

FKHA Magazine

Volume 01 | Issue 05 | July-August 2024 | ₹100

SWAGAT

OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF THE FEDERATION OF KERALA HOTELS ASSOCIATION

BI-LINGUAL BI-MONTHLY PUBLICATION

FEATURES



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NEW HEIGHTS**

**INNOVATING
GETAWAYS IN STYLE**

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FKHA House, TC 16/253/1, EVRA 371,
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Printers

Orange Printers Pvt. Ltd.

Gandhariamman Kovil Jn.,
Thiruvananthapuram 695001
orange@orangexpress.com



BI-LINGUAL BI-MONTHLY PUBLICATION

SWAGAT

Swagat is the official organ of the Federation of Kerala Hotels Association (FKHA). Swagat is a bi-lingual, bi-monthly publication. We welcome comments and opinions from our patrons. We also welcome articles in English and Malayalam on diverse aspects of the tourism industry. Please send original photographs, or photographs with copyright, along with articles. Collections of photographs for photo-essays are also welcome. Publication of articles and photographs will be strictly according to the discretion of the Editorial Board. Only soft copies of articles may be sent. The mail ID is fkhamagazineswagat@gmail.com.

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BASELESS CONTROVERSIES MUST NOT DETER GOVERNMENT FROM TAKING DECISIVE ACTION

Any government decision concerning liquor inevitably stirs controversy in Kerala, sparking vigorous socio-political debates and accusations of corruption. Amidst this tumult, little attention is paid to the predicament of hospitality entrepreneurs who have invested substantial sums in establishing hotels. While other struggling industries receive prompt governmental support and revival measures during crises, the liquor and hotel sectors, closely intertwined, often find themselves marginalized, devoid of public empathy or official assistance. Addressing this disparity requires a balanced approach that recognizes the economic and social contributions of liquor and hospitality sectors, ensuring that they receive fair treatment and support commensurate with their importance to the broader economy and societal fabric.

Although Kerala is a State without prohibition, there is a notable reluctance to recognize bar hotels operating in strict adherence to legal norms as a legitimate industry. Beyond their primary function of liquor sales, these establishments are pivotal components of the tourism sector, making substantial contributions to the State economy. The recent controversy surrounding a purported liquor policy change that never materialized illustrates how vested interests manipulate facts to unfairly vilify these hotels. Rather than being unjustly portrayed, these establishments should be appreciated for their economic significance and their integral role in promoting tourism.

The recent controversy echoes the tumultuous period in the hotel sector during 2014-15, the repercussions of which continue to resonate. During that time, Kerala witnessed the closure of 748 bar hotels following the implementation of a stringent liquor policy by the then government. Only 29 bar hotels with Five Star classification were permitted to

continue operations, alongside 813 beer and wine parlours. This policy upheaval resulted in severe consequences: entrepreneurs who had invested substantial amounts in the industry faced significant losses, while thousands of workers found themselves suddenly unemployed and vulnerable.

Following the change in government in 2016, 442 hotels had their bar licenses reinstated under the revised Abkari Policy. However, despite this revision, 305 hotels remained unable to meet the stringent financial requirements and were relegated to operating as beer and wine parlours. The requirement for hotels to obtain Three or Four Star classifications in order to obtain a bar license necessitated significant financial investments in infrastructure upgrades. Even among those hotels that successfully regained their bar licenses, the process was arduous and financially burdensome. It often entailed expenditures ranging from Rs. 8 to 15 crore, with the licensing process itself lasting between 2 to 3 years in many cases.

The Covid-19 pandemic delivered a severe blow to the already struggling hotel sector, exacerbating the fallout from the crisis that began in 2014-15 and persisted for nearly 8 years. Bar hotels, particularly hard hit by the pandemic, continue to grapple with accumulated tax arrears. Many hoteliers who had taken loans for renovation purposes still struggle to repay their debts. In response to these challenges, the Federation of Kerala Hotels Association had petitioned for amnesty from payment of Turnover Tax (ToT) and similar levies.

The government announced an amnesty period during 2021-22, but a significant number of hotels were unable to benefit from this relief measure. Some remained shuttered due to ongoing closures, preventing them from qualifying for

the amnesty. Others faced obstacles in securing personal loans, while a third group saw their CIBIL score hit dangerous levels due to hotel closures and subsequent defaults on loan repayments. The Association has persistently appealed to the government for further amnesty measures, but our pleas have gone unanswered. Even when an amnesty benefiting several other industries was included in the latest budget, the hotel industry was conspicuously overlooked.

Currently, the Taxes Department is actively pursuing the cancellation of GST registrations of hotels that have defaulted on Turnover Tax (ToT) payments. Without GST registration, these establishments are barred from buying or selling liquor, forcing many to remain closed. Their ability to settle tax arrears hinges on the opportunity to resume operations, a chance that is often denied. Meanwhile, operational hotels face their own set of challenges. License fees have skyrocketed, increasing by Rs. 12 lakh over the past seven years, with a notable Rs. 5 lakh hike in the last year alone. This steep rise, coupled with escalating taxes and duties on liquor sales, has precipitated a decline in consumption. Consequently, there is a troubling trend where the younger generation, disenchanted with costly liquor options, are turning towards drugs—a shift that tragically results in fatal outcomes.

Hotels play a crucial role in the economy by consuming a diverse array of products—from basic commodities like salt to specialized items such as sanitaryware and machinery—thereby sustaining numerous small and medium-sized industrial units. However, the government appears reluctant to acknowledge these contributions when addressing the industry's needs. Like entrepreneurs in any other sector, those in the hotel industry aspire to earn reasonable returns on their investments and create conducive

working environments. However, despite substantial capital investments and its role as a major employer, providing direct and indirect employment to thousands, the hotel industry receives minimal governmental consideration. On top of all this, the industry is also faced with hostility from certain officials within the excise, police, and taxation departments, aggravating the crisis.

The hotel industry operates in strict compliance with the laws and government directives, warranting equitable treatment akin to other sectors. With tourism showing signs of growth, maintaining a robust hotel industry becomes imperative. Consequently, there has been a longstanding demand from the hotel sector for official recognition as an industry, a status that would reflect its economic importance. But, unlike initiatives aimed at enhancing ease of doing business elsewhere, the hotel sector perceives a lack of corresponding support from the government.

It should be remembered that liquor not only plays a pivotal role in the operational viability of hotels, but also in ensuring the satisfaction of tourists. Liquor is integral to promoting Kerala as a destination for international conferences, destination weddings and other similar events. Unavailability of liquor is also hampering the government's efforts to promote nightlife because under the current regulations, bars can operate only from 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Anachronistically, while the retail liquor outlets of the Kerala State Beverages Corporation (Bevco) commence operations at 10 a.m., bars are restrained from opening before 11 a.m. Bevco is also opening outlets in close proximity to bar hotels, cutting into their business and profitability.

Hotels in Kerala have been living for a long time now with mandatory dry days on the first day of each month, several festival days and other specified times, leading to significant financial losses. The practice of observing dry days on the first day of every month is unique to Kerala and contrasts sharply with other States where

such restrictions typically apply only on one or two days in a year. Compounding these challenges, while several States are lowering the legal age for purchasing liquor, Kerala has raised it from 21 to 23 years. The sector has already witnessed a substantial 40% decline in revenue.

Establishing and operating a hotel entails navigating a complex regulatory landscape involving inspections from multiple departments and officials, including Excise, Police, Local Self Government, Weights and Measures, Food Safety, and Labour departments. Many hotels are able to continue their operations only thanks to interventions from the judiciary. It is notable that Kerala remains the sole State in the country levying Turnover Tax (ToT) on liquor, a policy unique to its regulatory framework. The hotel sector also faces numerous other hurdles, including mandatory monthly filings and reassessments, which contribute to operational inefficiencies. Bureaucratic red tape and instances of corruption further impede the sector's growth and stability.

Addressing these challenges requires a proactive approach from policymakers, one that acknowledges the indispensable role of liquor in the hospitality sector while streamlining regulatory frameworks and combating administrative inefficiencies. The government should not hesitate to take policy decisions in the name of controversies. Instead of cowering down before controversies, the government must take decisions that are in the best interests of the State economy, the tourism sector and the hotel industry.



V. Sunil Kumar
President, FKHA
& Editor, Swagat

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INTERNATIONAL
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NEW
GATEWAY
OF INDIA!

The Vizhinjam International Seaport, formally commissioned on July 12, is set to chart a new course in Asia's maritime landscape, writes **Gouri**.



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From the General Secretary's Desk
**PROPOSAL TO INTRODUCE THIRD PARTY
INSPECTIONS FOR STAR CLASSIFICATION
A RETROGRADE MEASURE**

The proposal of the Tourism Department, Government of India, to introduce Third Party Inspections for Star Classification of Hotels with the guidance of Quality Council of India (QCI), replacing the inspections by Hotel & Restaurant Approval & Classification Committee (HRACC), seems to be misguided and could have far reaching negative consequences, writes **Sqn Ldr K.B. Padmadas (Retd.)**, General Secretary, Federation of Kerala Hotels Association (FKHA).



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ഫീച്ചർ
**സിനിമാ ടൂറിസം
വെള്ളിത്തിരയിലെ ദൃശ്യചാരുകൾ
തേടുന്ന യാത്രികർ**

വെള്ളിത്തിരയിൽ തെളിയുന്ന പ്രകൃതിദൃശ്യങ്ങളിലേക്കും ചരിത്രഭൂമികളിലേക്കുമുള്ള സഞ്ചാരം ലോകമെമ്പാടും സിനിമാ ടൂറിസം എന്ന പ്രതിഭാസത്തിന് വഴിതുറന്നിരിക്കുകയാണ്. അശോകൻ പള്ളിക്കൽ എഴുന്നള്ളുന്നു.

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സൂപ്പർ ഹിറ്റ് സിനിമകളിലെ അവിസ്മരണീയ രംഗങ്ങൾ ചിത്രീകരിച്ച പ്രദേശങ്ങളിലേക്കുള്ള യാത്രകൾ പ്രോത്സാഹിപ്പിച്ച് കേരളത്തിലും സിനിമാ ടൂറിസത്തിന്റെ സാധ്യതകൾ തിരയുകയാണ് സംസ്ഥാന ടൂറിസം വകുപ്പും സാംസ്കാരിക വകുപ്പും. അശോകൻ പള്ളിക്കൽ എഴുന്നള്ളുന്നു.



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COCHIN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

SCALING NEW HEIGHTS

The extraordinary journey of the Cochin International Airport Limited (CIAL), where each takeoff and landing resonates with the spirit of vision, innovation, resilience and a steadfast dedication to excellence, presents a unique model before the world, marking the Silver Jubilee of CIAL, writes, **Sangeetha**
Interview: **S. Suhas IAS**, Managing Director, CIAL / **Sangeetha**
Profile: **V.J. Kurien**, Former MD, CIAL / **Harisankar**



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Tourism sector startups are bringing in innovation in the form of adventure activities and haute amenities in the lap of Nature, writes **K.R. Rejeesh**.

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PLANTATION TOURISM CATCHES WIND IN KERALA

Plantation tourism, which offers unforgettable experiences and the thrill of adventure amidst rolling greenery, is catching up as a major trend in Kerala, writes **Rehan Nair**.

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MALABAR RIVER FESTIVAL WHERE ADRENALINE MEETS ADVENTURE

The Malabar River Festival (MRF), now in its dazzling 10th year, unleashes a wave of pure adrenaline. The four-day annual extravaganza is not just a local affair anymore—it's a global magnet for daredevil kayakers itching to conquer untamed waters, writes **Harisankar**.

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THE STATE OF TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY 2024 TOWARDS NEW HORIZONS

Tourism and hospitality are set to soar, powered by new travelers, destinations, and trends, says McKinsey Report on 'The State of Tourism and Hospitality 2024', writes **Umasankar G.**



Kerala a future-ready tourism destination: Tourism Minister



Kerala has emerged as a future-ready tourism destination with several innovative tourism initiatives and products that comply with global sustainability norms, Tourism Minister P.A. Mohamed Riyas has said.

Interacting with Abel Despaigne, Charge d' Affaires, Embassy of the Republic of Cuba in India, the Tourism Minister pointed out that the State has adopted Responsible Tourism (RT) as one of its key thrust areas and is currently promoting experiential tourism concepts and sustainable approaches in all its

tourism-related activities.

The State's verdant coastal areas, picturesque backwaters and misty high ranges make Kerala the most preferred destination for tourists. "We are an all-season tourism destination and that

is the stand-out feature of Kerala," Mr. Riyas said.

Elaborating on major attractions of Kerala tourism such as Ayurveda and wellness, Caravan Kerala and adventure tourism, Mr. Riyas said the State has registered a substantial increase in tourist arrivals from other parts of India and abroad.

Mr Despaigne, who was on a nine-day visit to Kerala, said Cuba is giving huge prominence to mutual cooperation with Kerala in the tourism sector.

Commenting on the historical importance of the political and cultural exchanges between Kerala and Cuba, Mr. Despaigne said this cooperation has to be extended to other sectors, including tourism.

During his presentation on Cuban tourism, Mr Despaigne said that, like Kerala, his country's tourism activities were mainly focused on the landscape adjacent to the sea.

Tourism Secretary Mr. K. Biju said possibilities of collaboration with Cuba in the tourism sector will be examined as the State is eager to associate with the island nation in North America.

Tourism Director Sikha Surendran, who made a presentation on the salient features of Kerala Tourism, said Kerala is forging ahead with its activities by giving thrust to experiential tourism through innovative modules, including agri-tourism and RT.

Tourism Additional Director (General) Vishnuraj P. proposed a vote of thanks. ■

Kerala ecotourism centres go cashless



In a significant move towards streamlining tourism, ecotourism centres managed by the Kerala Forest Department will no longer accept cash payments. Visitors can pay for tickets, canteen meals, and accommodation using UPI apps or

through advance online bookings.

The Forest Department, overseeing 40 ecotourism centres across the State, has already started implementing these reforms. Centres like Konni Anathavalam,

Adavi Kuttavanchi Ride, and Mulamkudil are among those adapting the cashless system.

This decision follows recent inspections by the Forest Department's vigilance team, which uncovered discrepancies in cash handling at some ecotourism centers. Six months ago, an inspection highlighted irregularities, prompting the department to introduce stricter payment protocols.

Exceptions to this cashless policy include the Thenmala Eco-tourism Centre, where both cash and digital payments will be accepted. Situated in a popular tourist destination, Thenmala attracts numerous visitors, particularly from neighbouring Tamil Nadu. ■

Kerala sets its sights on cruise tourism, invites EoI



The Kerala Maritime Board (KMB) has invited expressions of interest (EoI) from competent firms to establish coastal cruise services connecting four non-major ports and a major port in the State with neighbouring ports on the west and east coasts, along with international cruise services.

Kerala is looking for ways to establish the State as a major cruise hub in the south by providing cruise services in different

categories, including deep sea and international cruises, domestic inter-state and intra-state services, river and marine cruises linking inland waterways and islands, and day cruises, including sunset cruises and MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions), etc.

Blessed with a coastline stretching around 590 kilometres along the west coast, Kerala boasts an unparalleled cruise network with a tranquil network of interconnected inland waterways, lakes, and rivers fringed by lush greenery and traditional villages in Kerala's backwaters, which presents an opportunity to enhance coastal tourism experiences, said N.S. Pillai, chairperson, KMB.

"We have a major port in Kochi and four non-major ports: Azhikkal, Beypore, Kollam, and Vizhinjam, which received International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS code) certification. Vizhinjam, Beypore and Kollam ports have

also received International Check Point (ICP) status. With untapped potential, the State is really ripe with opportunity to cater to the needs of the international cruise industry," said Mr. Pillai.

Among the ports, Vizhinjam has already hosted over 20 foreign cruise vessels since 2009, bringing in more than 3,350 foreign passengers, while Beypore, with an annual average of 10,000 passengers, serves significant maritime traffic to and from Lakshadweep Islands. Along with these, adding the potential of Kollam port, a historic port town on the Arabian coast, and Azhikkal port in north Kerala, the State can position itself to tap the potential of the sector. At present, no coastal cruise incentives are offered. However, based on the feedback from the players in the sector, an action plan would be prepared for the development and subsequent stages of the project, said Mr. Pillai. ■

Kerala Tourism's guest houses to get a facelift



The guest houses under the Tourism Department are set to get a major facelift with the State government giving nod to the proposals for renovation works as part of a project to upgrade and improve amenities at these prime properties. The total outlay for the project is Rs 28.5 crore.

As part of the project, the interior and furnishing of the new block at the guest house at the scenic Ponmudi is being taken up at an estimated cost of Rs 99.90 lakh.

The Tourism Department aims to complete the works at this property by December. The government has approved the proposal for the renovation of Yathri Nivas located on the premises of the guest house in Kozhikode at a cost of Rs 9 crore.

Yathri Nivas at Devikulam, opened in 2014, will get a makeover at a cost of Rs 98 lakh. The work at this property include renovation of the building, office room exterior, kitchen, staff room, electrification and landscaping.

A Rs 10.39 crore worth project has been approved for the conservation, repair and restoration works in the heritage wing at the guest house in Kollam. It is expected to be completed in 18 months. The government has given administrative sanction for Rs 6.50 crore for the renovation

works at the iconic Kerala House in Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu. This project will be completed in 18 months.

"These are prime properties of Kerala Tourism Department, which have a steady footfall of visitors. The renovation project will add new features and make the stay at these guest houses more comfortable and pleasant," said Tourism Minister P.A. Mohamed Riyas.

"The work will be completed within the time-frame set for each of them," he added. A building for staff room and car parking cum drivers' room will come up at the guest house in Kozhikode. Administrative sanction has been given for Rs 66 lakh to implement the project, which also includes other general upgrade activities at the facility. It will be completed in 12 months. ■

Africa-focused campaign to promote Medical Value Travel to Kerala



The Kerala Medical Tourism Facilitators Forum (KMTFF) plans to mount a month-long intense marketing campaign from November across 50 African nations in an attempt to promote Kerala as an attractive destination for Medical Value Travel (MVT).

The marketing pitch would be focused on the high-quality medical care available in the State at affordable costs as compared to destinations such as Europe. A road map of the campaign plan

was unveiled at the MVT Meet-2024 organised in Kochi by KMTFF on June 13.

"At present, medical value travellers from countries like Tanzania, Senegal, and Kenya make up only around 20% of the total number. The rest is composed of those from West Asia, Maldives, and Sri Lanka. A major hiccup in attracting African visitors to Kerala is the absence of direct flights to Kerala from African countries. At present, MVT from Africa is mostly routed via

West Asian destinations. But during peak seasons, airlines raise ticket fares exorbitantly making the service unaffordable for visitors, says K A Aboobacker, MVT pioneer and KMTFF president.

KMTFF also plans to approach the Ministry of External Affairs for a more liberal medical visa regime for ease of travelling to Kerala and India in general as part of their Africa outreach project. At present, those travelling to India on medical visa are required to renew the visa every two months which, he said, was a major put-off prompting potential visitors to opt for other destinations.

Mr. Aboobacker said business by way of MVT routed via KMTFF in 2023 stood at around Rs. 600 crore. It would be in the range of Rs. 1,000 crore if those who approached hospitals directly were taken into account, he added.

KMTFF was formed in 2017 and now has around 100 members. (The Hindu) ■

Rs 1.35-crore food street project in Kochi gathers steam



Kochi will soon have a major food-street project running with the Food Safety Department granting administrative sanction for the project proposal. Initiated in 2023, the Central Government project envisages setting up 100

safe and hygienic food streets across 100 cities/districts in the country.

In Kochi, the project would be implemented by the Greater Cochin Development Authority (GCDA). GCDA plans to have food

street at Kasturba Nagar. Work on the project began earlier this year. The plan is to complete the work within three months.

The DPR of the Food Street Project envisages the Food Street to cover 15,000 sq ft area. The street would also have parking facilities. There would be 20 food kiosks spread over 10,000 sq ft area with all the allied facilities. The food street will have facilities such as open dining, adequate wash areas, pathways, toilets, and parking lots spread across 5,000 sqft. The Food Street will remain open from evening till early morning.

The Rs 1.35-crore project would have drainage and solid waste management systems. The funds meant for the project is being channelised through the Corporation of Kochi. ■

Women-friendly tourism gaining momentum in Kerala: Minister Riyas



Catching up with the global trend, women-friendly tourism is gaining momentum in Kerala with the government initiatives, turning the entire state into a safe, clean and comfortable destination for women to travel solo or in groups, Tourism Minister Shri P A Mohamed Riyas said today.

Kerala has set another successful model by promoting women-friendly tourism in partnership with UN Women, Shri Riyas said while flagging off an all-woman destination promotion campaign organised by Kerala Responsible Tourism Mission Society (KRTM Society) from the city.

"It has become a global trend for women to travel on their own or with friends, colleagues or family members, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic. When hosts

are also women they are more comfortable. This model also opens plenty of economic opportunities for women, especially at the local community level," Shri Riyas noted.

Noting that the members of the destination promotion campaign are students, the Minister said it is significant that youngsters have become promoters of Kerala tourism by joining the campus tourism clubs. Tourism Director Smt Shikha Surendran and KRTM Society CEO Shri K Rupesh Kumar were present on the occasion.

The group that set off from Park View complex that houses Directorate were selected for the campaign on the basis of their expertise in promoting tourism on social media handles. They will tour panoramic places like Amboori and Vellarada in the district to take the message of women friendly tourism and encourage women to be stakeholders in this fast

emerging model.

The Women-Friendly Tourism Initiative was launched in October 2022 as a project of the Kerala

Responsible Tourism Mission.

The KRT Mission was entrusted with the responsibility of promoting the model in which women at local community level play a lead role as hosts and facilitators providing a whole range of services, creating a network of women stakeholders and service providers.

A key component of the project is to turn the tourism destinations across the state into places where women have a safe and comfortable travel experience. Since its launch, thousands of women have joined the initiatives and several RT units have

started tour packages exclusively for women. Significantly, 70 percent of 17,631 KRTM Society units are women-owned or led, and all of them have joined the Women Friendly Tourism initiative.

Also, workshops and training programmes in destination management, hospitality and souvenir making have also organised to enable women to benefit from the model. Kerala also stands out as the first state to conduct a gender audit in tourism sector in association with the UN Women. ■

Self baggage check-in facility at Cochin International Airport



The Cochin International Airport (CIAL) has introduced a self-baggage drop facility at the terminals to enhance the passenger experience. This lets the passengers drop their baggage on the conveyor without assistance from airport staff. Airline companies like IndiGo, Air Asia and Air India are currently using the facility.

Passengers can take printed boarding passes and baggage tags from the 10 common-use self-service kiosks that are installed near the terminal gates. After pasting

the baggage tag sticker on their baggage, they can drop these on the conveyor themselves.

'CIAL 4 Self Bag Drop' facility is available at the check-in counters from 27-30. This is linked to CIAL's baggage handling unit. Machines that are imported from Canada have been used at the counters for self-baggage drop. The latest facility has been introduced to provide a world-class travelling experience for the passengers as well as to improve the efficiency at the airport. CIAL Managing Director S. Suhas says. ■

Thiruvananthapuram International Airport to deploy Robotic Rover for canal cleaning



In a pioneering initiative for India, the Thiruvananthapuram International Airport in Kerala is set to deploy a state-of-the-art robotic rover aimed at enhancing the cleanliness of its canals and efficient management of rainwater. This transformative project marks a collaboration between the Adani Group, responsible for airport operations, and Genrobotics, a dynamic startup headquartered at Technopark in Thiruvananthapuram.

Confirming the groundbreaking development, Vimal Govind, CEO of Genrobotics, announced the receipt of a significant purchase order for their robotic rover. Named Wilboar, this cutting-edge machine promises to streamline the cleaning process using advanced technology. Equipped with high-pressure jets and precision grinders, Wilboar excels in dislodging and removing stubborn sludge, ensuring thorough maintenance of

the airport's canal network.

The rover's design features a robust metallic track chain system coated with rubber, enabling it to traverse storage tanks and access confined spaces with ease. Wilboar boasts two IP68-rated Machine Vision Technology cameras, enabling clear visibility even in challenging low-light conditions. This technological prowess positions it as a versatile tool for comprehensive canal management.

The collaboration between Adani Group and Genrobotics follows a notable incident where Genrobotics showcased its capabilities by deploying robots to aid in the rescue operation of a sanitation worker named Joy from a city canal. Although the rescue was tragically unsuccessful, the incident underscored the potential of robotics in enhancing operational safety and efficiency in challenging environments.

Genrobotics has expressed keen interest in expanding its partnership beyond the airport sector, aiming to supply similar robotic solutions to the Thiruvananthapuram Municipal Corporation. These efforts align with their broader mission to revolutionize waste management and rescue operations across the region.

As Thiruvananthapuram International Airport prepares to integrate Wilboar into its operations, the initiative not only signifies a leap forward in technological adoption but also sets a precedent for sustainable and efficient infrastructure management in India. With innovation at its core, this collaboration promises to redefine standards in airport maintenance and environmental stewardship, paving the way for future advancements in robotics and automation nationwide. ■

Kerala to set up 'Industry Connect' platform to help stakeholders tap tourism trends



Kerala is set to launch an 'Industry Connect' platform, a permanent initiative aimed at enabling tourism stakeholders and entrepreneurs to stay abreast of the latest trends in the industry.

Announced by Tourism and Public Works Minister Shri P. A. Mohamed Riyas during a recent Tourism Advisory Council meeting, the platform is designed to foster effective collaboration and innovation within Kerala's tourism sector. The platform will operate at both district and State levels through a dedicated cell that will bring the challenges faced by stakeholders to the attention of the government.

Mr Riyas also introduced plans for annual tourism awards to recognize outstanding contributions and performances across various sectors of the tourism industry. These

awards are aimed at motivating stakeholders to maintain high standards and drive excellence within the industry.

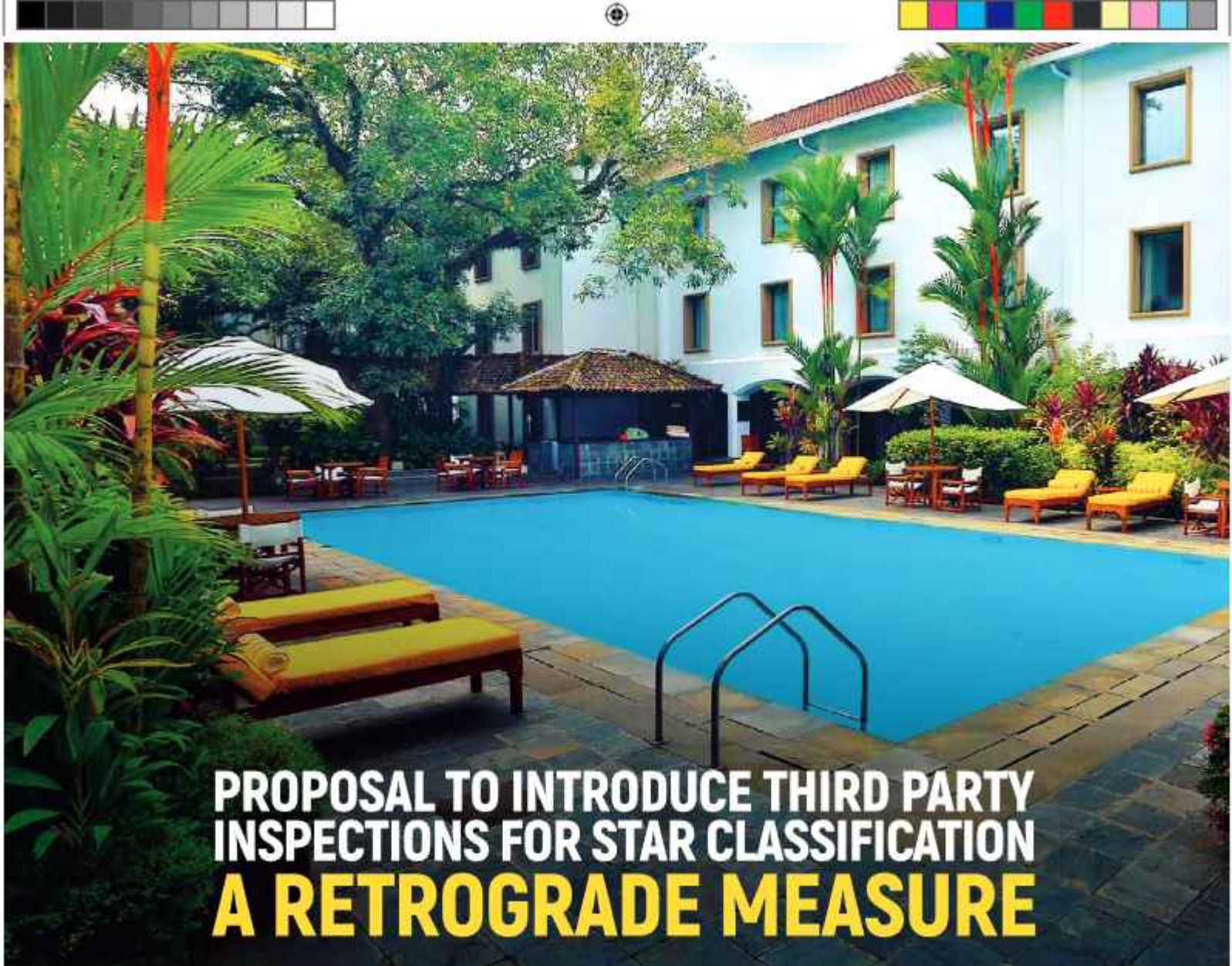
Marketing efforts are a significant focus of Kerala Tourism's strategy, with innovative campaigns planned for key international markets, including the UK, France and Germany, to boost the number of foreign tourists back to pre-COVID levels by next year. Additionally, an intensive marketing campaign targeting the Arab market is currently underway in Saudi Arabia, Oman and the UAE, aiming to attract tourists during their summer season.

Domestically, a year-long marketing campaign will be initiated to sustain the 'Kerala Tourism' brand among Indian tourists. The recently concluded 'India's Summer Camp' multimedia campaign successfully

attracted families from North India and the neighbouring states to Kerala during the school vacation period.

In the fiscal year 2023-24, Kerala Tourism participated in six international tourism trade fairs, and conducted B2B meetings in 13 cities across Europe and the Middle East. Domestically, the department attended seven major tourism trade fairs and hosted B2B meetings in 12 cities.

The stakeholders' meeting following the Advisory Council meeting addressed various industry concerns, including climate-smart tourism, flight fare hikes, medical tourism, and woman-friendly tourism initiatives, emphasizing the collaborative effort to elevate Kerala's tourism sector to the next level. ■



PROPOSAL TO INTRODUCE THIRD PARTY INSPECTIONS FOR STAR CLASSIFICATION **A RETROGRADE MEASURE**



Sqn Ldr K.B. Padmadas (Retd.)

The Tourism Department of Government Of India has recently circulated a proposal to introduce third party Inspections for Star Classification of Hotels with the guidance of Quality Council of India (QCI), replacing the inspections being carried out now by Hotel & Restaurant Approval & Classification Committee (HRACC). While the government's intention may be to improve the inspection standard and thus the Star hotels, the move seems to be misguided and could have far reaching negative consequences.

The move implies lack of trust in the existing system, which has been in place for decades. In fact Classification of Hotels in India was started by HRACC as early

as in 1957, long before the QCI certifications were established in 1996. The present proposal to bring it under Quality Council of India, or its certification bodies, undermines the hard work and efforts put in by hotels to maintain the set standards and Star Classification ratings. While, as per the present system, the Ministry of Tourism (MoT) is directly involved in Star Classification along with experts from the industry, entrusting it to QCI will amount to handing over the system to people who are total strangers to the hospitality Industry.

The Quality Council of India (QCI), set up on a public private model, is a non-profit organization that aims to promote quality in all aspects of life. The council is



FROM THE GENERAL SECRETARY'S DESK

For appreciation of the usefulness or otherwise of the proposed changes, it is mandatory for us to know the present hotel classification system. Presently, MoT sets certain guidelines for achieving different Star Classification ratings. These guidelines are updated periodically in line with industry requirements. Points are awarded for each criterion depending on the above guidelines and those who achieve the requisite points, in addition to all mandatory requirements, are awarded Star Classification.

Classification of hotels generally is a three step process. Online verification of the documents initially by the Ministry Of Tourism to assess the preparedness of the hotel for Star Classification inspections; site inspections by HRACC Committee and its recommendation; and finally the certification by MoT after verification of the above recommendations and the final documents. HRACC comprises an expert committee nominated by MoT, consisting of the Regional Director of Tourism (for 4 Star &

above) or a Director/Additional Director of State Tourism and a representative each from IHM and industry associations like FHRAI, HAI, TAAI and IATA. This Committee visits the hotel on an agreed date to assess the overall quality of the hotel as per the set guidelines. The committee, having hands-on experience of the Industry and the expectations and requirements of the end users/customers, would give their expert advice to the hotel for further improvement, if any, and finally RECOMMEND or NOT RECOMMEND the hotel for award of Classification after verification of the documents.

NIDHI (National Integrated Database of Hospitality Industry) and NIDHI+ are initiatives of the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, to improve the hospitality industry. While both are related to the Star Classification of hotels, they serve different purposes. NIDHI, launched in 2020, aims to create a national database for the hospitality industry. It provides a unique national identifier (NID) for stakeholders in the tourism and hospitality industry, helps

independent and works under the directions of its Governing Body, having equal representation of government, industry and industry associations such as ASSOCHAM, CII and FICCI. QCI was established under the Societies Registration Act in 1996 to provide accreditation services in various sectors for products, services and persons. The council is responsible for providing accreditation to certification bodies through its National Accreditation Board for Certification Bodies (NABCB). The Certification bodies coming under QCI include NABH (for Healthcare), NABET (for Education and Training), NABL (for Testing and Calibration Laboratories), etc.





improve the delivery of services and facilitates showcasing of registered entities on tourism portals like Incredible India and IRCTC. It also facilitates certification, classification, and recognition of hotels and other hospitality units. NIDHI+, launched in 2022, is an upgraded version of NIDHI. But it focuses on Star Classification and quality certification for hotels, resorts, tour operators, etc., and provides a more detailed and structured approach to Star Classification.

In its concept note to MoT, favouring scrapping of the present system and Introduction of Third Party Inspections for Star Classification of hotels, the Quality Council of India has observed certain challenges in the present Hotel Classification system by NIDHI+ and has given their suggestions to remedy these

The challenges identified by QCI are:

- Guidelines are not updated/revised and aligned with latest and best practices of the hospitality industry. Scheme requirements need to be reviewed and aligned with international requirements/ schemes & needs to be benchmarked/recognized in the international system.
- Scheme needs to rely on and prescribe national accreditation for certification/ inspection activities
- Coordination: Considering that the HRACC members come from different organizations, their coordination for assessment on a specific date is leading to delays



- Lack of Human resources:

Considering that the desktop assessment is centralized and largely done at MoT itself, many applications do not get timely attention due to limited trained resources. Currently more than 500 cases are pending with about 400 cases pending for more than 7 days.

- Onsite/Remote Assessment: There are only 4 Regional Directors and their presence is essential for an assessment as per the current guidelines. Regional Directors are typically responsible for overseeing 6-7 States and can only conduct a maximum of 20 assessments per month due to logistic and other constraints. Currently about 320+ cases are pending, of which about 231 cases have been waiting for more than 30 days.
- Credibility: Due to lack of an established monitoring system and accountability, the credibility of the system has taken a hit and the integrity of the assessment processes have been questioned time and again by the stakeholders.

As a solution to the above challenges and to give shape to the proposed change in the process followed for Star Classification Inspections, QCI has suggested the following points in their Concept Note:-

- The National Accreditation Board for Certification Bodies (NABCB) will grant accreditation to inspection bodies for inspection of accommodation units as per requirements of the Star Classification/ Rating Scheme in accordance with the international standard ISO/IEC 17020. These accredited inspection bodies will then be notified in public domain/website on QCI/NABCB's website.
- The applicant units (eg: a hotel) will be notified that one of the approved NABCB accredited inspection bodies as listed on the online portal, will inspect the hotel and its premises/facilities/ processes/resources etc., and submit the inspection report and recommendations on the online portal after carrying out the inspection.
- The MoT designated committee will review the report and its recommendations after inspection by the accredited body and will take a decision to grant or reject the star classification application.
- Once approval is accorded by the Ministry, an auto-generated certificate will be issued to the hotel.
- Annual surveillance may be carried by the same or another accredited body for verification of compliance by the hotels.

FROM THE GENERAL SECRETARY'S DESK



While QCI's eagerness to take over Star Classification of Hotels to its fold is justifiable, their inability to see any positive points in the present system cannot be unnoticed. Population of India, GDP of our country, the per capita income, tourist arrivals, number of hotels and those applying for classification have increased exponentially over the years. While the guidelines and the system have changed to a certain level, the mechanism and the manpower in MoT for Star Classification remain almost the same as before. Even after 60+ years of Star Classifications and an increase of almost 700+ Star hotels in Kerala alone over the last 20+ years, we even now manage India Tourism with only Four Regions and Regional Directors and limited staff. It will be worthwhile to remember at this stage that Indian Railways has bifurcated its regions as the traffic and operations grew and operate now with 19 Regions. The issue of pendency of classifications can straight away be answered by solving the above and with proper staffing, suitable division of duties and delegation of authority.

Regarding Credibility, any Inspection, testing or selection, be it NEET exams, HRACC Inspections or even the General Election in India, will always be looked upon with a suspicious eye as it involves human elements, power, prestige, positions, privileges and favouritism on the one side and

watchdogs and competitors on the other side. The only way to address it could be by bringing in a transparent and professional system with proper documentation, periodic reviews and updation of the system itself. Additionally, a mechanism which ensures non-inclusion of the same members repeatedly from Industry Associations shall also be helpful to ensure better credibility of the entire process. Further, assuming a third party inspection will solve all these issues defies logic, especially when we see that present inspections are also done by a third party as none in the team are connected with the hotel being inspected. While QCI itself says it actively contributed towards the ideation, conceptualization and development of NIDHI first and later NIDHI+, in case of shortcomings in those systems, QCI could have come forward to rectify these, rather than recommending its complete rejection.

While the present system, with no provision to reflect the size of the property seems perfect, many even in the Industry frown on seeing small hotels being classified. They fail to see the fact that a small hotel in a remote place cannot have the size and the extra facilities offered by a very big hotel. This is the case with Kerala. Though almost all the stakeholders in the hospitality industry, in their effort to increase the number of Classified Hotels, seek incentives for Classification, they are reluctant to accept the Kerala model of issuing Bar License to only hotels with Three Star or above Classification, as a credible incentive. They refuse to see the fact that owing to this, 700+ Star hotels have come up in the tiny State of Kerala and now a tourist can avail the facilities of a good hotel even in remote villages. These hotels, in fact, promote affordable tourism and are, thus, lending great help to tourism.



With the present system of classification involving HRACC, the expert services of the entire team except a couple of officers from the Central/State Tourism Ministry are available at no cost. Thus the present system ensures a one time and reasonable fees for the entire Star Classification process. But, if this classification is entrusted to QCI, with the involvement of private agencies, fees are likely to be very high, compared to that at present. The fee structure of NABH accreditation is seen to be very high compared to the present Hotel Classification system. Moreover, NABH levies a huge amount as an annual fee too, which isn't there in the HRACC led Classification system. Further, the present team of experts are from the Industry. They are personally and professionally attached to it and thus are capable of pointing

out any shortcomings on the part of the hotels and suggest practical solutions to many issues faced by them. Thus, this model ensures that stakeholders themselves get a chance to point out and improve the system. All these will be missing in the new proposal. Thus, the present system, which shows a certain amount of faith in the Industry, the Industry self regulating itself, is time proven and is practically very useful and industry friendly. By revamping the present set up/system with sufficient staff strength, reorganization of the Tourism Regions, ensuring a transparent system and periodically reviewing the system looking at global and local tourism scenarios shall definitely be better than scrapping it entirely and handing it over to a third party which is a total stranger to the Industry. ■



Sikha Surendran takes over as Director, Tourism

Sikha Surendran IAS has taken over as the Director of Kerala Tourism. She will also hold full additional charge as Managing Director, Kerala Tourism Development Corporation (KTDC).

Ms. Surendran, a 2018 batch Kerala cadre officer, started her career

as Assistant Collector trainee in Kottayam and served as the Sub Collector of Ottapalam in Palakkad and Kollam and as District Development Commissioner of Thrissur. Before this appointment, she was Deputy Secretary, Health and Family Welfare Department.



Taj becomes world's strongest hotel brand 2024

valuable and strongest hotel brands across the globe.

Mr. Puneet Chhatwal, Managing Director & Chief Executive Officer, IHCL, said, "We are delighted for the iconic brand Taj to be honoured as the World's Strongest Hotel Brand yet again, in its milestone 120th year. Receiving this recognition for four years, thrice as number one in the world, is testament to the brand's century-old legacy of pioneering destinations, setting global benchmarks and showcasing Indian hospitality to the world. This achievement underscores the trust and affection of our guests and the steadfast dedication and commitment of our colleagues in delivering warm and sincere service, a true hallmark of Taj."

"With a 45 % increase in brand value to USD 545 million, Taj has become the world's strongest hotel brand. Its improved Brand Strength Index (BSI) score of 92.9 out of 100 earned it an AAA+ rating, the highest brand strength rating awarded by Brand Finance. Taj also stands as the world's second-fastest-growing brand, underscored by supercharged revenue growth and an increase in brand strength. Taj's BSI score climbed more than three points and performed exceptionally well across various brand strength metrics, such as familiarity, consideration, recommendation, and reputation," Brand Finance's 'Hotel 50 2024' report said.

Taj group of hotels, owned by India's largest hospitality company Indian Hotels Company (IHCL), has once again been adjudged the World's Strongest Hotel Brand by Brand Finance. The 'Hotels 50 2024' annual report by the world's leading brand valuation consultancy recognises the most



Amrut Distilleries wins 'World's Best' title

Amrut Distilleries' flagship single malt, Amrut Fusion, was the most talked about whiskey in the competition. It is also recognised as one of India's most decorated whiskies. The Indian whiskey maker defeated whiskey brands worldwide, including prominent names from Scotland, Ireland, and Japan to clinch the world title.

By winning five gold medals in the fiercely competitive "World Whisky Category," Amrut set a new standard for Indian distilleries on the global stage.

The International Spirits Challenge celebrates the artistry and skill

behind whiskey distilling worldwide with its rigorous judging standards and prestigious awards.

Amrut Distilleries was praised for its outstanding performance in blind tastings by the International Spirits Challenge panel, reaffirming the distillery's dedication to producing exceptional whiskies.

Founded in 1948 by the late Radhakrishna Jagdale, Amrut Distilleries has grown beyond its Karnataka origins with its success in fusing innovative and traditional approaches to whiskey-making in India.

Bangalore-based Amrut Distilleries won the "World's Best Whiskey" title at the 2024 International Spirits Challenge in London, beating several world-renowned brands.

Vizhinjam International Seaport **NEW GATEWAY OF INDIA!**

Gouri

The Vizhinjam International Seaport, formally commissioned on July 12, is set to chart a new course in Asia's maritime landscape.

San Fernando, the first mother ship to arrive at the Vizhinjam International Seaport entering the port on July 12. A view from the Azhimala Siva Temple at Vizhinjam

Vizhinjam, a sleepy coastal hamlet till a few years ago, scripted history as the Vizhinjam International Seaport proudly welcomed its first mothership 'San Fernando', owned by SFL Corporation Ltd. and chartered by Maersk (AP Moller Group), Denmark, on July 12. San Fernando was welcomed with a water salute. A 300-meter-long cargo ship, San Fernando had over 1,900 containers on board. Decked in ceremonial splendor, the port erupted in jubilation, marking a pivotal moment in India's maritime ambitions.

With dignitaries and locals alike bearing witness, the arrival symbolized not just logistical triumph but a transformative leap for the region's economy. As the vessel docked, anticipation swelled for the opportunities it heralded—streamlined trade routes, economic prosperity, and global prominence. In this celebratory embrace, Vizhinjam sets sail on a voyage that promises to redefine India's maritime destiny in the heart of Asia.





Located strategically along the sun-kissed coastline of Kerala, the Vizhinjam International Seaport stands poised to redefine India's maritime narrative. Scheduled to become fully operational in the coming years, this ambitious project has sparked considerable interest both domestically and internationally, with proponents hailing it as the potential "Gateway of India" for the 21st century.

At first glance, Vizhinjam's strategic location is undeniable. Situated just 10 kilometers from Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala's capital city, and boasting a natural depth that allows it to accommodate the largest container ships currently in service, the seaport promises unrivaled connectivity and efficiency. This advantage alone places it in direct competition with established maritime giants like Singapore and Colombo.

The project's genesis dates back decades, with initial proposals surfacing as early as the 1990s. However, it was not until 2015 that construction truly gained momentum, following a collaboration between the Kerala government and global players in the infrastructure and shipping sectors. Today, what was once a cluster of fishing villages is rapidly transforming into a bustling hub of trade and commerce.





COVER STORY



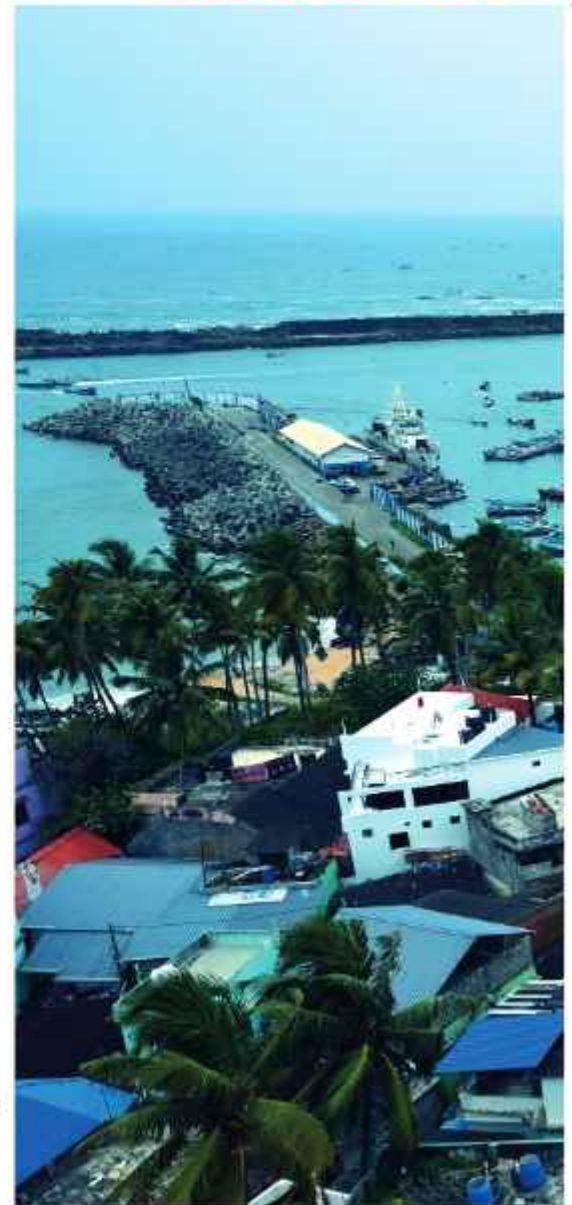
Central to Vizhinjam's appeal is its capacity to alleviate congestion at existing Indian ports, particularly those in Mumbai and Chennai. By diverting a significant portion of India's maritime traffic to its shores, the seaport aims to streamline logistics operations and reduce shipping costs, thereby enhancing the country's overall economic competitiveness on the global stage.

Moreover, Vizhinjam's strategic location along international shipping routes presents an opportunity to capitalize on emerging trends in global trade. As Asia continues to solidify its position as the world's economic engine, the seaport's potential to serve as a transshipment hub for goods destined for Europe, Africa, and the Middle East cannot be overstated. This, coupled with India's burgeoning domestic market, positions Vizhinjam as a pivotal player in the evolving maritime pecking order of Asia.

Beyond economic considerations, the seaport's development holds profound implications for the region's socio-economic landscape. The project promises to generate thousands of jobs, both directly and indirectly, across various sectors

ranging from construction and logistics to hospitality and retail. This influx of employment opportunities is expected to stimulate local economies and bolster Kerala's status as a key player in India's growth trajectory.

However, like any ambitious undertaking, Vizhinjam International Seaport is not without its challenges. Environmental concerns, including potential impacts on marine ecosystems and coastal erosion, have been raised by conservationists and local communities alike. Efforts to mitigate these risks through sustainable practices and stringent regulatory oversight are ongoing, underscoring the project's commitment to balancing economic development with environmental stewardship.





Furthermore, the seaport faces stiff competition from established maritime hubs in Asia, each vying for a larger slice of the global shipping pie. Singapore, with its world-class infrastructure and strategic location, remains a formidable rival, while ports in China and the Middle East continue to expand their capacities and capabilities. To secure its position as a new Gateway of India, Vizhinjam must not only meet but exceed international standards of efficiency, reliability, and transparency.

In navigating these challenges, Vizhinjam International Seaport can draw strength from India's rich maritime history and culture. From the ancient trade routes of the spice trade to the bustling ports of the Mughal and British

empires, India's maritime legacy is woven into the fabric of its national identity. By harnessing this legacy and leveraging its unique geographical advantages, Vizhinjam has the potential to revive India's maritime prowess and reclaim its historic role as a linchpin of global trade.

Looking ahead, the success of Vizhinjam International Seaport hinges not only on its infrastructure and economic potential but also on its ability to foster collaboration and innovation within the global maritime community. Partnerships with international shipping lines, logistics providers, and technology firms will be crucial in driving efficiency and maximizing operational capabilities. Moreover, investments in digitalization and smart port technologies will be

essential in ensuring seamless integration into the global supply chain network.

As construction progresses and the seaport inches closer to full operational capacity, the eyes of the maritime world will undoubtedly remain fixed on Vizhinjam. With its promise of prosperity, connectivity, and sustainability, this ambitious project has the potential to not only shake up Asia's maritime pecking order but also to leave an indelible mark on India's economic landscape for generations to come.

In the grand tapestry of India's maritime history, Vizhinjam International Seaport emerges not merely as a port of call but as a beacon of hope and opportunity—a testament to the country's enduring spirit of enterprise and ambition on the global stage. ■



Shining example of Govt.'s will: Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan

The Vizhinjam international seaport is a shining example of the willpower of an elected government. Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan has said.

Speaking after according a ceremonial reception for the mother vessel San Fernando that called at the Vizhinjam port on July 12, Mr. Vijayan said that after years of hard work and dedication when Vizhinjam emerges as an international port, it will catapult the country to new heights maritime prowess.

Speaking on the occasion, Karan Adani, Managing Director, Adani Ports and SEZ (APSEZ), said the Vizhinjam International Seaport is all set to see a total investment to the tune of Rs 20,000 crore by 2028 and work on the remaining phases

of the port is expected to start by October this year.

This is India's first transshipment hub and first deepwater container terminal and according to a Bloomberg report, APSEZ itself will be investing around Rs 10,000 crore in the project. The phase II to phase IV of the project is likely to be over by December 2028.

"By 2028-29, when all four phases of this project are completed, the Kerala government and Adani Vizhinjam Port will have invested a total of Rs 20,000 crore in this outstanding example of a large-scale public-private partnership project," Adani said. "The public hearing for the port's masterplan has just been successfully completed - and I am humbled by the overwhelming support from the

people of Vizhinjam. I am delighted to announce that, as soon as we receive the environmental clearance and other regulatory approvals, the Adani Group will begin work immediately on the port's remaining phases - and this could begin as early as October this year," he added.

Adani Group also indicated that Phase I will be completed much before December. "We already have 600 meters of operational quay length - and we are preparing 7,500 container yard slots to accept cargo. While we are expected to handle 1 million TEUs per annum in Phase 1, we are confident that we will handle 1.5 million TEUs - 50 percent more!" he added. ■

Transforming Kerala's Cruise Tourism Landscape

Kerala's vision for cruise tourism is more than a strategic economic venture; it's a celebration of the state's rich maritime legacy and an invitation to visitors worldwide to embark on a journey of discovery along its enchanting coastlines.

Kerala is poised to redefine its tourism landscape with an ambitious plan centered around cruise tourism. This strategic initiative is spearheaded by the Kerala Maritime Board (KMB), aiming to tap into uncharted waters and unlock the economic and cultural potential of coastal cruises.

At the heart of this initiative lies Kerala's diverse attractions, from serene backwaters to pristine beaches and rich cultural heritage. The Kerala Maritime Board intends to showcase these treasures on the global stage, emphasizing Kerala not just as a tourist destination, but as a premier venue for weddings, conferences, and other special events.

The recent consultation meeting held in Kochi marks a pivotal step in this journey, where stakeholders gathered to discuss and dispel any uncertainties among potential operators. This gathering also underscored Kerala's commitment to nurturing destination tourism, encouraging visitors to explore beyond the conventional sights and immerse themselves in the State's natural and cultural splendour.

The scope of the project is expansive, encompassing a variety of cruise offerings. These include ocean cruises linking ports and tourist hotspots both domestically

and internationally, domestic cruises connecting Kerala's ports with others across India, and river and marine cruises traversing the State's inland waterways. "We envision overnight cruises that offer leisurely stays at sea or on rivers, as well as specialized adventures like deep-sea exploration and sunset or dinner cruises," says N.S. Pillai, Chairman of KMB.

Kerala's ports, including Azhikkal, Beypore, Kollam and Vizhinjam stand ready to facilitate this ambitious venture with their International Ship and Port Facility Security compliance and International Check Point status. KMB assures operators of essential infrastructure support, including berthing and passenger terminal facilities, available against appropriate charges and in adherence to government guidelines.

For prospective operators, the mandate is clear: deliver comprehensive coastal cruise services encompassing vessel acquisition, staffing, safety protocols, logistics, and marketing. This includes charting feasible itineraries, ensuring regulatory compliance, and obtaining all requisite clearances and certifications.

Beyond mere tourism, these cruises are positioned as ideal venues for

hosting a spectrum of events—from intimate weddings to large-scale conferences and vibrant birthday celebrations. Each event promises an unforgettable experience set against Kerala's breathtaking coastal vistas and the backdrop of its rich cultural tapestry.

As Kerala sets sail towards a future anchored in sustainable tourism practices, the emphasis remains firmly on quality, safety, and authenticity. The KMB's proactive stance in providing logistical and regulatory support underscores their commitment to fostering a thriving cruise tourism industry that not only enriches local economies but also showcases Kerala's natural beauty and cultural heritage to the world.

The Kerala State Inland Navigation Corporation (KSINC) already operates two major cruises using its vessels Sagararani and Nefertiti. Sagararani was the first to hit the waters and proved to be a big draw with tourists. Encouraged by the success of its first initiative, the KSINC launched the Nefertiti cruise which can accommodate 200 people in its three decks. Enlisted as a Class VI vessel under the Merchant Shipping Act, Nefertiti has a total width of 14.5 m and length of 48.5 m, and offers a tour through the sea with four-star facility and entertainment programmes.

KMB plans to go beyond where KSINC has so far travelled and make its cruises an opportunity to explore the entire Kerala shore. In essence, Kerala's vision for cruise tourism is more than a strategic economic venture; it's a celebration of the state's rich maritime legacy and an invitation to visitors worldwide to embark on a journey of discovery along its enchanting coastlines.

In conclusion, as Kerala prepares to welcome the world aboard its cruise offerings, the sails are set for an exciting chapter in its tourism narrative—one where every voyage promises not just exploration, but a deep-seated connection with the soul of "God's Own Country."

- Harisankar ■



'India the most sought-after destination for medical tourism, preventive healthcare'



India has emerged as the most sought-after destination for medical tourism and preventive healthcare, Jitendra Singh, Union Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Science and Technology, has said.

Addressing the Second Healthcare Summit of the American Chamber of India (AMCHAM) in

the national capital, the Union Minister said, "Gone are the days when people used to visit other developed nations to access medical facilities. India has now become a healthcare hub and is the most sought-after destination for medical tourism. The country is also among the frontline nations in preventive healthcare."

Noting achievements such as the Ayushman Card, Digital Healthcare Mission and PM Jan Aushadi, the Minister said healthcare has been a priority sector for the government over the past 10 years. India had the world's largest vaccination drive against the Covid pandemic. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision for a healthy India envisaged the right to accessible healthcare

for every citizen, elimination of communicable diseases and reduction in non-communicable diseases, he added.

The Minister said the integration of tools like Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML) is revolutionising the healthcare sector. These tools can help enhance efficiency, reduce wait times, and improve overall healthcare delivery. India is also one among the top six bio-manufacturers of the world with one of the most cost-effective and efficacy-based bio-manufacturing as well as cost-effective healthcare destinations. Bio-manufacturing and bio-foundry has grown 10 times from \$13 billion in 2014 to \$130 billion in 2024, he said. ■

Delhi Metro launches 'check-in and bag drop' facility for international flights



Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) has launched a check-in facility for international flights at two key metro stations in the national capital city – New Delhi and Shivaji Stadium on the Airport Express Line.

The service, launched in the first week of June, aims to simplify travel procedures for passengers flying from Indira Gandhi International Airport (IGI) in New Delhi. Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) said in a statement.

In partnership with Delhi International Airport Limited (DIAL), Air India, and Vistara Airlines, the DMRC has extended this service to international passengers. Previously, the 'Check-in & Baggage-Drop' service was only available for domestic flights. Now, passengers flying with Air India and Vistara Airlines on international routes can also use this facility. The DMRC has invited more airlines to implement the service to provide additional benefits to travellers.

Key features of the service include the ability for passengers to check in their luggage at these metro stations, with the luggage then being securely transported to the aircraft via automated systems. The service operates at New Delhi and Shivaji Stadium metro stations for Air India passengers from 6:00 AM to 9:00 PM. For Vistara Airlines passengers, the service is available at New Delhi station from 6:00 AM to 8:00 PM.

The check-in timings for domestic flights are between 12 hours and 2 hours before departure, while for international flights, the check-in window is between 4 hours and 3 hours before the flight. The check-in counters at New Delhi Metro Station are located at the concourse level. At Shivaji Stadium Metro Station, the counters are adjacent to the VFS Global Office at the concourse level. ■

Navi Mumbai airport to be operational from March 2025



The Navi Mumbai International Airport (NMIA) will be ready by March 2025 and start operations immediately, Murlidhar Mohol, Union minister of State for Civil Aviation, has said.

Mohol said around 70% of the work at NMIA, which was to be ready by December 2024, had been completed and that the remaining 30% of work would be completed by March. He also announced expansion plans for Pune airport, which would enable wider-body aircraft to land and help improve international connectivity from

Pune. Mohol was on his maiden visit to Pune, his constituency, after taking over as Minister.

He met Airports Authority of India (AAI) officials to review expansion plans of the existing Pune airport and issues facing the opening of a new terminal in Pune. The Minister said the runway at Pune airport will be expanded, as it could currently only handle Type C aircraft.

The runway expansion would enable Type B and D aircraft to operate from Pune. The airport would need to acquire 35 acres, including defence and privately owned land, for this. The officials will meet Defence Minister Rajnath Singh to facilitate defence land acquisition and Defence Ministry clearances for the runway expansion.

Around 60% of the compensation for land owners would come from Maharashtra Government, 20% from the Pune Municipal

Corporation and 10% each from the Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporation and the Pune Metropolitan Region Development Authority.

While the new Rs 475 crore terminal building at Pune airport is ready, it is not yet operational due to lack of security personnel. AAI is also awaiting regulatory clearance from the Bureau of Civil Aviation Security. Mohol said he has reached out to home minister Amit Shah to augment the CISF force. The new terminal will be operational as soon as we get the CISF manpower, he said.

The Minister also said the Director General of Civil Aviation had approved the Purandar site for Pune's greenfield international airport. All technical clearances for the international airport at Purandar are in place, he said. The land acquisition process will now start, he added. ■

Mahabalipuram Shore Temple draws visitors with green technology



The historic Shore Temple at Mahabalipuram in Tamil Nadu, dedicated to Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu, has now added reason to be the cynosure of all eyes. It is India's first green energy archaeological site.

This UNESCO World Heritage site is one of the oldest stone temples in South India, dating back to the 7th century. It became a fully green energy driven site through

the Green Heritage Project, a joint initiative between Renault Nissan Technology & Business Centre India (Renault Nissan Tech) and Hand in Hand India (HiH).

The Shore Temple is now being illuminated using clean and sustainable solar power. Three solar plants with a capacity of 10 kilowatts have been installed to harness the large solar energy in the region. Surplus energy produced by these solar plants is being channeled back into the grid.

Apart from illuminating the shore temple, the project also focuses on enhancing the overall visitor experience and minimising the ecological footprint in tourism in the area. There is a solar-operated reverse osmosis plant, which serves as a source of clean drinking water for tourists.

Travellers can easily access Mahabalipuram from Chennai. Etihad Airways, Indigo and Air Arabia have direct flights from Abu Dhabi to the capital of Tamil Nadu, which has a population of more than 10 million. From downtown Chennai, it takes just 90 minutes by car to reach Mahabalipuram.

There is also another seaside attraction, Krishanankaranai, nearby. It has a cluster of temples and monuments dating back more than 1,000 years, which were revealed by the 2004 tsunami. A Tsunami Stone, a colossal slab with Tamil inscriptions, tossed up by the waves during the tsunami, stands tall at Krishanankaranai.

The temple is believed to have been built during the reign of the Pallava dynasty, which commanded a swathe of southern India, between the 4th and 9th centuries. ■

Goa mulling Tourism Bill to curb touts, keep tourists safe



A Tourism Safety Force with powers to arrest and impose fines for 'touting', a 'sustainability' fee for tourism enterprises and incentives for sustainable tourism — these are among some of the changes proposed Goa Tourism Promotion, Management and Regulation Bill 2024 that the Government of Goa plans to introduce in the State Legislative Assembly next month.

The Bill seeks to consolidate and amend the laws applicable to tourism and to "protect, preserve and retain the natural and cultural heritage of the State to ensure that it remains a destination of choice for tourists". The proposed Bill also seeks to repeal two existing legislations that govern State tourism — The Goa, Daman and Diu Registration of Tourist Trade Act, 1982 and The Goa Tourist Places (Protection and Maintenance) Act, 2001.

A key provision of the Bill, which has also drawn much criticism

from tourism stakeholders, is for the formation of a Tourism Safety Force consisting of police personnel and 'tourist guards' who would be deployed in tourist clusters 'for the safety of tourists'.

According to the draft Bill, "The Tourism Safety Force shall have the power to arrest in case of a non-bailable and cognizable offence; to conduct search of any person and seize any items in their belonging for violations; to secure evidence and to impose and collect fines for offences of nuisance and touting." It also says that the Force will coordinate with "all the departments and instrumentalities of the state for ensuring the safety and security of tourists in the tourism cluster".

The draft Bill says that the state's Director of Tourism will be responsible for the deployment of the Tourism Safety Force. The "Tourist Guards" will assist officers in prevention of crimes against tourists and ensure their safety;

assist the local administration and police in preventing drug trafficking, illegal liquor sale or illegal liquor consumption; detain anyone found violating provisions of the Act, alert tourists about touts and assist the local administration and the police in taking the necessary action.

The Bill proposes formation of a Tourism Board for periodic assessment of the capacity of tourism clusters. If an area has or is about to breach its carrying capacity, the Board will prohibit fresh registration or renewal of categories of tourism enterprises there.

The Bill also proposes levying a 'Tourism Development and Sustainability Fee' on all tourism enterprises in the State. It also seeks to provide incentives such as waiver of registration or renewal fee for complying with the applicable standards or codes of practice, scheme for grant or capital subsidy for adoption of sustainable technology and practices.

Tourism stakeholders have come out against several proposals in the Bill. They have strongly opposed deployment of the Tourism Safety Force with policing powers minus the power to carry out raids. The Goa Police already has a specialised Tourist Police unit. Set up in 1990, the objective of the unit is to ensure safety and security of tourists at tourist spots.

They are also up in arms against the proposal that every tourism establishment, including hotels and restaurants, must get re-registered and pay a 2% tourism sustainability fee, including on food items. The stakeholders also point out that the proposed stipulation that all gatherings involving more than 25 persons must be registered prior to the event would affect even birthday and Christmas parties. ■

Travel, tourism industry bats for uniform 12% GST for hotels



Rajesh Magow
MakeMyTrip co-founder and Group CEO



Pradeep Shetty
President, Hotel And Restaurant
Association (Western India)



Madhavan Menon
Executive Chairman,
Thomas Cook (India) Limited

The travel and tourism industry has urged the government to consider a uniform 12 per cent GST rate on hotels.

"The tiered GST based on hotel room tariffs can lead to price disparities as hotels adjust room rates based on demand and peak season rates. For example, a room night costing Rs 10,000 falls under the 18 per cent GST rate, while an off-season rate of Rs 7,000 falls under the 12 per cent GST rate. We urge the Finance Minister to consider a uniform GST rate of 12 per cent on hotels in Union Budget FY25. This will help simplify the compliance processes," online travel services provider MakeMyTrip co-founder and Group CEO Rajesh Magow said.

He said the government should remove disparities between e-commerce operators and e-commerce suppliers in the domestic market. "For example, currently, a customer pays a 5 per cent GST (goods and services tax) charge when booking a non-AC bus through an e-commerce platform. This charge is zero for a direct booking from a bus operator, irrespective of whether it is done in

online or offline mode," he added.

Magow further stated that tax incentives for hotels and homestays for adopting sustainable practices align with India's commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and SDG 13 (Climate Action). "By offering tax incentives that promote eco-friendly measures in the tourism sector, such as energy-efficient lighting, water-saving devices, and waste-reduction practices, the Finance Minister can encourage the industry to contribute to these global goals," he added.

Hotel And Restaurant Association (Western India) president Pradeep Shetty said the association believes that tourism and hospitality, accounting for around 10 per cent of India's GDP, should be declared a priority sector. "Granting infrastructure status to hotels and convention centres of project cost above Rs 10 crore is essential for attracting investments and accelerating growth in the hospitality sector," he added.

He further said the current GST rates for hospitality are among the

highest globally, making tourism expensive. "We urge the abolition of the 18 per cent GST category for hotels with room rates above Rs 7,500 per night, merging it with the 12 per cent GST category to boost both domestic and inbound tourism," Shetty noted.

Shetty said ease of doing business is essential, therefore, a national e-single window clearance system for hotels and restaurants through the Hospitality Development Promotion Board can significantly reduce costs and improve competitiveness.

Thomas Cook (India) Limited (Thomas Cook, SOTC, Sterling Holidays and TCI) Executive Chairman Madhavan Menon suggested exemption of Section 53 of GST for travel agents. "This will not cause any revenue loss for the government, as airlines are already discharging tax on their sale. We would also recommend lowering TCS (Tax Collected at Source) to 1 per cent. If not, a standardisation at 5 per cent on foreign travel packages (against the current 5 per cent and 20 per cent slabs)," he said. ■



COCHIN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT SCALING NEW HEIGHTS

The extraordinary journey of Cochin International Airport where each takeoff and landing resonates with the spirit of resilience, innovation, and a steadfast dedication to excellence



Sangeetha

Cochin International Airport (CIAL), the veritable gateway to Kerala and beyond, celebrates its 25th anniversary this year. From humble beginnings to becoming a beacon of modernity and sustainability, this airport has redefined connectivity, sustainability, and operational excellence on a global scale. With a vision rooted in enhancing passenger experiences, pioneering environmental stewardship, and fostering economic growth, CIAL has transcended boundaries to emerge as a symbol of India's prowess in the aviation industry.

Established as India's first airport under Public-Private Partnership (PPP), CIAL thrives on the synergy between public governance and private sector efficiency. This model that supports economic resilience by attracting private investment while upholding public oversight, has empowered CIAL in taking up many pioneering initiatives. The PPP approach has also positioned CIAL as a leader in aviation infrastructure, setting standards

for sustainable development and effective service delivery. Needless to say, the model has paved the way for many such Public-Private Partnerships in other Indian airports.

From its humble beginnings in May 1999, CIAL has evolved into a bustling hub, now overseeing 70,203 aircraft movements and accommodating a staggering 10.5 million passengers. The journey, however, was not without its challenges. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 brought a loss of Rs. 87.21 crores. But CIAL swiftly pivoted to become India's only airport to record a profit in the post pandemic year.

Within a span of two years, passenger numbers rebounded from 2.47 million in FY 2020-21 to an impressive 4.76 million in FY 2021-22. The momentum continued to build as CIAL achieved unprecedented milestones in subsequent years, culminating in a record-breaking operating profit of Rs. 521.50 crore in FY 2022-23 and a net profit of Rs. 267 crore. In FY 2023-24, CIAL solidified its success story by surpassing the 10-million passenger mark, attaining a significant profit margin of Rs. 350 crore.



SWAGAT



With domestic airlines increasingly viewing CIAL as a launchpad for their international services, CIAL has become a major player in the domestic travel market. To top it, CIAL itself is actively expanding its international routes. This translates to exciting new travel options, like Kerala's first direct flights to Vietnam on VietJet, premium Bangkok services with Thai Air, and budget-friendly Lion Air connections.

Looking ahead, CIAL is setting its sights on Europe, with plans for direct connections in the near future. Now CIAL operates 25 airlines connecting international and domestic destinations. The airport has started the expansion of its domestic routes, adding popular destinations like Kolkata, Chandigarh, Varanasi, Raipur, Ranchi, and Lucknow. This move will provide travellers with more connectivity options and boost tourism to these cities. This expanded network provides more travel options and boosts India's travel industry across its diverse cultural and historical landscape.

The CIAL Story is also a lesson on sustainability demonstrating a shining example of how a large energy consumer like an airport can transition to an eco-friendly practice. CIAL generates 200,000 units of power on a daily basis through its solar installations, out of which 160,000 units are used at the airport. With seven operational plants on airport premises and a solar carport, CIAL's cumulative solar capacity now stands at 50 MWp. By April 2024, the airport had generated 35 crore units of power, effectively reducing carbon emissions by 28,000 metric tons annually—





equivalent to the oxygen production of planting 4.6 million trees—while conserving 11.9 million litres of fossil fuels per year.

Two major green energy projects - a 4.5 MW hydro power plant in Arippara, Kozhikode, and a 12 MWp solar power plant in Payyannur - aided in elevating CIAL beyond being power neutral to becoming a power positive airport. CIAL's commitment to offset the carbon footprint of aviation has been recognized by the United Nations through the prestigious 'Champions of the Earth' award.

To navigate through Covid-19 protocols, CIAL adopted a unique passenger safety system, 'Mission Safeguarding' as they called it, employs the 5R technique - Recognize, Respond, Repeat, Record, Refer. This included innovations such as a dedicated immigration counter for flights from high-risk countries, a round-the-clock helpdesk, personalized assistance, and the deployment of over 250 testing machines capable of processing 400 samples simultaneously. Rapid PCR and RT-PCR results were delivered in just 30 minutes and 4 hours, respectively, enhancing efficiency and safety measures for all passengers.



“Considering the anticipated exponential growth in the global aviation sector, India stands poised for remarkable advancements. The Indian aviation industry is forecast to soar at an annual growth rate of 16%. At CIAL, our Board has meticulously crafted a strategic development plan to align with this trajectory. Leveraging cutting-edge technology, the management ensures that our passengers receive an exceptional experience at the airport. This year, our focus is on introducing new international routes and expanding domestic services to offer cost-effective air travel options. With innovation as our compass, we are charting a new course for a seamless and sustainable aviation experience.”

S. Suhas IAS

Managing Director
Cochin International Airport Limited (CIAL)

This brought home the prestigious Airport Service Quality Award-2022 from the Airport Council International (ACI). CIAL has been consistently earning ACI's 'Best Airport' award in the 5-15 million passengers category for the last 4 years. Successful implementation of 'Operation Pravaah', a Rs. 150-crore initiative to manage operational disruptions faced by the airport in each monsoon season due to flooding, enabled them in sustaining the top slot.



India's pioneer in integrating general aviation with tourism and MICE - Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, Exhibitions - travel, CIAL celebrated a major achievement with the launch of Business Jet Terminal in December 2022, India's first charter gateway. This innovative project integrated general aviation with tourism and MICE and marked the introduction of affordable chartered flying and has already handled more than 1000 landings.

On October 2, 2023, CIAL marked a pioneering milestone in infrastructure development by unveiling seven ambitious mega projects in a single day. These initiatives, geared towards accommodating the anticipated growth in cargo and passenger traffic, include: Construction of an expansive Import Cargo Terminal spanning 1 lakh sq ft; Phase 1 expansion of the International Terminal (T3); Modernization of Airport Emergency Services to enhance safety measures; Launch of the in-house developed DigiYatra software; Introduction of a golf tourism project; Implementation of a state-of-the-art Perimeter Intrusion Detection System (PIDS); and Opening of '0484,' India's largest luxury aero lounge.

Simultaneously, CIAL is boldly advancing its facilities and operations while prioritizing environmental stewardship. Key initiatives include:

Development of a comprehensive aerocity featuring business hotels, convention centres, entertainment zones, and logistics facilities, fostering a dynamic commercial ecosystem around the airport;

Embracing cutting-edge smart airport technologies such as self-service kiosks, biometric boarding systems, and automated baggage handling systems to enhance efficiency and passenger experience;

Expansion of green initiatives beyond existing solar power projects, with plans to further invest in renewable energy sources and explore sustainable practices across all operations. This includes forging strategic partnerships such as the MoU with Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited (BPCL) for the establishment of a green hydrogen plant and optimized use of idle lands.

CIAL's vision for the future is one of ambition and determination—a commitment to achieving exceptional financial performance, solidifying its pivotal role in South India's aviation landscape, and setting new benchmarks for excellence in the industry. With a clear focus on growth, sustainability, and innovation, CIAL stands ready to embrace the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead, continuing to soar to new heights of success and significance. ■

MAN OF THE MOMENT

'WE ARE LOOKING AT SUSTAINABLE, LONG-TERM GROWTH'

S. Suhas IAS

In any dynamic venture, leadership is often the catalyst for transformative growth and innovation. At Cochin International Airport Limited (CIAL) today, this catalyst is a young, dynamic, tech savvy officer - S. Suhas IAS.

Assuming leadership at CIAL during a critical moment marked by profound global uncertainties of the Covid pandemic, he navigated CIAL with strategic foresight and innovative management practices and transformed it into India's first profitable airport post-pandemic. With a leadership philosophy underscoring the resilience, innovation, and forward-thinking strategy, this young man holds the beacon as CIAL marches into silver jubilee.

In this interview, S. Suhas IAS shares insights into CIAL's transformative journey, highlighting important initiatives, strategic expansions, and the crucial role of sustainability in shaping the airport's evolution.

Swagat: Can you briefly explain the factors that enabled CIAL to achieve this feat, despite the multiple challenges of lockdown?

S. Suhas IAS: Robust leadership, innovative management practices, and strategic financial adjustments. These are the factors that helped CIAL in successfully managing the challenges brought by the Covid-19 crisis. Adoption of safety protocols like 'Mission Safeguarding,' which earned us the 'Covid Champion' award, alongside the implementation of new operational strategies, played a crucial role in sustaining passenger confidence and facilitating a consistent rebound in traffic and revenue.

What were the significant challenges you faced during this period and the lessons learnt from them?

During the 2020-21 fiscal year, CIAL faced a significant challenge due to the pandemic's impact on passenger traffic and revenue, resulting in a Rs. 87.21 crore loss. However, through collaborative



efforts and strategic measures, including operational innovations and financial restructuring, the company rebounded strongly. Passenger numbers increased from 2.47 million in FY 2020-21 to 4.76 million in FY 2021-22.

This positive momentum continued into FY 2022-23, where CIAL achieved record-breaking results with an operating profit of Rs. 521.50 crore and a net profit of Rs. 267 crore. By FY 2023-24, CIAL achieved a significant milestone, handling 10.5 million passengers and 70,203 aircraft movements, marking a strong recovery. The lessons learned highlight the critical importance of crisis response, strong leadership, diversified revenue streams, and sustainable innovation to ensure long-term growth.

You mentioned high profit margins achieved by CIAL in FY 2022-23. What do you think has contributed to swinging these numbers?

These robust profit margins stem from a combination of factors. Effective management and strategic planning were pivotal, complemented by innovative operational strategies and financial restructuring. Expanded connectivity led to higher passenger volumes, while successful sustainability initiatives lowered operational expenses.

Moreover, increased non-aeronautical revenue, including earnings from CIAL subsidiaries and duty-free sales, contributed significantly to overall profitability.

Given that a significant portion of CIAL's revenue in FY23 came from non-aeronautical sources like rental income and duty-free sales, how do you expect the company's revenue mix to evolve in the coming years?

CIAL is embarking on various non-aero projects such as a five star hotel, golf tourism facilities, commercial zones, and transit accommodation. And the revenue mix is expected to diversify significantly. By FY 25, non-aero revenue is projected to increase to around 35 per cent of total consolidated revenue, up from 19 percent in FY 23. This strategic shift aligns with CIAL's vision to capitalize on additional revenue streams while sustaining strong aero revenue growth driven by increasing passenger and cargo traffic.

CIAL has several significant projects in progress. Besides the recently announced Taj Hotel, we have projects such as terminal expansion, golf tourism, city hotel project, an aero lounge, and a commercial zone in the pipeline. The Phase 1 civil work for terminal expansion (T3) is aimed at

enhancing international terminal capacity. The golf tourism initiative is intended to promote tourism and leisure activities.

The city hotel project, a collaboration with IHCL - Taj Group, is currently under construction. The aero lounge (0484) is slated to become India's largest luxury facility, aimed at enhancing passenger experience. Development of the commercial zone aims to establish a comprehensive aerocity with business hotels, convention centers, entertainment zones, and logistics facilities.

Other initiatives include upgrading security with the Perimeter Intrusion Detection System (PIDS) and modernizing airport emergency services to bolster safety and emergency response capabilities. The DigiYatra software is intended as a state-of-the-art digital passenger processing system.

What is CIAL's track record in cargo movement?

With the launch of the new import cargo terminal, the annual cargo handling capacity at CIAL has expanded to 225,000 metric tonnes. In FY24, around 60,000 metric tons of freight was handled which was a 5.6 per cent increase. To further stimulate freight

movement, CIAL is improving connectivity with key cargo hubs, providing competitive pricing and effective logistics solutions. The airport is also collaborating with freight forwarders and logistics firms to attract additional business.

CIAL Cargo has also obtained authorization to handle imports of drugs and cosmetics, becoming one of the 11 certified airports in India with necessary certification. The cargo terminal includes a dedicated section for perishable goods, with a capacity of 25,000 metric tonnes, aimed at significantly enhancing the export of Kerala's agricultural products and other commodities.

We have heard much about CIAL's green initiatives...

CIAL already has a cumulative installed solar capacity of 50 MWp, encompassing seven plants and solar carports. We generate approximately 200,000 units of power daily, significantly surpassing our daily consumption requirement of 160,000 units. As of April 2024, these initiatives have collectively contributed to a reduction in CIAL's carbon emissions by 28,000 metric tons annually, equivalent to the oxygen production of planting 4.6 million trees, while also conserving 11.9 million litres of fossil fuels each year. CIAL has also undertaken several green initiatives,

including the establishment of hydro and solar power plants at Arippara and Payyannur. These efforts are complemented by the implementation of energy-efficient technologies and practices across the airport.

How can Kerala benefit from CIAL's successful Public-Private Partnership model?

Learnings from CIAL's achievements underscore the significance of robust collaboration between the public and private sectors and the establishment of a clear governance framework. Strategic planning and innovative management practices are important, alongside a dedicated focus on sustainability and green initiatives. Diversifying revenue sources enhances financial resilience, while a commitment to ongoing enhancement and modernization is critical for sustained growth.

Furthermore, effective public sector involvement is crucial in expediting regulatory approvals and providing policy support to foster an environment conducive to private investments. This approach ensures that infrastructure development aligns with broader economic and social objectives, maximizing public benefits and leveraging resources to mitigate project risks and attract private sector participation.

What are the emerging trends in India's burgeoning aviation sector, and how is CIAL preparing to ride the boom?

The aviation sector in India is witnessing a surge in domestic and international travel, growing preference for low-cost carriers, and a heightened focus on sustainability. In response, CIAL is expanding its route network, upgrading infrastructure, investing in green energy initiatives, and implementing smart airport technologies to enhance both passenger experience and operational efficiency. Furthermore, the Maintenance, Repair, and Overhaul (MRO) sector, crucial for aircraft maintenance and airworthiness, is gaining prominence globally. India, currently the seventh-largest civil aviation market, is projected to rank third by 2026, indicating substantial growth opportunities for MRO facilities. CIAL's advanced MRO facility is equipped with cutting-edge hangars, automated systems, extensive workshop areas, and dedicated aircraft parking spaces, positioning it to meet future demands and support the sector's expansion effectively.

What growth do you foresee for CIAL in the next five years?

Over the next half-decade, CIAL is set to expand its route network and improve connectivity. Priority projects include the completion of significant infrastructure developments such as terminal expansion and commercial zone construction. The airport aims to boost non-aeronautical revenue through innovative ventures while reinforcing its reputation as a sustainable, environmentally friendly hub. Additionally, CIAL will focus on integrating advanced technologies to enhance both passenger experience and operational efficiency. ■

Excerpts from a written Q & A interview



SEAMLESS IMMIGRATION SOON FOR INTERNATIONAL TRAVELLERS

CIAL will become the second airport in India to implement the 'Trusted Traveller Programme' launched by the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) in August.

International travellers transiting through the Cochin International Airport would soon be able to do self-immigration in 20 seconds at specially designed smart gates. With this, CIAL will become the second airport in India to implement the 'Trusted Traveller Programme' launched by the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), which facilitates a seamless immigration by self-authentication at smart gates at

the immigration counters. The facility was rolled out at the Delhi International Airport in June and it will be rolled out at CIAL in August this year.

International travellers must go in for a one-time registration on the MHA portal with the necessary documents and biometrics. The travellers must first upload the necessary documents, including a passport-size photo that is not more than six months old with a plain white background, a

scanned copy of a passport with a minimum 6 months validity, address proof and a scanned copy of the OCI

(Overseas Citizenship of India) card if the person in question is an OCI cardholder.

Once this is done, the travellers can enrol their biometrics at any of the designated international airports in India, help desks or the nearest FRRO office. If the validation is successful through mobile OTP, travellers can use smart gates by self-scanning their passports and using the face recognition system. This will make immigration clearance fast for eligible Indian and foreign nationals holding the Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) cards.

CIAL has begun setting up the necessary facilities, dedicating eight lanes for biometric e-gates. The Bureau of Immigration at Cochin International Airport has already established an enrollment facility at the FRRO office within the airport premises and help desks at the immigration area. ■



Premium transit lounge

The passengers who travel via the airport can also soon stay inside the airport, in the premium '0484' - transit lounge, which is expected to be launched soon. While the hotels in the vicinity charge rent daily, you could rent rooms in the lounge on Flexi rates from up to four hours onwards. The stylishly designed transit lounge that boasts modern facilities has been arranged in the arrival area of the old domestic terminal.

There are 42 rooms, five conference halls and four suite rooms in the transit lounge. Interestingly, facilities for holding business meetings and conferences are arranged inside the airport itself. Besides, a gym, bar, spa and a restaurant are part of this lounge. Meanwhile, professional agencies have been roped in to

run the premium transit lounge in the airport. The lounge is likely to be inaugurated by the middle of next month. Last year, more than 10 million passengers used the domestic and international transits in Cochin International Airport.

CIAL hopes to increase the income generated by the non-Aero projects when the Taj CIAL hotel, with 112 rooms, opens in November. Currently, around 60% of CIAL's income comes from aero projects like the operating and parking fees of aircraft. It is possible to increase the income from non-Aero projects, at least by 50%, when the transit lounge, Taj Hotel, golf resort and commercial area become operational. Such income achievements could help in reducing service charges like the user fee or allowing relaxations in landing fees. This may even lead to affordable air tickets in the future. ■





V.J. KURIEN THE MAN WHO BUILT IT UP

Harisankar

It all started with one question—a question that posed the challenge of a lifetime for a young IAS officer.

The year was 1991. V.J. Kurien was the Ernakulam District Collector. Chief Minister K. Karunakaran, known for his defiance in the face of the heaviest of odds, asked Kurien to accompany him to Delhi for a meeting with the then Union Civil Aviation Minister Madhav Rao Scindia.

Karunakaran was exasperated by the limitations of the Naval Airport at Willingdon Island, which was also doubling as a civilian airport. The airport had a short runway, which could hardly service the new generation aircraft. Indian Airlines, the national domestic carrier, was

transitioning from Boeing 737-200 to Airbus 320 which required a longer runway for landing and take-off. Kochi risked being removed from the country's aviation map if it did not find ways to extend the runway. But that was next to impossible given the cost—Rs 80 crore, which was no mean sum those days.

During the meeting, Scindia posed a question: can't the Government of Kerala find a new location somewhere in Ernakulam for a civilian airport? Chief Minister Karunakaran turned to Kurien with his trademark smile and a question in his eyes. Kurien promised to look into that suggestion.

Upon his return to Kochi, he instructed Revenue officials to



scout for land where a new airport could come up. After some initial rejections, Nedumbassery, some 37 kilometres north of Kochi city, was identified as a possible location for the airport. However, the Union Government was not ready to fund the ambitious project.

That challenge called for innovation. And that was precisely what Kurien did. He proposed a crowd funding initiative that would help raise sufficient amounts to finance the project. His proposal was to collect Rs 5,000 from 20 lakh Malayalis in the Middle East to raise sufficient funds

"Many said behind my back that it is an idiotic project by that idiot Kurian. Karunakaran was also initially sceptical, but after consulting with experts and forming the Kochi International Airport Society (KIAS), the idea began to take shape," recalls Kurien. But Karunakaran, always unfazed by criticism, stood solidly behind him.

Despite initial fundraising challenges, KIAS collected Rs 5 crore. With the idea catching wind with the political leadership, KIAS was renamed Cochin International Airport Ltd and registered as a company. "We prepared a Rs 162-crore project, with Rs 98 crore as a loan from HUDCO and Rs 64 crore as equity. The State Government stood guarantee for the HUDCO loan. Institutions such as the Federal Bank, BPCL and Air India were also brought on board as equity investors. By then, some in the Middle East began to see the potential of the project and money began to flow in.

The project was completed at an expense of Rs 305 crore, marking the culmination of a journey of constant innovation, readiness to stand up to gargantuan odds and perseverance. It was a veritable journey on an obstacle course. As challenging as raising funds was acquisition of predominantly paddy land. The paddy land could hardly be acquired without inviting the wrath of the local populace.

SWAGAT



Kurien recalls that he held 42 rounds of discussions with the representatives of the landowners and key political players in the district. Finally, land was acquired from 3,894 families. The land, spread over Angamaly municipality and three panchayats, had 820 houses. CIAL paid Rs 1,500 a cent for paddy land against the existing market rate of Rs 100 and Rs 8,000 for residential land against the market rate of Rs 1,000 a cent and six cents of land for free.

CIAL developed a community on 56 acres with basic amenities and provided jobs to 820 families. Kurien says the package, approved by the then Chief Minister E.K. Nayanar was acknowledged by the World Bank as one of the best rehabilitation packages at the time. What is more, thousands from the locality have either a job at the airport or have found a way of sustenance thanks to the airport. And the airport itself has become a unique model, hosting around 25 airlines and over a million passengers a year, becoming self-reliant in power generation, and launching several innovative steps along its 25-year skyward journey.

Kurien, who serves as non-executive Chairman of the South Indian Bank post-retirement from the civil service, is still full of ideas for the airport. He wants CIAL to venture more into tourism and power generation and currently go in for a second runway to be future-ready. Under his leadership, the airport had become the world's first fully solar-powered airport in 2015, winning the coveted Champion of the Earth Award in 2018, the highest environmental honour instituted by the United Nations.

A second runway, he says, is essential to enable simultaneous take-off and landing, increasing frequency of flight movement and avoid flight disruptions when recarpeting, due in 2028, is done. He feels that given the profit earnings of the airport, land acquisition and construction of a second runway should not pose any challenge. He also bats for the creation of facilities for passengers who arrive by late night flights and depart by early morning flights to freshen up at a reasonable cost. Goes to show that CIAL is there deep within him, though it's years since he left charge of the airport. ■

UPI payments will soon become active in Qatar



NPCI International Payments Ltd (NIPL), the international arm of the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI), has signed an agreement with QNB, the largest financial institution in the Middle East and Africa, to launch QR code-based Unified Payments Interface

(UPI) payments across the Gulf nation.

This will enable UPI payment acceptance in Qatar through the QNB merchant network, benefiting Indian travellers visiting and transiting through the country.

"We believe that enabling UPI acceptance in Qatar will offer substantial benefits to the large number of Indians visiting the country, simplifying their transactions, and ensuring a hassle-free travel experience abroad," Anubhav Sharma, Deputy Chief - Partnerships and Business Development, NPCI International, said in a statement.

This partnership will provide Indian tourists the option to use their preferred payment method across

retail stores, tourist attractions, leisure sites, duty-free shops, and hotels.

This partnership will provide Indian tourists the option to use their preferred payment method across retail stores, tourist attractions, leisure sites, duty-free shops, and hotels.

"With this new digital payment solution acceptance, we are revolutionising the way transactions are conducted, enhancing the travel experience like never before," said Adel Ali Al-Malki, Senior Executive VP, QNB Group Retail Banking.

By adopting UPI payments, merchants in Qatar will also be able to offer a faster and more convenient payment and checkout process. ■

Saudia Group signs landmark pact with Lilium for 100 eVTOL Jets



In a major development that could revolutionize air travel by visitors and pilgrims to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Saudia Group and Lilium N.V., a leading electric aircraft manufacturer and pioneer in Regional Air Mobility (RAM), have signed a binding sales agreement for 50 Lilium Jets, with options for an additional 50.

The signing ceremony took place at Lilium's headquarters in Munich, attended by Fahd Al-Jarbou, CEO of Saudia Private, and Lilium's

CEO Klaus Roewe, Ibrahim Al-Omar, Director General, Saudia Group, Michael Kindsgrab, German Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, and Lilium Chairman Tom Enders.

The agreement, which follows a Memorandum of Understanding signed in October 2022, is the largest of its kind in the MENA region. It marks a significant industry milestone as the largest reported firm order of eVTOL aircraft by an airline planning to operate them.

The agreement includes detailed provisions on deposit and pre-delivery payments, delivery timelines, aircraft performance guarantees, and maintenance support. Additionally, the parties plan to sign a comprehensive "Lilium POWER ON" agreement for fleet maintenance and support services.

Commenting on the pact, Ibrahim Al-Omar said: "Saudia Group is proud to be the first in the MENA region to acquire all-electric eVTOL jets. This reflects our dedication to reducing our carbon footprint and leading regional electric aviation. Lilium plays a crucial role in enabling us to offer a sustainable, premium aviation experience, bringing guests closer to their destinations. This agreement aligns with Saudi Vision 2030 and results from years of collaboration between Lilium and Saudia Group to bring eVTOL to Saudi skies. We look forward to this transformative journey." ■

Thailand expands visa-free entry to 93 countries to boost tourism



Thailand has significantly expanded its visa-free entry scheme to include 93 countries and territories, aiming to give a boost to its crucial tourism industry. The new policy would allow visitors to stay in the South-East Asian nation for up to 60 days. Earlier, passport holders from only 57 countries could enter Thailand without a visa, according to a BBC report.

Tourism, a vital component of Thailand's economy, has struggled to fully recover from the pandemic's impact. Official data shows that Thailand welcomed 17.5 million foreign tourists in the first half of 2024, a 35% increase from the same period last year. However, this number remains below pre-pandemic levels. Most visitors hailed from China, Malaysia, and India.

Tourism revenue during this period reached 858 billion baht (\$23.6 billion; £18.3 billion), falling short of the government's target.

Known for its golden temples, white sand beaches, picturesque mountains, and vibrant nightlife, Thailand attracts millions of tourists annually. The revised visa-free rules are part of a broader strategy to boost tourism.

Thailand has also introduced a new five-year visa for remote workers, permitting holders to stay for up to 180 days each year. Visiting students who earn a bachelor's degree or higher in Thailand can now stay for one year after graduation to find a job or travel. Despite recent measures to boost tourism, including a two-year extension of a hotel fee waiver and the scrapping of a planned tourism levy on air passengers, concerns linger about the country's readiness to accommodate the expected influx of visitors. ■

New York's Long Island to have snake boat race this Onam



New York Malayali Heritage Foundation is planning to grand festivities, including a snake boat race, at Long Island on September 15, Thiruvonam day. The snake boat race would be conducted in the lake near Cow Meadow Park (701, South Main Street, Freeport, NY 11520), reports Onmanorama.

Other than the boat race, traditional events such as vadamvali (tug of war), pulikali, chendamelam (traditional percussion) and athappoovu (floral carpets) would also be held on Thiruvonam day at the Cow Meadow Park. The foundation also hopes to serve an elaborate Onasadya (Onam feast) on the day.

The verdant lawns of the park are proposed to be turned into a venue for the mega Onam celebrations. The foundation is already putting together the schedules for the boat race and making the necessary arrangements. ■

UAE tourist visas to have integrated health insurance



The Federal Authority for Identity, Citizenship, Customs, and Port Security (ICP) of the United Arab Emirates has unveiled plans for a new project that would provide health insurance with the UAE tourist visa.

The UAE government plans to automate the health insurance process through an electronic platform, including streamlining pricing. The initiative would make

the process of applying for a visa significantly smoother and convenient, as well as support the tourism and healthcare sectors in the UAE.

The project allows tourists to obtain health insurance electronically while applying for their visas through our services system.

Having insurance cover for all travellers is an assurance that they will be covered for their

hospitalisation in case of an unexpected medical emergency. This also ensures the government and private hospitals in the country that they don't have to foot the bill for an emergency for visitors.

The Emirati government has started implementing several projects, considered qualitative initiatives. These changes are expected to improve service, as

The project, part of the "We Are the Emirates 2031" vision, aims to offer health coverage in emergency cases and also provide the service through an electronic platform. This platform is expected to manage the pricing and issuance of different packages from all insurance companies in the UAE.

"We the UAE 2031" contains four national priorities, including Forward Society, Forward Economy, Forward Diplomacy and Forward Ecosystem. ■

Tourist footfall in Dubai goes up



A total of 17.15 million people had visited Dubai in 2023, marking an increase of 19 percent compared to

2022, according to data from Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing (DTCM), Dubai.

International arrivals have surpassed even the pre-pandemic times (2019), when 16.7 million visitors were recorded.

The main markets for tourism were the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), including the six Middle Eastern countries—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman (16 percent), followed by Eastern Europe (13 percent), and MENA (12 percent).

While in 2023 there were more African tourists to Dubai, tourists from GCC and North Asia-Southeast Asia had the smallest increases for the year.

Some of the must-see attractions in Dubai include the Burj Khalifa, Miracle Garden, and Mall of the Emirates to Abu Dhabi's Ferrari World, Qasr Al Hosn Fortress, and SeaWorld Yas Island. ■



NEHRU TROPHY BOAT RACE

Thrilling Spectacle on Water



Event date: 10 August 2024

Venue: Punnamada Lake, Alappuzha

District: Alappuzha

The Nehru Trophy Boat Race, a thrilling spectacle among Kerala's famed snake boat races, will take place on August 10. This aquatic extravaganza unfolds on the Punnamada Lake, drawing hordes of spectators eager to witness the prowess of nearly 100-foot-long snake boats slicing through the water to the rhythm of ancient boat songs.

The race owes its name to an extraordinary moment in 1952 when Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, enraptured by the sight of these grandiose boats, impulsively boarded one, disregarding his security detail. This daring act left an indelible mark, leading Nehru to donate a magnificent silver trophy shaped like a snake boat, immortalizing his fond memories of that eventful day. Thus, the race was christened the Nehru Trophy Boat Race in his honour.

During the racing season, the atmosphere crackles with excitement as ceremonial water processions and exquisite water floats adorn the lake. From colossal chundan valloms to rustic country rafts, the waters come alive under the command of skilled oarsmen who transform rowing into an art form. The spectacle is not just a race; it's a riveting display of tradition and skill that leaves an unforgettable impression.

The competition itself is fierce, as teams battle fiercely for supremacy, their synchronized rowing echoing across the lake, setting the pulse of the crowd racing. Each boat, meticulously crafted and adorned, represents not just a team but a community's pride and heritage, passed down through generations. The race course is about 1,370 meters long and divided into various tracks. As of July 20, 2024, 73 boats, including 19 snakeboats, have registered to compete in nine categories in the prestigious event.

As the sun dips low over the shimmering waters of Punnamada Lake, the Nehru Trophy Boat Race becomes more than just a sporting event; it's a celebration of Kerala's rich cultural tapestry, where history, tradition, and sheer adrenaline converge in a spectacle that must be seen to be believed. ■





സിനിമാ ടൂറിസം

വെള്ളിത്തിരയിലെ ദൃശ്യചാരുകൾ തേടുന്ന യാത്രികർ

'മഞ്ഞുരുന്തൻ മേഘം' ചിത്രീകരിച്ച ലൊക്കേഷൻ

അശോകൻ പത്മിനി

സിനിമാ എന്ന വിനോദ വ്യവസായം വളരൻ തുടങ്ങിയതോടെയാണ് ലോകത്ത് സിനിമാ ടൂറിസവും ആരംഭിക്കുന്നത്. ഷൂട്ടിംഗ് ലൊക്കേഷനുകളായ പ്രദേശങ്ങളുടെ സൗന്ദര്യവും, പ്രകൃതി ഭംഗിയും അതേപടി പകർത്തി പ്രേക്ഷകരിലേക്ക് സംപ്രദക്ഷണം ചെയ്യാൻ ഫോട്ടോഗ്രാഫിയുടെ സാങ്കേതികവിദ്യ വളർന്നതോടെ കഴിഞ്ഞു. കലയും സാഹിത്യവും സാങ്കേതികവിദ്യയും പരസ്പരം ഇഴചേരുന്ന സിനിമ, പ്രമേയങ്ങൾക്ക് മാത്രമല്ല കാഴ്ചയ്ക്കും അങ്ങനെ മനോഹരമാകാൻ തുടങ്ങി. പ്രകൃതിയുടെ വർണനാഞ്ചിതമായ സൗന്ദര്യം ക്യാമറ കണ്ണുകൾ ഒപ്പിയെടുത്ത് ഫിലിമിലൂടെയും പിൻകാലത്ത് ഡിജിറ്റൽ ആയും സംഗീതത്തിന്റെ മേമ്പാടിയോടെ

ദൃശ്യവൽക്കരിച്ചപ്പോൾ ഈ ഭംഗി നേരിട്ട് കാണണമെന്ന ആഗ്രഹവും പ്രേക്ഷകരിൽ വളരൻ തുടങ്ങി. അപ്പോളുകളിൽ പകർത്തിയ പ്രകൃതിദൃശ്യങ്ങളിലേക്കുള്ള സഞ്ചാരികളുടെ യാത്ര സിനിമാ ടൂറിസത്തിന് വഴികാട്ടിയായി.

ലൊക്കേഷനുകളായ പ്രദേശങ്ങളിലേക്കുള്ള സിനിമാസാധകരുടെ യാത്ര മാത്രമല്ല സിനിമാടൂറിസം. ചരിത്ര സ്മാരകങ്ങൾ, ചിത്ര കലകളുടെയും, വാസ്തുശില്പ സൗന്ദര്യത്തിന്റെയും വർണഭംഗിയാൽ ആകർഷണീയമായ കൊട്ടാരങ്ങൾ, ക്ഷേത്രങ്ങൾ, മ്യൂസിയങ്ങൾ, പൈതൃക സ്ഥാപനങ്ങൾ, സാംസ്കാരിക കേന്ദ്രങ്ങൾ അങ്ങനെ സിനിമയിലൂടെ പ്രേക്ഷകർ അറിഞ്ഞതും, ആസ്വാദിച്ചതുമെല്ലാം സിനിമാടൂറിസത്തിന്റെ ഭാഗമായി. മഞ്ഞ് മുടി കുളിരണിഞ്ഞ് വിനോദ സഞ്ചാരികളെ മാടി വിളിക്കുന്ന താഴ്‌വാരങ്ങൾ, മലയാരങ്ങൾ, മനം കവരുന്ന കായൽപട്ടെകൾ, വെള്ളച്ചാട്ടങ്ങൾ ഒക്കെ സിനിമ



ലൊക്കേഷനുകൾ ആയതോടെ സിനിമാ സാദകരും വിനോദ സഞ്ചാരികളാകാൻ തുടങ്ങി. ബാഹുബലി പോലുള്ള ബ്രഹ്മാണ്ഡ സിനിമകളുടെ സിനിമ സെറ്റുകൾ, ഫിലിം സ്റ്റീകൾ, സ്റ്റുഡിയോകൾ എന്നിവിടങ്ങളിലൊക്കെ സന്ദർശകരായി പ്രേക്ഷകർ എത്തിയതോടെ ഇവയും സിനിമ ടൂറിസത്തിന്റെ ഭാഗമായി.

സിനിമ ഷൂട്ടിംഗിലൂടെ പിൻകാലത്ത് പ്രസിദ്ധമായി തീർന്ന നിരവധി പ്രദേശങ്ങളും നിർമ്മിതികളും മനകളും സന്ദർശക കേന്ദ്രങ്ങളായി മാറി. പ്രേക്ഷകർ സിനിമയിൽ കണ്ട ലൊക്കേഷൻ സന്ദർശിക്കാൻ ആകർഷിക്കപ്പെട്ടാൽ സിനിമാടൂറിസമായി സിനിമാടൂറിസം ടൂറിസത്തെയും സിനിമ എന്ന വിനോദ വ്യവസായത്തെയും പരസ്പരം പ്രോത്സാഹിപ്പിക്കുന്നു. സൂപ്പർ താരങ്ങൾ അഭിനയിച്ച പ്രധാനപ്പെട്ട ടൂറിസ്റ്റ് കേന്ദ്രങ്ങളിൽ ചിത്രീകരിക്കുന്ന സിനിമകൾ കാണാൻ പ്രേക്ഷകർ കുടുംബ, പ്രമേയ ക്ലിപ്തം ഗാനമംഗങ്ങളും പ്രകൃതി മംഗലവും



“ഇനി ഇഡിയറ്റ്സ്” ചിത്രീകരിച്ച തടാകത്തിലും

സാഹസിക മംഗങ്ങളും ചിത്രീകരിച്ച സിനിമകൾ. അത് സിനിമയെ മാത്രമല്ല ടൂറിസ്റ്റ് കേന്ദ്രത്തിന്റെ പ്രസിദ്ധിക്കും വികസനത്തിനും വഴിയൊരുക്കും.

1990 കളിലാണ് ലോകത്ത് സിനിമാടൂറിസം വളർന്നു തുടങ്ങിയത്. 1996 ൽ ബ്രിട്ടീഷ് ടൂറിസം അസോസിയേഷൻ എന്ന ഏജൻസി ബ്രിട്ടനിലെ പ്രസിദ്ധ സിനിമ ലൊക്കേഷനുകളെ ബന്ധപ്പെടുത്തി ഒരു ടൂറിസം മാപ്പ് പ്രസിദ്ധീകരിച്ചു. ഹാർജ്പാർട്ടർ സിനിമ സീരിയൽ ചിത്രീക

രിച്ച പതിനൊന്നാം നൂറ്റാണ്ടിൽ നിർമ്മിച്ച ആൽവിക് (ALNWICK) കോട്ടയും, ലണ്ടൻ കിംഗ്സ് ക്രോസ്സ് റെയിൽവേ മസ്ജിദും സിനിമ റിലീസ് ആയതോടെ ടൂറിസ്റ്റുകളുടെ സന്ദർശന കേന്ദ്രമായി മാറി. എക്കാലത്തെയും സൂപ്പർ ഹിന്ദി സിനിമ ത്രി ഇഡിയറ്റ് (3 Idiots) റിലീസ് ആയ ശേഷം സിനിമ ചിത്രീകരിച്ച ലഡാക്കിലെക്ക് സന്ദർശകരുടെ പ്രവാഹമായിരുന്നുവെന്ന് ഫിക്സി (FICCI) ചൂണ്ടിക്കാണിച്ചിട്ടുണ്ട്. 2006 ലെ സൂപ്പർ ഹിറ്റ് ചിത്രം ക്രിഷ് (Krish)



കൂപ്പി ചിത്രീകരിച്ച സിംഗപ്പൂരിന്റെ രാത്രിദൃശ്യം

റിലീസായ ശേഷം ചിത്രം ചിത്രീകരിച്ച സിംഗപ്പൂരിലേക്ക് ഇന്ത്യൻ സഞ്ചാരികളുടെ എണ്ണം വൻതോതിൽ വർദ്ധിച്ചതായും രേഖപ്പെടുത്തിയിട്ടുണ്ട്. സ്വാതന്ത്ര്യ സമര കാലത്ത് സമരസേനാനികളെ പാർപ്പിച്ചിരുന്ന ആൻഡമാനിലെ സെല്ലുലാർ ജയിലുകളിൽ അവർ അനുഭവിച്ച ദുരന്ത ജീവിതത്തിന്റെ കഥ പറഞ്ഞ 1996 ലെ കാലാപാനി എന്ന മലയാളി ചിത്രത്തിന്റെ റിലീസിന് ശേഷം മലയാളികളായ വിനോദ സഞ്ചാരികൾ ആൻഡമാൻ ദ്വീപുകളിലേക്ക് കൂടുതലായി യാത്ര ചെയ്യാൻ തുടങ്ങി. രാജസ്ഥാനിലെ കൊട്ടാരങ്ങളും, കോട്ടകളും വിവിധ സംസ്ഥാനങ്ങളിലെ ക്ഷേത്രങ്ങളും, കേരളം അടക്കമുള്ള സംസ്ഥാനങ്ങളിലെ ഭൂപ്രദേശങ്ങളും ലോക സിനിമയ്ക്ക് വരെ ലൊക്കേഷനുകളായിട്ടുണ്ട്. ഈ പ്രദേശങ്ങളിലേക്ക് വിദേശ വിനോദ സഞ്ചാരികളെ ആകർഷിക്കാൻ സിനിമയും കാരണമായിട്ടുണ്ട്. ടൂറിസം ഡെസ്റ്റിനേഷനുകളായി മാറാനും പ്രദേശങ്ങളുടെ സാമ്പത്തിക വളർച്ചയ്ക്കും ഇതു വഴി യൊരുക്കി.

യാത്രയും സിനിമ ടൂറിസത്തിന്റെ ഭാഗമാണ്. യാത്രയെ സ്നേഹിക്കാനും, യാത്ര ചെയ്യാനും പ്രേരിപ്പിക്കുന്ന യാത്ര ഇതിവൃത്തമായ സിനിമകൾ ലോകത്തെ എല്ലാ ഭാഷകളിലും ഉണ്ടായിട്ടുണ്ട്. പുതിയ കാഴ്ചകളും, പുതിയ അനുഭവങ്ങളും സമ്മാനിക്കുന്നതാണ് ഓരോ യാത്രയും. അതുപോലെ തന്നെയാണ് യാത്ര പ്രമേയമായ സിനിമകളും. എന്നെന്ന് ചൊഗാലെയും സുഹൃത്തും തെക്കെ അമേരിക്കയിലൂടെ നടത്തിയ മോട്ടോർ സൈക്കിൾ യാത്രയുടെ കഥ പറയുന്ന "ദ മോട്ടോർ സൈക്കിൾ ഡയറീസ്" പോലെ യാത്ര പ്രേമികളെ കീഴടക്കിയ നിരവധി സിനിമകളുണ്ട്.

ഈയിടെ പുറത്തിറങ്ങിയ " മഞ്ഞുമ്മൽ ബോയ്സ് " മലയാളം സിനിമ കണ്ടാൽ കൊടൈക്കനാൽ കാണാത്തവർക്ക് അവിടെ പോകണമെന്ന് തോന്നും.

ഇന്ത്യയിലും സിനിമാടൂറിസം വളർച്ചയിലാണ്. പല സംസ്ഥാനങ്ങളും ഇതിന്റെ പ്രാധാന്യം തിരിച്ചറിഞ്ഞിട്ടുണ്ട്. പ്രകൃതി ഭംഗി കൊണ്ടും വൈവിധ്യമാർന്ന ഭൂപ്രദേശങ്ങളാലും നമ്മുടെ രാജ്യം വിദേശ വിനോദ സഞ്ചാരികൾക്ക് ഏറെ പ്രിയപ്പെട്ടതാണ്. ഹെറിമുജ് സ്റ്റേഷനുകൾ, പുൽമേടുകൾ, മഞ്ഞണിഞ്ഞ പർവ്വത നിരകൾ, കുള്ളി കോരുന്ന ഹിൽ സ്റ്റേഷനുകൾ, കായൽ പരപ്പുകൾ, ബീച്ചുകൾ, മലമടക്കുകൾ, വെള്ളച്ചാട്ടങ്ങൾ തുടങ്ങി സിനിമയുടെ അണിയറ പ്രവർത്തകരെ ആകർഷിക്കുന്ന നൂറ് കണക്കിന് ഡെസ്റ്റിനേഷനുകൾ വിവിധ സംസ്ഥാനങ്ങളിലുണ്ട്. സിനി

മകളിൽ ഇടംപിടിക്കുന്നതോടെ ഈ പ്രദേശങ്ങൾ വിനോദ സഞ്ചാരികൾക്ക് പുറമെ സിനിമാസാദകരെയും ആകർഷിക്കുന്നു. കർണാടകയിലെ കൂർഗിന്റെ പ്രകൃതിഭംഗി, പ്ലാന്റേഷൻ, മടിമേൽ കോട്ട, നാഗർഹോൾ നാഷണൽ പാർക്ക്, വെള്ളച്ചാട്ടങ്ങൾ ഇവയെല്ലാം രാജ്യത്തെ സിനിമ പ്രവർത്തകരുടെ ആകർഷണ കേന്ദ്രങ്ങളാണ്. മധ്യ പ്രദേശിലെ ഖജുരാഹോ ക്ഷേത്ര നഗരവും, കർണാടകയിലെ ബുധാനി ഗുഹാ ക്ഷേത്രങ്ങളും സിനിമ ഷൂട്ടിംഗിലെ പ്രധാന ലൊക്കേഷനുകളാണ്. "കാമസൂത്ര-എ ടെയ്ൽ ഓഫ് ലാ ആൻഡ് ഗുരു " പോലുള്ള സിനിമകൾ ചിത്രീകരിച്ചത് ഈ ചരിത്ര പ്രാധാന്യമുള്ള സ്ഥലങ്ങളിലാണ്. ഊട്ടിയിലും, കാശ്മീരിലും സിനിമ ചിത്രീകരണത്തിന് നിരവധി ആകർഷക ലൊക്കേഷനുകളുണ്ട്.



ആൻഡമാൻസിലെ സെല്ലുലാർ ജയിൻ



ഫിക്ചർ

ആലപ്പുഴയിലെ ഹൗസ് ബോട്ടും, കായൽ പരപ്പും, തേക്കടിയും, കാസർകോഡിലെ ബേക്കൽ കോട്ടയുമെല്ലാം നിരവധി സൂപ്പർ സിനികൾക്ക് ലോക്കേഷനുകളായിട്ടുണ്ട്. ഇന്ത്യയുടെ വൈവിധ്യമാർന്ന സാംസ്കാരിക ഉത്സവങ്ങളുടെയും, പരമ്പരാഗതമായ ആഘോഷങ്ങളുടെയും നിറകുട്ടുകൾ ഇന്ത്യൻ സിനിമയുടെ സൗന്ദര്യമാണിത്.

കേന്ദ്ര ടൂറിസം വകുപ്പും മധ്യപ്രദേശ്, ഉത്തർപ്രദേശ്, രാജസ്ഥാൻ ഉത്തരാഖണ്ഡ് തുടങ്ങി പല സംസ്ഥാനങ്ങളും

സിനിമാടൂറിസം പ്രോത്സാഹിപ്പിക്കാൻ പല നടപടികളും സ്വീകരിച്ചു വരുന്നുണ്ട്. രാജ്യത്തെ പല പ്രധാന ടൂറിസ്റ്റ് കേന്ദ്രങ്ങളിലും ചരിത്രപ്രാധാന്യമുള്ള സ്ഥലങ്ങളിലും, സ്ഥാപനങ്ങളിലും സിനിമ ഷൂട്ടിംഗിന് സഹായസഹകരണങ്ങൾ നൽകാൻ ഫിലിം ഫെസിലിറ്റേഷൻ സെന്റർ തന്നെ ഇന്ത്യ ടൂറിസം ആരംഭിച്ചിട്ടുണ്ട്. ദേശീയ ചലച്ചിത്ര അവാർഡിൽ ഏറ്റവും നല്ല സിനിമ സാഹ്യ സംസ്ഥാനം എന്ന അവാർഡും ഏർപ്പെടുത്തിയിട്ടുണ്ട്. രാജസ്ഥാനിൽ സംസ്ഥാനത്തിനകത്തു തന്നെ സിനിമ ചിത്രീകരിക്കുന്നതിന് രണ്ട് കോടി രൂപ സബ്സിഡി നൽകും. പല സംസ്ഥാനങ്ങളും ടൂറിസ്റ്റ് കേന്ദ്രങ്ങളിൽ സിനിമ ചിത്രീകരിക്കുന്നതിന് നികുതി ഇളവുകൾ നൽകുന്നുണ്ട്.

ഇന്ത്യ അദ്ധ്യക്ഷ സ്ഥാനം വഹിച്ച ജി-20 രാജ്യങ്ങളുടെ സമ്മേളനത്തിലും ഇന്ത്യയുടെ ടൂറിസം സാധ്യതകൾ ചർച്ച ചെയ്തതിൽ സിനിമ ടൂറിസവും ഉൾപ്പെടുന്നു. സിനിമ വ്യവസായത്തിലേക്ക് കൂടുതൽ വിദേശ നിക്ഷേപം ആകർഷിക്കാനും സംയുക്ത സിനിമ നിർമ്മാണ സംരംഭങ്ങൾ ആരംഭിക്കാനും ചർച്ചകൾ നടന്നു. സിനിമാടൂറിസം രംഗത്ത് രാജ്യാന്തര

തലത്തിൽ വിജയം കൈവരിച്ച സംരംഭങ്ങളും ആശയങ്ങളും പരസ്പരം കൈമാറാനും, ചർച്ച ചെയ്യാനും ഇന്ത്യയിൽ നടന്ന ഈ സമ്മേളനം വേദിയായി.

സിനിമ ടൂറിസത്തിന് സാമ്പത്തികവും, സാമൂഹികവുമായും വലിയ പ്രാധാന്യം ഉണ്ട്. പ്രാദേശിക സമ്പദ് വ്യവസ്ഥയുടെ ഉണർപ്പിനും, പുതിയ തൊഴിലവസരങ്ങൾക്കും സിനിമ ടൂറിസം വഴിയൊരുക്കും. നമ്മുടെ സാംസ്കാരിക പൈതൃകത്തെയും, ചരിത്ര സ്മാരകങ്ങളെയും സംരക്ഷിക്കാനും, പ്രമോട്ട് ചെയ്യാനും ഇതിലൂടെ കഴിയും. പുതിയ ടൂറിസം ഡെസ്റ്റിനേഷനുകൾ കണ്ടെത്താനും അതിലൂടെ ടൂറിസം സാധ്യതകൾ വികസിപ്പിക്കാനും സിനിമ ടൂറിസത്തിന് കഴിയും. വിവിധ രാജ്യങ്ങൾ തമ്മിലുള്ള സാംസ്കാരിക വിനിമയത്തിനും ഇത് സഹായകരമാകും. രാജ്യത്തിന്റെ സാംസ്കാരിക വൈവിധ്യവും, വൈവിധ്യമാർന്ന ഭൂപ്രകൃതിയും മനോഹരമായ ചരിത്രനിർമ്മിതികളും പുരാവസ്തുക്കളും കൊട്ടാരങ്ങളും ക്ഷേത്രങ്ങളും കലയും സാഹിത്യവുമെല്ലാം സിനിമയിൽ പരിചയപ്പെടുന്നതിലൂടെ സിനിമ രംഗത്ത് വിദേശനിക്ഷേപകരുടെയും, വിനോദ സഞ്ചാരികളുടെയും വരവിന് ആക്കം കൂട്ടും. അത് നമ്മുടെ സമ്പദ് വ്യവസ്ഥയെ മെച്ചപ്പെടുത്തും. ലോക ഇക്കണോമിക് ഫോറത്തിന്റെ അഭിപ്രായത്തിൽ ലോക ഫ്രാമ്പ് ആൻഡ് ടൂറിസം മത്സരശേഷി ഇൻഡക്സിൽ ഒരു പ്രമുഖ സ്ഥാനം ഇന്ത്യക്കുണ്ടെന്നാണ്. ആ സ്ഥാനത്തെ ഉയർത്താൻ രാജ്യത്തെ സിനിമ ടൂറിസത്തിന് കഴിയും. ■



SWAGAT





കേരളവും സിനിമാടൂറിസത്തിലേക്ക്

അശോകൻ പള്ളിക്കൽ

മലയാളികൾക്ക് ഏറെ പ്രിയപ്പെട്ടതാണ് സിനിമ. ആഴത്തിൽ സ്വാധീനിക്കപ്പെടുന്ന ഒരു മാധ്യമം കൂടിയാണ്. കാലങ്ങൾ ഏതെങ്കിലും മനസ്സിൽ നിന്നും മാഞ്ഞുപോകാത്ത സിനിമ പ്രെയിമുകൾ നമുക്കുണ്ട്. സിനിമയിൽ പ്രേക്ഷകരെ ഏറെ സ്വാധീനിച്ച രംഗങ്ങൾ, പ്രകൃതി ദൃശ്യങ്ങൾ, ഗാനങ്ങൾ എന്നിവ പിൽക്കാലത്ത് ഗൃഹാതുര ഓർമ്മകളായി നിലനിൽക്കും. ഇത്തരം ഓർമ്മകൾക്ക് നിറം പകരുന്നതാണ് സിനിമാടൂറിസം. ലോകത്താകമാനം സജീവമായി കൊണ്ടിരിക്കുന്ന സിനിമാടൂറിസത്തിന് കേരളത്തിലും തുടക്കം കുറിക്കുകയാണ് വിനോദ സഞ്ചാര വകുപ്പ്. സാംസ്കാരിക വകുപ്പുമായി ചേർന്ന് അതിനുള്ള നടപടികൾ ആരംഭിച്ചു. മലയാളികൾ മനസ്സിൽ താലോലിക്കുന്ന

സൂപ്പർ ഹിറ്റ് സിനിമകളിലെ അവിസ്തരണീയ രംഗങ്ങൾ ചിത്രീകരിച്ച ലൊക്കേഷനുകളെയും, ചലച്ചിത്രങ്ങൾ ദൃശ്യമാർമയ പകർന്ന പ്രദേശങ്ങളെയും പറ്റിയ കൗഴ്ചകൾക്കും, അനുഭവങ്ങൾക്കുമായി അണിയറയിലൊരുക്കും, ചിത്രത്തിലെ അഭിനേതാക്കളെയും പിന്നണി പ്രവർത്തകരെയും വീണ്ടും അവിടെ എത്തിച്ചും സഞ്ചാരികളെ ആകർഷിക്കുന്ന പദ്ധതിയാണ് സിനിമാ ടൂറിസമായി വിനോദ സഞ്ചാര വകുപ്പ് വിഭാവനം ചെയ്തിട്ടുള്ളത്.

ടൂറിസത്തിന്റെ പുതിയ മേഖലകളിലേക്ക് സഞ്ചാരികളെ മാടി വിളിക്കുകയാണ് സിനിമാ ടൂറിസം. ദൈവത്തിന്റെ സ്വന്തം നാടിനെ വിദേശ വിനോദ സഞ്ചാരികളോടൊപ്പം, ആഭ്യന്തര സഞ്ചാരികളെയും ആകർഷിക്കും വിധം വൈവിധ്യമാർന്ന പദ്ധതികൾ നടപ്പാക്കുന്നതിന്റെ ഭാഗമാണ്



ഈ പദ്ധതി, സിനിമ ടൂറിസത്തിനായി വികസിപ്പിക്കാവുന്ന നിരവധി ലൊക്കേഷനുകൾ കേരളത്തിലുണ്ട്. ആദ്യ ഘട്ടമായി തെരഞ്ഞെടുത്ത രണ്ട് പ്രദേശങ്ങളെയാണ് കൂടുതൽ വിനോദ സഞ്ചാരികളെ ആകർഷിക്കുന്ന തരത്തിൽ തെരഞ്ഞെടുത്തിട്ടുള്ളത്. തിരുവനന്തപുരം വെള്ളായണിയിലെ കിരീടം പാലവും കാസർകോഡ് ബേക്കൽ കോട്ടയുമാണ് ഈ പദ്ധതിക്കായി വികസിപ്പിക്കുന്നത്.

1989 ൽ പുറത്തിറങ്ങിയ കിരീടം എന്ന സിനിമ അക്കാലത്ത് വലിയ ജനപ്രീതി നേടിയതായിരുന്നു. മലയാളത്തിന്റെ സൂപ്പർ സ്റ്റാർ മോഹൻലാലും അഭിനയിച്ച പെരുന്തച്ചൻ തിലകനും മത്സരിച്ച് അഭിനയിച്ച ചിത്രം. ചിത്രത്തിന്റെ കഥയും സ്റ്റോറും ഗാനവും തമാശയുമെല്ലാം ഇന്നും സിനിമ ആസ്വാദകരിൽ ഗൃഹാതുര സ്മരണകൾ ഉണർത്തുന്നതാണ്. തിരുവനന്തപുരത്തെ വെള്ളായണിയിലും, പരിസരപ്രദേശത്തുമാണ് സിനിമ ചിത്രീകരിച്ചത്. കാർഷിക മേഖലയായ വെള്ളായണിയിലെ കായലും, പ്രകൃതി സൗന്ദര്യവും, പുഞ്ചപാടങ്ങളും, പുഴയും, വഴിയോരവും, കള്ളിപ്പാലമെല്ലാം ചിത്രത്തിന്റെ ഗ്രാമീണ കഥാതന്തുവിനെ മികവുറ്റതാക്കുന്നതായിരുന്നു. 'കണ്ണൻ പൂവിന്റെ കവിളിൽ തലോടി ...' എന്ന ഹിറ്റ് ഗാനത്തിന് പശ്ചാത്തലമായും നിരവധി അവിസ്മരണീയ മുഹൂർത്തങ്ങൾ ചിത്രീകരിച്ചതും പുഞ്ചക്കുളി കുന്നുകാലിപ്പാലിന് കുറുകെയുള്ള പാലത്തിലും സമീപത്തുമാണ്. സിനിമയുടെ കഥാപാരിസരത്തിൽ ഒരു പ്രതീകാത്മകമായി നിലക്കൊള്ളുന്നുണ്ട് ഈ പാലം. സിനിമ



കിരീടം പാലം

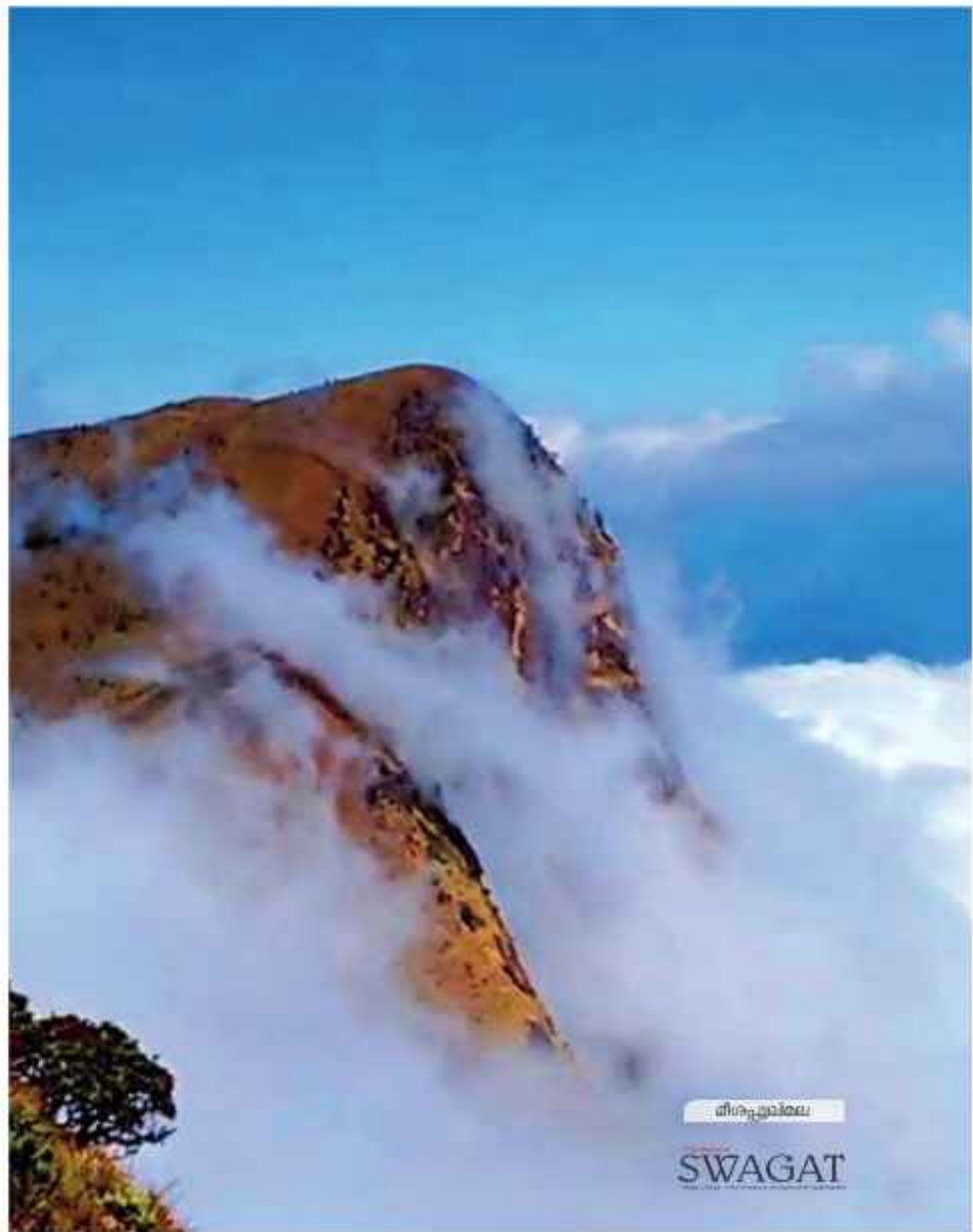
ഹിറ്റായതോടെ പാലവും ഹിറ്റായി. സിനിമയിൽ ശേഷം ഈ പാലം കിരീടം പാലം എന്നറിയപ്പെടാൻ തുടങ്ങി. പാലം മുതൽ പുഞ്ചക്കുളി കള്ളിപ്പാല വരെയുള്ള ബണ്ട് റോഡിന് പത്തുശ്രീ തിലകൻ റോഡ് എന്ന് കല്പിയൂർ പഞ്ചായത്ത് പേരിട്ടു. പാലവും റോഡും ചായക്കടയും പുഞ്ചപാടവും പുഴയും പക്ഷികളും ഇവിടത്തെ സായാഹ്നങ്ങളെ സന്ദർശകർ ഹരിതാഭമാക്കി.



തെമ്പലം കോട്ട

തിരുവനന്തപുരം ജില്ലയിലെ തന്നെ ഏറ്റവും വലിയ തണ്ണീർത്തടമാണ് വെള്ളായണി കായലും, പുഞ്ചക്കരി പാടശേഖരങ്ങളും ഉൾക്കൊള്ളുന്ന വിശാലമായ ഈ പ്രദേശം. "ഹരിതാഭ നിലനിർത്തു, തണ്ണീർത്തടങ്ങൾ സംരക്ഷിക്കൂ " എന്ന അടികുറിപ്പോടെ പ്രകൃതി സ്നേഹികൾ പക്ഷി നിരീക്ഷകൻ ഇന്ദുചന്ദ്രന്റെ ചിത്രമുള്ള ബോർഡും സ്ഥാപിച്ചിട്ടുണ്ട്.

ഒന്നുകൽ കോടി രൂപ ചെലവഴിച്ച് ആറു മാസത്തിനകം പൂർത്തിയാക്കുന്ന "സിനി ടൂറിസം പ്രോജക്ട്- കിരീടം പാലം അറ്റ് വെള്ളായണി " എന്ന പദ്ധതിയാണ് വിനോദ സഞ്ചാരികളെ ആകർഷിക്കാൻ ഇവിടെ നടപ്പാക്കുന്നത്. പ്രോജക്ടിന് ജീവൻ പകരുന്നത് പ്രമുഖ ആർക്കിടെക്ട് ജി.ജി.ജി ആണ്. കിരീടം പാലവും പരിസരവും നവീകരിക്കും. ഇവിടെ എത്തിച്ചേരുന്ന വിനോദ സഞ്ചാരികൾക്ക് ആവശ്യമായ അടിസ്ഥാന സൗകര്യങ്ങൾ ഒരുക്കും. പാലത്തിന് ഇരുവശത്തുമുള്ള നോക്കത്താറ്റത്തെ പഴയ പുഞ്ചപ്പാടങ്ങൾ മനോഹര കാഴ്ചയാണ്. ഇത് ആസ്വദിച്ച് നടക്കാനുള്ള സ്ഥലം, കുടികൾക്കുള്ള കളിസ്ഥലം, സോളാർ ലൈറ്റ്സ്, ഇരിപ്പിടം എന്നിവയെല്ലാം ഒരുക്കും. സിനിമയിലെ നാസറിന്റെ ചായക്കട നാസർ കഫേ എന്ന പേരിൽ പുനഃസൃഷ്ടിക്കും.



മീതപാലം



വർക്കാരപ്പള്ളി മഠ, ഒറ്റപ്പാലം

സിനിമയിലെ ചില മുഹൂർത്തങ്ങൾ ശില്പകലയിലൂടെ രേഖപ്പെടുത്തും. വെള്ളായണി കായൽ, കുടുംബസമേതം ഭക്ഷണം കഴിക്കാറുണ്ടെന്ന പുഞ്ചക്കെട്ടി കളച്ച് ഷാപ്പ്, കാർഷിക കോളേജ്, ശിവ ക്ഷേത്രം ഇവയെല്ലാം ടൂറിസ്റ്റ് കേന്ദ്രമാക്കി വെള്ളായണി എന്ന കാർഷിക ഗ്രാമത്തെ ഉയർത്തും.

കഥയുടെ പ്രത്യേകത കൊണ്ടും, ദൃശ്യപരമായ കൊണ്ടും മലയാളിയെ ഏറെ ആകർഷിച്ച തമിഴ് ചിത്രമാണ് മണിമന്തൻ തതിന്റെ 'ബോംബെ', അരവിന്ദ് സാരിയും, മനീഷ് കൊയ്താളയും നായികനായകന്മാരായ ചിത്രം 1995 ലാണ് പുറത്തിറങ്ങിയത്. 'ഉയിരെ.' എന്ന പ്രസിദ്ധമായ ഗാനം ചിത്രീകരിച്ചത് കാസർകോഡ് ബേക്കൽ കോട്ടയും അതിന്റെ പരിസരത്തുമാണ്. സിനിമാ ടൂറിസത്തിന്റെ ഭാഗമായി രണ്ടാമത്തെ പ്രൊജക്ട് ഇവിടെയാണ് നടപ്പാക്കുന്നത്. ഇത് സംബന്ധിച്ച് ചർച്ചകൾ നടക്കുന്നു. ഈ സംരംഭവുമായി സഹകരിക്കാമെന്ന് ചിത്രത്തിന്റെ സംവിധായകനായ മണിമന്തൻ സംസ്ഥാന ടൂറിസം മന്ത്രി ശ്രീമൂഹമ്മദ് റിയാസിന് ഉറപ്പ് നൽകി കഴിഞ്ഞു. കോഴിക്കോട് വച്ച് ഇത് സംബന്ധിച്ച് ഇദ്ദേഹവും ചർച്ച നടത്തി. റോജ, ദിൽസേ തുടങ്ങിയ അദ്ദേഹത്തിന്റെ ഹിറ്റ് ചിത്രത്തിലെ ഗാനങ്ങൾ ചിത്രീകരിച്ചതും കേരളത്തിന്റെ പ്രകൃതി മേണിയമായ സ്ഥലങ്ങളിലാണ്.

സർക്കാർ ഓരോറ്റാഗികമായി സിനിമാ ടൂറിസം പ്രഖ്യാപിച്ചിട്ടില്ലെങ്കിലും സിനിമയിലൂടെ സഞ്ചാരികളെ ആകർഷിച്ച നിരവധി പ്രദേശങ്ങൾ കേരളത്തിലുണ്ട്. 2012 ൽ റിലീസായ ബിജു മേനോനും, കുഞ്ചാക്കോ ബോബനും അഭിനയിച്ച 'ഓർഡിനറി' എന്ന സിനിമയ്ക്ക് ശേഷമാണ് പത്തനംതിട്ടയിലെ ഗവിയിലേക്ക് സന്ദർശകർ വർദ്ധിച്ചത്. ഗവിയിലേക്ക് പുറപ്പെട്ട ഒരു ബസ്സിന്റെ യാത്രയിലൂടെ ഗവിയിലൂടെ പ്രകൃതി സൗന്ദര്യം പ്രേക്ഷകരെ സഞ്ചാരികളാക്കാൻ പ്രേരിപ്പിച്ചു. സന്ദർശകർ വർദ്ധിച്ചതോടെ വിനോദ സഞ്ചാര വകുപ്പ് അവിടെ പുതിയ പദ്ധതികളുമായി മുന്നോട്ടു വന്നു. വനത്തിന്റെ അഗാധതയും സൗന്ദര്യവും നുകരാൻ സ്ഥാപിച്ച ഗ്ലാസ്സ് ബ്രിഡ്ജ് സഞ്ചാരികൾക്ക് മറ്റൊരു അനുഭവം കൂടിയായി. സിനിമയിലൂടെ പ്രചാരം നേടിയ ഒരു പ്രദേശം സിനിമാ ടൂറിസത്തിന് കാരണമായതിന് മറ്റൊരു ഉദാഹരണം വേണ്ട.

ദുൽഖർ സൽമാനും, പാർവ്വതി തെരുവോത്തരും അഭിനയിച്ച ചാർളി എന്ന റൊമാന്റിക് സിനിമയിൽ ആത്മഹത്യ ചെയ്യാൻ പോകുന്ന നായികയോട് നായകൻ ചോദിക്കുന്നത് 'മിശപ്പുലിലേയിൽ മണൽ പെയ്യുന്നത് കണ്ടിട്ടുണ്ടോ..?' എന്നാണ്. മരണത്തിൽ നിന്നുപോലും പ്രകൃതിയുടെ മടിതട്ടിലേക്ക് ജീവനെ മടക്കിക്കൊണ്ടു വരാൻ മനസ്സിൽ കുളിച്ച് കോരുന്ന

മനോഹര ദൃശ്യങ്ങൾക്ക് കഴിയുമെന്ന് പറയുന്ന ചിത്രമാണ് ഇത്. 2015 ൽ പുറത്തിറങ്ങിയ ഈ സിനിമ തെക്കേ ഇന്ത്യയിൽ രണ്ടാമത്തെ ഏറ്റവും ഉയരം കൂടിയ മീശപ്പുലിലെ എന്ന പ്രകൃതി വിരുന്നൊരുക്കിയ സ്ഥലം ഉൾപ്പെടെ ഇടുക്കിയുടെ പ്രകൃതി ഭംഗി ഒപ്പിയെടുത്ത ചിത്രമാണ്. ഈ പ്രകൃതി സൗന്ദര്യം ആസ്വദിക്കാൻ സാഹസിക സഞ്ചാരികൾ വർദ്ധിച്ചത് ഈ സിനിമയ്ക്ക് ശേഷമാണ്. ഇത്തരം ധാരാളം പ്രദേശങ്ങൾ ചൂണ്ടിക്കാണിക്കാൻ ഇനിയുണ്ട്. ഇവയെല്ലാം ഫലപ്രദമായി ഉപയോഗപ്പെടുത്താൻ കഴിഞ്ഞാൽ ടൂറിസത്തിനും, സാഹസിക ടൂറിസത്തിനും വലിയ സാദ്ധ്യതകൾ സൃഷ്ടിക്കും. പാലക്കാട് ജില്ലയിലെ പല പ്രകൃതിമേണിയ സ്ഥലങ്ങളും സിനിമ സംവിധായകരുടെ ഇഷ്ടപ്പെട്ട ലൊക്കേഷനുകളാണ്. ഒറ്റപ്പാലത്തെ വർക്കാരപ്പള്ളി മഠ ഏതായാ പ്രസിദ്ധമായ സിനിമകൾക്ക് ലൊക്കേഷനായി മനസൽക്കിക്കാൻ സഞ്ചാരികൾ എത്തുകയാണിപ്പോൾ. സിനിമ രംഗത്തുള്ളവരെയും, ടൂറിസം രംഗത്ത് പ്രവർത്തിക്കുന്നവരെയും സഹകരിപ്പിച്ച് സിനിമാ ടൂറിസം യാഥാർത്ഥ്യമാക്കാനാണ് ശ്രമിക്കുന്നതെന്ന് ടൂറിസം മന്ത്രി വ്യക്തമാക്കിയിട്ടുണ്ട്. സിനിമാ ടൂറിസം ടൂറിസത്തെയും, പ്രാദേശിക സമ്പദ്വ്യവസ്ഥയെയും അതോടൊപ്പം സിനിമയെയും പരസ്പരം പ്രോത്സാഹിപ്പിക്കും. ■



K.R. Rejeesh

Startups have redefined travel and tourism across the globe. Apps have eased the hectic preparations before tours, apart from providing cozy arrangements for our itinerary and other stapled activities. In Kerala, penetration of startups has helped introduce new adventure activities other than the more familiar trekking, paragliding, etc. Adventure tourism is gradually evolving in the State attracting the interest of stakeholders, including

domestic and foreign tourists. A few new companies on the bloc are focusing on niche segments with a dollop of innovations and haute amenities for the tourists.

Surfing and 'Clamping' (glamorous camping) are gaining wide currency in the adventure tourism sector of the State. Surfing mainly draws people to Varkala due to its tropical weather and long coastline that offer excellent waves from

Papanasam beach to Kappil beach. And, Glamping is striking firm roots in the hill stations of the State.

Like her peers, innovation was the key for Aparna Gopan when she founded her startup Tripwright along with her friends Vineeth, Syam and Akhil in 2023. It is an ethical travel startup with three verticals: Stays, Trips and Adventures. 'House of Surf by Tripwright' was their maiden curated stay, which is India's first and sole surf hostel for women. Located at Odayam Beach in Varkala, they host surfing women, solo women travelers and wellness retreat guests in their boutique hostel.

A creative marketing professional working with tourism clients in South East Asia for more than eight years, Aparna and her friends had forayed into the tourism sector due to their common passion for travel and adventure. Aparna says the idea behind their surf hostel is to provide a safe and healing space for women travelers to Varkala and to create an active community of

surfing women in the country.

"Varkala is a global destination for surfing today as it is the best place for slow travelers. The surf community here is also emerging into a very harmonious circle of friends. The recently-concluded International Surf Festival has also boosted our visibility on the global surf map," she says.

As Varkala offers waves for both beginners and intermediate surfers, a lot of surf schools have started training tourists. Most of Aparna's guests are long-stay guests and women who come to learn surfing from countries like Russia, Australia, Germany, France and UK. Kerala, Aparna says, is a treasure house of

unique experiences. Destinations such as Thollayiramkandi, Suryanelli, Kainakary, Munroe Island and Varkala offer experiences that one can find only in Kerala.

The surf house that Aparna and her friends have put together, for instance, offers both safety and close communion with nature. "We have a pool and sea view cafe and deck. We offer Watsu and other water healing therapies," says Aparna and her team members, who share the same passion for travel, wellness and adventure.

Kochi-based startup Campper is a major player in the 'Glamping' segment. They provide a platform for campers who seek unique



Sooraj Rajan



Prabil M.J.



Aparna Gopan

Tourism sector startups bring in innovation in the form of adventure activities and haute amenities in the lap of Nature



experiences. Campper has set up camping sites in various parts of Kerala by acquiring unused land from land owners, thereby creating an opportunity for land owners to monetize their vacant plots.

Founded in 2016 by Prabil MJ and Sooraj Rajan, the startup has received grant from Kerala Startup Mission (KSUM) and startup scale fund from Kerala State Industrial Development Corporation (KSIDC).

The definition of camping has changed over the years from the normal concept of enjoying scenic landscape by shoe-horning people into a tent. Shying away from traditional camping norms, now it has become a space where one can experience confluence of comfort and luxury in the lap of Nature.

According to Prabil MJ, Founder and CEO, Campper, startups have myriad opportunities in the tourism sector, besides scaling up globally. "Kerala's captivating landscape, natural beauty, and rich cultural heritage offer several possibilities for glamping experience."

Prabil, who quit his IT job to become an entrepreneur, had the idea of developing a geo-local app for discovering travel deals while incubating his company with the Kerala Industrial and Technical Consultancy Organisation (KITCO). However, this concept didn't gain traction.

In 2015, during a New Year camping trip in Kerala, he realised that there were insufficient organized campsites in the area. "I leased a portion of land in Vagamon and organized a camping event. It was a success, prompting me to realize the broader potential of utilizing excess land for camping purposes, especially for landowners facing restrictions on permanent constructions," recalls Mr Prabil, who then founded Campper. "I'm myself an outdoor guy. That's why I chose this path," says the Kochi-born entrepreneur.

Sooraj Rajan, co-founder and COO, Campper, says Kerala had only a handful of campsites when they entered the domain. "Today, the landscape has transformed dramatically with the emergence of hundreds of such sites."

Rajan, who hails from Kannur and currently lives in Thiruvananthapuram now, observes that the camping guidelines introduced by the Kerala government underscore the immense potential of this sector in the state. "Most of our visitors are from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka. It shows the widespread appeal and growing interest in camping experiences within Kerala," he says.

Both of them feel that though State agencies like KSUM and KSIDC are making a commendable effort to support startups, a dedicated startup incubator focused entirely

on nurturing and supporting such ventures in the tourism sector is the need of the hour.

They stress the need for providing resources, mentorship, and networking opportunities tailored to the needs of tourism startups. It would not only empower local entrepreneurs, but also contribute to Kerala's position as a leading destination for tourism-related innovation and entrepreneurship.

Campper.com has been collaborating with campsite owners over the years and now they have developed an innovative glamping tent known as Zpodz, which is an all terrain, all weather and highly modular tent designed to provide a thrilling experience for tourists.

With a generous space of around 300 square feet, their innovative pods are designed to provide ultimate comfort and convenience without compromising on the





thrill of being close to nature. A glamping pod is a wooden structure that offers a more comfortable alternative to a traditional tent, while still allowing the occupant to feel they are getting closer to nature.

"It is an eco-friendly initiative and has been crafted from renewable and recycled materials. We are contributing ourselves to the Responsible Tourism (RT) initiatives of the government with this project," Prabil says, and adds that Kerala has great potential to become a glamping destination of the country with its diverse natural features.

As a solo traveler who has been to Nepal, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and

Kenya, Aparana observes that the state government needs to give focus on community-based tourism that can enhance the tourism sector in so many ways.

Noting that tourism generates revenue for the local community, she says that it is vital to involve and educate the community to follow eco-friendly norms to provide a safe space for all tourists to make their journey across Kerala an unforgettable experience.

Prabil suggests that Kerala's wildlife reserves and national parks such as Periyar Tiger Reserve and Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary can be chosen for luxury tent accommodations that will give a unique opportunity for tourists. The

beautiful and picturesque beaches of Kovalam and Varkala too could become excellent glamping sites. "Our backwaters and tea plantations offer a tranquil setting for glamping. Luxurious tents set up deep within tea plantations can provide a peaceful retreat with breathtaking views of the surrounding landscapes."

"Kerala's rich cultural heritage can be incorporated into glamping experiences through themed accommodations inspired by traditional architecture and local customs. This could include luxury tents designed to reflect the region's cultural ethos," he feels.

Prabil says there is also great potential for Ayurvedic glamping





retreats, which can offer holistic wellness experience to the visitors even while adventure glamping features activities such as trekking, camping, wildlife safaris and water sports. Investing in sustainable infrastructure projects holds the key to enhancing the overall tourism experience while simultaneously minimizing ecological footprints, he says.

Campper distinguishes itself within the camping industry with its commitment to delivering exceptional experiences, fostering a strong sense of community, promoting sustainable practices, leveraging technology for user convenience, providing personalized services, and prioritizing safety standards.

In the future, Campper will focus on integrating zpodz.in into its portfolio, expanding its reach to new locations, and enhancing the glamping experience. It aims to solidify Campper's position as a leader in outdoor hospitality while providing guests with unique and luxurious camping experience. Currently, Campper has its presence in Wayanad, Munnar, Vagamon, Kanthalloor,

Vattavada and Ootty while Zpodz is set up in Munnar.

"Through strategic planning and implementation, we can create a more sustainable and appealing destination for visitors from around the world. This singular focus will not only elevate Kerala's reputation but also foster long-term environmental stewardship and economic growth. As budding entrepreneurs in this segment, our effort is to deliver authentic, high-quality experiences to build a strong reputation over the time," he says.

Meanwhile, founders of Tripwright are currently working on integrating a strong Ayurveda and wellness vertical to their surf house and scale up the project across south East Asian countries in the next five years. "Those who would like to eke out a living from the tourism sector or want to be a key player, should work on creating opportunities for community-based and sustainable travel and try to elevate the experience of guests during their visit to 'God's Own Country'. And that is what we are trying to do," they say. ■



'HOLIDAY HEIST' WINS PATA GOLD AWARD

KERALA TOURISM'S MONTH-LONG CAMPAIGN LAUNCHED IN JULY 2023 TO WOO TOURISTS THROUGH A BIDDING GAME

Kerala Tourism has won the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) Gold Award 2024 for its online contest 'Holiday Heist' in the Digital Marketing Campaign category. The month-long campaign was launched in July 2023 to woo tourists through a bidding game on the Tourism department's WhatsApp ChatBot 'Maya.'

Travellers from across the country made 80,000 bids to visit the State's prime destinations at low prices. The bidding game also generated over 45 million impressions besides amassing 13 million plus video views. Some of the participants also managed to secure tour packages worth over ₹30,000 for ₹5.

During the campaign period, Maya witnessed 5.2 lakh interactions, as participants bonded over their love for travel in Kerala. The game revolved around the concept of 'lowest unique

bidding', challenging participants to secure tour packages. Unlike traditional auctions, strategic thinking and creativity were at the forefront, celebrating the uniqueness of each player.

The PATA Gold Award 2024 will be presented to Kerala Tourism at a function at Queen Sirikit National Convention Centre, Bangkok, Thailand on August 28.

"Holiday Heist has redefined tour package promotions. The award is a recognition of the campaign through which Kerala has managed to woo back tourists post-pandemic. We have to keep up the momentum of growth by introducing novel concepts like this," Tourism Minister P. A. Mohamed Riyas said.

The PATA Grand and Gold Awards recognise the best contributions from the travel industry in the Asia-Pacific region.



maya



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The State of Tourism and Hospitality 2024 TOWARDS NEW HORIZONS

Umasankar G.

Tourism and hospitality are set to soar, powered by new travelers, destinations, and trends, says McKinsey Report on 'The State of Tourism and Hospitality 2024'.



Tourism and hospitality are experiencing significant transformation. Changes are occurring at every stage of the travel experience, from the origin of travel to the destinations themselves. Equally noteworthy are shifts in traveler preferences, characterized by a rising desire for immersive and high-end travel experiences. In this dynamic environment, stakeholders in the tourism and hospitality sectors must stay agile and adapt to evolving trends. It's crucial for businesses to innovate their strategies and refine their offerings to cater to a new generation of travelers who are drawn to specialized spaces and distinctive experiences.

McKinsey & Company, multinational strategy and management consulting firm which offers professional services to corporations, governments, and diverse industries, is here with its 'State of Tourism and Hospitality 2024' report, outlining the emerging contours of tourism and travel at the global level with significant insights into the Indian travel and tourism scenes. The report highlights the many factors that are combining to dramatically alter the industry landscape, giving stakeholders important inputs to strategize for the new tourism and travel world order.

The report seeks to understand the new travel ways of the world in terms three core concepts:

Bulk of travel spending is close to home

International travel might feel more glamorous, but tourism players should not forget that domestic travel still represents the bulk of the market, accounting for 75 percent of global travel spending. Domestic travel recovered from the COVID-19 pandemic faster than international travel, as is typical coming out of downturns. And although there has been a recent boom in 'revenge travel,' with travelers prioritizing international trips that were delayed by the pandemic, a return to pre pandemic norms, in which domestic travel represents 70 percent of spending, is expected by 2030.

The United States is the world's largest domestic travel market at \$1 trillion in annual spending.

Sixty-eight percent of all trips that start in the United States remain within its borders. Domestic

demand has softened slightly, as American travelers return abroad. China's \$744 billion domestic travel market is currently the world's second largest. Chinese travelers spent the pandemic learning to appreciate the diversity of experiences on offer within their own country. Even as borders open back up, Chinese travelers are staying close to home. And domestic destinations are benefiting. China's domestic travel market is expected to grow 12 percent annually and overtake the United States' to become the world's largest by 2030. Hotel construction reflects this expectation: 30 percent of the global hotel construction pipeline is currently concentrated in China. The pipeline is heavily skewed toward luxury properties, with more than twice as many luxury

hotels under construction in China as in the United States.



India, currently the world's sixth-largest domestic travel market by spending, is another thriving area for domestic travel. With the subcontinent's growing middle class powering travel spending growth of roughly 9 percent per year, India's domestic market could overtake Japan's and Mexico's to become the world's fourth largest by 2030. Domestic air passenger traffic in India is projected to double by 2030, boosted in part by a state-subsidized initiative that aims to connect underserved domestic airports.

Europe and Asia, in particular, demonstrate strong and growing intra-regional travel markets. Recognizing this general trend, stakeholders have been funneling investment toward regional tourism destinations. An Emirati wealth fund, for instance, has announced its intent to invest roughly \$35 billion into established hospitality properties and development opportunities in Egypt.

Europe has long played host to a high share of intra regional travel. Seventy percent of its travelers' international trips stay within the region. Europe's most popular destinations for intraregional travelers are perennial warm-weather favorites—Spain (18 percent), Italy (10 percent), and France (8 percent)—with limited change to these preferences expected between now and 2030.

India, currently the world's sixth-largest domestic travel market by spending, is a thriving area for domestic travel. India's domestic market could overtake Japan's and Mexico's to become the world's fourth largest by 2030.

Despite longer travel distances between Asian countries, Asia's intraregional travel market is beginning to resemble Europe's. Intraregional travel currently accounts for about 60 percent of international trips in Asia—a share expected to climb to 64 percent by 2030. As in Europe in past decades, Asian intraregional travel is benefiting from diminishing visa barriers and the development of a low-cost, regional flight network.

Thailand is projected to enjoy continued, growing popularity with Asian travelers. Thailand waived visa requirements for Chinese tourists in 2023 and



is doing the same for Indian tourists starting in 2024. It has aggressively targeted the fast-growing Indian traveler segment, launching more than 50 marketing campaigns directed at Indians over the past decade. The investment may be paying off. Bangkok recently overtook Dubai as the most popular city destination for Indian tourists.

A McKinsey ConsumerWise survey on consumer sentiment, conducted in February 2024, suggests that Chinese travelers are also exhibiting high interest in international travel, with 36 percent of survey respondents indicating that they intend to spend more on international travel in the next three months. Much of this interest is directed toward regional destinations such as Southeast Asia and Japan, with interest in travel to Europe down from previous years.

Given travelers' preference for proximity, how can tourism stakeholders further capitalize on domestic and intraregional travel demand? Here are a few strategies:

Craft offerings that encourage domestic tourists to rediscover local gems: Destinations, hotels, and transportation providers can encourage domestic tourists to integrate lesser known cultural landmarks into their trips to visit friends and relatives. In France, the upscale hotel chain Relais & Châteaux markets historic properties that lie far from classic tourist sights—such as Château Saint-Jean in rural Auvergne—as a welcome escape from the bustle of Paris. In Mexico, the Pueblos Mágicos program has successfully boosted domestic tourist visits to a set of “magical towns” that showcase Mexican heritage.

Fold one-off domestic destinations into fuller itineraries: Route 66 in the United States is a classic road trip pathway, which spurs visits to attractions all along the highway's length. Tourism stakeholders can collaborate to create similar types of domestic itineraries around the world. For instance, Mexico has expanded on its Pueblos Mágicos concept by branding coordinated visits to multiple villages as “magical routes.” In France, local tourism boards and vineyards have collaborated to promote bucket list “wine routes” around the country.

Make crossing borders into neighboring countries seamless: Removing logistical barriers to travel can nudge tourists to upgrade a one-off trip to a single attraction into a bucket list journey across multiple, less-trodden destinations. In Africa, for example, Ethiopian Airlines is facilitating cross-border travel to major regional tourist sites through improved air connectivity. In Asia, Thailand has announced its intent to create a joint

visa easing travel among Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Source markets are shifting

The United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, China, and France remain the world's five largest sources of travelers, in that order. These countries collectively accounted for 38 percent of international travel spending in 2023 and are expected to remain the top five source markets through 2030. But interest in travel is blossoming in other parts of the world—causing a shift in the balance of outbound travel flows.

North Americans' travel spending is projected to hold steady at roughly 3 percent annual growth. US consumers voice growing concerns about inflation, and the most cost-constrained traveler segments are reducing travel, which is affecting ultra-low-cost airlines and budget hotels. Most travelers, however, plan to continue traveling. McKinsey research suggests that American consumers rank international and domestic travel as their highest-priority areas for discretionary spending. Instead of canceling their trips, these consumers are adapting their behavior by traveling during off-peak periods or booking travel further in advance.

Travel spending by Europeans paints a slightly rosier picture, with roughly 5 percent projected annual growth. Meanwhile, the projected 12 percent annual growth in Chinese travelers' spending should anchor substantial increases in travel spending across Northeast Asia. Alongside these enduring traveler segments, new groups of travelers are emerging. Eastern Europe, India, and Southeast Asia are still comparatively small source markets, but they are developing fast-growing pools of first-time tourists.





India's breakneck GDP growth of 6 percent year over year is bolstering a new generation of travelers, resulting in a projected annual growth in travel spending of 9 percent between now and 2030. Indian air carriers and lodging companies are making substantial investments to meet projected demand. Budget airline IndiGo placed the largest aircraft order in commercial aviation history in 2023, when it pledged to buy 500 Airbus A320 planes; that same week, Air India nearly equaled IndiGo's order size with purchase agreements for 250 Airbus and 220 Boeing jets. IndiGo later added an order for 30 additional Airbus A350 planes, well suited to serving both domestic and international routes.

The Indian Hotels Company Limited is ramping up its hotel pipeline, aiming to open two new hotels per month in the near future. International players are not sitting on the sidelines: seven hotel chains are launching new brands in India in 2024, including Marriott's first Moxy- and Tribute-branded hotels in India and entrants from Hilton's Curio and Tapestry brands.

Development focus has shifted away from major metropolises such as Mumbai and Delhi and toward fast-developing, smaller cities such as Chandigarh and Hyderabad. Southeast Asian travel spending is projected to grow at roughly 7 percent per year. Pockets of particularly high growth exist in Cambodia, Malaysia, and the Philippines.

To capitalize on this blossoming source market, neighboring countries are rolling out attractive visa arrangements: for example, China has agreed to reciprocal visa waivers for short-term travelers from Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. Travel spending by Eastern Europeans is expected to grow at 7 percent per year until 2030—two percentage points higher than spending by Western Europeans. Areas of especially high growth include the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland, where middle-class travelers are increasingly venturing farther afield.

Major tourism players, including the TUI Group, have tapped into these new source markets by offering charter flights to warm-weather destinations such as Egypt. Although the number of travelers from these new source markets is growing, their purchasing power remains relatively limited. Compared with Western European travelers (who average \$159 per night in total travel spending), South Asians

spend 20 percent less, Eastern Europeans spend 40 percent less, and Southeast Asians spend 55 percent less.

Only 3 percent of the current Asian hotel construction pipeline caters to economy travelers, suggesting a potential supply gap of rooms that could appeal to budget-constrained tourists. While acknowledging that historical source markets will continue to constitute the bulk of travel spending, tourism players can consider actions such as these to capitalize on growing travel demand from newer markets:

- **Reduce obstacles to travel.** Countries can look for ways to strategically invest in simplifying travel for visitors from growing source markets. In 2017, for example, Azerbaijan introduced express processing of electronic visas for Indian visitors; annual arrivals from India increased fivefold in two years. Requirements regarding passport photocopies or in-person check-ins can similarly be assessed with an eye toward reducing red tape for travelers.

- **Use culturally relevant marketing channels** to reach new demographics. Unique, thoughtful marketing strategies can help destinations place themselves on first-time travelers' bucket lists. For example, after the release of *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*, a popular Bollywood movie shot in Spain with support from the Spanish Ministry of Tourism, Indian tourism to Spain increased by 65 percent.

- **Give new travelers the tech they expect.** Travelers from newer source markets often have access to tech-forward travel offerings. For example, Indian travelers can travel anywhere within their country without physical identification, thanks to the Digi Yatra app. The Southeast Asian rideshare app Grab has several helpful travel features that competitors lack, such as automated menu translation and currency conversion. Tourism stakeholders should consider how to adapt to the tech expectations of newer travelers, integrating relevant offerings that ease journeys.

- **Create vibrant experiences tailored to different price points.** Crafting lower-budget offerings for more cost-constrained travelers doesn't need to result in giving them a subpar experience. Capsule hotels, in which guests sleep in small cubbies, began as a response to the high cost of accommodations in Japan, but they have become an attraction in their own right—appearing on many must-do lists.

Destinations are changing

The world's top ten destination countries (the United States, Spain, China, France, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Italy, Thailand, Japan, and India, in that order) currently receive 45 percent of all travel spending, including for domestic travel. But some new locales are gaining traction. A significant number of travelers are expanding their horizons, booking journeys to less visited countries that are near to old standbys.

For instance, Laos and Malaysia, which both border Thailand—an established destination that is home to Bangkok, the world's most visited city—are up a respective 20 percent and 17 percent, respectively, in year-over-year international travel spending. Several other countries that have crafted thoughtful tourism demand generation strategies—such as Peru, the Philippines, Rwanda, and Vietnam—are also expected to reap benefits in the coming years.

Vietnam logged a remarkable 40 percent increase in tourism spending in the five years before the pandemic. Post pandemic, it has rebounded in part by waiving visa requirements for European travelers (while indicating intent to offer similar exemptions in the future for Chinese and Indian travelers). The Philippines has made a concerted effort to shift its sun-and-beach branding toward a more well-rounded image, replacing its long-standing "It's more fun in the Philippines" tourism slogan with "Love the Philippines."

Peru is highlighting less visited archeological sites while also marketing itself as a top-notch culinary destination through the promotion of Peruvian restaurants abroad. Rwanda is investing in infrastructure to become a major African transit hub, facilitated by Qatar Airways' purchase of a 60 percent stake in the country's major airport. Rwanda has also successfully capitalized on sustainable tourism: by charging \$1,500 per gorilla trekking permit, for instance, it has maximized revenue while reducing environmental impact.

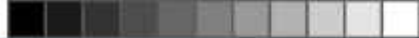
Tourism players might consider taking some of these actions to lure tourists to less familiar destinations.



- **Collaborate across the tourism ecosystem.**

Promotion is not solely the domain of destination marketing organizations. Accommodation, transportation, and experience providers can also play important roles. In Singapore, for instance, the luxury resort Marina Bay Sands partners extensively with Singapore Airlines and the Singapore Tourism Board to offer compelling tourism offerings. Past collaborations have included flight and stay packages built around culinary festivals.

- **Use infrastructure linkage to promote new destinations.** By extending route options, transportation providers can encourage visitors to create itineraries that combine familiar destinations with new attractions. In Asia, Thailand's tourism authority has attempted



to nudge visitors away from the most heavily trafficked parts of the country, such as Bangkok and Phuket, and toward less popular destinations.

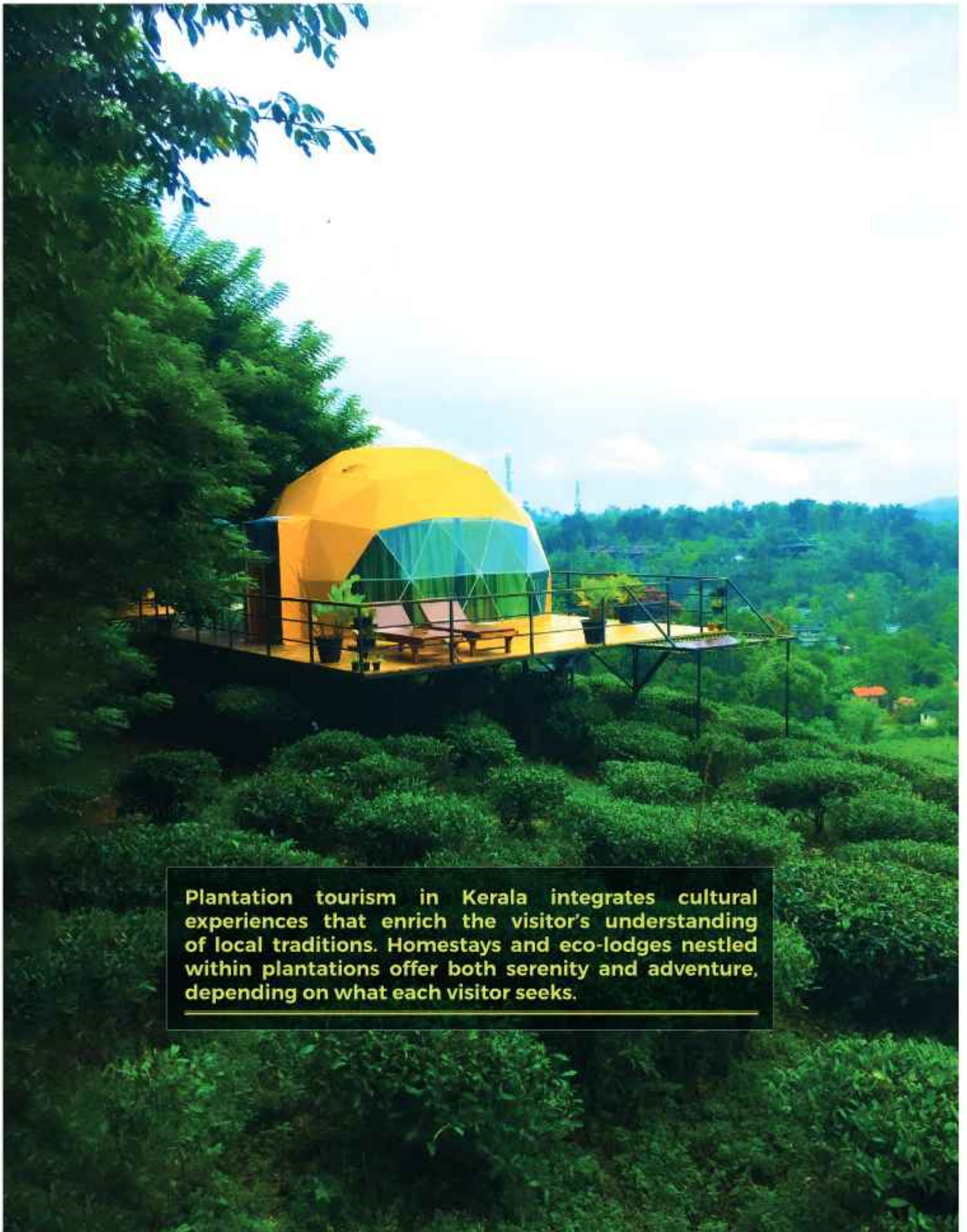
- **Deploy social media to reach different demographics.** Innovative social media campaigns can help put a destination on the map. Australia launched its “Ruby the kangaroo” campaign in China to coincide with the return of post-pandemic air capacity between the two places. A video adapted for Chinese context (with appropriate gestures and a hashtag in Mandarin) garnered more than 20 million views in a single day on one of China’s largest social media platforms.

- **Embrace unknown status.** “Off the beaten path” messaging can appeal to widely traveled tourists seeking fresh experiences. Saudi Arabia’s

“#WhereInTheWorld” campaign promoted the country’s tourist spots by acknowledging that they are less familiar to travelers, using a series of images that compared these spots with better-known destinations.

As tourism stakeholders look to the future, they can take steps to ensure that they continue to delight existing travelers while also embracing new ones. Domestic and intraregional tourism remain major opportunities—catering to local tourists’ preferences while building infrastructure that makes travel more seamless within a region could help capture them. Creative collaboration among tourism stakeholders can help put lesser-known destinations on the map. Travel tides are shifting. Expertly navigating these currents could yield rich rewards. ■





Plantation tourism in Kerala integrates cultural experiences that enrich the visitor's understanding of local traditions. Homestays and eco-lodges nestled within plantations offer both serenity and adventure, depending on what each visitor seeks.





PLANTATION TOURISM

SERENE, WITH A DASH OF ADVENTURE

Rehan Nair

If you're someone looking to find yourself or a family desperate for a break from the hustle and bustle, there's truly nothing like escaping into the wilderness. Picture yourself surrounded by vibrant greenery, with the breeze bringing scents of fresh coffee or tea or cardamom, all while birds chirp softly in the background. If this sounds like your ideal getaway, then the Plantations in Kerala might just be the perfect place for you.

Immerse yourself in the art of tea plucking, delve into the science of tea making, refine your palate through tea tasting sessions, and experience the intricacies of coffee roasting. Engage in guided tours through spice plantations, witness first-hand the harvesting and processing of spices, and participate in lively fruit harvesting festivals.

These unforgettable experiences are set against the backdrop of unpolluted terrains and fresh air in the enchanting locales of Wayanad, Idukki, Palakkad, Kottayam, Pathanamthitta, and more. Here, tourists can revel in pristine misty mountains, verdant greenery, cascading waterfalls, and occasional glimpses of wildlife. It's an adventure that promises to rejuvenate both body and spirit.



Nestled amidst the Western Ghats, Kerala's plantations are a treasure trove of biodiversity, spanning familiar flora like tea and coffee, but several plants and animals that have enriched human knowledge about the exhilarating diversity that nature holds in the sub-continent. Over the years, these plantations have evolved from mere agricultural hubs to sought-after destinations that attract tourists eager to explore their natural beauty and cultural significance.

One of the key attractions of plantation tourism in Kerala is the opportunity to witness the meticulous processes involved in cultivating and harvesting crops. Visitors can engage in guided tours that take them through sprawling tea estates, where rows of tea bushes carpet the hillsides

in shades of green. The fragrance of fresh tea leaves wafts through the air as expert guides explain the art of tea plucking and processing, offering insights into the journey from leaf to cup.

Coffee plantations, predominantly located in Wayanad and the Idukki district, provide another facet of Kerala's plantation tourism. Here, visitors can wander through dense canopies of coffee plants shaded by towering trees. The journey includes learning about the nuances of coffee cultivation, from planting and nurturing the beans to the roasting and brewing processes. Some plantations even offer interactive sessions where tourists can try their hand at picking coffee cherries under the guidance of local farmers.

Spice plantations, notably in regions like Thekkady and Munnar, provide a sensory overload with their aromatic gardens. Kerala's reputation as the "Spice Garden of India" is aptly showcased here, where visitors can explore the cultivation of spices like cardamom, pepper, cinnamon, and cloves. Guided walks through these plantations introduce travelers to the various spices growing in their natural habitat, along with their historical significance and medicinal properties.

Beyond agriculture, plantation tourism in Kerala integrates cultural experiences that enrich the visitor's understanding of local traditions. Homestays and eco-lodges nestled within plantations offer a glimpse into the daily lives of plantation workers and their



families. Guests can indulge in authentic Kerala cuisine prepared with locally sourced ingredients, often accompanied by traditional music and dance performances that celebrate the region's vibrant culture.

Environmental conservation and sustainability are integral to Kerala's plantation tourism initiatives. Many plantations adhere to eco-friendly practices, promoting biodiversity conservation and responsible agricultural methods. Educational programs on conservation and organic farming practices are often part of the visitor experience, fostering awareness and appreciation for sustainable agriculture among tourists.

The economic impact of plantation tourism is significant for Kerala's rural communities, providing livelihoods to local residents through employment opportunities in hospitality, guiding, and agriculture-related services. Community-based tourism initiatives empower local stakeholders by involving them in the tourism value chain, ensuring that benefits are shared equitably and contribute to the overall socio-economic development of the region.

The 2024 UN Tourism Congress highlighted a renewed emphasis on health tourism, encompassing

both medical and wellness aspects. Needless to say, Kerala, with its rich heritage of Ayurveda, Yoga, Siddha, Naturopathy, and other traditional health practices, is uniquely positioned to embrace and lead in primary wellness tourism. These practices align seamlessly with Kerala's spiritual philosophy and cultural ethos, offering travellers holistic experiences that integrate physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. All that you need to do

is to reach out to the many travel-assistance agencies and major institutions spread over the State to experience Kerala's time-tested treatment practices for healing the mind and the body.

Imagine embarking on thrilling escapades like trekking through lush green plantations, zooming through the air on exhilarating zip-lines, navigating rugged terrain on mountain and dirt bikes, experiencing the breathtaking views of paragliding, and taking the leap with heart-pounding bungee jumps – all of these adrenaline-pumping activities await you here.

Wayanad and Idukki have emerged as Kerala's premier destinations for these exhilarating adventures. Similar to Nepal's success in leveraging its rugged terrain for adventure tourism and boosting its economy, Kerala too can replicate this triumph. Wayanad stands out as the crown jewel in Kerala's treasure trove. If you're seeking both adventure and serenity, all while creating unforgettable memories with loved ones, then look no further – you've found the perfect destination.





If breathtaking vistas are a must on your bucket list, then Idukki has a wealth of options to offer. This picturesque region boasts popular hill stations, expansive tea estates, and verdant spice gardens crisscrossed by flowing rivers and streams.

If breathtaking vistas are a must on your bucket list, then Idukki has a wealth of options to offer. This picturesque region boasts popular hill stations, expansive tea estates, and verdant spice gardens crisscrossed by flowing rivers and streams. Whether you're captivated by stunning scenery or seeking wellness opportunities amidst nature's bounty, Idukki promises

a blend of scenic beauty and rejuvenating experiences.

The plantations provide a unique glimpse into a bygone era of colonial charm, inviting visitors to immerse themselves in the tranquil rhythm of plantation life. Set amidst lush landscapes, historical colonial bungalows offer guests a chance to experience the rich heritage and unhurried pace of plantation living. This immersive experience not only rejuvenates the soul but also cultivates a deep appreciation for the cultural and historical significance of these estates.

Colonial bungalows within the plantations exude luxurious

charm, offering a serene lifestyle experience. Positioned typically atop hills, these bungalows provide panoramic views of the entire plantation below. Surrounding gardens burst with vibrant blooms, enhancing the idyllic setting. Inside, traditional fireplaces, antique furnishings, and decor further evoke the colonial era, creating an atmosphere that transports guests to a different time and place.

Expectations serve as the guiding stars that illuminate a tourist's journey right from the moment you begin dreaming about your upcoming adventure. Imagine a tranquil haven far removed from the hustle and bustle of city life.

PLANTATION TOURISM ON A GROWTH TRAJECTORY



traditions, flavours, and landscapes. Iceland and Thailand are notable examples where wellness tourism has flourished, providing valuable insights that have inspired similar initiatives in Kerala.

Though a little late to join the party, Kerala too is beginning to showcase its agritourism potential. With its rich plantation legacy waiting to be fully explored, Kerala has begun its own agritourism journey leveraging its natural beauty, diverse agriculture, and traditional practices to attract travelers seeking authentic and immersive experiences in agricultural settings.

The global agritourism market is on a growth trajectory, projected to increase from 56.92 billion USD in 2023 to 60.89 billion USD in 2024, with expectations to reach 79.9 billion USD by 2028, as highlighted in the 2024 Global Agritourism Market Report. The concept of farm stays gained prominence in Europe during the 1970s, particularly in Spain and Italy, where the *Agri turismo* movement took root.

Currently, destinations like Mrizi I Zanave Agroturizem in Albania and Follonico hotel in Montefollonico, Tuscany, are reaping the benefits of agritourism. These locations are successfully blending hospitality with agricultural experiences, attracting visitors seeking authentic rural encounters. Globally recognized agritourism hotspots include Taiwan, Tuscany, Mallorca, Brazil, Hawaii, Grenada, California, and the Philippines.

These destinations have effectively capitalized on their agricultural sectors to offer immersive farm experiences to tourists, showcasing local

A key segment of such experiential tourism is wellness. Kerala has several Yoga retreats nestled amidst lush plantations and rejuvenating Ayurvedic spas using local plantation products as priceless offerings for tourists.

Blessed with abundant scenic landscapes, lush green hills, ravishing valleys, pristine lakes, sunshine beaches, diverse cultures, and an illustrious legacy make Kerala a sought-after tourism destination. Among the bouquet of this diversity, plantation tourism lies hidden with the ability to offer unparalleled experience to the discerning tourists.

Amid the many plantations that include tea, coffee, spices, rubber, and various fruit trees, plantation tourism can offer multifaceted experiences. It could be solitude or slow life for one, paragliding, rafting, cycling or swimming for another. It is a hidden treasure chest waiting to be discovered by the guests as well as the hosts.

- Rehan Nair ■

where the air is crisp with peace and every direction offers lush shades of greenery. This is the essence of plantation tourism.

When planning a trip, you must prioritize finding a peaceful retreat to escape everyday stressors, seeking places that are clean,

hygienic, safe, and secure. In Kerala, when envisioning a serene getaway far from urban noise and bright lights, the first place that comes to mind for many is the plantations. These estates provide the perfect setting for solitude and reflection, offering a sanctuary away from

both internal and external chaos.

Ultimately, the primary reason for travel is often to find solace, and plantation stays in Kerala offer just that – a place where one can disconnect, unwind, and reconnect with oneself amidst nature's embrace. ■



Malabar River Festival Where Adrenaline Meets Adventure

Kerala, often celebrated for its serene backwaters and tranquil landscapes, has chosen to go off the beaten track, seeking to turn itself into an adventure tourism hub. At the peak of this initiative is the Malabar River Festival (MRF), which unleashes a wave of pure adrenaline. Now in its dazzling tenth year, this four-day extravaganza is not just a local affair anymore—it's a global magnet for daredevil kayakers itching to conquer untamed waters.

Picture this: the lush greenery of Kodenchery and Thiruvambady gram panchayats in Kozhikode sets the stage for a heart-pounding spectacle. Participation by about a score international kayakers this year's event (July 25-28) is proof for the success of this festival of thrills. The Malabar River Festival isn't just an event; it's an adrenaline-infused pilgrimage drawing paddlers from over eight countries. Imagine the roar of the river, the rush of competitors, and the sheer thrill

as kayakers battle it out in nature's own arena.

International watersport luminaries like Benjamin Jacob from France, Manu Vink Wackernagel representing New Zealand's prowess, and Eric Hanson, the Norwegian trailblazer, are just a glimpse of the star-studded lineup gracing this year's event. Add to that the Italian flair of Martina Rossi and Paulo Rogna, the Russian dynamism brought by Maria Korinava, Daria Kuznetsova, and Anton Sveshnikov, and the Spanish finesse of Mike Krutyansky—this is a gathering of the best in the business, all converging on Kerala's waterways.

What sets MRF apart isn't just the skill on display; it's the spirit of adventure that electrifies the entire region. From challenging rapids to precision maneuvers, each twist and turn promises thrills that leave spectators breathless and kayakers hungry for more. Whether you're a seasoned enthusiast or a curious onlooker, the Malabar River Festival promises a spectacle like no other—a fusion of sport, nature, and the undying quest for the perfect run.

This is the 10th year of MRF. Hundreds of kayakers, each with their own tale of triumph and tenacity, have been converging in Malabar year after year to push the limits of human capability against a backdrop of stunning scenery. It's more than just a competition; it's a celebration of courage, camaraderie, and the raw beauty of nature's playground. It's an experience that promises to redefine adventure in the heart of Kerala.

The build-up to the festival is as exhilarating as the event itself. Over the past weeks, the upland villages have seen a flurry of pre-events that have captured hearts and imaginations alike. From the thrilling angling competition at Pulikkayam to the adrenaline-fueled State off-road championship in Kodenchery, crowds have flocked to witness feats of skill and endurance.

The festivities have also spilled over into a carnival of adventure with events like the mud fest, mud football matches echoing cheers across the countryside, and a grueling cycle rally spanning three districts, all culminating in Kodenchery. The State-level Kabbaddi championship, swimming bouts, water polo clashes, and treks through scenic trails have added layers of excitement, drawing participants and spectators alike into the whirlwind of action.

MRF isn't just about competition; it's a festival in the truest sense. For beginners eager to dip their paddles into the world of kayaking, Jelly Fish Water Sports at Beypore offers a golden opportunity with

a special competition on the scenic Chaliyar River at Kolathara. As the sun sets on another year of MRF, Kerala reaffirms its status as a global hub for adventure tourism. With each edition, the festival not only pushes the boundaries of kayaking excellence but also strengthens the bonds of community and camaraderie that define this exhilarating sport.

So, whether you're a thrill-seeker craving the rush of rapids or a spectator in search of awe-inspiring feats, the Malabar River Festival beckons. Join us as we navigate the currents, celebrate victories, and forge memories that will echo long after the rivers calm. Adventure awaits—embrace the challenge and let the waters tell your story.

Malabar River Festival A Collective Initiative



The Department of Tourism, Government of Kerala, organises the Malabar River Festival (MRF) annually. The international event is held at Iruvanjhipuzha and Chalipuzha Rivers in Kozhikode district. The event is organized under the aegis of Kerala Adventure Tourism Promotion Society (KATPS) and District Tourism Promotion Council (DTPC) in association with the Kozhikode District Panchayat. The event is technically managed by Indian Kayaking and Canoeing Association (IKCA).

Satish Srinivasamurthy takes over as GM, Le Meridien, Kochi



Le Meridien Kochi has appointed Satish Srinivasamurthy as General Manager. With an impressive career

spanning 23 years with many reputed hotel brands, Satish brings with him a wealth of experience in leadership and a strong understanding of the hospitality landscape. A postgraduate from IMI Luzerne, he began his career in Food & Beverage at The Oberoi Bangalore in 1999, which was followed by overseas stints in the Bahamas and Switzerland. Later, he went on to work with The Claridges Surajkund and Hyatt Pune.

Satish began his journey with Marriott International in 2013 as F&B Manager at Courtyard by Marriott Chennai. He then served

as the Director of F&B at The Westin Velachery and Sheraton Grand Chennai Resort & Spa. He assumed the role of Hotel Manager at the Four Points by Sheraton Mahabalipuram Resort & Convention Centre in 2021.

Under his leadership, the property has excelled in year-on-year growth in all the financial matrix, guest satisfaction and associate engagement. He was elevated to the position of General Manager in 2023 where he successfully opened Katra Marriott Resort & Spa.

Vibe Munnar Resort and Spa appoints Prasad Kakkoth as Chef de Cuisine



Vibe Munnar Resort and Spa has appointed Prasad Kakkoth as its new Chef de Cuisine.

An MBA in Hospitality Management from Jaipur National University, Prasad Kakkoth has two decades of experience in the hospitality industry. He launched his career at Malabar Palace Hotel, Kozhikode, in 2002 and has since worked with esteemed international brands such as The East Ramada Hotel KSA, ITC WelcomHotel Raviz Kozhikode, Vivanta by Taj Trivandrum, Grand Hyatt Abu Dhabi, Hyatt Regency Thrissur, and Marriott Hotel Whitefield Bangalore.

Shafee Ahmed appointed as Cluster General Manager at Gokulam Grand Hotel & Spa



Gokulam Grand Resort & Spa Bengaluru has appointed Shafee Ahmed as Cluster General Manager.

Shafee Ahmed's journey in the hospitality industry began as a chef at Holiday Inn, Bangalore. Over the years, Ahmed transitioned into sales and marketing, leveraging his talent for direct interaction and earning a Post Graduate Diploma in Management from the National Institute of Sales. He has held key

positions in sales and marketing at hotels such as Raintree, Asiana and K Raheja Hotels in Chennai and South India.

Establishing himself as a successful entrepreneur, Ahmed had launched his hospitality brand, Purpletree. His entrepreneurial spirit extended to mentoring and consulting of aspiring business investors, helping them navigate the complexities of starting their own hospitality ventures.



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