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Union Budget: Travel and Tourism Sector Expects More Than Lip Service

T

he Union Budget 2020 will be presented on 1 February amidst a sluggish economy and humiliating downgrade by IMF. Governments and ministers have time and again proclaimed tourism as an economic multiplier for India. However, budgetary allocation towards developing tourism-specific infrastructure and tax reliefs to promote travel make all the sound bytes look like mere lip service!

For at least a decade now, the industry has been demanding infrastructure status for the hotel sector and export status for tourism business as a whole. Since the GST regime has been established, the cost of construction has gone up by 8-10 per cent as the entire civil structure is being treated as an immovable property. Hoteliers are hoping to get the option to claim the input tax credit on GST for this. Outbound travel agents are already losing business as customers are booking holidays directly with foreign agents to avoid the GST. Tour operators complain that GST for outbound travel is like double taxation as customers anyway pay taxes at the destination. Tourism is the third-largest earner in terms of foreign exchange for India, yet the export status evades it!

Another key expectation from this budget is clarity on the issue of Air Travel Agent being subjected to Tax Collection at Source. The amendment of the proviso to section 16(2) in claiming input tax credit on the tax charged by the airline will help in providing for the



specific scenario of payment made by corporates or registered passengers to a travel operator.

Lack of quality infrastructure and poor connectivity pose a challenge to domestic tourism, especially in the North East. Creation of new travel circuits in the North East will open up a window of opportunity for the tourism sector that is still under-tapped. Concerted efforts from airlines to operate these routes along with lower GST rates on hotels will help boost increased traffic to the region.

Reduction in personal income tax rates and Capital Gains Tax will place more money in the hands of customers which will accelerate the growth of travel. Only then the PM's Independence Day wish that every Indian visit 15 domestic tourist destinations by 2022 will become a reality. Not to forget, the critical need to create basic infrastructure like roads, accommodation and sanitation, and last-mile connectivity in many of these destinations.

The government's recent proposal to enhance curbs on the purchase of duty-free liquor and stop duty-free sale of tobacco products is shocking. Duty-free shops contribute 15-20 per cent of non-aeronautical revenue at airports. Sale of liquor and tobacco products make up 70-75 per cent of total duty-free revenue. The proposal if approved will cripple the aviation industry, upset the financial viability of privatized airports and leave no money for AAI to invest in airport upgradation and improve regional connectivity.

What can we really expect from the Union Budget, if this is how decision-makers think? Another disappointing budget which we will all praise because we are scared!!!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jose Kunnappally'.

Jose Kunnappally | Editor

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/JoseKunnappally @JoseKunnappally

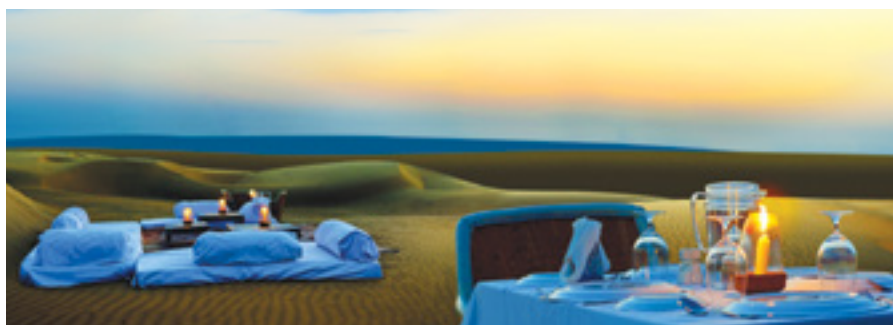
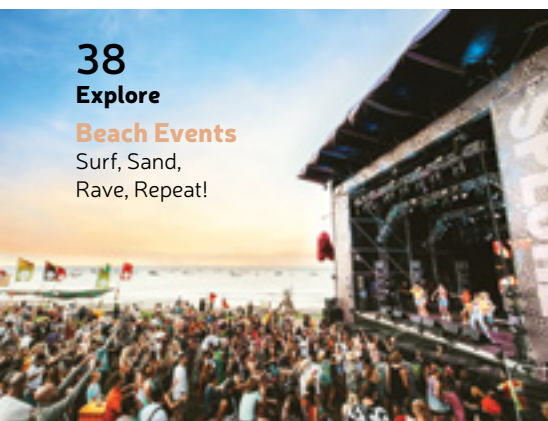
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International
**Kanchanaburi
and Khao Yai**

The Hidden Gems of Thailand



Cover Photograph
The 2-hour ride by
Death Railway train
from River Kwai Bridge
to Tham Krasae Cave
in Kanchanaburi is an
amazing experience

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OTOAI to Focus on Stakeholder Relationships

The industry body has plans to grow the membership base and conduct events with various tourism boards to educate trade partners on destinations, attractions and experiences

The newly elected president of the Outbound Tour Operators Association of India (OTOAI), Riaz Munshi (President, N Chirag Travels) shares his plans and priorities with *Destination Reporter*.

What are your top three priorities?

As the industry body representing outbound travel from India, we have three major priorities. Our foremost priority is to strengthen our relationship with the Union Ministry of Tourism (MoT), embassies, tourism boards and stakeholders. We will work with the MoT and other central government ministries like civil aviation, home affairs and finance to facilitate ease of foreign travel and create a level playing field for tour operators. We want to have a strong brand presence for OTOAI in India and abroad. Tour operators abroad should know about OTOAI and work with its members to promote outbound travel from India.

Another priority is to focus on growing our membership base. Today, we have over 550 tour operators across India as members and want to aggressively grow this to 1500 in the next two years. We are increasing our presence through events and roadshows in tier II and III cities. We are strong in North and Western India. Our focus will be to grow our presence in South and Eastern India as well.

The third priority will be in the area of education and skill development. We have lined up a few programs and more are getting added as we speak. We are receiving a very good response from the members too. Together with Destination Canada we have conducted Product Training Workshops in New Delhi and Ahmedabad in January. We will conduct similar events with the tourism boards of Germany and Korea who have worked with us in the past. We want many more such events with various tourism boards to educate trade partners on destinations, attractions and experiences. Such activities help front line sales personnel to effectively sell to customers.

Can you tell us about the theme of the next Annual Convention?

As you are aware, we have just announced the 5th annual convention of OTOAI. From March 15-18, 2020, it will be held at Antalya in Turkey. Turkish Culture &



RIAZ MUNSHI
President, OTOAI



Tourism Office and Turkish Airlines are our partners this time and there will be pre and post FAM trips for members and media to Istanbul, Cappadocia, Izmir and Pamukkale. The theme of the convention is to explore means to enhance faith and confidence of customers in outbound tour operators as well as strategize on ways to grow our business in these challenging times.

Have you been in touch with MoT for tabling recommendations for consideration in the Union Budget?

OTOAI has tabled a draft letter in front of the MoT for consideration in the Union Budget. One of the major concerns is around GST on outbound travel. We are of the considered view that it amounts to double taxation. Outbound travelers pay GST for our services and then the local tax in the foreign destination because of which many Indian travelers are not buying packages and services in India. Our agents are losing business to foreign players because of this. Another pain point is in the area of ensuring parity in GST for companies in India vis-a-vis companies operating in India but not liable for GST as they are not registered in India. There has to be a level playing field where no one has an undue advantage.

How do you view digital transformation in the travel industry?

While there has been talk of tech-enabled business models overshadowing offline travel businesses, I believe, in India both will continue to co-exist and grow simultaneously. Having said that, tour operators have to be aware of developments on the technology front as the consumer profile has changed. They are digitally savvy and mobile-first today. So agents need to know how social media works and to showcase destinations, leverage influencers and facilitate word of mouth advertising. Understanding millennial travelers and how they search and gather information for their travel needs are paramount in being business ready in the new age. However, what we see in India is that segments like luxury travel and special interest travel groups continue to engage with offline travel agents for their bookings. Online travel businesses have been so far successful in selling only point to point tickets and one-size-fits-all packages.

VisitBritain Organises India Sales Mission 2020

Held in Mumbai and New Delhi, the event saw UK suppliers showcasing destinations and products to leading buyers in India's travel trade industry

VisitBritain held its India Sales Mission 2020 in January in Mumbai and New Delhi. The VisitBritain India Sales Mission gave the UK suppliers an opportunity to meet 300 Indian travel agents and tour operators (buyers) from both cities specialising in leisure, MICE & luxury. The UK suppliers held B2B table-top meetings during the day and partook in lavish networking dinner.

Destination Reporter caught up with Victoria Braddock, Director of International Marketing at Marketing Manchester and Vishal Bhatia, Country Manager India, VisitBritain.

In 2019, Manchester was in the limelight due to the ICC Cricket World Cup. "We have witnessed substantial growth since 2013. India is an important strategic market for Manchester and we have great air connectivity via the Middle East," commented Victoria Braddock, Director of International Marketing at Marketing Manchester.

Manchester is working on securing a direct flight from Mumbai or Delhi. When the now-grounded Jet Airways was operating the Mumbai-Manchester route, it had a load factor no less than 85 per cent. Emirates, Etihad and Oman Air among others offer great connections to Manchester.

Marketing Manchester is leveraging key relationships that VisitBritain has in India and collaborating with agents like MakeMyTrip and Thomas Cook to ensure they have enough content and also to make up for the void left behind by Cox & Kings.

Talking about MICE groups, Braddock said that Marketing Manchester is engaging with agents who deal in the segment. "The absence of a direct flight has not impacted the MICE groups coming to Manchester," she reiterated.

Marketing Manchester considers tier II and III markets in India as feeder markets. "Our all-out participation in Global Panorama Showcase (GPS) was reflective of our commitment to the Indian market and we received an overwhelming response at GPS in 2018 and 2019," confirmed Braddock.

Marketing Manchester is working aggressively to ensure it gets into the Indian travellers' UK itinerary and targeting young frequent travellers to choose Manchester as their destination of choice!



"In 2020, we will be tapping untouched markets like Chennai, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Kolkata and Chandigarh in partnership with UKVI and other trade partners"

VISHAL BHATIA
Country Manager India, VisitBritain



"India is an important strategic market for Manchester and we have great air connectivity via the Middle East"

VICTORIA BRADDOCK
Director of International Marketing
Marketing Manchester

VISITBRITAIN TO HIKE B2B BUDGET

The "I Travel For" campaign launched in February 2016 was developed based on feedback and data received from digital platforms. "It is a digitally-led campaign that helps us in creating content for tier I markets and then tuning it for tier II and III. We gather valuable insights on consumer journeys and consumer segments," said Vishal Bhatia, Country Manager India, VisitBritain.

As per recent data of H1, 2019, visits were up 14 per cent and spend up by 41 per cent. For the first time (2018 and 2019), Indians are staying more nights in the rest of England than in London. VisitBritain is focussing on destinations other than London in the "I Travel For" campaign and it is delivering great results.

"TXGB (Tourism Exchange GB) launched in May 2019 is progressing well with the ongoing backend integration with MakeMyTrip," informed Bhatia. This will ensure MMT is accessible to many suppliers in the UK be it B&B providers in Lake District or smaller attractions in the rest of England especially Manchester which cannot directly talk to agents in markets like India. TXGB allows them to plug and play with content, check the effectiveness of the content with trade and tweak the same based on feedback. "TXGB is a game-changer for us helping develop interesting products for long-term success," commented Bhatia.

The Discover England Fund (DEF) has been doing commendable work to support the development and distribution of tourism products. As part of DEF, VisitBritain worked on the 'Open Joy' itineraries for India which was part of Manchester, Birmingham and London. It has been a great success story with group departures witnessing people getting into the UK from London or Manchester and getting out from a third city.

In 2020, VisitBritain plans to increase its B2B budget to engage a lot more with the travel trade. "We will be tapping untouched markets like Chennai, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Kolkata and Chandigarh in partnership with UKVI and other trade partners like Marketing Manchester or other DMOs. We are also working with UKVI and VFS Global to craft visa messaging, address myths about UK visa, talk about MICE scheme and passport fast track services," concluded Bhatia.

'TAAI is the Face and Voice of India's Travel Industry'

The newly elected TAAI leadership is on a mission mode to engage with the government to arrive at a formal structure for the industry

Director, New Airways Travels and the newly elected President of Travel Agents Association of India (TAAI), Jyoti Mayal and MD, Triway Travels and the new Honorary Secretary General of TAAI, Lokesh Bettaiah, share their priorities and views with *Destination Reporter*.

What are your key focus areas as the new leadership of TAAI?

Mayal: We want to be the face and voice of the industry and work closely with the government. We wish to have media, both mainstream and trade, supporting us to grow this industry. We are working with the Union Ministry of Tourism (MoT), Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA) and IATA. We are setting the agenda for the next two years.

The TAAI constitution is undergoing a revamp with certain amendments coming in. From a technology standpoint, we are trying to bring in processes and practices for the effective day-to-day working of the association nationwide.

Bettaiah: The full team under Jyoti Mayal's leadership won the election this year so our mandate is clear. We will have a dynamic team working across 20 regions and chapters of TAAI to promote travel and tourism. We want to make each travel professional prepared to do business in these changing times. We also want to encourage sports tourism and inbound to India.

Can you share details of some of the major activities planned?

Mayal: We have signed an MoU with Department of Culture and Tourism, Abu Dhabi. We are discussing the possibility of celebrating 2020 as Abu Dhabi Tourism Year in India.

Bettaiah: We have also signed an MoU with MATTA (Malaysian Association of Tour & Travel Agents) for promoting travel to Malaysia. Similar engagements are in place or in the process of being finalised with Destination Canada, Belgium Tourism Office, Dubai Tourism, Turkish Culture & Tourism Office, and many more.

Which are some of the policy recommen-



JYOTI MAYAL
President, TAAI

dations you would like to see in the new Union Budget?

Mayal: We want to see a formally structured travel industry. Decisions taken by the government should have our inputs. I have to say this even if it may turn controversial: What are FICCI, CII and ASSOCHAM doing in the travel and tourism industry? Why are they talking to the government on behalf of our industry? TAAI is the face and voice of the travel industry in India and it is we whom the government has to engage with to grow and shape the industry.

Bettaiah: We have given inputs to MoT regarding the growth of critical tourism infrastructure across destinations in India and hope to see some allocation in the budget. Our PM has said that tourism is a focus area for growth. We also hope the government will address our concerns around GST.

Airline commission has always been a bone of contention?

Mayal: We are preparing a White Paper and presenting to the MoCA on how to work together. We have already moved the document regarding the airline commission. We are an integral part of the ecosystem. We are agents. Anywhere in the world, an agent is protected by the supplier. Or let us agree that we are principals and then explore how we can work together. We have OTAs, mom and pop shops, reseller model, agent model, MICE model – so we are losing focus on who we really are. It's a conflict of thought process.



LOKESH BETTAIAH
Honorary Secretary General, TAAI

So the government has to sit with us and agree on rules of engagement in the travel industry so we have a formal structure to it.

What is TAAI doing to ensure agents are digital ready?

Mayal: We started a platform called TAAI Connect some time back. We are exploring how to take it forward.

Bettaiah: Educating consumers through social media seems to be more effective these days than traditional channels. Consumers need to understand our business, for example, that we don't receive a commission on airline tickets, so don't seek discounts.

Mayal: Consumers have to be responsible when putting stuff out on social media. Please don't kill a tourism product instantly because someone slipped up somewhere. There is a lot of money, careers and families riding on it. Kindly be positive about things and explore solutions along with us.

How is TAAI facilitating education and skill development?

Mayal: TAAI will hold joint roadshows with various tourism boards to facilitate awareness building and destination education for its members across India. We are also looking at soft skills training for front line staff.

Bettaiah: We will continue to conduct Knowledge Conclaves on topics relevant to the travel trade. In 2019, we had five such sessions.

South Africa to Offer E-visa for Indian Travellers

In 2020, South African Tourism aims to cross one lakh visitors from India, which continues to remain one of South Africa's key focus markets globally

South African Tourism (SAT) has had a busy start this year – SAT was at SATTE for the very first time with a jumbo 43-member delegation followed by a 3-city Annual Roadshow culminating in Mumbai with the new Minister for Tourism Mmamoloko Kubayi-Ngubane interacting with trade and media. The campaigns were aimed at targeting 1,00,000 visitors from India in 2020.

The SAT delegation also had other senior leaders like Ravi Nadasen, Interim Board Chairperson, South African Tourism, Sthembiso Dlamini, COO, Hanneli Slabber, Regional General Manager, Middle East, Asia and Australasia and Neliswa Nkani, Hub Head, MEISEA.

South Africa is aiming to double arrival numbers to touch 21 million FTAs by 2030 according to Minister Kubayi-Ngubane. She said India is a key source market witnessing exponential growth. "During my visit, we have engaged with tour operators, MICE agents and corporate buyers to understand barriers to growth and how to effectively address them."

The current visa regime, one of the major hurdles impacting growth in Indian arrivals will see a major shift soon. The Minister announced an e-visa program for Indian travellers. The program will be piloted in January and full implementation will be from April 2020. Five days will be the turn around time for the e-visa. "We are exploring how to leverage the US/Schengen visa holder database to expedite visa approval for these travellers from India."

For families with children, the child's unabridged birth certificate which was earlier a requirement has been done away with to allow hassle free family travel. "As part of BRICS community, SAT wanted visa fee waiver for Indian travellers, but we have not been able to secure it. However, regarding the issue of multiple entry visa, a Memorandum of Agreement has been signed between home ministers of South Africa and India. We are now waiting for South African parliament's ratification," the Minister informed.

SAT recently finalised a Tourism Safety and Security Strategy and ran a pilot program in December 2019-January 2020 during their peak season with just one incident reported. Ground personnel (tourist police) and technology (CCTV cameras) are ensuring the focus is on prevention rather than post incident response.

When asked about the discontinued Mumbai – Johannesburg direct flight of South African Airways, Minister Kubayi-Ngubane had a surprising response. "We have reached out to Indian carriers as well as foreign airlines flying to India and South Africa to operate the Mumbai – Johannesburg schedule. We can complete the paper work and offer the license we

hold to any willing partner in two weeks and in three months from now hope to have that direct flight operationalised."

With 81,316 Indian arrivals as of October 2019, the destination board shared a positive outlook for the Indian market. From January to September 2019, MICE accounted for 24 per cent of the Indian arrivals. 43 per cent of overall Indian visitations to South Africa were repeat travellers. As of September 2019, total spends by Indian travellers in South Africa had reached a 4-year high. 2019 witnessed a 36.6 per cent increase in Indian traveller spends on shopping and a 26 per cent increase in spends on leisure activities in South Africa. Average length of stay witnessed a year on year increase of 8 per cent in the first half of 2019.

"India continues to remain one of our key focus markets globally and it is encouraging to observe consistent, upward growth from traditional regions like Mumbai, Delhi & Bengaluru as well as rising visitor traffic from emerging cities like Pune. With more and more visitors citing South Africa's scenic natural beauty as reasons to visit, we are focused in our efforts towards opening up newer geographies in our country. This will serve a dual objective of catering to this very consumer demand as well as offering a diversity of itinerary options for our trade partners to sell," said Nkani.

Between January to June 2019, around 43 per cent of total Indian visitors to the Rainbow Nation were from Mumbai. 62 per cent visitors from Mumbai travelled solo, while 13 percent travelled with their partners. During the same period, around 21 per cent of total Indian visitors to South Africa were from Delhi. 40 per cent visitors from Delhi travelled solo, while 26 per cent travelled with their partners.



"We have reached out to Indian carriers as well as foreign airlines flying to India and South Africa to operate the Mumbai – Johannesburg schedule"

MMAMOLOKO KUBAYI-NGUBANE
Minister for Tourism
South Africa



Neliswa Nkani, Sthembiso Dlamini, Ravi Nadasen and Mmamoloko Kubayi-Ngubane



SriLankan to Commence Four New Flights in 2020

The 'world's most punctual airline' has announced its intent to fly into Ahmedabad and Kozhikode in India as well as Sydney and Ho Chi Minh City this year

SriLankan Airlines, as the flag carrier of the island nation, has had a challenging year in 2019. The Easter Sunday attacks and the travel advisories which soon followed crippled the dynamic tourism industry. But timely government intervention, and a joint outreach by the tourism board and travel trade have ensured the industry bounced back in no time.

V Ravindran, the new Regional Manager (India and Bangladesh) of SriLankan Airlines is confident that the largest foreign carrier serving India in terms of frequency and entry points is on a path of expansion and growth in 2020.

The airline operates 120 flights weekly and flies to 11 destinations in India currently – Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Chennai, Kolkata, Hyderabad, Kochi, Thiruvananthapuram, Coimbatore, Trichy and Madurai. The daily frequency to Delhi was enhanced from two to three last year. It also announced its intent to fly into Ahmedabad and Kozhikode which will get operationalized in the second half of this year. "With two new entry points that we have announced, we will be flying



V RAVINDRAN
Regional Manager (India and Bangladesh)
SriLankan Airlines

to 13 cities in India. No other airline has our connectivity, capacity or frequency," said Ravindran. "We still have more room to grow."

Many blue-collar workers, especially from South India, prefer to fly SriLankan to the GCC region – the airline flies daily to UAE, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Three SEA destinations favored by Indians – Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand – also are part of its network. SriLankan has three entry points served double daily in China (Beijing, Shanghai and Ganzhou). Jakarta (Indonesia) and Tokyo (Japan) are also part of the network. "We have been flying to Melbourne for two years with excellent load factor and plans are afoot to launch service to Sydney. With two cities, we hope to attract more leisure travellers from India," informed Ravindran. This year, SriLankan will commence flights to Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

As part of cost rationalization, the airline which once flew to many points in Europe, today just serves London with daily flights. "Europe is a very low yield market

and seasonal too. So we have been very cautious about expanding in that region. However, the management is considering Paris though no decision has been made yet," commented Ravindran.

Sri Lanka does not have a huge travelling population. Hence the traffic for SriLankan's expanding network has to primarily come from India's growing breed of outbound travellers, the largest source market for the island's tourism industry and airline.

In November 2019, for the first time, SriLankan announced a big bonanza offering 20-30 per cent discount on fares. "It was a moderate success and we plan to run more such schemes to ramp up load during off-peak season," confirmed Ravindran.

Recently, SriLankan signed a code-share agreement with Gulf Air, adding to its existing list of 18 code-share partners including Air India. It is exploring code-share with Indian LCCs too.

At SATTE 2020, the airline unveiled an offer for those enrolling as members of its frequent flyer program, FlySmiLes. The intent is to grow the membership base considerably. Enhancements are being effected to the internet booking engine to provide a more customer-friendly experience. With the introduction of a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) tool, the airline will be able to enhance its offering to the FlySmiLes members and provide greater rewards for loyal customers.

The on-board passenger experience is also being greatly enhanced, including

significant changes to the content and user-friendly aspects of the inflight entertainment system; revamping of the Business Class product and service; improved ranges of meals and beverages; and plans are underway to introduce more comfortable seating in the Business Class cabins of the narrow-body fleet including the NEO aircraft serving the Far East.

The company is focussing on the importance and user-friendliness of its online direct sales channel www.srilankan.com and has succeeded in increasing its contribution to overall revenue by up to 15 per cent from the previous 11 per cent.

2019 saw the airline being recognized the world over for its customer centricity as well as marketing excellence with multiple awards - ITB Berlin 2019 (three coveted awards at the Golden City Gate Awards); PATA Awards 2019 (one award); "Asia's Leading Airline to the Indian Ocean" title for the third consecutive year and 'World's Leading Airline to the Indian Ocean' for the fourth consecutive year, at the esteemed World Travel Awards, Asia and Oceania ceremonies.

"Vigorous commitment to service quality and efficiency has resulted in SriLankan being named the 'World's Most Punctual Airline' twice during the last 12 months," concluded Ravindran.



Decoding the Chinese Outbound Tourism Market

While it may not be a great time to welcome Chinese visitors, their outbound market is booming and it makes sense to understand their mindset and psyche

The Chinese outbound tourism market is already very strong and has huge potential to grow further still. In a bid to offer valuable insights for the global travel trade to effectively tap the Chinese outbound market, World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and the China Tourism Academy (CTA) have jointly published a set of guidelines after carrying out a primary research into the factors motivating Chinese tourists to travel. The document also presents a valuable toolkit to guide destination managers and decision makers on the best way to tap into this lucrative and productive market.

China occupies the privileged position of the leading tourism outbound market in the world both in departure numbers, as well as total expenditure. The Chinese outbound market is characterised by its rapid growth, large volume, far outreach and huge potential. NTOs and DMCs need to be "China ready" in their plans and products to tackle this valuable and lucrative market. It is strategically important to understand the mindset and psyche of the travellers to be able to cater to their needs.

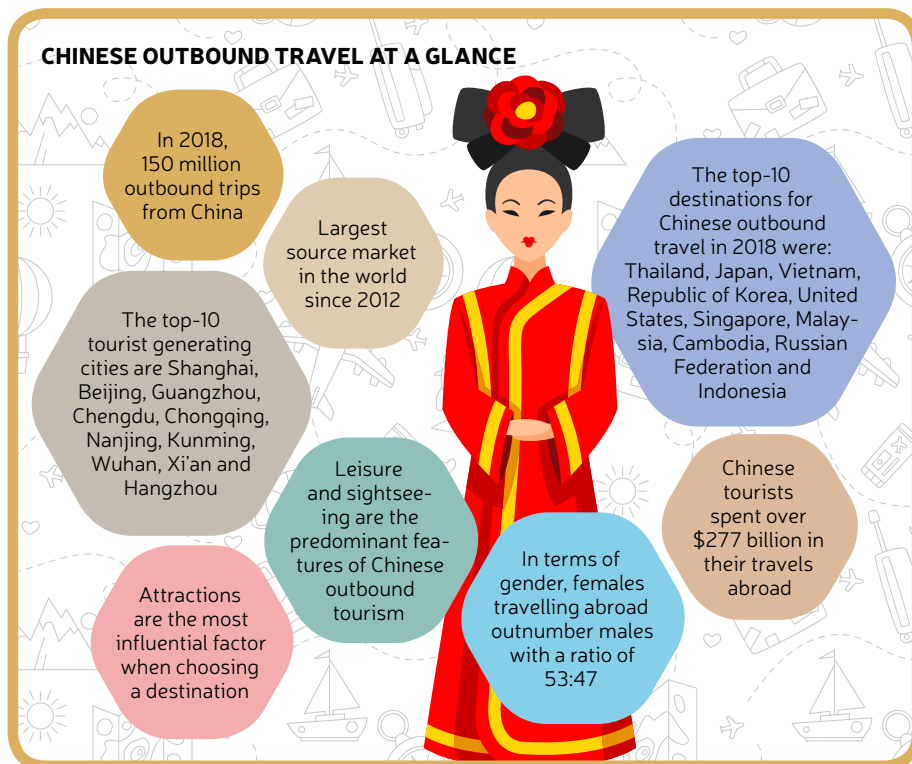
In the past ten years, China's outbound market has continued to maintain double-digit, even over 20 per cent growth, being today the world's largest source market. Besides the nearby destinations in Asia and the Pacific, more and more Chinese tourists are discovering long-haul traditional and emerging destinations.

China has been the largest source market in the world since 2012. In 2018, there were around 150 million outbound trips (+15 per cent) from China and Chinese tourists spent over \$277 billion (+5 per cent) in their travels abroad.

Nearby countries in North-East and South-East Asia, as well as Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan are the main destinations visited by Chinese tourists. Emerging destinations are also attracting more and more Chinese tourists.

KEY BEHAVIOURAL TRAITS OF CHINESE TOURISTS

- Millennials are the dominant group
- Family bonds are an overriding feature
- Leisure and sightseeing are still the main purpose of travel, and attraction of scenic spots is the most important



decision-making factor

- Online information search and booking is prevalent
- Besides shopping, gastronomy in the form of local delicacies and cultural entertainments are also highly welcomed
- Ease of payment is expected
- Both travel and non-travel online user generated content platforms are the place for travel experience sharing. Sharing with families and friends is customary

KEY FACTORS DEFINING THE SATISFACTION OF CHINESE TOURISTS

- Value for money: high quality at reasonable prices
- Good air quality and natural environment
- Enhanced safety and security
- Better mobile phone signals
- Professional tour guide services

MARKET OPPORTUNITY

The market has a huge potential since about 90 per cent of Chinese citizens have not yet travelled overseas. Key emerging trends worth taking into consideration include:

- The pursuit of Chinese tourists has evolved from viewing beautiful scenery to 'scenery enjoying and life experiencing'
- Cultural entertainment is becoming an indispensable component of local life experience
- Individualized services and products are expected, especially for frequent travellers

Destinations are thus encouraged to develop and promote places of interest, activities and services enriched by local culture and lifestyle; pay more attention to mobile devices to attract young people, especially those born after 1990 and provide innovative products and services

It is understandable that destinations are at different stages of attracting Chinese tourists and therefore have different strategies. Mature destinations should focus on free independent travellers (FITs) in the wealthier cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Tianjin, Suzhou and Chengdu, as well as group tourists and new FITs in the tier II and tier III cities.

Emerging destinations can focus on high-end tourists needing tailored tours,

but those with lower costs are also attractive to the young and FIT tourists.

CHINESE-READY MARKETS

Five of the most-visited destinations by the Chinese are Australia, France, Thailand, Japan and the United States of America. These destinations follow some of the best practices detailed below to remain effective in welcoming Chinese tourists.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

Increase in expenditure: Chinese tourists spent \$277 billion in 2018 (+5 per cent).

Growth of independent tours and personalized services: Outbound departures with traditional package tours through travel agencies was 59 million in 2016 (latest available data) which accounted for 47 per cent of the total market share. However, the trend is being reversed with richer overseas travel experiences and the increase in the millennials where more Chinese tourists choose to travel independently.

Advent of incentive, business and other travel groups: Besides the fierce competition among conventional tour operators (Caissa Touristic, U-tour, CITS, CYTS, etc.) and online travel agencies (Ctrip, Tuniu.com, Qunar.com, LY.com, Fliggy.com, etc.), new business entities with loyal consumer base are entering the outbound tourism market.

The impact of technology – switch from computer websites to mobile applications: Chinese are increasingly going mobile for bank transactions, booking tickets,

Family bonds are an overriding feature in Chinese outbound travel with 51 per cent travelling with family, 27 per cent with friends and only 13 per cent travelling alone

payments, videos and comments.

Catchment areas of Chinese outbound tourism – richer areas with higher per capita income dominate: According to the sales data by Ctrip, the top-10 tourist generating cities are Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Chongqing, Nanjing, Kunming, Wuhan, Xi'an and Hangzhou.

TOP AND EMERGING DESTINATIONS

Among these, the top-10 destinations for Chinese outbound travel in 2018 were: Thailand, Japan, Vietnam, Republic of Korea, United States, Singapore, Malaysia, Cambodia, Russian Federation and Indonesia.

In 2018, destinations such as Cyprus, Croatia, Bahamas, Turkey, Serbia and Georgia attracted more attention. This has been confirmed by Ctrip.com that also witnessed

the highest sales growth from destinations such as Montenegro, Serbia, Argentina, Mexico, Brazil and the Czech Republic.

UNDERSTANDING CHINESE TOURISTS

In terms of gender, females travelling abroad outnumber males with a ratio of 53:47. In terms of age, millennials (aged between 15 and 34 years) dominate with 55 per cent the market, followed by those between 35 and 44 years old (33 per cent). On the other hand, senior citizens (over 60 years of age) and children (under 15 years of age) constitute 6 per cent and 5.6 per cent respectively.

Chinese outbound travellers have a good standard of education with an appreciable percentage (25 per cent) having graduate and post-graduate degrees.

One third of the Chinese outbound travellers have monthly pre-tax income of between \$700 and \$1100 which put them into the category of the middle-class while almost another one third can be categorized as affluent.

Leisure and sightseeing are the pre-dominant features of Chinese outbound tourism.

Family bonds are an overriding feature in Chinese outbound travel with 51 per cent travelling with family, 27 per cent with friends and only 13 per cent travelling alone.

For most Chinese tourists, attractions are the most influential factor when choosing a destination (39 per cent). Many tourists (16 per cent) are also price sensitive. Delicious food (11 per cent) and colourful activities (15 per cent) can help to attract Chinese tourists.

WELCOME CHINESE CERTIFICATION

The China Tourism Academy has issued the Welcome Chinese Certification delivered by its exclusive worldwide partner Select Holding Ltd., who is in charge of verifying that the standards are implemented and in place. The Welcome Chinese Certification has been recognised by the European Travel Commission as the standard of reference from China for the European market.

Based on this certification, key points are provided to all destinations eager to welcome Chinese tourists. They include understanding of Chinese culture, customs and traditions as the first step; open visa policy; understanding the evolution of the Chinese outbound market and its new realities; free Wi-Fi, ease of payment and language (Mandarin service); close contact with Chinese travel partners that can help destinations to detect and follow market changes and provide diverse and authentic travel experiences that will help to attract repeat tourists.

DOS	
	Smile. Chinese people value non-verbal communication
	Allocate hotel rooms with the numbers 6, 8 or 9, as all are considered lucky
	Pay compliments and offer other forms of respect such as giving small gifts
	Use some basic Chinese phrases as a mark of respect
	Handle items such as dishes and documents with both hands as a sign of respect
	Treat complaints seriously and be prepared to formally apologise

DON'TS	
	Don't give Chinese tourists a fourth-floor room as number '4' resembles death in Chinese language
	Don't raise politically sensitive issues such as human rights or independence without great care
	Don't correct or contradict people in public or say anything that causes them to lose face
	Don't put someone's business card in your pocket without being seen to read it first
	Don't expose groups to long queues or make them wait for service

Ethiopian to Launch Chennai Direct in April 2020

The airline is evaluating if it can operate the Mumbai – Johannesburg route discontinued by South African Airways



TIGIST ESHETU
Regional Director – India
Sub-continent
Ethiopian Airlines

The Ethiopian Group has also entered the five star hospitality segment through the recently inaugurated Ethiopian Skylight Hotel in Addis Ababa

Tigist Eshetu, Regional Director – India Sub-continent, Ethiopian Airlines is a 19-year veteran with the airline group who took up the new role just a few months ago. In an exclusive interview with *Destination Reporter*, she speaks about her priorities and plans for the future.

2019 must have been a very challenging year for the airline especially the tragic crash in March when four Indians were among those killed and then in June when India issued a travel advisory after attacks on expats. Can you comment?

Ethiopian Airlines is engaged constantly in enhancing its capability including safety and security. Regarding the tragic incident in March 2019, as the accident was caused due to some technical features of the aircraft, Ethiopian has grounded the remaining Boeing 737 MAX 8 aircraft. As you are aware, similar measures have been taken by almost all carriers operating the said model of aircraft. We have not witnessed any drop in traffic due to the travel advisory as the attack was an isolated incident.

In August 2019 you added a third entry point in India – Bengaluru, after Mumbai and New Delhi. How has the response been?

As Bengaluru is an internationally recognised IT hub that has growing demand from all over the world, this has helped the new route to have sufficient traction. Since launch, this route is functioning smoothly and the outcomes are quite encouraging.

In August 2018, you commenced stop-over packages targeting transit visitors to explore Ethiopia. What has been the outcome?

Given Addis Ababa is not only the capital city of Ethiopia, but also one of the major business centres in Africa with a large number of important regional institutions like the African Union, UN agencies, the World Bank as well as corporates, the 3-hour stopover package we have introduced is giving an opportunity to our esteemed customers and business travellers to experience the beautiful city of Addis Ababa which is also known for its culture, food and coffee, free of charge.

The Vision 2025 strategy of the airline was to cross 100 destinations which you achieved much earlier. What is the Vision 2030 target like? Can you elaborate on the program?

Currently, Ethiopian Airlines is building on what has been achieved, and working towards flying to additional destinations in Africa, Middle East, Asia, North & South America as well as Europe. The airline does not only want to add new destinations but continue to give world-class five star service to its clientele although it is a four star airline.

Besides the airline industry, the Ethiopian Group has also entered the five star hospitality segment through the recently inaugurated Ethiopian Skylight Hotel in Addis Ababa.

What has been the performance (uplift and load factor) in 2018 and 2019?

For the period July 1, 2018 to June 30, 2019, the uplift recorded in India was 1,85,629 passengers and the load factor 79.35 per cent. From July 1, 2019 to December 31, 2019, the uplift has been 90,974 passengers and the load factor 75.09 per cent. At this rate, when we report July 2019 to June 2020 numbers, we should have improved our performance compared to 2018-19 as the peak season is the next few months. 70 per cent of our traffic is transit which is huge. That is why we are targeting them for spending more time in the country through attractive packages created by Ethiopian Holidays.

Our Business Class is also performing well as the seats are very comfortable and the food served on board is also excellent. We have a wide choice of entertainment content and both on-board food and entertainment have Indian options too.

Tell us about how the MICE movement from India is faring? What percentage of total uplift in a year is MICE?

Last year we organised several MICE groups from Rotary, medical tourism and some cargo groups as well who hopefully will consider having their big gatherings in Addis Ababa this year as well. The Indian textile group is also holding an exhibition in Addis Ababa this month. We are trying to secure more MICE bookings.

Ethiopian is currently conducting market studies in Hyderabad, Chennai, Kolkata and Ahmedabad to gauge the African appetite of these cities. Have you zeroed in on the fourth city?

Yes, we have! And I am happy to announce the launch of our fourth destination in India – Chennai starting April, 2020. We will fly direct thrice weekly. We already have double daily direct flights to Mumbai and Delhi and service Bengaluru four times a week.

How is Ethiopian Holidays business doing in India? What kind of numbers are you handling currently?

Currently, we are promoting Ethiopian Holidays products widely. Although the responses have not been very high as expected, the campaign has helped to create awareness about Ethiopia. We had also organized a FAM trip for media in 2016 and the participants had provided encouraging feedback. A lot of Indians do book trips online from Ethiopian Holidays and we get rave reviews. But this number can really go up considering our air connectivity. We have Ethiopian Holidays packages being sold by travel agents and tour operators across India. Our GSAs work to promote the packages.

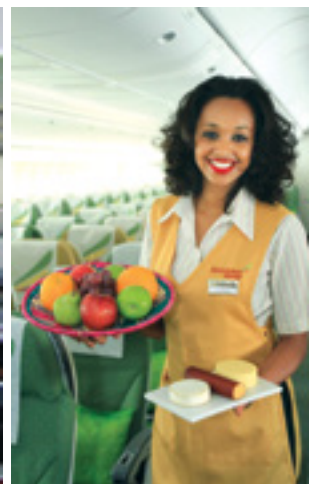
Tell us about your plans for the next three years for the airline and the holidays business?

Route expansion in terms of both cargo and passenger services is our focus. We will aggressively promote digitalization and also try to further enhance overall quality of our customer services to maintain our competitive position.

We will also be spending the forthcoming years creating awareness about Ethiopia, conducting workshops, giving presentations and also educating the MICE traveller to make Ethiopia a business as well as pleasure destination.

What are some of the sought-after experiences Indians should explore? Can you tell us more about the profile of the Indian clientele?

In Northern Ethiopia, the UNESCO® World Heritage Sites of Lalibela and Gondar, the holy city of Axum or cruising on the Lake Tana in Bahir Dar; explore the fascinating cultures of the ethnic groups which inhabit Omo Valley in Southern Ethiopia; indulge in a wildlife safari at the Awash National Park in Eastern Ethiopia; take a selfie at Erta Ale (Smoking Mountain) in north-eastern Ethiopia, the most active volcano in the region, and don't miss the Bonga coffee tour – Bonga in



south western Ethiopia is the birthplace of Arabica coffee.

My overall take is that our Indian customers are very polite, sociable and business-oriented. Overall, I found it unique that several Indians travelled as a family. Indians love to visit new countries and they are increasingly pursuing immersive experiences. We have beautiful spa resorts in Ethiopia and the Indian travellers enjoy these comforts. Of course, they are particular about vegetarian cuisine and Ethiopia is well equipped to cater to their needs.

We heard you are evaluating the Mumbai – Johannesburg route of South African Airways?

Yes, I met the visiting South African tourism minister in Mumbai in January. Ethiopian would be interested in operating the Mumbai – Johannesburg route which South African Airways has discontinued. I have briefed my head office and will wait for their final decision. I believe there is tremendous potential to grow this route.





SATTE's 27th Edition Bigger and Better

With a focus on building new business partnerships and product announcements, the three-day expo talked about the current trends in the industry



"I would like to congratulate SATTE for 27 glorious years and thank them for giving representation to states such as Leh-Ladakh. India is the only country that has a different cultural identity across destinations. Events like these showcase our rich culture in a great way. I hope foreign guests and visitors attending the event get a glimpse of our country"

PRAHLAD SINGH PATEL

Union Minister of State for Tourism & Culture (I/C), Government of India

Informa Markets inaugurated the 27th edition of SATTE, India's leading B2B travel trade engagement show at India Expo Mart in New Delhi on January 8, 2020. The three-day expo brought over 1050 exhibitors, 200 foreign buyers from over 50+ countries and 500+ domestic hosted buyers from 104 Indian cities. More than 30,000 travel and tourism professionals attended the show – a 15 per cent growth over previous year. The marquee expo was inaugurated by Prahlad Singh Patel, Union Minister of State for Tourism & Culture (I/C), Govt. of India along with key dignitaries like Mansukh L Mandaviya, Minister of State (I/C) for Shipping, Govt. of India; YB Tuan Muhammad Bakhtiar bin Wan Chik, Deputy Minister of Tourism, Arts and Culture, Malaysia; Nia Niscaya, Deputy Minister of Tourism Marketing, Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Indonesia; Michael Goh, President, Dream Cruises & Head of International Sales, Genting Cruise Lines; Michael Duck, Executive VP, Informa Markets – Asia; Yogesh Mudras, MD, Informa Markets in India and Pallavi Mehra, Group Director, Informa Markets in India, amidst an august gathering.

With a focus on building new business partnerships and product announcements, the expo talked about the current trends in the industry. Keeping up with their annual promise, SATTE 2020 delivered an exciting line-up

of sessions and workshops, presented and led by high profile speakers and industry stalwarts, covering topics from all aspects of the industry. The first panel discussion on 'Global Economic Scenario, Tourism Trends and India' on Day 1 discussed the emerging scenario in global travel and tourism industry and India. The second panel discussion: 'Adventure Tourism: Unlocking New Avenues' focussed on major challenges in adventure tourism. Day 2 of SATTE 2020 Conference was Corporate Travel Day powered by the Corporate Travel Community (CTC), which saw two sessions on 'Airline Programs + NDC Education Forum' and 'The Accommodation Outlook and Technology Innovations Education Forum'. Apart from these, the Network of India MICE Agents (NIMA) held a set of five sessions and two workshops on MICE tourism.

SATTE 2020 received support from international organisations/associations and Indian travel trade forums such as Indian Association of Tour Operators (IATO), Travel Agents Association of India (TAAI), Association of Domestic Tour Operators of India (ADTOI), Travel Agents Federation of India (TAFI), IATA Agents Association of India (IAAI), India Convention Promotion Bureau (ICPB), Universal Federation of Travel Agents Association (UFTAA), Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA), Skal and Enterprising Travel Agents Association (ETAA).



Award winners, jury and organisers during the 4th Edition of the SATTE Awards



"Despite the current economic and political climate, tourism industry still remains one of the fastest-growing sectors. This year is the largest edition of SATTE till date due to outstanding participation. It has emerged as one of South Asia's largest international travel shows that both the exhibitors and buyers from across the world participate to showcase as well as shop for the diverse global travel and tourism products and services. Not only tourism, SATTE also has the potential to harness rural development as well."

YOGESH MUDRAS
Managing Director
Informa Markets in India



PRADEEP SABOO
MD, Guideline Travels

2019 was not the best year for India travel trade due to the grounding of Jet Airways, elections and Cox & Kings fiasco. But 2020 looks promising. We are sure to achieve 10-15 per cent growth. The Iran-US conflagration is a concern as rise in fuel prices will impact air fares. This year we launched 'Cruise Plus', a website for B2B cruise bookings with live inventory of Dream Cruises and Jalesh Cruises.



ARVIND BUNDHAN
Director, Mauritius Tourism Promotion Authority (MTPA)

2019 has been a difficult year for Mauritius Tourism due to challenges related to airlift in their traditional markets especially Europe. India market also under-performed in 2019 with a decrease of 10 per cent compared to 2018 resulting in annual arrivals falling by about 8000. In 2019, over 80,000 Indians travelled to Mauritius and this year, the target is to touch 85,000. We launched a campaign to incentivise agents – where an agent bringing more than 100 visitors for 3N stay in Mauritius is entitled to a cash incentive of Rs. 2,00,000 and if it's a group of 250 visitors for 3N stay the cash incentive will be Rs. 4,00,000. If a group of 100 visitors and above stay for more than 3N, the agent will enjoy a tax rebate of 15 per cent which means zero VAT. Air Mauritius has 10 direct flights a week from Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru and Chennai. On top of that, around 17 per cent of Indians travel via Dubai to Mauritius. Visa is not required to enter Mauritius.



DR. ALI FOLLAD
Advisor, Bahrain Tourism and Exhibition Authority (BTEA)

In December 2019, Manama, Bahrain's capital, was named Capital of Arab Tourism for 2020 at the 22nd session of the Arab Ministerial Council for Tourism, held in Saudi Arabia. On New Year's Eve, BTEA unveiled a new identity and logo to complement the recognition. Bahrain International Exhibition Center, poised to be the biggest in the GCC region, will be ready by 2022. Multiple-entry e-visa for five years for BD60 has proved useful for corporate travellers. Visitor arrivals in 2019 touched 4620 from India. Bahrain has been a sought-after wedding destination for Indians for two years. November and December 2019 saw eight Indian weddings with six more scheduled for 2020. We are developing sea activities like the world's largest underwater theme park Dive Bahrain, which has a sunken Boeing 747 aircraft, two ships and also a museum. Pearl diving is very unique to Bahrain but is not promoted for mass tourism as the fragile ecosystem has to be respected.



DR. TRUST LIN
Director
Taiwan Tourism Bureau

Taiwan is continuing its aggressive marketing push in India in 2020 as well. We are at SATTE and will be at OTM, BLTM and TTF and conduct a 6-city roadshow across India. We have planned advertisements at airports, metros, shopping malls and theatres as well as online campaigns and webinars. In Q1, 2019, we achieved 20 per cent growth in India market which met the target; Q2, 2019 saw challenges due to the grounding of Jet Airways and bankruptcy of Cox & Kings. These unforeseen developments impacted incentive group movements in a big way. 2019 saw 6 per cent growth over 2018 and in 2020 a 20 per cent growth is being projected. We are exploring a strategic partnership with Singapore Airlines to launch a Singapore-Taiwan package in Q1, 2020.



KISHAN BIYANI
Managing Director
Ark Travels

Ark Travels, the PSA for Genting, Norwegian Cruise Lines (NCL) and Club Med, added Rail Europe and Europamundo Vacations to its client roster in 2019. We grew only by about 5 percent in 2019 due to the slowdown of the economy. Now, the market is gradually picking up and corporate movements are 20 per cent higher than in 2019. Ark Travels will conduct 89 roadshows in tier II, III and IV cities from January to March 2020. We have already conducted many theme parties (DJ nights and 'Indian Idol' nights) on-board Dream Cruises with 700-800 passengers cruising. Now, we are looking at hosting a musical event on-board Dream Cruises with an intention to charter the whole vessel – 3500 passengers from India.



PANKAJ AND SUCHETA NAGPAL
MD and CEO, Travstarz Global Group

Travstarz Global Group started Bali operations in 2019 and now has 21 DMCs under our belt. It was our first year with cruise product as a PSA for Genting's Dream Cruises & Star Cruises, Celestyal Cruises Europe and India's Jalesh Cruises. We are excited about the imminent re-launch of our online reservation system clickontravstarz.com. The portal has live inventory – world-wide flights, hotels, tours, cruise, insurance, visa, and transfers – and will be specific to our 21 DMC locations. In 2020 the main focus of Travstarz Global Group however will be on the cruise app.



ANKUSH NIJHAWAN
Co-founder
TBO

In 2019, TBO grew at 52 per cent in India and 90 per cent in international markets. TBO is now one of the few companies in the world which will enable Hajj and Umrah travel online (ticket, visa and hotel). The TBO DMC business did about 9000 passengers in 2019 and the ambition is to serve 20,000 passengers in 2020. TBO Cruises sold about 1400 cabins in 2019, our first year in the cruise vertical and hopes to double sales in 2020.



SUNIL V A
Regional Vice President – ISC
Oman Air

2019 has been an excellent year for the airline inspite of the unforeseen cancellation of the Boeing MAX aircraft in March. Oman Air has witnessed growth in all 11 cities that we fly to – in fact, each market has doubled numbers in terms of local contributions, and the biggest achievement is that point-to-point traffic to Oman has increased from India. Oman is now a preferred destination for weddings and events from India.



PRIYANKA NIJHAWAN
Director
Nijhawan Representations

We completed a decade in the Representation business and added more accounts in 2019 like – Banyan Tree Resorts, Siam@Siam Design Hotel (Bangkok & Pattaya), Le Rou de Montreal (Montreal Eye), Village Coconut Island Resort Phuket, properties in Malaysia, and also delivered a few standalone projects with tourism boards. However, the biggest validator of performance is the number of accounts that have remained with Nijhawan Representations over the years – Address, Armani, Harbour Plaza. Soon the company is expanding into the weddings and corporate sector. Dubai Tourism is the flagship account of Nijhawan Representations and the five-year multiple entry visa announced by the UAE government recently will be a catalyst to further boost arrivals into Dubai. We are working to change the perception of Ramadan from fasting to feasting as the shopping malls stay open beyond midnight, and there is more time to shop and dine which is attractive to visitors. Expo 2020 starting in October is yet another reason to travel to Dubai.



ANIL PULIPALYAM
Founder & CEO
Global Trails

Global Trails was launched at SATTE 2020 as a tourism representation firm handling DMCs, destinations and hotel brands. To start with, we have a presence in Egypt and Hungary through our partner Elegant Group, one of the biggest travel and hospitality players in Egypt and Europe, and one of the first to come to India. Elegant Group has its head office in Budapest and branch offices in Cairo, London and Paris. Global Trails will manage FITs, MICE, Groups, van tours and so on.

TBO's Corporate Travel Management Tool to be Launched Soon

Travel Boutique Online (TBO), India's largest 'B2A' travel company, will soon launch PAXES, a corporate travel management tool for travel agents to better manage and service their corporate clients.

Travel agents have been losing corporate business to large TMCs strong on tech as the big clients insist on technology and scale in handling requests. Now SMB travel agents can harness the power of PAXES powered by TBO.

"The tool has three stakeholders," explained Suarabh Juneja, Product Head – TMC Tools, PAXES. "Corporate Travel Agent who will act as an OTA and manage revenue; Corporate Admin (Client) will manage travel policies and approval workflow; and Corporate Employees who will book their own itinerary on the app."

Millennial business travelers today want everything on their mobile app. Corporate Employees using PAXES can engage with a chatbot representing the corporate travel agent to address their queries.

PAXES has been deployed in TBO as a pilot and all their employees across 57 countries where TBO is present are using the tool



since the last four months. Once the product is fully developed it will have a complete inventory – tickets, hotels, transfers, visa, car rentals and forex. As of now, only airline tickets are available, however, the rest of the inventory categories will be live soon.

TBO will share its inventory and power content and technology for PAXES. Agents can publish their own inventory and itineraries as well.

"SMB travel agents losing business to large TMCs and OTAs who have entered the business travel space, now have a lifeline in PAXES," said Ankush Nijhawan, Co-founder, TBO.

Travel is one of the biggest expense heads in corporate. Corporate is the largest travel segment in India and growing at a healthy 7 percent annually. It will be a \$45 BN opportunity in the next five years.

The tool built on the latest technologies incorporating AI, helps corporate customers save costs and manage travel budgets better. All travel documents including tickets and visas will be uploaded on the app and available 24x7 including details of past trips. PAXES app is available for Apple and Android users.



LIAM FINDLAY
General Manager
Yas Island Abu Dhabi

The award-winning theme park of Warner Bros. World™ Abu Dhabi completed its first year of operation in 2019. Towards the end of the year, Abu Dhabi unveiled CLYMB™ Abu Dhabi, the latest addition to its portfolio of world-class experiences and attractions. Etihad Arena is slotted to open later this year. The association with UAE's national airline, Etihad Airways, and its international reach, will help to position Etihad Arena globally as a must-visit destination for live entertainment. The Yas Bay Waterfront is on track to open later this year and will feature two world-class hotels, a beach club, 12 cafes and restaurants as well as 19 retail outlets, alongside the Etihad Arena. The stunning 18,000 capacity indoor multi-purpose arena will host concerts, sporting competitions, cultural performances, and more. Experience Hub, the trade and promotion arm of Yas Island Abu Dhabi, creates packages with value-added experiences and in 2019, we contributed to an increase in visitation from India to the award-winning theme parks of Ferrari World Abu Dhabi, Yas Waterworld and Warner Bros. World™ Abu Dhabi.

TBO Academy's Courses Come in Handy for Travel Agents

India's largest OTA platform Travel Boutique Online (TBO) is creating an L&D (Learning & Development) ecosystem for travel partners with TBO Academy. "Most employees of travel companies have never travelled outside India but they sell destinations, experiences, attractions and hotels from around the world to customers," said Vidhu Lamba, Business Head, TBO Academy. "Our initiative is a virtual academy where one can undergo learning modules on what they sell. TBO Academy has over 60 courses on offer. There is no charge for travel agents and TBO Academy will certify those who have successfully completed the courses."

9000+ agents have already received certification from TBO Academy since its launch at Arabian Travel Market (ATM 2019). The learning content is available in English and Arabic now and soon in Spanish and Portuguese.



Tourism boards, hotels and attractions also collaborate with TBO Academy creating L&D content. Content is available as videos, images, voice (webinars) and text. Some of the courses are sponsored by travel partners who want travel agents certified as experts. Fact sheets can be downloaded from the platform for future reference too.

TBO Academy is the 'expert program' implementer for many tourism boards.

"Over 30,000 travel agents are currently undertaking courses on the TBO Academy every month," informed Lamba.

"Especially in tier II, III and IV cities where customers rely more on brick and mortar travel agents, content on the TBO Academy is extremely useful to sell better. Travel agents who are not partners of TBO can also benefit from the courseware on TBO Academy," confirmed Ankush Nijhawan, Co-founder, TBO.



TIMUR RASULEV
Cultural and Tourism
Counselor, Sochi Tourism

In 2019, Sochi Tourism appointed Linkin Reps as their market representative in India. Sochi, Russia's largest resort city shot into global prominence when it hosted the 2018 FIFA World Cup. We have so far been promoting Sochi as a summer destination but there is potential to showcase it as a winter destination for skiing, snowboarding and snowmobile, in the India market. Sochi has many European style mountain resorts that were built for the 2014 Winter Olympics. With 73,000 rooms and large meeting venues, Sochi is perfect for MICE too. We are working on launching a direct flight from Mumbai this year. Indians have been visiting Russia but confine their travel to Moscow and St. Petersburg. We welcomed less than 3000 visitors from India in 2019 and hope to receive 10,000 in 2020. We have Indian chefs in the hotels and vegetarian food is available but we are working towards opening an Indian restaurant in the city soon.



SAROJ JENA
Vice President, Calculus Holidays

We started Calculus Holidays to focus on Africa and Indian Ocean destinations. We are building Calculus Online, our bookings engine that will be launched at OTM in February 2020. Offline communication around enquiry, rates, proposals, bookings will all then move online.



PRATEEK SHARMA
Asst. Vice President, Calculus Holidays

SATTE is a great platform to meet vendors and industry partners. Interest towards southern and eastern Africa has grown tremendously in the last two years with around 20,000 visitors from India. We will be the first DMC in India to organise tours to Mt. Kilimanjaro.



CLELIO MONTEIRO
CEO, Visa Lounge

Visa Lounge has lined up 15 new enhancements to the technology platform – most important being WhatsApp integration – allowing updates on visa application and visa forwarding as well as delivering visa documents to passengers. We have tied up with Blue Dart Express to pick up documents and deliver offline visa to customers. We have rolled out our platform to 37 countries which have online visa and in February 2020 we will launch offline countries also making Visa Lounge the most comprehensive visa processing solution available in the market.



KUNAL SAMPAT
Country Head – Sales, Visa Lounge

Visa is one of the greatest concern areas when it comes to overseas travel and is something that requires expertise. We are focussing on ensuring that we have the technology that can assist trade partners to process their visas hassle-free using our platform. This year we are opening a new office in New Delhi. We are also launching the mobile app for Visa Lounge soon.

Informa Markets also hosted the 4th Edition of the SATTE Awards, that recognises and celebrates the excellence, triumphs and innovations of key stakeholders in the Travel and Tourism industry.

Best Blogger – **My Travel Diary**

Best Cruise Liner – **Genting Cruise Lines**

Best Domestic Tour Operator – *Operations Less Than 5 Years* – **The Samsara Holidays**

Best Domestic Tour Operator – *Operations More Than 5 Years* – **MakeMyTrip Ltd.**

Best Foreign Destination – *Short Haul* – **Dubai Tourism**

Best Foreign Destination – *Long Haul* – **Destination Canada**

Best Hotel in India – *Resort Luxury Hotel* **The Tamara Coorg**; *Boutique Hotels* – **Aloha on the Ganges, Rishikesh**; *Budget Hotels* – **Summit Denzong Hotel and Spa, Gangtok**; *Business Luxury Hotel* – **Shangri-La's Eros Hotel, New Delhi**; *Heritage Hotel* – **Alila Fort Bishangarh**

Best Inbound Tour Operator – *Operations Less Than 5 Years* – **Destinos India Gurus Pvt Ltd.**; *Operations More Than 5 Years* – **Creative Travel Pvt. Ltd.**

Best Niche Tour Operator – **Adventures Overland**

Best Online Travel Booking Site – **EaseMyTrip.com**

Best Outbound Tour Operator – *Operations Less Than 5 Years* – **Europa D Tours**; *Operations More Than 5 Years* – **Thomas Cook (India) Ltd.**

Best Start Up – **NotOnMap - Unknown Destinations Pvt. Ltd.**

Best Travel Education and Skill Development Provider – **Bird Academy**

Best Travel Publication – **National Geographic Traveller India**

Best Travel Website – **National Geographic Expeditions India**

Most Outstanding Woman Leader of the Year – **Priya Paul**

Tourism Brand – **Gujarat Tourism**

Best Exhibition Venue in India – **India Expo Mart, Greater Noida**

Lifetime Achievement Award – **Sundar Advani**



Moments from the inaugural ceremony of SATTE 2020



Priya Paul



Genting Cruise Lines



Sundar Advani



Europa D Tours



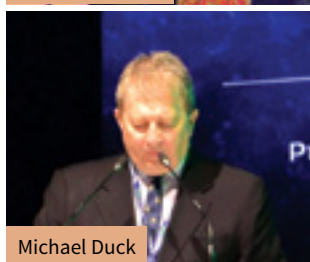
SATTE Awards – Cultural Show



EaseMyTrip.com



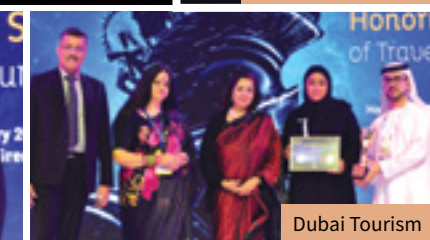
Meenakshi Sharma



Michael Duck



Bird Academy



Dubai Tourism



Pallavi Mehra



Destination Canada

Kanchanaburi and Khao Yai, the Hidden Gems of Thailand

Thailand, for which India is one of the top 10 source markets, is now eying repeat customers from the country by promoting lesser-known but alluring destinations like Kanchanaburi and Khao Yai

BY JOSE KUNNAPPALLY



Bridge on River Kwai



It was in February 2018 that Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) launched the 'Open to the New Shades of Amazing Thailand' campaign in India. It was aimed at showcasing Thailand, popular in the sub-continent for its beaches, nightlife and shopping, as a destination with experiences like gastronomy, art & craft, nature & wildlife, and the Thai way of life and culture. As part of the campaign, Thailand started promoting destinations beyond the already well-known triangle of Bangkok-Pattaya-Phuket, among India travellers.

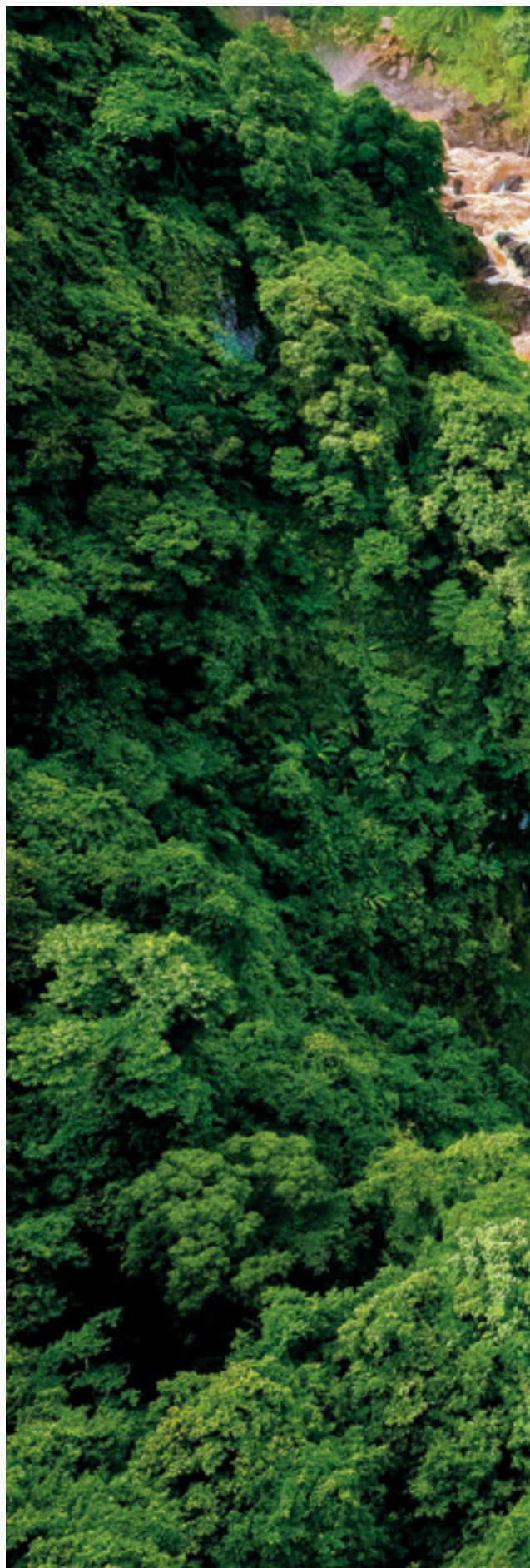
India is one among the top ten source markets for Thailand, the small club of nations sending more than one million visitors each year. TAT is actively targeting repeat visitors considering India is a proximity market and for that new destinations, attractions and experiences are a must. It is also reaching out to India's populous tier II and III cities for first-time visitors.

On December 20, 2019, Thailand stepped over the previous year's record arrivals of 38.26 million. The 38,260,000th visitor to Thailand was a tourist from India! The final result for tourist arrivals into the Kingdom in 2019 will end up around 4 per cent up on the previous year's audited numbers. 2020 arrivals projection is being set at 40.8 million, which would be up 2.5 per cent on 2019 audited numbers.

The visitor from India also broke the record of 1.9 million arrivals from India into Thailand in one year. The India market has grown significantly, touching 22 per cent growth in arrivals in 2019 and 85 billion baht in tourism revenue, a 27 per cent spike.

Tourist arrivals from India have been boosted by the Visa on Arrival (VoA) fee waiver (now extended till April 30, 2020) and availability of cheap flights from several Indian cities. Bilateral airline capacity is at an all-time high with more than 300 weekly flights between 16 major cities in India. About 12 airlines fly between Indian cities and Thailand including Thai Airways, Bangkok Airways, Thai Smile, Bhutan Airlines, Druk Air, Air Asia, SpiceJet, Vistara, Thai Lion Air, Indigo, NokScoot and GoAir.

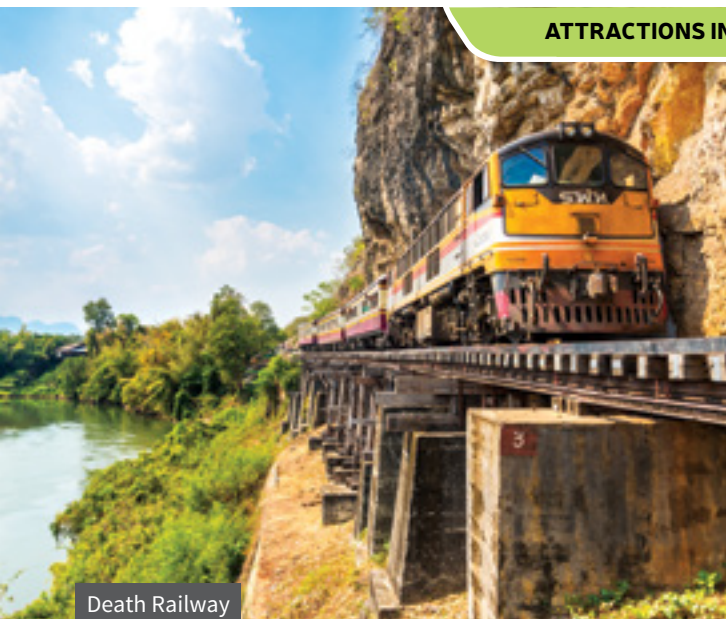
Thanks to the new campaign, more and more Indians are checking out destinations like Chiang Mai, Kanchanaburi, Khao Yai, Ko Samui, Chiang Rai, Krabi, Ayutthaya and Ko Chang (Trat). Of late, there has been a notable increase in visitors from India to attend MICE events, hold weddings and honeymoons; and even shoot movies and music videos.





Heow Narok (Hell's Abyss) waterfall, Khao Yai

ATTRACTIONS IN KANCHANABURI



Death Railway



Elephants World Sanctuary

Death Railway

In 1942, Kanchanaburi was under Japanese control during WWII. It was here that Asian forced labourers and Allied PoWs, building the infamous Burma Railway, constructed a bridge, an event portrayed in the films. Almost half of the prisoners working on the project died from disease, maltreatment or accidents. At Kanchanaburi, there is a memorial and two museums to commemorate the dead. In March 2003, the Thailand–Burma Railway Centre opened and the JEATH (Japanese–English–American–Australian–Thai–Holland) War Museum dedicated to the bridge and the Death Railway. The city is also home to the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery.

The Bridge over the River Kwai

This steel bridge is one of the most important historical landmarks and memorials in Thailand and probably the most photographed landmark of Kanchanaburi. The damaged bridge was renovated by the Thai government after WWII in 1946. Visitors are able to walk across the bridge to the other side of the river, but should be mindful of trains and motorcycles.

Death Railway Train from River Kwai Bridge

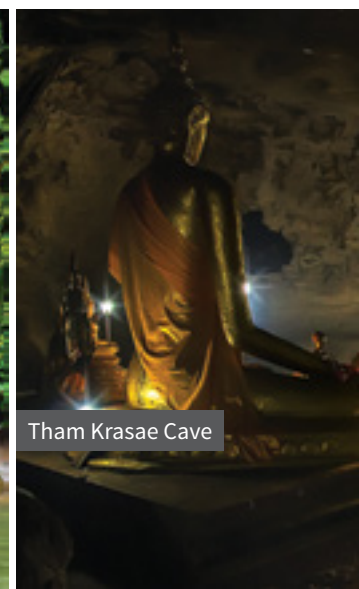
Visitors with sufficient time should take a Death Railway train from River Kwai Bridge for a 2-hour ride to Tham Krasae Cave. Tham Krasae station marks the start of the long viaduct by the cliff built by the PoWs during WWII, part of the infamous Death Railway.

The Elephants World Sanctuary

Animal lovers will appreciate a visit to the Elephants World sanctuary. Here visitors can watch elephants playing in the mud, gather food to feed them and help bathe them in the river. Elephants World is a non-profit organization founded in 2008, a sanctuary for sick, old, disabled, abused and rescued elephants who now receive the rest and joy that they deserve. For those who want to stay longer, the sanctuary also has overnight and week-long programs for guests.



Sai Yok waterfalls



Tham Krasae Cave



Kwai Bridge

Sai Yok Waterfall

Located within Sai Yok National Park, Sai Yok Noi Waterfall is about 60 km from Kanchanaburi. In the same national park, a little further away from Kanchanaburi town, is another waterfall called Sai Yok Yai Waterfall. Apart from being a home to numerous wild animals and birds, the park is also home to the world's smallest mammal, the tiny two gram Kittis Hog-nosed Bat, which was first discovered in 1973. Other attractions include Lawa and Dao Wa Dung caves that feature beautiful stalactites and stalagmites.



"We want to create visibility for destinations in Thailand beyond Bangkok-Pattaya-Phuket. ATTA wants to focus more on India. This is first time we are engaging directly with India travel trade on a platform like GPS EDWIN. Kanchanaburi and Khao Yai are ideal for tours (families and friends), MICE, weddings and even film shoots. We can ensure Indian vegetarian/non-vegetarian fare and Jain cuisine. We are planning a ten city Bollywood film on the lines of *Zindagi Na Milega Dobara*"

PREECHA C SINGH (VICKY)

GM, Destination Siam Group
Executive Committee Member, ATTA

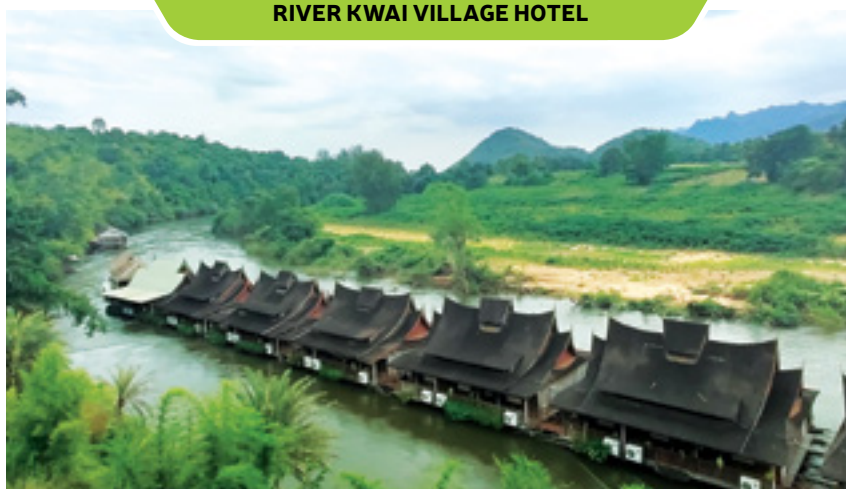


"Our EDWINs have been selling Bangkok-Pattaya-Phuket for a decade now. We have to offer customers new destinations and experiences and GPS' EDWIN program is all about educating and empowering the travel trade. Bangkok is the default entry/exit point and Pattaya is very critical for MICE so they will continue to be part of itineraries. But new destinations like Kanchanaburi and Khao Yai can change the value proposition especially for repeat customers"

HARMANDEEP SINGH ANAND

Managing Director
GPS

RIVER KWAI VILLAGE HOTEL



The jungle resort and onsen on the banks of River Kwai is spread across 400 acres and offers 221 rooms including 26 Thai Raft Rooms. There is so much greenery all around and many activities to do. The resort has atleast a kilometre of river front all to itself – immortalised in the famous Hollywood films, *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), *Return from the River Kwai* (1989) and *The Railway Man* (2013).

At the Xtreme Centric Park within the property, one can engage in ATV, archery, bamboo rafting, paintball shooting, zorbing and eurobungy jumping. There is also a lavish pool. The restaurant serves Thai and international cuisine and for groups they can arrange Indian food.

Across the river is the Rock Valley Hot Spring & Fish Spa with 15 plunge pools of varying temperature up to 42 degrees. Motorised Bamboo rafts and boats are available. Experienced swimmers can hit the waters. Lockers and bathing areas are separate for men and women at the onsen. Swim wear is provided by them; Trunks and bikinis are not allowed. Short facials and mud body treatment which can be washed off at the waterfalls within the spa premises are available; so is Thai massage.

High season is October to April. There are many meeting venues including outdoor options. This is a perfect place for MICE and wedding/honeymoon.

The Bridge over River Kwai is the nearest attraction. 20 minutes away from the resort is the Sai Yok Noi waterfall.



“50 per cent of our visitors are repeat travellers. We are trying to educate trade so that they can recommend new destinations and experiences. In 2020, TAT will launch global campaign to promote responsible tourism”

KLISSADA RATANAPRUK
Executive Director, TAT
(ASEAN South Asia and South Pacific Region)



“Europe and ASEAN markets are responding very well to secondary destinations like Kanchanaburi and Khao Yai especially the repeat travellers. Indian visitors interested in nature trails, adventure activities and agrotourism including wine tours will find these two places extremely satisfying”

PORNTHIP HIRUNKATE
Vice President
ATTA



Owned and managed by Visooth Lohitnavy (CEO & MD) and his two daughters Nikki Visootha Lohitnavy, Thailand's first and only female winemaker and Mimi Suvisooth Lohitnavy, Director of Marketing & PR, GranMonte is the best national producer of wine in Thailand and recipient of multiple international awards. There is also a 7-bedroom guest house available on rent. The annual harvest festival is in February and there's a party too at night.

Wine Tour including Wine Tasting

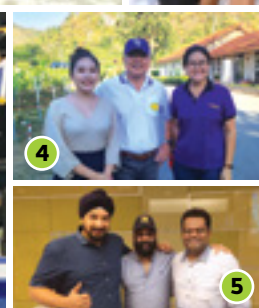
THB 450/350 (card rate for adult and teetotaler)

THB 360/275 (agent rate for adult and teetotaler)

Wine Tour including Wine Tasting and Lunch/Dinner

THB 995/895 (card rate for adult and teetotaler)

THB 945/845 (agent rate for adult and teetotaler)



(1) EDWINs in front of Mallika City Kanchanaburi; (2) EDWINs on River Kwai; (3) EDWINs at Suvarnabhumi International Airport, Bangkok; (4) Lohitnavy family of GranMonte; (5) Vicky with Rishiraj Singh Anand and Mohit Deshpande of GPS; (6) Greenery Resort Khao Yai; (7) B2B Meet at Khao Yai; (8) Traditional Thai dwelling at Mallika City; (9) My Ozone Khao Yai



In the last week of November 2019, Global Panorama Showcase (GPS) organised EDWIN (Educational Destination Workshop International) to Kanchanaburi and Khao Yai – 52 agents from 12 states and 30 cities in India – a first-of-its-kind initiative from India to these two emerging destinations.

“Our EDWINs (that’s what agents attending EDWIN are called) have been selling Bangkok-Pattaya-Phuket for a decade now. We have to offer customers new destinations and experiences and GPS’ EDWIN program is all about educating and empowering the travel trade,” said Harmandeep Singh Anand, Managing Director, GPS. “We are introducing EDWINs to two fabulous destinations suitable for families, MICE and wedding/honeymoon, hardly three hours by road from Bangkok.”

We zoomed from Bangkok to Kanchanaburi and as we neared our destination the temperature started to fall. Evenings are a comfy 19-20 degrees. We checked into the River Kwai Village Hotel, our abode for the next two days. Have to say, GPS has a special knack of selecting stunning properties for EDWIN!

After a brief tour of the resort we had time off at the Rock Valley Hot Spring & Fish Spa managed by the resort across the River Kwai. Swimming in the river, the currents are strong, was an exhilarating experience and thank God for the life jacket!

I remember the mineral water pool, mineral hot spring, herbal hot spring, tea pool, fish pond, milk pool, coffee pool, orange pool, butterfly pea pool,... By the time we completed the hot spring routine all of us were so famished that the barbecue and drinks served onsite came as godsend. The Hot Spring session is charged Rs. 4000.

Later in the evening we had a sumptuous sit-down dinner by the river bank when TAT officials addressed the visiting EDWIN delegation from India.

After dinner we were treated to something out of the world – the firefly experience. We left the resort by open trucks to a nearby forest site and emptied cans of mosquito spray all over our exposed body areas. And in perfect silence, mobile phones not flashing, we waited. And one, then two, then three, then many, we spotted fireflies all around! They are soft-bodied beetles that are commonly called fireflies or lightning bugs for their conspicuous use of bioluminescence during twilight to attract mates or prey. Even the screen light of a mobile phone can scare them away. A surreal experience!

Next morning we checked out the Xtreme Centric Park at the resort. Many of us were driving an ATV for the first time and in spite of knowing well to handle a bike and/or car, found the ATV a challenging task to tame.

MOVING AROUND

Many attractions in Kanchanaburi are within walking distance of each other. Small orange and large yellow Songtaew (buses) traverse up and down Saengchuto Road between 6 am and 6 pm, connecting the bus station, train station and the bridge, and charge a standard TBH 10. Motorbike taxis and tuk-tuks are also available and some guesthouses offer bicycle rental. Always negotiate the fare.

Our next destination was Mallika City, a retro-township reflecting the past Siamese lifestyle in the Chao Phraya River Basin after King Chulalongkorn, Rama V abolished slavery. Once freed, they had to live a life of self-sufficiency, self-reliance, and in harmony with all other Siamese people. These changed patterns of lifestyle are the cornerstone of today’s Thai people.

The ‘city’ features recreated traditional Thai buildings, including a ‘turnable’ bridge city tower, various types of houses and a market zone. Though we had lunch here, visitors are recommended to try out the Thai costume, enjoy dinner and a traditional Thai dance show. Don’t forget to pick up traditional clothing, handicrafts and souvenirs.

Kanchanaburi is peaceful, slow and refreshing. It is perfect for recharging both mind and body before getting back to the grind of daily lives. Once a year, a carnival comes to town and is set up in the area next to the bridge. At night there is a small pyrotechnics display that re-enacts the wartime bombing of the bridge.

Equally rejuvenating is another destination which is again green, pleasant and beautiful – Khao Yai.

As you enter Khao Yai, you will see many European themed resorts. Blessed with a lush, mountainous landscape, fertile valleys, pounding waterfalls and rich biodiversity, Khao Yai is a year-round getaway destination just three hours’ drive from Bangkok. The west side boasts a range of wild-west theme parks and vineyards of Thailand’s award-winning labels. The south and east are peppered with a wealth of natural wonders, from Prachinburi’s jungle-clad waterfalls to Wang Nam Kheo’s ozone-rich valleys. Khao Yai, a UNESCO® World Heritage Site, is Thailand’s third largest and one of the most visited national parks.

Khao Yai is a haven for both nature and adventure lovers. It’s an all-in-one destination where you can pack as many or as few activities as you want in one day, whether a waterfall hiking trip, a round of golf, farm tours, scenic mountain biking, or fun theme



“More than 1000 leisure travellers from India visited Khao Yai in 2018. They are interested in our golf courses, national park and the vineyards. We want to attract MICE groups too”

RUNG TIP BOOKKHUNTOD
Director, TAT
Nakhon Ratchasima Office



“We received 4,88,000 tourists in 2018 and India is one of our Top 20 source markets. We really want to welcome many more Indian travellers who have already visited Thailand but did not consider Kanchanaburi. We are very happy we got to meet 50 travel agents from across India through GPS EDWIN”

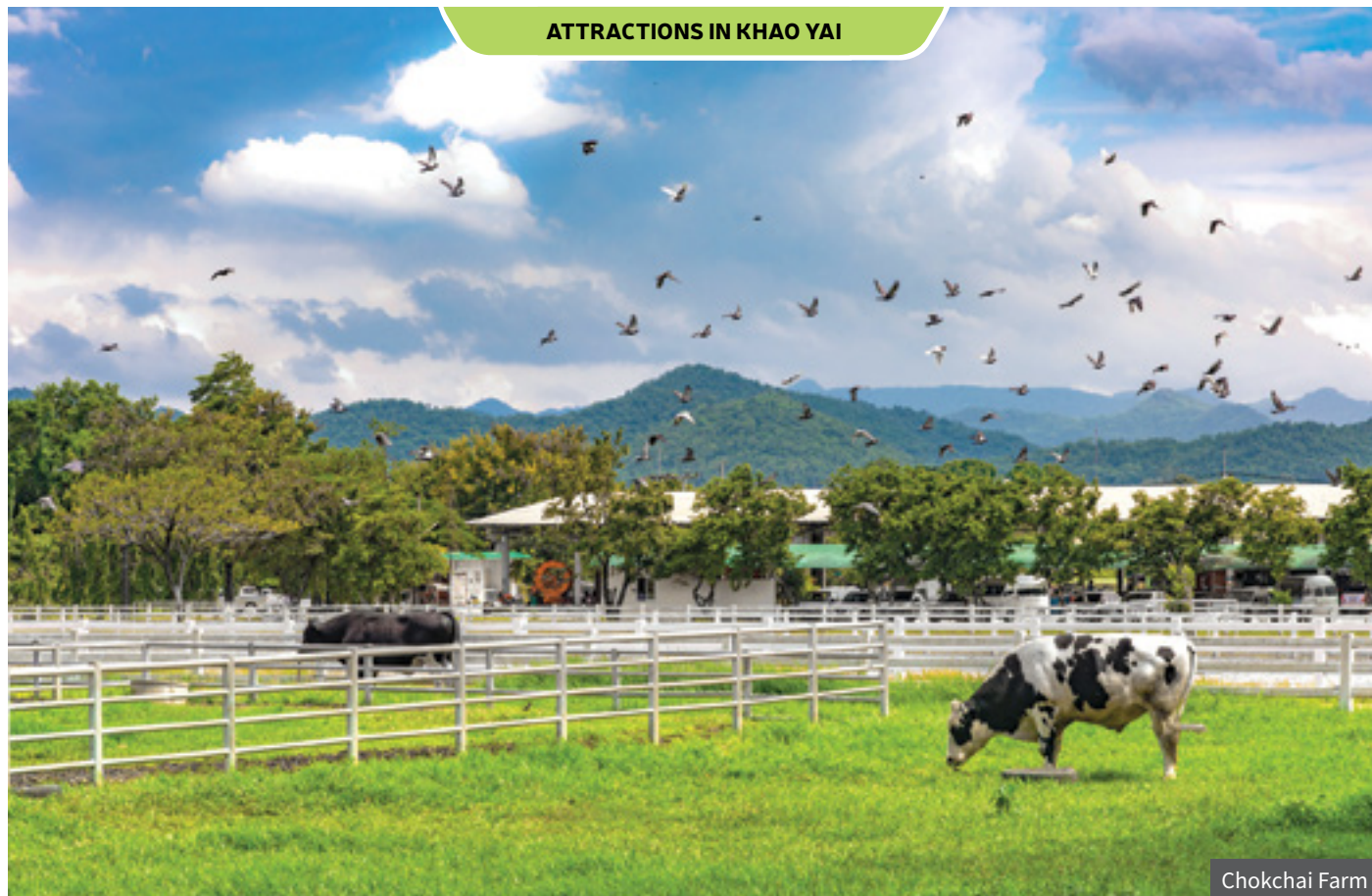
PIYAPAT VONGDOIWANG
Director, TAT
Kanchanaburi Office



“More than 1,00,000 guests who stay with us swim in the River Kwai and about 80 per cent of our guests use the hot springs. We are bullish about India and hope to welcome a large number of them to Kanchanaburi”

SUCHIN JIENJITLERT
Assistant MD
River Kwai Village Hotel

ATTRACTIONS IN KHAO YAI



Chokchai Farm

Chokchai Farm

The love for cowboys and the American Wild West runs deep in the Chokchai family, so deep that they decided to bring a huge slice of it to Saraburi's countryside, 30 km from Khao Yai. It all began in 1957, with a small herd of cows and a piece of land. Today it has become one of the most popular tourist attractions in Khao Yai, with exciting cowboy shows, cattle herding, farm tours, horse-drawn cart rides and ATV adventures. An overnight package comes with a campfire dinner and accommodation in its boutique tent – with all modern luxuries thrown in.

Palio Village

Palio is a picturesque shopping centre just 20 km from Khao Yai, themed around a Tuscan village where visitors are treated to an out-of-the-ordinary combination of

clothes and gift shopping, gourmet snacks, live entertainment and an eclectic mix of independent shops and stalls.

Upon entering the village, the striking terracotta-toned buildings resonate with an unmistakably Mediterranean vibe. A plethora of potted flowers, baby ferns and creeping ivy add to the sensation. Everywhere you look you can see hanging baskets, ornate railings, medieval-styled castle walls and an overstocked supply of benches for visitors to sit and enjoy the sights.

Sketch artists, clowns, musicians and masquerading Venetian ladies stroll around the market and are happy to have their picture taken with visitors. The carnival atmosphere is best felt in the central Piazza Palio, where a number of bars and coffee shops surround a fountain, characters perform for the amusement of the visitors and classical

music is piped in through hidden speakers. It's an enchanting experience.

Khao Yai National Park

Khao Yai National Park, a UNESCO® World Heritage Site, is an oasis teeming with wildlife and primeval jungles. The main two-lane highway passes through all natural attractions and scenic points on Khao Yai National Park. Heow Suwat (Suwat Abyss) and Heow Narok (Hell's Abyss) Waterfalls are two of the most visited sites. Avoid night safari if you are sensitive to the wellbeing of animals. The Park can get too crowded in the cool season (October to January).

Rai Thong Somboon Club

One of the original adventure parks in Khao Yai, Rai Thong Somboon is where you can try all kinds of rides imaginable, including ATVs, horseback riding, kart cross, luges, buggies, log rides, bumper boats, rolling balls, dry sledges, and more. The park is set on a vast 480,000 sq.m. area of landscaped green, with well-planned obstacle courses and water parks setting the stage for all the rides. If you can't get enough in one day, stay overnight in one of its wild-west theme rooms – teepees, camping trailers, gypsy caravans, log cabins, cowboy suites – all air-conditioned and fitted out with modern conveniences.



Khao Yai National Park



Palio Village

park with horseback riding, ATV adventures and combat-style games. If you have kids, Khao Yai is one of the best places to bring them along.

We checked into the Greenery Resort, a tree-filled property, 14-minute walk from Scenical World water park and 5 km from Khao Yai Golf Club. Rooms feature furnished balconies and other amenities include an airy restaurant, sports bar and a garden cafe. There's also an outdoor pool, a spa and a water park. This property is just 3 km from Palio and a 20 min drive from Farm Chokechai.

Scenical World and the three adjacent resorts Greenery Resort (256 rooms; 4-star), Foresta (luxury condos for sale and rent) and Botanica (114 rooms; 5-star) as well as the next door KYCC (Khao Yai Convention Center), are all owned and managed by the Scenical Group. KYCC is the largest of its kind in Khao Yai and the Northeast of Thailand. Offering 3800 sq. m. of flexible meeting space, KYCC can accommodate every need. There is also a 1900 sq. m. outdoor plaza, set between the two KYCC buildings, which can be used for banqueting, performances, or any open-air activity.

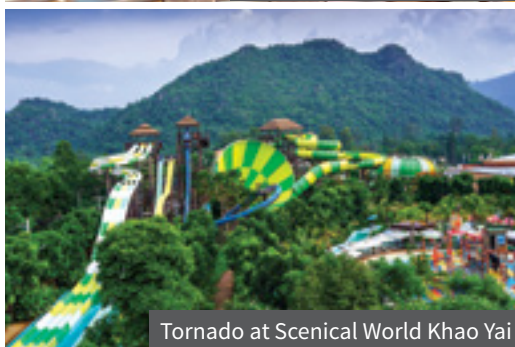
Scenical World is perfect for a day of fun with friends and family with many land and water-based rides and slides. I tried out Tornado and Python, considered the most challenging water-based thrills and it was so much fun.

At the foot of Khao Yai National Park, just before you pass the main gate, is a small side street that turns into an expansive valley where grapes are grown, harvested, crushed and turned into fine wine. We visited the 40-acre GranMonte Estate which has brought a slice of Tuscany's sun-drenched vineyards to Khao Yai's verdant foothills. The main highlight here is the cellar-door shop and the VinCotto restaurant, that whips up delicious pastas and salads as well as hearty Italian main courses and desserts. The best time to visit is October-February and guided tour (1.15 hours) of the vineyard along with wine tasting and Thai/Western set menu including Jain specifications are available.

One of the cool experiences which will find



Chocolate Factory Khao Yai



Tornado at Scenical World Khao Yai

many admirers (who doesn't love chocolates) is Chocolate Factory. Participate in their fun workshop and learn the art of making chocolates. It's THB 380 for a 30-45 min session which includes tasting. Over 200 products are there to buy at their store which also offers desserts and European eats along with tea & coffee.

On our way back we wanted to check out some of the many British, German and Italian-styled resorts lining the street. We just had time for My Ozone, a stunning German theme golf resort. My Ozone has 60 rooms, 50 villas of 2-bed and 3-bed configuration and an 18-hole golf course. Panacee Wellness Center from Germany is another highlight of the resort. This is a great location for MICE, weddings and even music video shoots!

Khao Yai is perfect for adventure activities like trekking, hiking, mountain biking, or having a communion with nature by indulging in bird watching, star gazing, agro-tourism and the like.

ARRIVING IN THAILAND

- VoA fee has been waived till April 30, 2020. If the queue is long, then you can jump that by paying THB 200 for Express VoA
- Book only with a travel agent who is a registered member of ATTA (Association of Thai Travel Agents). For any help reach out to ATTA counter at Gate 10 of Suvarnabhumi International Airport, Bangkok
- Internet: Buy a local SIM card with 15 GB data valid for 8 days for THB 299. Rate is same for all service providers



The author was hosted by Global Panorama Showcase



Mallika City, Kanchanaburi

An Iconic Hotel with a *Storyed Past*

The longest operating Hilton Hotel internationally, Hilton Istanbul Bosphorus offers traditional Turkish hospitality since 1955

By JOSE KUNNAPPALLY



Recently, when the Turkish Culture and Tourism Office in India hosted a travel trade media delegation from India in Istanbul, they chose the Hilton Istanbul Bosphorus for our stay. When one learns about the history and legacy of this hospitality property, it comes as no surprise. It is the first international Hilton Hotel outside of the United States; it was also Turkey's first five-star hotel when it was built in 1955. Facing the Bosphorus Strait that separates Asia from Europe, this iconic hotel has welcomed celebrities and VIPs from around the world visiting the 'gateway city'.

Hilton Istanbul Bosphorus, with its beautifully landscaped gardens and stunning Bosphorus views, is an oasis of traditional Turkish hospitality and first-class comfort

amidst the bustle of one of the world's most vibrant cities and is the longest operating Hilton Hotel internationally.

The hotel's location in Istanbul's city center ensures that it is just a short walking distance to Taksim Square, the upmarket district of Nişantaşı, the Istanbul Congress Center (ICC) and the Istanbul Convention and Exhibition Center (ICEC). In addition, this hotel is just 45 km from the new Istanbul International Airport or Sabiha Gökçen Airport.

All the 500 rooms including 186 executive rooms, 37 family rooms, 12 spacious suites and two triplex suites ideal for large families and long stay guests, come with balcony. The view of the Bosphorus as you sit down to enjoy the pleasant weather and your drink any time of the day or night is





Walking Distance

Taksim Square; City's Nişantaşı Shopping Mall; Cemal Reşit Rey Concert Hall; Cemil Topuzlu Open Air Theater; Istanbul Congress Center; Lutfi Kırdar Congress Center (ICEC)



Easy Access by Metro or Tram

Galata Tower; Topkapı Palace; Hagia Sophia; Blue Mosque; Basilica Cistern; Grand Bazaar; Spice Bazaar; Kidzmondo; Cevahir Shopping Mall



Easy Access by Taxi

Dolmabahçe Palace; Chora Museum; Rahmi Koç Museum



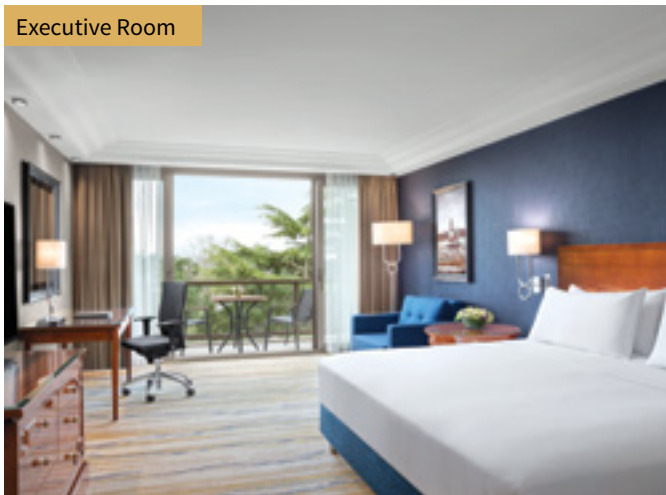
“We are eager to grow our business from the India market. Hence we have implemented Hilton's ‘Namaste’ program which is a tailored business meetings, conventions or wedding experience for our Indian guests at the hotel. Add to that, the exceptional quality, impeccable service and warmest welcome at the iconic Hilton Istanbul Bosphorus and you have a truly memorable event”

TOLGA AY TAN
Hotel Manager
Hilton Istanbul Bosphorus

Executive Lounge



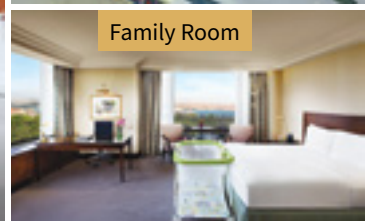
Executive Room



Turkish Bath



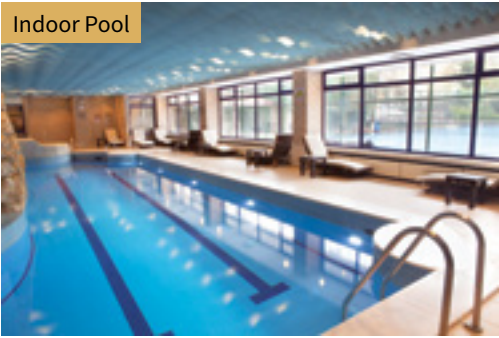
Family Room



Lobby



Indoor Pool

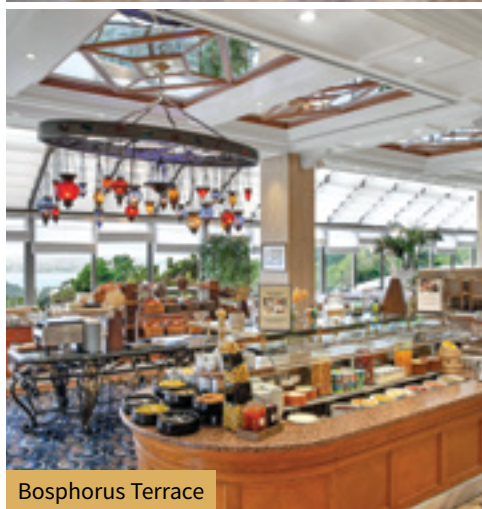


Convention Center Upper Floor



Meeting Vista

Convention Center Lower Floor



Bosphorus Terrace

Dragon Restaurant



Lalezar Meyhanesi



simply stunning. The Presidential Suite is as luxurious as it can get and costs €7000 plus taxes!

For discerning business travellers, the Executive Lounge offers a private reception, concierge service and all-day dining. On the top most 9th floor of the hotel, the Executive Lounge is bathed in natural light thanks to the floor-to-ceiling windows, and offers a view that is impressive, to say the least.

The Hilton Istanbul Bosphorus has extensive food and beverage venues offering sweeping Bosphorus views. The highlight is Dubb Indian Bosphorus Restaurant, serving a range of authentic Indian dishes from the 9th floor during the winter and in the garden during the summer. There are two private VIP rooms that can be used for events too.

The Bosphorus Terrace Restaurant is famous for the Hilton breakfast as well as a wide range of Turkish and international dishes. For fans of Chinese cuisine, there is Dragon Restaurant where one can savour Cantonese and Szechwan flavours during the winter in the restaurant next to the hotel's own Convention and Exhibition Center, or the garden during the summer.

For guests wanting to discuss work over a drink or enjoy the evening over drinks and conversations, the Hilton has excellent options starting with Lalezar Meyhanesi, the traditional Turkish tavern. At the Verandah Bar and Terrace, with stunning views of the Bosphorus and overlooking the hotel's lush gardens, enjoy superb Mediterranean and Turkish cuisine options and cocktails.

Hilton Istanbul Bosphorus has ideal venue options including the on-site Convention and Exhibition Center for up to 3000 guests, and open-air venues. The Hilton in Istanbul comes with 27 purpose-based meeting rooms, most of them bathed in natural light, and a fully-equipped Business Center. The pillar-less Ballroom and Şadırvan are ideal for large events with natural light, garden views, and a terrace. The meeting rooms which are perfect for social gatherings and occasions have views overlooking the Bosphorus. The Park floor meeting rooms come with a private terrace, absolute for outdoor breaks. And last but not the least, the private garden areas are available in the summer for weddings, corporate and social events. The hotel's car park can accommodate 450 vehicles.

April-May and September-November are peak seasons for MICE and the hotel's convention center sees up to 70 per cent bookings. The Hilton hosts over a 100 international events a year. Since the hotel is close to ICC and ICEC and has its own convention and exhibition center too, its rooms are mostly booked for MICE groups. During the summer, the hotel plays host to many weddings. In 2019, there were no Indian weddings though over 10 Indian MICE groups of 100-350 pax stayed with the hotel.

Hilton Istanbul Bosphorus offers exclusive services exceeding all expectations with outdoor and indoor pools; a fully-equipped 24-hour fitness center; three tennis courts; two squash courts; a Turkish bath, steam room, and sauna; a jogging track; and newly renovated massage rooms featuring unique treatments from all over the world by expert therapists. Experience a fantastic family stay with facilities that include two kids play zones and a special area for kids between the ages of 0-4. The hotel welcomes pets up to 25 kg. Now that's the best reason to stay with Hilton Istanbul Bosphorus.

Surf, Sand, Rave, Repeat!

*Indulge in fun and frolic
overlooking the stunning views of
the ocean at any of these popular
beach festivals across the globe*



Splore, Auckland



Sziget Festival, Budapest



The Revere Beach National Sand Sculpting Festival, Massachusetts



The Washington State International Kite Festival, Washington

NEW ZEALAND

Splore

There are few festivals in the world where you can dance in the ocean while watching the main stage, but Splore is one of them. Set in Auckland's Tapapakanga Regional Park, just one hour from the CBD, Splore is more than just a music festival and focuses on creativity, inclusiveness and ecological responsibility. Splore aims to have zero waste every year and has a leave-no-trace philosophy. The family-friendly atmosphere encourages kids to get involved as well.

Venue: Tapapakanga Regional Park, Auckland

Date: February 21-23, 2020

USA

The Venice Beach Music Festival

Much awaited by the locals of California and travellers from all over the world, this summer beach festival is full of color, life, and love for fine arts. The annual Venice Beach Music Festival celebrates music, art, dance, and literature. This is a full-day affair and is open to the general public.

Venue: West End of Windward Ave, Venice, California

Date: July 2020

The Revere Beach National Sand Sculpting Festival

Putting up huge sculptures on display which are made of sand and water by the world's best sculptors, Revere Beach is filled to the brim by spectators which makes it one of the best beach festivals in the world. Held on America's first public beach, this festival sees sand sculpting competitions, food trucks, vendors and other entertainments.

Venue: Revere Beach, Revere, Massachusetts

Dates: July 2020

The Curacao North Sea Jazz Festival

Considered to be one of the largest Caribbean beach music festival, this mega event stretches for three days and offers music of every kind ranging from R and B to soul, and from jazz blues to funk. The Curacao North Sea Jazz Festival is one of the biggest music events in the Caribbean.

Venue: Piscadera Bay Willemstad, Netherlands Antilles

Date: August, 2020

Entry: Approximately \$1000 for three nights

The Hangout Music Festival

This international beach festival is all about music, rocking with your favorite artist on the stage, enjoying the stunning views of the beach, and one of the best crowds in Alabama. This three-day festival is held in collaboration with its sister restaurant, the Hangout.

Venue: Gulf Shores Public Beach, Gulf Shores, Alabama

Date: May 15-17, 2020

Entry: Approximately \$300 per person

South Beach Wine and Food Festival

Being one of the massive beach festivals in the world that is enjoyed for about five days in Miami, Florida, the South Beach Wine and Food Festival celebrates the art of cooking like never before amidst the top chefs from all over the world.

Venue: Miami Beach, Florida

Date: February 20-24, 2020

Entry: Starts from \$100 per person

The Washington State International Kite Festival

Can you believe a week-long celebration just for kite competitions? If your answer is no, then you have to be a part of one of the best beach festivals in the world to believe it. Held in Washington, the sky comes alive with colorful kites during the day as well as in the nights. It is hosted by the World Kite Museum in America, an organisation that is dedicated to the history of kite making and flying.

Venue: Long Beach, Washington

Date: August 17-23, 2020

The Hawaii Food & Wine Festival

Who wouldn't love three full weekends of wine tasting, feasting on delicious cuisines, and rejuvenating in the Hawaiian air? Watch more than a hundred chefs cook for you, along with top personalities of the culinary world at this beach festival. A part of the money generated by the sale of tickets for this event is sent to the farmers, ranchers and fishermen of Hawaii.

Venue: Honolulu, Hawaii

Date: October 2-25, 2020

Entry: Starts from \$275 approx. per person

AUSTRALIA

The Surfest

One of the world-renowned and offbeat beach festivals in the world, the Surfest attracts top-class surfers from all over the world to the Southern Hemisphere of Australia. This is the largest surfing festival in the Northern hemisphere with more than 700 countries participating in it.

Venue: Newcastle, New South Wales

Dates: January 25-March 8, 2020

UK

The Boardmasters

Reckoned to be one of the most popular beach festivals in the world, the Boardmasters provides one of the greatest platforms for professional surfers and skateboarders at Fistral



(Clockwise from top)
The Boardmasters, UK;
Gnaoua Festival, Mo-
rocco and The Venice
Beach Music Festival,
California

Beach. Combining their favorite adventure with music, you might as well get to watch global popular artists perform live on stage. This four-day event is a huge hit among the young surfers and music lovers.

Venue: Fistral Beach, Cornwall

Date: August 5-9, 2020

Entry: Approximately \$200 to \$260 per person

FRANCE

The Cannes Film Festival

One of the much-awaited festivals in Europe, Cannes Film Festival adds the much-needed glamour to one of the popular beach festivals in the world. Indulge in fun and frolic while you get unlimited access to drinks, movies and endless celebrity sightings. With movie exhibitions on wide screens installed at the beach, this event is a hit.

Venue: Cannes

Date: May 12-23, 2020

Entry: Starts from \$1,800 approx. per person

PORTUGAL

MEO Sudoeste

Revel in the five-day celebration of food, music, and dance. Live an unforgettable week. Enjoy the music, dance, food, friendship and the beach.

Venue: Zambujeira do Mar

Date: August 4-8, 2020

CANADA

Cavendish Beach Music Festival

There's no chance country music lovers are gonna miss this three-day-long bash, Atlantic Canada's largest outdoor concert held annually. Taylor Swift, Carrie Underwood, Blake Shelton, among others

have top-lined the festival.

Venue: Cavendish Beach Events Centre, Cavendish, Prince Edward Island

Date: July 10 -12, 2020

CROATIA

Dimensions 2020

With the Adriatic Sea in the backdrop, Dimensions 2020 taking place across three stunning locations: the idyllic Garden Resort in Tisno, a fortress-top Amphitheatre in Sibenik in addition to star-lit dancing at the world-famous Barbarella's Discotheque, brings the best of urban music to Croatia. Dimensions' next chapter will be a continuation of the festival's heritage, with the same commitment to programming, sound quality, spirit, and a continued nurturing of a close-knit community of labels and club partners will remain – adding the signature Dimensions touch to the Garden Resort.

Venue: The Garden Resort, Tisno

Date: August 13-17, 2020

Entry: £100

MOROCCO

Gnaoua Festival

Gnaoua Festival is an eclectic music, arts and culture festival in the Moroccan port city of Essaouira, a UNESCO® World Heritage Site. Deeply rooted in North African styles, sounds and traditions, the festival is a vibrant and immersive experience, filling the city's streets, squares, docks and performance venues with a fantastic extravaganza of sound and colour.

Venue: Essaouira

Date: June 20-23, 2020

HUNGARY

Sziget Festival

With River Danube in the backdrop, Sziget is the perfect 7-day festival that includes heated spring baths, exquisite sky-bars, and theatre shows as well. Sziget is a massive 'Island of Freedom' filled with music, culture and love! While music is an important part of Sziget, art is also a core element. There are multiple venues including a circus, theater, museum quarter and much more. Artists and performers come from all over the world to display their talents. This is one of Europe's largest music festivals featuring over 1000 shows across 60 stages.

Venue: Óbuda Island, Budapest

Date: August 5-11, 2020

Entry: EUR 229 (7-day pass)

MALTA

Lost & Found Festival

For those who've been yearning for the best pool parties, be a part of the Lost & Found Festival that takes places right in the heart of Mediterranean Sea. From day to night, you'll be welcomed with breath-taking boat party backdrops of the coastline, ancient castles, pool-side parties overlooking the sunset and an intimate open-air night-time arena. It's all about your island adventure!

Venue: Malta

Date: April 30 – 3 May, 2020



✓ TAT EYES 3.18 TRILLION BAHT IN TOURISM REVENUE FOR THAILAND IN 2020

The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) is expecting 3.18 trillion Baht in overall tourism revenue for Thailand in 2020, or a 4 per cent year-on-year increase. This includes 2.02 trillion Baht from international tourists (up 3 per cent) and 1.16 trillion Baht from domestic tourists (up 5 per cent). The outlook for 2020 follows the overall tourism situation in 2019, which is estimated to generate 3.06 trillion Baht (4 per cent increase over 2018), comprising 1.96 trillion Baht (up 4 per cent) from 39.77 million international tourists (also up 4 per cent) and 1.10 trillion Baht (up 3 per cent) from 167 million domestic trips (up 1 per cent). Thailand welcomed the 39 millionth tourist on December 27, 2019. "TAT's target for 2020 is based on several favour-

able factors, ranging from the government's stimulus measures, TAT's focussed marketing strategies and promotions of emerging destinations, new air routes and the positive outlook of international tourists to Thailand from key source markets," said Yuthasak Supasorn, TAT Governor. The Thai government has launched 16 tourism stimulus measures aimed at generating more inbound travel, including the opening of more VAT refund shops and counters, 24-hour cross-border tourism on the Thai-Malaysian and Thai-Lao borders during weekends and holidays, the e-visa service and exemption of the visa-on-arrival fee until April 30, 2020, and the 50 per cent discount on airport landing fees for international flights from December

1, 2019 to April 30, 2020, to name but a few. Thailand is also seeing new air routes, including Hangzhou-Chiang Rai, Sendai-Bangkok, Munich-Phuket, and Doha-Chiang Mai. Yuthasak said, "Leveraging these favourable factors and gearing up to mark the 60th anniversary in 2020, TAT is committed to making travel and tourism the kingdom's most economically promising, environmentally sustainable, and culturally vibrant sector." TAT's marketing strategies also include the launch of 'The MICHELIN Guide Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Phuket & Phang Nga 2020'. In 2020, TAT is seeing a positive outlook of international tourists to Thailand from several markets including the CLMV countries (Cambodia, Lao PDR., Myanmar and Vietnam), Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, South Korea, Taiwan, India, Spain, Eastern Europe, Israel and the US. The Chinese, Singaporean and Middle East markets are showing signs of recovery. Meanwhile, the Japanese, Hong Kong, European, Scandinavian, Australian and Latin American markets are expected to remain stable or show slow growth. Yuthasak said, "TAT is also preparing to overcome several challenges, including the effect from the China-US trade war, the rise in consumption tax in Japan, and Brexit. The strong Thai Baht, Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics, World Expo 2020 Dubai and stimulus visa schemes from competitors have also been taken into consideration when laying out our tourism marketing strategies."

✓ SCHENGEN VISA FEE HIKE TO COME IN TO EFFECT IN FEBRUARY

Schengen Visa, which is required for travel to 26 European nations, will get dearer from February 2 onwards. The Schengen visa fee will be raised to Euro 80 from the existing rate of Euro 60. As per updated regulations, children between 6 to 12 years of age will need to pay Euro 40 instead of the earlier fee of Euro 35. However, there is no fee for infants and children below six years of age. The Schengen visa application form has also been slightly restructured under the new visa regime. According to Schengen-VisaInfo.com, over 16 million Schengen Visa applications have been filed at the embassies, consulates and visa centres of the 26 Schengen member countries across the globe in 2018. India was listed as the third-largest source for Schengen visa applications in 2018 with 10,81,359 requests being made from the country.

✓ 'MOBILE BIOMETRICS' VISA SERVICES FOR ITALY VISA APPLICANTS IN INDIA

VFS Global has launched the Mobile Biometrics service for Italian visa customers across India, enabling them to submit applications, documents, and enrol biometrics from the comfort of their office or any location of their choice, making it more convenient than ever before. This 'doorstep' service can be delivered to individuals and groups living in all cities in India. A team of trained VFS Global staff will visit the customer at the location of their choice to collect their visa application and enrol biometric data. They will also be available to assist with any visa application queries, ensuring the application process is fast, convenient and stress-free. Submissions from large tour groups, business delegates and school trips wishing to travel to Italy, will especially benefit from this new service, as the applicants will not be required to visit a Visa Application Centre (VAC) to

submit their applications. The documents, once processed with the visa decision will be returned by courier to the customer's desired location. The service is optional and applicants will have to pay an additional fee. It has been introduced in view of the rise in travel to Italy from India. Around 5,55,000 travellers from India visited Italy in 2019, an increase of 15 per cent over the previous year. Vincenzo de Luca, the Ambassador of Italy, said, "The launch of this new service completes the rich offer of Visa services for the Indian public." Vinay Malhotra, Regional Group COO – South Asia, Middle East & North Africa, and Americas, VFS Global, said, "This optional service was developed keeping in mind customers' demand for flexibility and superior experience, allowing them to submit applications, documents and enrol biometrics, all from the comfort of their home or office."



✓ SRI LANKA EXTENDS FREE VISA-ON-ARRIVAL SCHEME TILL APRIL 30

Sri Lanka has decided to extend the free visa-on-arrival scheme till April 30 for the citizens of 48 countries, including India, Tourism Minister Prasanna Ranatunga said. "We have decided to extend this facility due to requests from the stakeholders. A Cabinet paper would be submitted for this purpose," Ranatunga said. According to reports, the tourism industry in Sri Lanka has urged the government to continue the fee-free visa regime, as it has been helpful to recover from the post-Easter Sunday setback. They have pointed out that any loss of revenue to the government from granting free visas is insignificant considering the net \$4.4 billion income the industry brings in as foreign exchange earnings. Nationals from Thailand, European Union nations, the United States, Australia, South Korea, Canada, Singapore, New Zealand, Malaysia, Switzerland, Cambodia, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Iceland, and Russia are among the 48 nations included in the measure.

✓ STRONG UPWARD TREND IN INDIA'S OUTBOUND TRAVEL



The latest findings of the World Travel Monitor® by IPK International point to a strong upward trend in India's outbound travel in 2020. IPK International forecasts a six per cent increase in outbound travel from India in 2020, thus continuing strong growth of the Indian market. Rolf Freitag, CEO of IPK International, will present the final findings of the World Travel Monitor® for 2019 at the ITB Future Day of the ITB Berlin Convention along with forecasts for 2020. Despite a large population and economic development India is not one of Asia's high-volume source markets for outbound trips. It ranks fifth, a long way behind China, South Korea, Japan and even Taiwan. However, in recent years India's market has recorded above-average growth in outbound travel: With an increase of seven per cent in the first eight months of 2019, outbound trips from India exceeded the average figure for Asia overall. The main beneficiaries of India's growth in outbound travel are destinations in Asia, whose market share rose to almost 70 per cent in 2019. Destinations in Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and Japan were in particularly high demand and reported double-digit growth. At seven per cent, travel to North America increased significantly too, whereas trips to Europe were below average during the period.

✓ UAE TO OFFER 5-YEAR TOURIST VISA FOR ALL NATIONALITIES

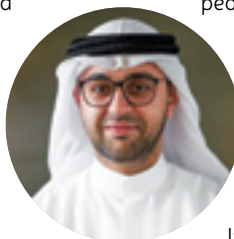
In a major development, the UAE has decided to introduce a new multiple-entry tourist visa scheme valid for five years for all nationalities as part of efforts to affirm the country's position as a global tourist destination. The new visa scheme was approved by the UAE cabinet during its first meeting during 2020, the Year of Preparation, chaired by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President, Prime Minister and ruler of Dubai. The decision will be implemented during the first quarter of 2020. Previously, the tourist visas were valid for only 30 to 90 days. But now, tourist of any nationality can have the benefit of five-year visa. The



terms and conditions for obtaining the new visa will remain the same as those in place for all other types of tourist visas. The holders of the new five-year multiple-entry tourist visa will be allowed to stay for six months at a stretch. Sheikh Mohammed took to Twitter to announce the news saying, "Today we change the system of issuing tourist visas in the country, to make the duration of the tourist visa for five-years, multiple uses, for all nationalities. We receive more than 21 million tourists annually and our aim is to establish the country as a major global tourist destination." Another key decision made during the meeting was the introduction of a visa waiver for Mexican citizens travelling to the UAE.

✓ 'SHARJAH TO BENEFIT IMMENSELY FROM FIVE YEAR VISA SCHEME'

With the recent announcement of multiple-entry five year UAE visas for all nationalities, Sharjah considers it a great opportunity to attract more visitors from India and around the world. Commenting on the same, Khalid Jasim Al Midfa, Chairman of Sharjah Commerce and Tourism Development Authority said Sharjah, being an important cultural and tourism hub will definitely benefit and have a huge advantage due to this new scheme. "Now, tourists of any nationality can have the benefit of a five-year visa and explore our beautiful destination and return several times to enjoy various experiences offered by Sharjah. The new visa scheme aims to double the number



of tourists and will make it easier for the VFR segment as well to visit Sharjah. This will help UAE be a global tourism destination," he said. On the upcoming, Sharjah Light Festival 2020 on February 5-15, Midfa said: "More than 1.2 million people attended Sharjah Light Festival 2019. We plan to build on this success for the 2020 edition, which is a special anniversary, as its the 10th edition of the festival. With the help of technological advancements, the decorations, lightings and musical celebrations are expected to be bigger and better than ever especially as it will be the 10th anniversary year. There will be international and local artists, curators and musicians creating a fascinating display of lights, colours and music in the city."



✓ JAPAN NATIONAL TOURISM ORGANIZATION LAUNCHES “YOUR JAPAN 2020” CAMPAIGN

In a strategic move to entice the Indian outbound travellers, Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) is kickstarting the year with a brand new ‘Your Japan 2020’ campaign. It aims to provide special experiences and great offers to the Indian travellers on an unprecedented scale. Commenting on the campaign, Yusuke Yamamoto, Executive Director, JNTO said, “The year 2020 is highly crucial for Japan as all eyes would be on our destination for hosting the World Olympic Games. In order to make every individual’s visit to our destination enthralling, JNTO has made conscious efforts in planning activities all around the year starting from January 1 to December 31, 2020. Through our new campaign, we would like to invite more and more Indians to come and explore Japan to the fullest the way you want it to be.” Japan, in fact, witnessed 11,700 Indian tourist arrivals in December, posting 13.9 per cent hike. Moreover, 1,75,900 Indians visited Japan from January – December, 2019, posting a phenomenal 14.2 per cent year-on-year hike. As part of the campaign, JNTO wants to invite visitors globally to experience Japan their way through events like never before. JNTO through its premeditated partnership is allowing travellers on an economical trip to Japan as both, domestic & international airlines are handing out phenomenal discounts. The year 2020 in Japan also marks a year for the shopaholics as the destination is hosting



their largest shopping festival on record from January 1, 2020 – February 28, 2021. More than 1000 stores nationwide are providing never seen before discounts. Moreover, for a special shopping experience during the bargain seasons, Japan Shopping Tourism Organization (JSTO) will be providing additional cashback benefits. For a hassle-free travel in Japan the visitors can also enjoy the

luxury of ‘hands-free’ travel with half-price luggage storage and delivery services. As the year begins with winters in Japan, one can head for a thrilling skiing experience in Hokkaido region or mountainside of Japan. The Hakusan Ichirino Onsen Ski Resort in Ishikawa is giving out a free lift pass for the day where you can rejuvenate in a relaxing hot spring. The Niigata Sake-no-Jin Fair 2020 in the Niigata prefecture will display Sake of over 500 brands Spring brings with it the season of cherry blossom and never imagined experiences. History lovers can also rejoice as they can visit the tourist sites of Mie Prefecture steeped in the traditions of samurai and ninja at half the price. Summer in Japan will showcase Tohoku summer festivals where one can experience large, traditional and exciting activities. Adventure lovers can experience Hokkaido prefecture like never before. Not only that, there will be new spots which people haven’t explored yet. The Tokyo Bay Night Cruise has been a popular summertime tradition for 85 years. The 2020 cruise is replete with food stalls, Taiko drum performances, etc. Enjoy sightseeing in the Mt. Fuji area with special 50 per cent off during the 2020 campaign period. Autumn in 2020 will bring with it ‘Savor Japan’ campaign which will be positioned at developing countryside experiences. Travellers can stay in an authentic countryside settlement and experience their local cuisine.

✓ ATM TO LAUNCH INAUGURAL IN-DESTINATION FORUM ARIVAL DUBAI @ ATM

The Middle East’s (ME) first-ever edition of Arival Dubai @ ATM will take place alongside Arabian Travel Market (ATM) 2020 at Dubai World Trade Centre from April 19-22, 2020. The dedicated forum, which will take place on April 19, will enable vendors, agents and operators of tours, activities and attractions to gain invaluable insights into the latest trends and challenges impacting the in-destination industry, as well as improving customer experience and business development throughout the ME market. Danielle Curtis, Exhibition Director ME, ATM, said, “Tours, activities and attractions are currently the third largest and fastest-growing sector within the travel and tourism industry, representing



approximately \$180 billion in global travel spend annually. Add to this, one-third of tours, activities and attractions are booked online at present with the ME representing one of the world’s fastest-growing online travel experience markets and we can see a pattern forming.” Given their competitive edge, it is clear that professionals within the tours and attractions segment in the ME as well as associated travel brands, need to invest in the latest technology and innovative online booking tools in order to capitalise on this rapidly expanding travel experiences sector. Delegates at the inaugural Arival Dubai @ ATM forum will have access to a packed conference agenda featuring high-profile keynote speakers, with Arival Co-Founder and CEO Douglas Quinby, kicking-off proceedings with a session on the current and future in-destination trends, challenges and opportunities shaping the ME sector. The forum will also feature ‘Ask Me Anything Interviews’ with a range of senior executives from leading attractions and online agencies within the region.

✓ EBIXCASH SIGNS PARTNERSHIP WITH AMADEUS



EbixCash, a fully owned subsidiary of Ebix, Inc. has signed a strategic travel technology partnership with Amadeus to grow its footprint across the Asia-Pacific region and the UAE. The partnership will provide EbixCash’s online websites, travel agents and corporations in Asia Pacific and UAE with greater access to the content offered by the Amadeus Travel Platform, enabling EbixCash to better serve its customers. Robin Raina, Chairman, President & CEO, Ebix, said, “Partnering with Amadeus will allow us to further expand our footprint across the region, especially in India, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, Dubai and Abu Dhabi, where we see the greatest potential.”

SOAKING IN THE NYC EXPERIENCE

The author had a whale of a time in NYC celebrating her birthday with spouse. And the Travel Prepaid Card was the best decision

Text by
Noopur Jain



(The author is an avid traveler and works in the payments industry. She can be reached at noopur_jain@hotmail.com)

We decided to celebrate my milestone birthday by making the long haul trip to the United States. Both Vik (my husband) and I agreed to focus on the east coast and more or less the three large cities, Boston, DC and NYC. While planning the trip, three big decisions needed to be taken – how to travel, what to do and budgeting. New York is much more than Times Square (though the neon lights did dazzle me). I got some excellent travel tips from friends and New York insiders. It is only fair that I pay it forward and share some of my experiences with future travelers. Therefore, here goes:

LOCAL TRANSPORTATION

Get up & about the city like a local by purchasing the MTA's (Metropolitan Transportation Authority) 7-day pass. MTA connects New York City (Manhattan & boroughs) through its network of subways, buses and suburban trains. The 7-day pass allows unlimited trips and the subway is the fastest way to move around NYC. Surface transport (cars & buses) is prone to delays due to heavy traffic in NYC. For airport transfers, Uber (Indian Account & Credit Card works) is the most convenient way to travel. Lyft is another option but when we travelled in June 2019, it required a US local number for verification.

CONNECTIVITY

While you have free WiFi everywhere in NYC, the Vodafone IR plan was handy to access Google Maps, online purchases of tickets and to make local calls – all without the hassle of managing an additional US SIM.

WEATHER CHECK

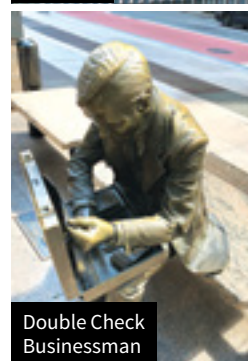
Very important to note. Check the weather forecast before you head out and plan the day's activities. The Weather Channel was eerily accurate.

LIVE ENTERTAINMENT

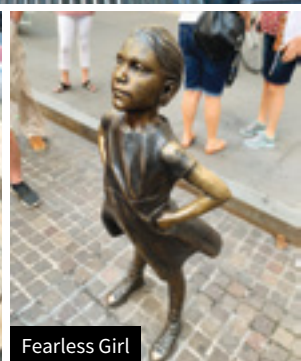
Jazz, Broadway & Comedy Clubs. NYC is much about experiencing the best of the best in performing arts as much as it is about sightseeing. So make sure you plan each evening carefully. 2019 was one of the best years for Broadway in terms of ticket



One WTC



Double Check
Businessman



Fearless Girl

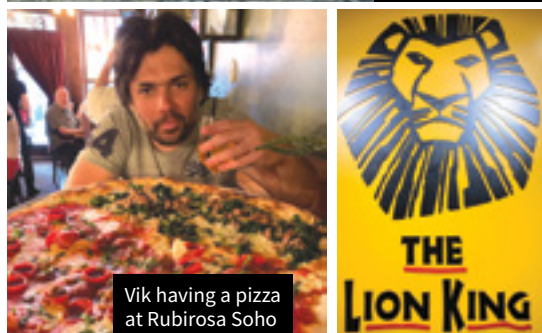
sales and there are plenty of options. Book in advance if possible – for same-day tickets there is a discount booth TKTS, which gives 50-80 per cent discount on same-day tickets (but you have to queue up and be very patient). We simply walked up to the individual theatres and got reasonably good seats at affordable prices. We managed to see *The Lion King* and *To Kill a Mocking Bird* – experiencing two very different genres! Attend other live performances like concerts/boxing etc. in NYC at the Madison Square Garden, Radio City Hall, Barclays Centre (in Brooklyn). Make sure you also get your fill of Jazz, Piano Bars (Don't tell Mama in Hell's Kitchen) and Comedy Clubs (Comedy Cellar in Greenwich Village) for clean fun. We were amazed by world-class talent. Plan ahead, try to apply for audience seats at Comedy Central/Saturday Night Live and who knows you might get super lucky!

FOOD SCENE

The food scene in NYC is exploding. Here are some recommendations:



Statue of Liberty



Vik having a pizza at Rubirosa Soho



Comedy Cellar at Greenwich Village

- Street food (\$1 pizzas, hotdogs & doner kebabs, especially Joes Pizza in Greenwich)
- Korea Town (Jongro – Korean Barbecue)
- Soho (artisanal sushi – Sugarfish, spanish wine & tapas – Boqueria, best pepperoni pizza – Rubirosa – reserve ahead)
- Meat Packing District (bar hopping, view from The Standard) & Chelsea Market (buzzing food market with great artichoke pizza)
- Hell's Kitchen (bar & restaurant hopping)
- Brooklyn
- Little Italy & China Town

ENJOY THE FREE THINGS

Take a stroll on Brooklyn Bridge; enjoy the architectural buildings/skyline (Empire State, Chrysler, Woolworths, Rockefeller); walk on the High Line; visit the 9/11 Memorial & One World; pay tribute to the Charging Bull, Fearless Girl, Double Check at Wall Street; take the Staten Island Ferry for a view of the Statue of Liberty; or amble along in Battery Park; soak in the neon lights at Times Square; window shop at

5th Avenue and then rest your feet & soul at St. Patrick's Church; visit the New York City Public Library on 53rd Street. To get initiated – join the plethora of free walking tours available. Familiarize yourself with the numbering system in Manhattan (Streets run east-west/Avenues run south-north, with numbers beginning on the east side of the island and ascending to the west).

PARKS IN NEW YORK

Central Park in Manhattan, Prospect Park & Botanic Garden in Brooklyn are delightful oases in NYC. We rented a bicycle for about three hours and circled the perimeter of Central Park. One could carry a picnic basket to enjoy a good day outdoors.

MUSEUMS

If you like museums, this is the city with many choices – Museum of Modern Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Guggenheim, 9/11 Memorial, Whitney Museum of American Art. If there are children in the group, the American Museum of Natural History is a good choice. Look for free museum days. Usually, there is one day per week, but they tend to be crowded. Each museum also has a scheduled highlights tour, which lasts an hour and covers a lot. I enjoyed visiting the MoMA (houses Rembrandt, Van Gogh, Picasso). It might be better to visit museums in DC, as they are free and well maintained.

RETAIL THERAPY

The ideal state is a day trip to Woodbury Commons, an outlet mall – however, it does require time & money (~\$80 per person for the round trip). There are many discount stores like Century 21, Macy's, Bloomingdale's, Nordstrom Rack in the city, where you could find deals on American brands.

SKY DECKS & OBSERVATORIES

For New York sunsets head up to decks on the skyscrapers (\$20-\$30) or bar rooftops. The Edge at Hudson Yards opens in March 2020 and will be the highest observation deck in the western hemisphere at 1131 ft.

EXPLORING THE BOROUGHES

NYC is not just Manhattan but seven boroughs (Jersey, Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, Governors Island, Long Island, Ellis Island). Each one is unique. Brooklyn for example is/was home to some greats like (Al Capone, Truman Capote, Jimmy Fallon, JayZ). While it is gentrified, still interesting to see the neighborhood. Governors Island, is also fine for a day trip – very quiet, barbecue or bike around and enjoy a good day outdoor.

DOWNLOAD THE PLAYLIST

Get in a New York State of Mind with

songs dedicated to the city. Great fun to share the bond that some of the musical greats like Billy Joel, James Brown, Simon & Garfunkel, Bob Dylan (not to forget A&B) built with the city.

THINGS THAT WERE JUST NOT FOR ME

- Hop on Hop off tours: There are many resellers on the streets & crossings. Not on my recommendation list, as it wasted too much time, the commentary is recorded and patchy, oversold and crowded
- Statue of Liberty Cruise: Only one company (www.statuecruises.com) is licensed to land on Ellis Island and Statue of Liberty Island – so book months in advance. Avoid the regular cruises that operate from Battery Park, simply take the Staten Island Ferry (free) to get some great pictures of NYC Skyline, Brooklyn Bridge and the Statue

Vik and I have credit cards that offer the functionality of transacting internationally; however, given the expenses foreseen at the destination, we wanted to lock in the forex exchange rate. Therefore, we decided to avail of a Visa Travel Prepaid Card from EbixCash World Money.

In hindsight, it was an excellent decision to take the Travel Prepaid Card because of many reasons:

LOCKED IN FOREX

EbixCash offered us competitive exchange rates and excellent doorstep service. In fact, the dollar appreciated slightly during our trip – so we felt elated having locked in a good rate.

RELOAD WHILE ON THE TRIP

It took only a WhatsApp conversation and an online money transfer to top up the card while on the trip. Great benefit for emergencies & contingencies or simply when you are self-indulgent (that was me in NYC!)

- Used it everywhere seamlessly – online to book events/tours, at shops and restaurants, you name it. The card is accepted at Visa's 50 million-plus merchant network across the world
- Transaction alerts helped in keeping track of the spend and balance on the card. The welcome kit contained a replacement card – very handy in case of an untoward incident

For most of our travel, we were able to comfortably use the Travel Prepaid Card and it served as a reliable companion. I believe it was only at the MTA that we had to use cash as the manned counter did not accept cards.

New York is an experience, so set enough time aside to soak in as much as you can.



A MÉLANGE OF PAN-INDIAN CUISINES

GOPAL JHA

Executive Chef

Novotel Mumbai Juhu Beach

Novotel Mumbai Juhu Beach offers a variety of cuisines and dining options. Natural light, a magnificent view of the sea and a relaxed yet sophisticated ambience makes it the perfect place to indulge in hearty breakfasts, casual lunches, leisurely dinners and drinks by the beach. On Sundays, enjoy the special Sunday Brunch, featuring international specialties and interactive counters.

DISHES YOU JUST CAN'T MISS



Mushroom Galouti

The mouth-watering vegetarian galouti comes with a spicy flavour



Lucknowi Dum Biryani

A very traditionally-prepared Dum Pukht Lucknowi Chicken Biryani with aromatic flavours and subtle spices



Kebab Platter

The yummy dish comes with Lal Mirch ka Murg Tikka, Kasundi Fish Tikka, Zafrani Murgh Kebab and Mutton Gilafi Seekh



(Clockwise): Gadda Da Vida – chic sea lounge; Sampan – Chinese cuisine; The Square – multi-cuisine all-day dining restaurant; Olio Restaurant – authentic Italian cuisine; Bageecha – Indian dining terrace



NALLI NIHARI

Ingredients:

Mutton (shank portion), 1 kg; Ghee, 60 gm; Onions (finely sliced), 200 gm; Ginger paste, 20 gm; Garlic paste, 20 gm; Coriander powder, 10 gm; Turmeric powder, 5 tsp; Gram flour, 50 gm; Nihari masala, 20 gm; Salt to taste.

Spices to make Nihari masala:

Cumin seeds, 15 gm; Fennel seeds, 30 gm; Saunth dry ginger, 5 gm; Green cardamoms, 5-6; Black cardamoms, 2; Cloves, 4-5; Bay leaf, 1; Cinnamon stick, 1 inch; Black peppercorns, 8-10; Grated nutmeg, 3 gm.

Dry roast all the whole spices for the masala. Once cooled, grind the masala to a fine powder.

For garnish:

Ginger (cut into thin strips), 1 inch; Coriander leaves (fresh), 4-5 stalks.

Method:

Heat ghee in a deep bottom stock pot. Once the ghee is hot, add the sliced onions and fry till they start to turn brown. Add mutton pieces, ginger paste, garlic paste, coriander powder, turmeric powder and salt. Mix well to coat the mutton in ghee and spices. Sauté for 5 minutes. Add the Nihari masala and lamb stock. Mix well, cover and cook on very low heat for about 4 hours until the meat is tender. Keep checking in between. The way to know that the meat is cooked is when it breaks easily with a wooden spoon. Make a roux of gram flour and ghee. Slowly add it to the gravy. Stir to mix it well in the gravy and let it simmer for another 10-15 minutes till the gravy thickens. Add some lime juice and garnish with ginger strips and fresh coriander leaves. Serve hot.



A Great Resort Experience in the Middle of a Desert

Surrounded by sand dunes, Desert Hermitage in the Thar in rural Jodhpur offers a once-in-a-lifetime experience

By DILEEP KUMAR P I



It was our long-pending wish to visit The Great Indian Desert, Thar, in Rajasthan. Hailing from the lush green State of Kerala, we haven't had much of an idea about life in a desert. Though Rajasthan is famous for its mighty forts and magnificent palaces, we decided to skip all those for experiencing the real rural life in a desert. We booked our accommodation for three nights at Desert Hermitage at Garha village 90 km from Jodhpur on the National Highway 125 to Jaisalmer. Desert Hermitage was recommended by a friend who had given us a fair idea about the property.

We booked our flight to Jodhpur from Kochi via Mumbai. Jodhpur airport is under the Indian Army which reminded me of the Naval Airport at Willingdon Island in Kochi.

We came out of the city quickly through the bypass road and entered the NH 125 to Jaisalmer. After 10 km or so from the city, barren landscapes began appearing on both sides of the highway with shrubs dotting these sandy areas. There were only a few

varieties of vegetation like the common *Khejri* and *Neem* trees, and plants like *Madar* and *Cactus*. We crossed small villages on the way where we found people engaged mostly in rearing cattle. Sandstone mines could also be seen along the way.

Our car took a left turn from the NH 125 at Jawahar Nagar junction towards the village road leading to Garha. The resort is about 6 km further into the desert from the main village road, located inside a large compound protected by green fencing and stone slabs. The huge iron gates of Desert Hermitage were opened by the guard when he spotted our car coming from a distance. Inside the compound there is a large car parking area which is again separated by a wall from the resort, so the vehicles parked there will not be visible to the inmates. There is a long driveway from the gate to the resort building lined by fairly large trees providing much-needed shade.

We got down in front of the reception block. Standing there, we got to capture the

amazing sight of the entire resort which was quite impressive than what we saw in pictures. The L-shaped resort block facing the garden in the middle has two types of accommodation; five circular-shaped traditional cottages and four modern villas. Our hosts Karan Singh Bhati, his wife Anjana Bhati and their younger son Digvijay Singh were waiting at the entrance to receive us. Since we had started at around 2.30 am from Kochi, Karan advised us to have lunch and take rest for a while, and we accepted his thoughtful suggestion. Our room was in the villa section and interestingly those villas are named after the martyrs from the village who laid down their lives while defending our nation from the enemies. The circular cottages are named after the Gallantry award winners from that region.

The Banwar Villa (No. 4) was as big as a suite. Banwar was a Sepoy of the Indian Army who lost his life at the age of 22 during Kargil War. The villa has a private courtyard at the entrance with garden seating and a





large balcony on the opposite side facing the gardens. The size of the bedroom is unusually large, bigger than any luxury hotel room. It is constructed using local sandstone, hard wood panels and glass. The walls and floors are mostly clad with thick wooden panels. The full-length windows fitted with glass facing the inner courtyard and at the balcony allow plenty of natural light to come in. There is a king-size bed plus a rollaway bed placed in the room with fresh and crisp linen. Amenities included air conditioning, room heater, LED TV with cable connection, telephone, Wi-Fi, and tea and coffee-making facility. The bathroom and vestibule areas are also quite spacious with all essential items. The bathroom has a shower cubicle with an option for open sky view. There is a large wooden wardrobe outside the bathroom fitted with a full-length dressing mirror.

Lunch was served within 15 minutes at our room. It was vegetarian and we found all dishes very tasty. Food is a major highlight of this place. All the ingredients

are locally sourced within 40 miles of this resort. For Keralites like me, North Indian cuisine means *Dal Makhani*, *Palak Paneer*, *Butter Chicken*, *Pulao* and *Roti/Naan*. But we couldn't find any of these dishes in our meals served during our four-day stay in this place! For desert folks fresh vegetables and fruits are a luxury, and they make their daily food using dry vegetables, leaves, *besan* flour, *bajra* flour etc. Cooks are all from the local area and they are trained in star category hotels in Jodhpur, giving them lessons in food safety and hygiene. My wife and I are vegetarians. On our departure day the Head Cook even surprised us by serving hot *idlis* and crispy *vadas* with *sambar* and *chutney*. My daughter relished different varieties of mutton preparations, including the famous *Laal Maas*. The taste of *Gatta Curry*, *Gatta Biriyani*, *Corn and Palak Curry*, *Kofta Curry*, *Mirchi Pakoda*, sweet dish made with broken wheat etc. still lingers in our mouth.

In the evening, we met Karan Singh in the garden just before sunset, and the outside temperature was about 18-20 degree Celsius. A seasoned hotelier, Karan started his career with The Oberoi Group and later held senior positions with Accor Group, HRH Group, Le Meridien, Club Mahindra etc.

Desert Hermitage was started by his father the late Brigadier Uday Singh Bhati; who was awarded the 'Maha Vir Chakra', the second highest gallantry award of the country. After retirement, he returned to his ancestral house at Garha. Initially, his focus was to bring basic facilities like electricity, water, telephone connection etc. to that remote area. Parallel to that, he also worked to improve the facilities provided to the ex-service personnel hailing from that region. Those days a defence service pensioner had to walk 20 to 40 km to collect their pension from the treasury of the nearest town. Even after reaching the treasury, they had to stand in the queue braving the hot sun. At Brig. Bhati's initiative waiting sheds with seating, drinking water and toilet facilities were made at those treasuries and canteens.

Brig. Bhati started Desert Hermitage to

create employment opportunities for the village people, but his untimely demise caused the place to remain shut for a couple of years. Karan took over the resort in 2014 and went for a massive makeover adding four villas and the doors were again opened to the visitors last year.

We spent more than two hours with Karan that evening and he gave us an authentic account of the socio-cultural and economic conditions of the rural population in the desert. Our advice to those who wish to visit Desert Hermitage is never miss a session with Karan, it would be like missing the sight of the tiger at a wildlife reserve!

According to Karan, life is still challenging in the desert. People have to walk several miles in hot sun to fetch a pot of drinking water, even primary schools are far away from villages and they have to live with very limited resources. But there are some advantages also; there is no pollution with air quality remaining excellent and sound pollution is nil. When we went out to the dunes in the evening, our driver was Capt. Kheram, a retired honorary captain, who was in his 70s. The desert was so calm and silent. The candle light dinner arranged on top of sand dunes was a life-time experience for us!

While saying goodbye to Karan's family and resort employees, we genuinely felt that this place is not just a resort but an institution which helps change the lives of the rural people.



A veteran hospitality professional, the author is the CEO of Intimice Hospitalities based in Kochi





The Rock Bar

AYANA RESORT AND SPA, BALI

Situated 8 km from Central Jimbaran, AYANA Resort and Spa, Bali offers luxurious rooms overlooking the private beaches of Jimbaran Bay. It is set on 90 hectares of cliff-top tropical garden, perched 35 m above Jimbaran Bay. Home to the famous Rock Bar, widely respected as one of the world's most popular sunset, cocktail and entertainment venues, showcasing unparalleled views above the Indian Ocean, the resort provides 12 swimming pools and 19 dining options. Multi-lingual staff are always ready to assist guests during stay. Spa on the Rocks offers a most amazing treatment experience for all the senses. Guests will discover Europe's best kept beauty secret with Thalassotherapy treatments, combining the powerful anti-oxidant benefits of seaweed and seawater. They can also play a game of golf at the 18-hole putting course. The resort provides an on-site tennis court, fitness centre and a tour desk. AYANA is 10 km from Ngurah Rai International Airport.

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