land locked Ladakh left me bewildered and proud. Wanderings far from over, India 'pushes' me to explore more! Discover its spectacular variety for yourself!! ♦

*'The views expressed in the column are of the author, and may or may not be endorsed by the publication.'*

**Hector Dsouza** is the founder of L'orient Travels & Brand Builder. A prolific travel writer with over 1.2 million words to his credit, he began by publishing a Travel Magazine, 'Travel-n-Tell' in the early nineties. He switched over to online mode in 1997, continuing to this day & is featured in a number of national as well as international publications including - Times of India, Economic Times, ET Travel World, Mid-Day, Afternoon, Dreamscapes, & E Turbo. He is also a qualified Ashtanga Yoga Instructor. His forte is describing travel destinations, tourism analysis, & opinionated reporting.

# Ark Travel's gives agents first-hand experience of Resorts World Cruises' Genting Dream

TBM Staff | Mumbai

**M**umbai-based Ark Travel Group hosted the fifth edition of its cruising event, 'Big Bang Nautical Fiesta' after a gap of three years due to the pandemic. This time the event was organised onboard Genting Dream, in its new avatar as the flagship vessel of Resorts World Cruises. For this edition, Ark Travel Group brought together 350 travel agents.

Commenting on this, Kishan Biyani, MD, Ark Travel Group, said, "We had concentrated mostly on agents from Tier-II and III cities along with some new ones as we see a lot of potential in business from those areas. Since the ship was rebranded and there was a gap of over two years, for any exposure to the vessel and cruising, it was appropriate to showcase the ship and reassure the agent fraternity of our commitment along with that of Resorts World to the Indian market and our travel trade partners."

Talking about revised brand, Michael Goh, President, Resorts World Cruises, said, "We are excited about our return and sailing in the Asian waters. Asia is the home base for Resorts World Cruises and within the region; India is key source market for us. We are excited to explore opportunities in this market and connecting with travel professionals."

Naresh Rawal, Vice President - Sales & Marketing, Resorts World Cruises, said, "Our



association with the Ark Travel Group goes a long way and the team has always been very supportive and always think out-of-the-box to create experiences for their guests and travel partners. The objective is always learning while enjoying."

Elaborating on the same, Rawal said, "During this event onboard, events were created like foam parties, glow in the dark party, white theme and the gala dinner. Besides the parties, there was a very interactive business session too and we are happy to say that all our travel

partners participated and we hope that they have taken back ideas which will generate revenue streams for all of us. Marketing videos were also created by the Ark team to target all the segments to come onboard and create memories of a lifetime. Resorts World Cruises and the Ark Travel Group stand committed to work together to create business solutions for our travel partners and grow the cruising market from India and beyond."

Shedding light on the importance of the event, Biyani said that it is a kind of fresh beginning for cruise industry after the pandemic. The agent fraternity was already familiar with FIT and MIICE facilities on board. "We created events to show case how we can enhance the scope of target audience and add value for our clients by customising events which can keep different segments engaged. The agent should be able to target weddings segment/kitty party groups/Women groups/Bachelorette. They were encouraged to think out of the box and we are committed to support a variety of innovative events on board."

Ark Travel Group wanted agents to see for themselves the facilities and services available onboard Genting Dream and the various event opportunities that can be curated for their clients. Biyani said, "Seeing is Believing" they say. This event onboard has re-established agents' faith in the product 'Resorts World Cruises' as well as their preferred partner Ark Travels. It regained their confidence in both the brands and I am looking at reaping the results in the near future." ♦



# Are you nature deficient?

By **Dr. Nimit Chowdhary**, Professor of Tourism,  
Faculty of Management Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia

**F**or 99.9 per cent of our existence, we (humankind) have remained close to nature and been an integral part of it. It is only since the age of Anthropocene that we have earned a might to ghettoize ourselves from nature. Humans have all through time tried to be in sync with nature. Their innate tendency was to connect with nature and other life forms. However, of late, armed with technology, we have dared to defy nature. So empowered, as we stand ready to step into the metaverse- a hypothetical

iteration of the Internet as a single, universal and immersive virtual world- I fear that we will increasingly find this more real than the natural world outside our workspaces, gradually losing our connection with our habitat. Instead, we feel more comfortable indoors. From concrete homes to workspace and back in the car, engaging with machines like laptops, mobiles, TVs, and other gadgetry disconnects us from surrounding natural environments. The place blinds our vistas- *place blindness*.

Another fall out of this place blindness is our disconnect from other species in our habitat. Except for the rural landscapes, we have minimal contact with other species. As a result, we care least about them, and many of them have become extinct. We are supposed to cohabit on this planet with others- which we do not realize have begun to disappear because of our apathy. As a result, we have become a *lonely species* that cannot live and share the planet with others.

Not only that we have become a lonely species, but we have also become an *ungrateful species*. Our focus has narrowed to what we can have from this planet- a repository of resources to be consumed by humans- rather than an ecosystem shared by all. A couple of millennia back, organized religions and science aimed at taming nature. However, oriental philosophy and, to some extent, western paganism consider trees, soil, stones, and other elements of nature as alive.

Further, this renders our senses numb. We lose our ability to discern feedback that we receive from nature through our five senses. In the process, we miss our instinctual, perceptible relationship with nature. As a result, we increasingly fail to notice changes in our immediate or more extensive environment and thus are less mindful of what is happening around us. This phenomenon is sometimes called *sensory anaesthesia*.

Similarly, all through our lives, we have been advised to focus. So, we practice concentrating, filtering out other distractions around us. However, unfortunately, even our job roles require that we focus only on certain things for long periods, which typically leaves us distracted and irritable. This phenomenon is called *directed attention fatigue*. Research suggests that directed attention fatigue lowers our ability to self-

control, making us more aggressive, less tolerant, and less sensitive to social cues.

If one can identify with symptoms of *place blindness, lonely species, ungrateful species, sensory anaesthesia, or directed attention fatigue*, they probably suffer from *nature deficiency or nature deficit disorder*. While some researchers do not agree with this idea, many others, like Richard Louv, propose that lack of time outdoors adversely affects an individual's mental well-being. This disorder is aggravated by urban upbringing, which includes parental fears, loss of natural spaces in urban setups, and restricted access to natural areas.

Humans are part of nature, and any attempted isolation leads to nature deficiency, manifesting in rising cases of stress and anxiety, especially in urban built environments. Therefore, the western idea of protecting nature from humans by restricting access must be revisited. It has redefined our relationship with nature and perverted our eco-cultural identities.

While nature deficiency is unrecognized by most medical institutions, there is a growing recognition and diagnosis of the disorder. Of late, many pieces of research suggest that escaping to a park in the neighbourhood, trekking through the forests, or a weekend trip to a lake or a mountain can lower a person's stress levels, control blood pressure and reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, among others, while boosting mental health and increasing life expectancy. As a result, doctors around the world have begun prescribing time in nature as a way of improving their patient's health. Natural settings presumably evoke a form of attention that is undemanding or effortless. Related research suggests that mystery in nature has direct cognitive benefits on attention. To improve people's physical and psychological health, agencies like Park Prescriptions (PaRx) and Parks Canada have urged doctors to prescribe time in a national park, national historic site, or national marine conservation area as a form of treatment.

Is the travel industry listening? ♦

*'The views expressed in the column are of the author, and may or may not be endorsed by the publication.'*



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