

FKHA Magazine

Volume 02 | Issue 02 | January-February 2025 | ₹100

SWAGAT

OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF THE FEDERATION OF KERALA HOTELS ASSOCIATION

BI-LINGUAL BI-MONTHLY PUBLICATION

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Maha Kumbh Mela

SPIRITUAL ODYSSEY, CELESTIAL SPECTACLE

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'NAVA KERALAM'

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SPECIAL PACKAGE

KOCHI WATER METRO
VOYAGE OF
DISCOVERY!





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Swagat

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Editorial



Hospitality Key to Shaping 'Nava Keralam'



V. Sunil Kumar
President, FKHA & Editor Swagat

Having established itself as a global model for social development, Kerala is currently into a period of fundamental transformation, marked by the emergence of modern technology-based industrial parks, implementation of thousands of infrastructure development projects and such signature projects as the NH 66 widening, surge in entrepreneurial activities and the ongoing expansion of numerous social welfare programmes. This remarkable progress has garnered acclaim from the NITI Aayog and several national and international agencies. While challenges such as high population density and environmental concerns may limit the availability of land for large-scale industrial projects, Kerala has adeptly navigated these obstacles by strategically encouraging the growth of Medium, Small and Micro Enterprises (MSMEs) and actively attracting companies operating in the IT, digital, startup, services and tourism sectors. Of course, the availability of a highly skilled and proficient workforce within the State serves as a compelling factor for industrial investments. Any project needs to navigate through numerous

stages for its successful implementation. This intricate process typically involves the submission of project proposals, site visits by representatives of various financial and certification agencies, multi-level discussions, conferences, consultations, and a multitude of other procedural steps. A significant portion of these crucial interactions transpires within the confines of star hotels.

By providing comprehensive hospitality services, including accommodation, entertainment, dining options, and essential facilities to the visiting experts and representatives from diverse agencies, the hotels contribute significantly to enhancing the State's overall image, which is a key factor in investment decisions.

Given its distinction as the State with the highest concentration of star hotels in the country, Kerala possesses the necessary infrastructure and expertise to provide top-tier hospitality services. Our motto is simple: 'You never get a second chance to make a first impression'. And, in keeping with this motto, we in the hotel business have been consistently delivering high-quality hospitality services to our guests. We would say with confidence that our commitment to excellence has significantly facilitated the smooth and efficient progress of various development projects.

We would, therefore, make ourselves bold to say that the hotel industry in Kerala has played a significant role in the State's progress towards the vision of 'Nava Keralam', creating facilities for comfortable stay for the burgeoning number of visitors to the State, both business people and tourists and, in the process, generating thousands of new job opportunities.

Business tourism, which touches upon a spectrum of activities including business deals, meetings,

conferences, and exhibitions, has witnessed substantial growth. These events are typically hosted within the esteemed confines of leading star hotels. Consequently, the dynamic transformations currently underway within Kerala's industrial sector are poised to exert a positive and mutually beneficial influence on the State's thriving hotel industry as well.

Tourism, encompassing the hospitality sector, hotels, restaurants, and travel services, constitutes one of the key cornerstones of economic development, contributing significantly to the State's foreign exchange earnings. As an integral component of the tourism ecosystem too, the hotel industry has been playing a pivotal role in the State's overall development.

Hotels fulfill this crucial need by providing comprehensive services, including accommodation and culinary offerings tailored to the specific requirements of each traveller. Moreover, an increase in tourist arrivals invariably leads to a corresponding surge in demand for more hospitality services. But, the hotel business would be able to meet such heightened demand only if the State Government treats the tourism sector, and the hotel business within it, as an industry.

The recent decision of the Andhra Pradesh Government to grant 'industry status' to tourism serves as a commendable precedent. A similar recognition of the tourism sector's significance in Kerala would undoubtedly catalyze further development within the hospitality sector in Kerala.

MICE tourism and destination weddings represent two pivotal segments of the tourism industry that are inextricably linked to the hospitality sector. Kerala possesses immense potential in both these domains. The success of MICE events hinges on the



seamless integration of international conferences with comprehensive hospitality services, encompassing accommodation, F&B, and entertainment options, all conveniently available within a single venue.

Kerala has demonstrated its capacity to host such prestigious events on a global scale, as evidenced by its successful hosting of the G-20 summit. However, realizing the full potential of this sector necessitates significant investments to further enhance Kerala's infrastructure and position it as a preferred destination for similar international initiatives.

A significant impediment to attracting international meetings to Kerala stems from the inability to seamlessly provide alcoholic beverages to foreign delegates, primarily due to the complex and often prohibitive process of obtaining bar licenses. Destination Weddings, attracting a significant influx of visitors from both within India and abroad, similarly rely heavily on the availability of hotels that can provide a comprehensive range of services, including suitable accommodation, event spaces, bar services, and entertainment options. The current regulatory framework, with its stringent restrictions on bar operations, inadvertently hinders the promotion of Destination Weddings in Kerala. The loss of revenue associated with missed opportunities in both MICE and Destination Weddings has a detrimental impact not only on the broader tourism sector but also the economic viability of the State's thriving hotel industry. Today, hotels serve as integral spaces for a diverse range of social functions, from everyday accommodations to large-scale events like weddings and exhibitions. The demand for well-equipped convention centres, both public and private, in close proximity to hotel clusters is evident. Furthermore, enhancing the visitor experience necessitates a concerted effort to improve infrastructure within tourist destinations. Essential amenities such as public restrooms, adequate parking facilities, and efficient waste management systems are paramount.

Kerala, with its unique blend of urban development and natural beauty, boasts numerous charming towns that have emerged as popular destinations for both domestic and international travellers. Three-star hotels, in particular, play a vital role in promoting tourism within these locales. The hospitality sector thus holds immense significance in the realization of the goal of a new Kerala, and, as such, the government should extend its unwavering support and assistance to this vital industry.



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COVER STORY

Maha Kumbh Mela
**SPIRITUAL
ODYSSEY,
CELESTIAL
SPECTACLE**

In what is clearly a testament to the enduring power of faith, millions of faithful from all over India and foreign lands are flocking to Prayagraj in Uttar Pradesh for a holy dip in River Ganges during the once-in-twelve-years Maha Kumbh Mela, writes **Anil Menon**.



FROM THE GENERAL
SECRETARY'S DESK

HOTEL INDUSTRY

**CHALLENGES AND
BUDGET HOPES**

Hotel industry in Kerala is looking forward to the State Budget for one-time settlement of ToT, collection of ToT at the first point of sale and grant of 'Industry Status' to the tourism sector, says **Sqn Ldr K. B. Padmadass** (Retd.), General Secretary, FKHA.

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തീഷ്ണവർണ്ണങ്ങൾ നിറച്ചാർത്തണിയിച്ച കണ്ണൂർ ജില്ലയിൽ മണ്ണിൽ ഒട്ടിച്ചടർന്നും എന്നാൽ ആകാശത്തേക്ക് നെഞ്ചുവിരിച്ചും കിടക്കുകയാണ് മാസായിപ്പാറയെന്ന വിസ്മയലോകം - **പി.കെ. ശ്യാംസുന്ദർ** എഴുതുന്നു.



SPECIAL PACKAGE

Kochi
Water Metro
**Voyage of
Discovery!**

The Kochi Water Metro is a testament to the power of innovative thinking and a commitment to sustainability. It's a model for other cities, a beacon of hope in a world grappling with urban transportation challenges. writes **Umasankar**.

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PHOTO FEATURE

**WINGED WONDERS
OF KERALA**

Neighbourhood birdwatching adventure awaits all comers in Kerala

Award-winning photographer **Dr. K.M. Anand** presents a collection of photographs of the winged friends in the neighbourhood.

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REPORT

Andhra Pradesh

Shows the way

Andhra Pradesh bets big on tourism with industry status recognition, writes **Harisankar**.

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താത്ര

കാറ്റ് കഥ പറയുന്ന
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കാറ്റിന്റെ മേടാണ് രാമക്കൽമേട്. രാമക്കൽമേട്ടിലെ കാറ്റ് ജീവിതം തന്നെയാണ് അവിടെ തഴുകലുണ്ട്, തലോടലുണ്ട്, രൗദ്രഭാവങ്ങളുണ്ട്... സ്വർണ്ണ വിപിൻ എഴുതുന്നു.

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REPORT

**'India Poised to
Become a Tourism
Powerhouse'**

The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTTC) is bullish about the key role that India is set to play in the robust resurgence in global tourism in the coming years, writes **Jyothish R.**, citing statements by WTTTC President and CEO **Julia Simpson**.

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Ministry of Defence to promote battlefield tourism



Civilians can soon visit theatres of India's major wars, thanks to a new initiative of the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Tourism.

Places related to the 1962 War, such as Ladakh's Rezang-La and Arunachal Pradesh's Kibithoo and Bum-La, Pangong Tso in Ladakh, and the site of the Galwan clash will be opened up. Tourists can also visit Doklam, the site of the 73-day stand-off between India and China in 2017.

Modalities are being worked out to open some parts of Kargil, Batalik and Drass on the western sector for trekkers to get a first-hand feel of the Kargil conflict in 1999. The operational areas will be off-limits, but the idea is to open up as many of the forward locations as possible, so that citizens get a feel of the pitched battles that were fought at various locations in inhospitable terrain and harsh weather conditions.

Tourists can also visit the base camp at Siachen, the world's highest battlefield, but going beyond could be tough due to challenges

in acclimatisation.

Chief of Army Staff General Upendra Dwivedi said the initiative was part of broader efforts to promote holistic development of border areas.

The Ministry of Defence has launched an app and website as a one-stop solution for all information on travelling to the battleground destinations. Titled "Bharat Ranbhoomi Darshan", the app was launched by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh at Pune on January 15 to coincide with this year's Army Day celebrations.

"The Indian Army is transforming border areas and historic battlefields into tourist destinations, offering citizens a chance to witness valour up close. Explore the hallowed grounds where gallant soldiers fought and serve the motherland, even today," the Army posted on X ahead of the launch. The Army Chief said the initiative would focus on four pillars: infrastructure, communication, tourism, and education. ■



Ayodhya big tourism draw in UP, but Taj is still global favourite

Lucknow: Ayodhya, home to the recently inaugurated Shri Ram Temple, has edged out Taj Mahal as Uttar Pradesh's most popular tourist destination, but the iconic Taj continues to be the favourite of foreign visitors. According to the Uttar Pradesh Tourism Department, Ayodhya received 13.55 crore domestic tourists and 3,153 international visitors during January-September, 2024. In comparison, Agra attracted 12.51 crore visitors, comprising 11.59 crore domestic and 9.24 lakh international tourists. Uttar Pradesh witnessed a record-breaking surge in tourism, with an estimated 47.61 crore tourists visiting the State during the period. This significant increase in tourist arrivals is attributed to the inauguration of the Ram Temple, which has significantly impacted the State's tourism landscape. ■

Guwahati emerges as India's fastest-growing tourist destination: Agoda report

Guwahati has emerged as the fastest-growing destination in India for international travellers visiting India, according to digital travel platform Agoda. The travel platform's "New Horizons" ranking reveals that Puri was the top trending destination for domestic travellers during 2023-24, while Langkawi, Malaysia, was the most popular emerging hotspot among Indian travelers seeking international destinations. Agoda's annual New Horizons ranking identifies the highest-rated destinations in domestic and international travel by comparing accommodation booking ranks from the previous two years. Guwahati is gaining significant attention from foreign visitors due to its strategic location as the gateway to North East India. It offers a unique blend of natural beauty, rich cultural experiences, and modern infrastructure. Factors contributing to its growing popularity include:

Kaziranga Connection: Proximity to Kaziranga National Park, a renowned wildlife sanctuary.

River Cruises: Scenic river cruises along the Brahmaputra River.

Increased Air Connectivity: Improved air connectivity has made Guwahati more accessible to international travelers.

The broader Northeast region has witnessed a surge in tourism interest, driven by its diverse cultural offerings and stunning natural landscapes.

Major Festivals: Events like the Hornbill Festival, Ziro Music Festival, and Shillong's Cherry Blossom Festivals have gained international recognition, featuring renowned artists such as Boney M, Akon, Clean Bandit, and Lucas.

High-Profile Concerts: Concerts by renowned artists like Diljit Dosanjh in Guwahati, Bryan Adams in Shillong, and the upcoming Ed Sheer-



an performance in Shillong have further enhanced the region's appeal as a destination for major musical events in India. For Indian travelers, Puri is rapidly climbing the ranks as a top domestic destination.

Spiritual Significance: The city is home to the revered Jagannath Temple, a major pilgrimage site that attracts devotees from across the country.

Coastal Charm: Puri Beach offers a serene and scenic retreat for those seeking relaxation by the sea. Langkawi, an archipelago of 99 islands in Malaysia, is emerging as a highly sought-after international destination for Indian travelers.

Natural Beauty: The destination boasts stunning beaches, lush rainforests, and a unique local culture.

Visa-Free Travel: The recent introduction of visa-free travel for Indian tourists to Malaysia has significantly contributed to Langkawi's growing popularity.

Krishna Rathi, Senior Country Director India at Agoda, stated, "It's incredibly exciting to witness the growing popularity of Guwahati, Puri, and Langkawi among travelers. Guwahati, in particular, has risen significantly in the rankings for international visitors, moving from outside the top 50 to now being among India's top 20. Guwahati's unique blend of nature and modernity, Puri's spiritual charm, and Langkawi's tropical allure are clearly resonating with our customers. At Agoda, we are committed to connecting travelers with these dynamic destinations and making their journeys as seamless and affordable as possible." Looking at the top emerging destinations for Asian travelers as a whole, Shanghai tops the New Horizons list, followed by Jeju (South Korea), Paris (France), Nha Trang (Vietnam), and Fukuoka (Japan). ■

J&K to develop 4 new tourist destinations with WB Aid

New Delhi, December 6, 2024: The Jammu and Kashmir government, encouraged by a surge in tourist arrivals, plans to develop four new destinations with financial and technical assistance from the World Bank. Kokernag in Anantnag district, Baradari in Reasi district, Bhadarwah in Doda, and Doodhpathri in Budgam have been selected for development with world-class tourist infrastructure. ■



Rajasthan Tourism signs 1,320 MoUs worth ₹96,967 crore at investors' meet



Rajasthan Tourism signed 1,320 MoUs worth ₹96,967 crore at the Rising Rajasthan Global Investment Summit 2024. These MoUs have the potential to create 2,02,607 jobs, according to Rajasthan Tourism Secretary Ravi Jain. These investments span sectors such as hotels, resorts, entertainment parks, eco-tourism, MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions), and wellness

tourism. Proposals for film cities, ropeways, and heritage projects were also received, indicating a diverse range of opportunities on offer in Rajasthan, he said. Mr. Jain said a dynamic transformation was taking place in the State's tourism sector under the strategic leadership of Deputy Chief Minister Diya Kumari, who also holds charge of tourism and is personally associated with the

tourism industry. The Rising Rajasthan Global Investment Summit had underscored the growing importance of tourism in the State's economy. A special session focused on encouraging investment in heritage sites, eco-tourism, and innovative travel experiences was held considering the special significance that the sector holds, Mr. Jain said. He said the upcoming IIFA Awards 2025 ceremony, scheduled for March 7-9 in Jaipur, is expected to elevate Rajasthan's international appeal. This high-profile event will promote local art and culture while contributing significantly to the State's economy and film tourism. According to Mr. Jain, the State has allocated ₹5000 crore to promote cultural heritage and sustainable tourism. This fund will accelerate the conservation of heritage sites and initiate new projects. The implementation of a single-window clearance system has simplified processes for stakeholders, enhancing the ease of conducting business in the tourism and hospitality sectors, he said. ■

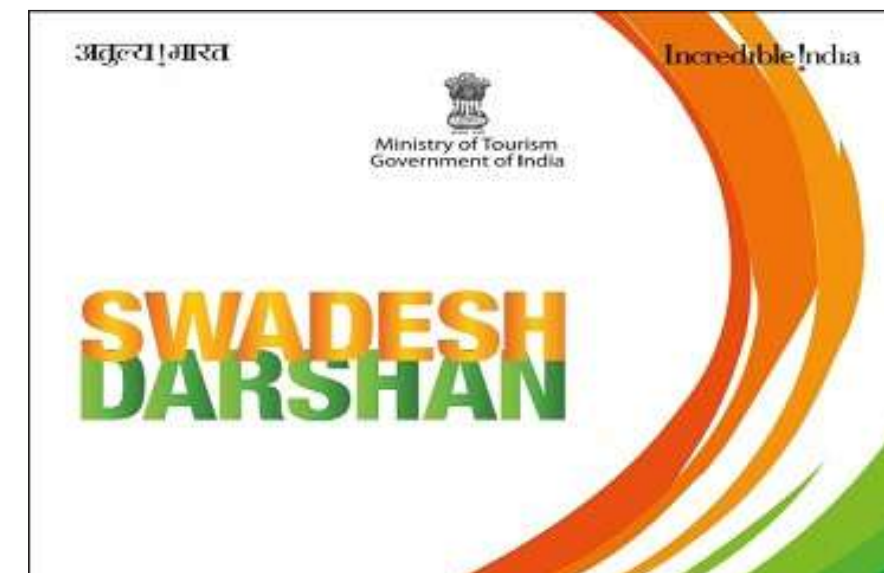


India's first glass sea bridge commissioned at Kanyakumari

Glass bridge connecting the Vivekananda Rock Memorial with the Thiruvalluvar Statue at Kanyakumari has been commis-

sioned. Built at an estimated cost of Rs. 37 crore, the Bowstring Arch Bridge or the Mirror Bridge offers

an enchanting view of the two savants and the sea around it. It has been built to withstand harsh climate conditions in the coastal region. The bridge is 77 metres in length and has a width of 10 metres. Earlier, tourists had to use the ferry services plying between the Vivekananda Rock Memorial and the Thiruvalluvar Statue. The bridge has been constructed using advanced technology that will help it withstand harsh coastal climate conditions, prevent it from corroding and allow it to brave strong seaside winds. It works as a durable and safe option for the current and future generation of visitors. ■



76 projects sanctioned under Swadesh Darshan Scheme

As many as 76 projects with an allocation of ₹5,287.90 crore have been sanctioned under the Swadesh Darshan Scheme, out of which 75 projects are physically complete, according to the Union Tourism Ministry. The Swadesh Darshan Scheme was launched by the Centre in 2014-15 for the integrated development of theme-based tourist circuits. It was revamped as Swadesh Darshan 2.0 in order to develop

sustainable and responsible destinations with a tourist and destination-centric approach. Under Swadesh Darshan 2.0, 34 projects have been sanctioned for ₹793.20 crore so far, the Ministry said. As part of its efforts to enhance tourist experiences across all points of the tourist value chain, the Ministry has formulated guidelines for 'Challenge Based Destination Development' as a sub-scheme of Swadesh Darshan 2.0.

Under this scheme, proposals have been invited under four thematic categories namely Spiritual Tourism, Culture and Heritage, Vibrant Village Programme, Ecotourism and Amrit Dharohar Sites. As of now, the Ministry has selected 42 destinations under various tourism themes for development under the scheme. Apart from this, a total of 48 projects at a cost of ₹1,646.99 crore are being developed under the PRASHAD Scheme, out of which 23 have been completed. The PRASHAD or 'Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Heritage Augmentation Drive' scheme provides financial assistance to the State governments and union territories for development of tourism infrastructure at the pre-identified pilgrimage destinations. The government has also sanctioned a total of 40 projects across 23 States for an amount of ₹3,295.76 crore under the Special Assistance to States for Capital Investment (SASCI) as a follow up to the Budget announcements 2024-25. These funds are meant to infuse long-term interest-free loans for a period of 50 years to States for comprehensive development of iconic tourist centers in the country and branding and marketing them at a global scale. ■

Mumbai Airport becomes world's third to earn ACI Level 5 Accreditation



Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport (CSMIA) has become the first airport in India and only the third in the world to earn Level 5 Accreditation for Airport Customer Experience from the Airports Council International (ACI) – the highest accolade in the airport sector.

The Mumbai international airport is managed by Adani Airport Holdings Ltd (AAHL) led by Gautam Adani. Sharing the good news, Mr. Adani wrote: "There is no greater manifestation of business success than a company's ability to serve its customers. Every moment, it is this guiding principle that I urge

all members of Adani Airports to dedicate their hours to. Not only are we the first airport in India but also only the third in the world to do so."

Announcing the achievement in an Instagram post, Mumbai Airport said: "The credit for this milestone goes to our data-driven, digital-first, and passenger-focused approach that puts you at the heart of everything we do. Here's to smoother journeys, happier passengers, and setting new standards in excellence!"

Putting up a strong performance, the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport achieved remarkable growth in passenger traffic, operational efficiency, and cargo handling.

The airport welcomed 5.05 million passengers during December, which was its busiest month ever. December 21 was the highest single-day traffic day for the airport, with 169,782 passengers passing through it. Overall, CSMIA handled 54.8 million passengers in 2024, a 6.3% increase from 2023. ■

Musi River historic buildings on 2025 world monuments watch

Several heritage structures along the Musi river in Hyderabad have been included in the world monuments list by the New York-based World Monuments Fund (WMF). These include the buildings that house the Telangana High Court, the State Central Library, the British Library and the Osmania General Hospital. Gujarat's 'Bhuj Historic Water Systems' have also been included in the monuments list, according to a media release issued by the organisation on January 15. These sites have been included in the list of heritage structures from 29 countries which face risk due to the water crisis and climate change and which are in need of help advocacy and protection. "As Hyderabad confronts environmental challenges and rapid



change, World Monuments Fund highlights heritage as a pathway for rejuvenation alongside environmental conservation and climate adaptation," says the WMF. "Landmarks like the High Court, State Central Library, Osmania General Hospital, City College, and the former British Residency, now

a women's university, highlight the waterfront's civic legacy," said the media release.

The 2025 World Monuments Watch spotlights the Musi River Historic Buildings at a key moment in the city's history. It comes just in time when the Congress government is pursuing an aggressive and challenging programme for rejuvenation of the river and its surroundings.

"The Watch underscores World Monument Fund's commitment to ensuring that heritage preservation not only honors the past but actively contributes to building a more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient future for communities around the world and beyond," wrote WMF President & CEO, Bénédicte de Montlaur in the media statement. ■

Tourism Ministry partners with hospitality giants for skill development



The Ministry of Tourism is partnering with the country's top global hospitality chains to train and mentor the students in government-run hotel management institutions.

Tourism and Culture Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat said that the top Indian hospitality brands

had agreed to design the curriculum of state-run institutions and give training as per their requirement.

"We had a discussion with stakeholders keeping in mind the future requirement of human resources in the tourism industry. The way the industry is expanding, there

would be a need for more trained professionals. While the hotel management institutions were not getting students in sufficient numbers, the industry was suffering from shortage of skilled manpower," he pointed out.

The Minister said the government had set up a committee to assess the gap. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed with the hospitality groups to impart training to the students in 21 government institutions.

Top global hospitality chains such as Taj Hotels, Marriott International and Radisson Group are involved in the project. They will design a curriculum and impart training based on their requirement. After on-ground training, the groups will absorb the students. The results of this initiative will be visible in the next one-two years, Mr. Shekhawat said.

The government-run hotel management institutes offer various courses of six months to three years' duration. ■

Tourism key to India's job creation and growth: Amitabh Kant

New Delhi: Tourism holds the key to unlocking India's economic growth and creating a significant number of jobs, according to G20 Sherpa Amitabh Kant. Speaking at the 18th Annual CII Tourism Summit, Mr. Kant emphasized the sector's potential to transform livelihoods and drive economic development. "India needs jobs, and there is no better sector than tourism to create them," he stated. Currently contributing 8% of the nation's total employment, the tourism and hospitality sector is poised to add a remarkable 61 lakh new jobs by 2034, according to a recent report. Kant highlighted the multiplier effect of tourism and urged industry leaders to engage directly with State governments. "The industry



must emphasize the significant job creation potential of tourism and convey this message to every Chief Minister," he advised. He also proposed taking industry events like the CII conference to tourism-rich States like Rajasthan and Kerala to showcase successful

tourism models. Furthermore, Kant advocated for positioning India as a global hub for Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, and Exhibitions (MICE). With world-class infrastructure like Yashobhoomi and Bharat Mandapam, India possesses the capacity to compete globally in this lucrative segment.

"The MICE market is substantial, and with facilities that rival the best in the world, India can attract premier global events," he added. Puneet Chhatwal, Chairman of the National Committee on Tourism at CII, emphasized the need for an integrated approach. "Tourism, hospitality, and civil aviation must work together seamlessly. Jobs are created across these sectors, and infrastructure development must incorporate hospitality," Chhatwal remarked.

He also called for a review of outdated taxation policies that hinder the sector's growth, urging policymakers to recognize tourism as a strategic priority for India's evolving economy. ■



HOTEL INDUSTRY

CHALLENGES AND BUDGET HOPES

Hotel industry in Kerala is looking forward to the State Budget for one-time settlement of ToT, collection of ToT at the first point of sale and grant of 'Industry Status' to the tourism sector



Sqn Ldr K.B. Padmadas (Retd.)

The Federation of Hotel & Restaurant Associations of India (FHRAI), the country's largest hotel association, had recently submitted a petition to the Ministry of Tourism highlighting three key demands:

- Grant infrastructure status to the hotel industry, similar to other industries.
- Simplification of licensing procedures.
- Resolution of issues related to GST.

Needless to say, all these demands are of critical importance for hotel industry stakeholders in Kerala as

well. Ahead of the state budget, the Federation of Kerala Hotels Association (FKHA) had submitted memorandums to the Hon'ble Chief Minister, Finance Minister, Excise Minister and Tourism Minister regarding these issues. The primary demand of hotel owners is that the State government must adopt a supportive approach to help the industry overcome the crisis that it faces currently. The Amnesty 2024 tax settlement scheme, announced in the last State budget by the Finance Minister, was a major setback for the hotel industry. Under the Turn-

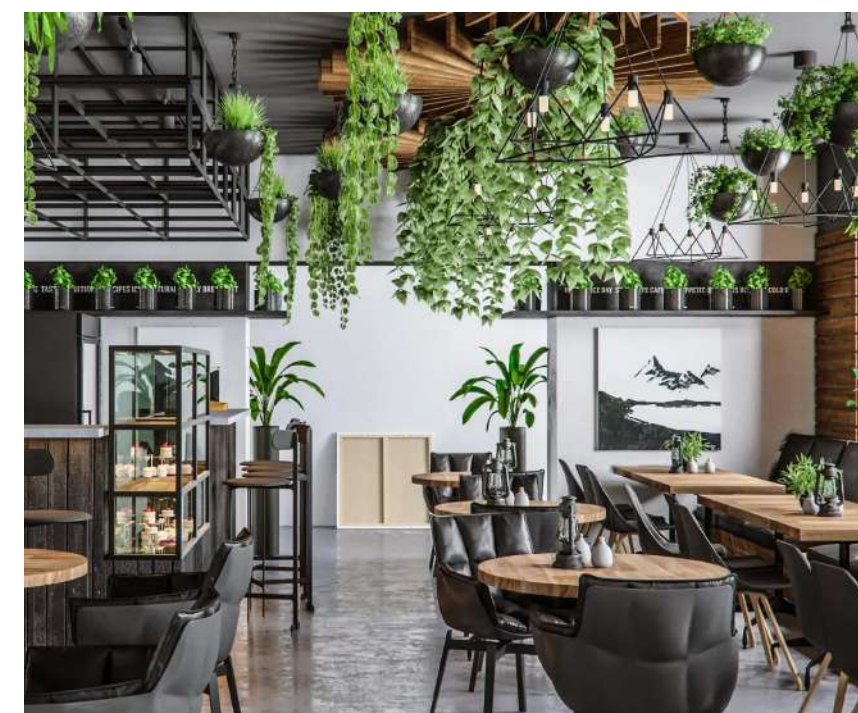
over Tax (ToT) regime, that existed before the implementation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST), tax arrears owed to the government by various businesses amounted to approximately ₹14,000 crore. The amnesty was announced to collect these arrears. However, bar hotels were excluded from availing this benefit. This was a grave injustice to the hotel industry.

It is well known that the majority of bar hotels in the State could not function for years due to the disastrous liquor policy of 2014, various natural disasters and, finally, the COVID-19 pandemic. The hotel owners had demanded amnesty for turnover tax payments against this backdrop.

A significant portion of the outstanding tax amount consists of penalties and interest. A one-time settlement would enable bar license holders to clear these dues. The hotel owners were ready to pay the arrears because of the difficulties arising from non-payment of the tax arrears. There were even instances of supply of liquor to hotels being stopped for non-payment of the arrears.

The UDF government's 2014 liquor policy had severely affected this industry, but the LDF Government remedied the situation with its 2016 policy and that helped the revival of the hotel business. We have welcomed the measures of the LDF Government. However, we regret to say that the turnover tax arrears continue to put immense pressure on the industry.

Besides this, there are various other issues adversely affecting the industry. Frequent increases in liquor prices have led to a sharp decline in alcohol sales and consumption. As a result, consumers are shifting to dangerous synthetic drugs. Government statistics themselves indicate that liquor consumption and sales have declined, while drug sales and usage have risen. Additionally, several factors are worsening the financial crisis in the industry, including: opening of Beverages Corporation outlets near bar hotels, continuous



increases in various taxes and surcharges and annual hikes in license fees. Due to these challenges, many hotels have shut down and many have exited the industry. Given this situation, government support is absolutely essential for the survival and growth of the hotel sector.

We have been demanding for a long time that Turnover Tax be collected at the first point of sale. This would ensure that the government receives revenue at the time of purchase, reduce administrative complexities and costs, and eliminate unnecessary pressure from officials on hotels.

This would also help eliminate several of the present-day cumbersome procedures such as filing of monthly returns, monthly remittances, annual returns, assessments, re-assessments, notices, court cases, and amnesty schemes.

Since the implementation of GST at the national level, Kerala is the only State in India where Turnover Tax is still imposed on liquor sold in hotels. Collecting the Turnover Tax at the first point of sale would ensure that the government does not suffer revenue losses while also

freeing the bar hotels from excessive procedural burdens. We have been raising this demand for years and strongly urge the government to consider it favourably.

Despite being an integral part of the tourism sector, the hotel industry has not been granted 'industry' status. Moreover, it does not receive even the basic benefits extended to other industries, such as: one-time exemption from building tax, industrial tariff for electricity instead of commercial rates, access to benefits on par with other industries when availing bank loans, capital subsidies, etc. Given the evolving landscape of the tourism sector, the government must grant 'industry' status to tourism, including the hotel sector, and extend all relevant benefits to us.

The Federation of Kerala Hotel Associations (FKHA) had urged the Finance Minister to include the following in the state budget: one-time settlement for Turnover Tax arrears, collection of Turnover Tax at the first point of sale and grant of industry status to the tourism sector. These measures will provide much-needed relief and support for the hotel industry to thrive in Kerala.

MAHA KUMBH MELA

SPIRITUAL ODYSSEY, CELESTIAL SPECTACLE

Picture this: millions of people from all over India and many living in far corners of the world, converging on a single sacred site in India, united in a breathtaking display of faith and devotion. That's the Maha Kumbh Mela, a profound spiritual odyssey, a pilgrimage etched into the very fabric of ancient Hindu lore. Unfolding once every 12 years, this festival is the world's grandest collective act of devotion, marking the human soul's eternal yearning for self-discovery and purification from the stains of earthly existence. Like a river of devotion flowing from countless tributaries, thou-

sands of saffron-clad ascetics and millions of pilgrims drawn from far and wide have converged at Prayagraj in Uttar Pradesh from January 13 for the Maha Kumbh Mela. Their hearts overflowing with faith, the faithful are converging from the far-flung corners of the Indian subcontinent, and even from distant shores beyond the seas. This breathtaking spectacle of unity embodies the very essence of human spirituality, a vibrant tapestry woven with threads of unwavering belief. This celebration faith graces four sacred sites in the States of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh in a cyclical rhythm over twelve years—the holy waters of Haridwar, where the Ganges descends from the Himalayan heights; the banks of the Shipra at Ujjain, a city steeped in ancient mysteries; on the shores of Godavari at Nashik; and, at the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna and the mythical Sarasvati at Prayagraj, forming the sacred Triveni Sangam.

Faith Meets Spectacle

Maha Kumbh Mela is a spectacle of an astounding kind. As the sun beats down on the milling millions, the entire Prayagraj gets painted in saffron and the air is rent by chants by the ascetics who make their way to the Sangam. And, by evening, the entire riverbank is lit up with lamps as the faithful offer prayers to River Ganga. In India, rivers have long been revered as divine entities. The Ganga, in particular, holds immense spiritual significance. At the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna, known as the Sangam in Prayagraj, the Aarti ceremony is a mesmerizing

Fired by their faith, an estimated 40-45 crore people are expected to descend on the banks of the River Ganga at Prayagraj for the holy dip during the 40 days of the Maha Kumbh Mela, writes **Anil Menon**

spectacle. During the Maha Kumbh Mela, lakhs of devotees gather to witness this enchanting ritual. As dusk descends, the banks of the river come alive. Batuk priests, adorned in traditional attire, begin the Aarti with fervent hymns and chants. Holding intricately designed lamps, they move in a rhythmic procession, their movements creating a mesmerizing dance of light and shadow. The air fills with the fragrant aroma of incense and the rhythmic chanting, creating an atmosphere of profound spirituality. Tens of thousands of lamps, held by the devotees, are simultaneously lit, transforming the riverbanks into a breathtaking sea of flickering flames. The reflection of the myriad lights on the calm waters of the river creates a surreal and ethereal ambiance. This symphony of light, sound, and devotion is truly a spellbinding experience, leaving an indelible mark on the hearts and minds of all who witness it. A harmonious blend of astronomy's precise calculations, spirituality's boundless depths, the intricate choreography of ancient rituals, and a rich, vibrant tapestry of cul-

The Maha Kumbh Mela, held every 12 years at Prayagraj, brings millions of devotees together in a breathtaking celebration of faith, devotion, and purification.

tural traditions, the Kumbh Mela stands as a timeless monument to the enduring power of unwavering faith.

The Holy Dip

At the heart of this grand assembly of rituals is the holy dip at the Triveni Sangam, where the sanctified waters are believed to have the power to absolve one's karmic burden, to cleanse the slate of past transgressions, liberating both the individual and their ancestors from

the relentless cycle of birth and rebirth, and ultimately granting them the coveted prize of Moksha, that blissful state of spiritual liberation.

While every dip in the holy waters of the Prayagraj Maha Kumbh, commencing from the auspicious dawn of Paush Purnima, is considered sacred, certain dates shimmer with an even greater luminescence. These are the days of celestial grace, when magnificent processions unfold, a vibrant spectacle featuring saints adorned in their resplendent attire, their devoted disciples following in their wake, and members of the various Akharas (religious orders), each with their own unique traditions and customs.

And at the zenith of this grand celebration, the most magnificent ritual of all unfolds: the Shahi Snan, also known as the Rajyogi Snan, which takes place on the hallowed occasion of Mauni Amavasya. This day, a confluence of cosmic energies, draws the largest multitude of pilgrims during the entire Kumbh Mela. It is believed that bathing on this day not only purifies one's own karma, washing away the accumulated dust of worldly actions,

but also extends its benevolent grace to their ancestors.

Myth and history

The narrative of the Maha Kumbh Mela, a spectacle of faith that has captivated the human spirit for millennia, unfurls like an ancient scroll, its origins deeply entwined with the threads of Hindu mythology. As the mists of time begin to clear, the Maha Kumbh Mela emerges from the realm of myth into the light of recorded history, its first tangible traces appearing during the Maurya and Gupta periods, a span encompassing roughly the 4th century BCE to the 6th century CE.

During this era, the reign of the illustrious Emperor Ashoka, a monarch known for his pivotal role in the propagation of Buddhism, casts a long shadow. While Ashoka's focus lay primarily with Buddhism, historical records hint at the existence of a nascent form of the Maha Kumbh Mela, a gathering that drew pilgrims from the far corners of the Indian subcontinent. With the ascendancy of Hinduism, the Maha Kumbh Mela's significance grew in proportion, its spiritual gravity drawing ever

more devotees. The Gupta dynasty, renowned for its generous patronage of the arts, sciences, and culture, played a crucial role in elevating the Kumbh to its status as a sacred congregation of immense importance. The ancient city of Prayagraj, then known as Prayag, emerged as a prominent centre for the celebration of the Kumbh. The medieval period witnessed the Maha Kumbh Mela blossoming into a spectacle of even greater grandeur, its tapestry enriched by royal patronage and the flourishing of diverse cultural traditions. The Chola and Vijayanagar dynasties in the south of India, and the powerful Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire in the north, all played significant roles in fostering and supporting the Kumbh Mela, recognizing its importance as a cultural and spiritual touchstone. During the Mughal era, a period marked by both conflict and cultural exchange, emperors such as the enlightened Akbar participated in the festivities of the Kumbh Mela, demonstrating a remarkable spirit of religious tolerance and understanding. The Mughal rulers, with their keen appreciation for art and architecture, contributed

to the construction of ghats, those iconic steps leading down to the sacred riverbanks, and oversaw the development of essential infrastructure around the sacred sites, enhancing the experience for countless pilgrims. One of the most compelling historical narratives associated with the Maha Kumbh Mela is the alliance forged between the Mughal Emperor Akbar and the Naga

At the Triveni Sangam, the sacred confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and Sarasvati, devotees believe that bathing in the waters absolves them of karmic burdens, offering spiritual liberation.



PILGRIMAGE OF FAITH

A significant influx is expected on key bathing dates, particularly during Mauni Amavasya, where estimates suggest 4 to 5 crore (40 to 50 million) visitors may participate.

This is pilgrim tourism of ginormous dimensions, far beyond anything that any other country has ever witnessed. Fired by their faith, an estimated 40-45 crore people are expected to descend on the banks of the Ganga at Prayagraj during the 40 days of the Maha Kumbh Mela for the holy dip. This is a special year for the Maha Kumbh Mela as this is the year of the 'Purna Kumbh', the last of

which occurred 144 years ago—reason enough for the massive jump in pilgrim arrivals this year. In anticipation of such massive pilgrim arrivals, the Uttar Pradesh Government has created a new tent city on the riverbanks in Prayagraj, with some 160,000 tents, 150,000 toilets and temporary hospitals.

The total length of bathing ghats is a mind-boggling 12 kilometres. The Mela area has roads extending an estimated 450 kilometres. Expected financial transactions during the event could reach between ₹2 lakh crore and ₹2.5 lakh crore (approximately \$25 billion to \$30 billion), which may account for about 0.8% of India's GDP.

The Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, has made elaborate arrangements to make the Maha Kumbh 2025 a landmark event not only for spiritual gatherings but also for global tourism.

To celebrate this momentous occasion, the Ministry has rolled several initiatives aimed at boosting both domestic and international tourism as the mega event, expected to attract millions of devotees, tourists, and pilgrims from across the world, offers a unique opportunity to showcase India's cultural and spiritual heritage and tourism potential.

The Ministry of Tourism has set up a sprawling 5000 sq. ft. 'Incredible

Maha Kumbh Mela 2025, which lasts till Feb 26, will be a monumental spiritual gathering, surpassing any other global event of its kind.

India Pavilion' at the Maha Kumbh to assist foreign tourists, scholars, researchers, photographers, journalists, expatriate community, Indian diaspora, etc.

The pavilion offers an immersive experience for visitors, showcasing India's rich cultural heritage and the significance of the Kumbh Mela. The pavilion also features the Dekho Apna Desh People's Choice Poll, allowing visitors to vote for their favorite tourism destinations in India.

To cater to the specific needs of foreign tourists, influencers, journalists, and photographers attending the Maha Kumbh, the Ministry has set up a dedicated toll-free Tourist Infoline (1800111363 or 1363).

Besides English and Hindi the Toll Free Infoline is now operating in ten (10) International languages and also in Indian regional languages. The service will provide assistance, information, and guidance to make the experience smoother and more enjoyable for international visitors.

The Ministry is also collaborating with key tourism stakeholders like the Uttar Pradesh State Tourism Development Corporation (UP-STDC), IRCTC, and ITDC to offer a range of curated tour packages and luxury accommodation options. ITDC has set up 80 luxury accommodation facilities at the Tent City, Prayagraj, while IRCTC is also providing Luxury Tents to accommodate the visiting pilgrims and tourists. These packages are available in a digital brochure, which has been widely circulated to Indian Missions and India Tourism Offices for greater amplification. To capsule this rare opportunity, the Ministry of Tourism will undertake a large-scale photoshoot and videography project to capture the grandeur and spiritual essence of the Maha Kumbh. The visuals will be shared widely across international and national media platforms, showcasing the grandeur of the Maha Kumbh and highlighting the tourism potential of Prayagraj as a spiritual and cultural destination. - Anil Menon ■

Festival of Art

Beyond the throngs and the rituals, the Maha Kumbh Mela is a canvas for faith, expressed not just in prayer, but in art. Prayagraj comes alive as a vast painted canvas spread over its many streets and built up structures. The art works that adorn the buildings are

collectively known as 'Kalakriti'. With Kalakriti, art seamlessly blends with the very architecture of the Mela, offering a unique testament to the profound spiritual and artistic expressions of this grand gathering. A distinguishing characteristic of Kalakriti is that the architectur-



al elements of the given space are harmoniously incorporated into the picture. In recent years, Kalakriti has undergone a major transformation in public opinion to become a socially accepted and respected accent to the public places that they adorn. The Prayagraj Mela Pradhikaran is supporting the efforts of the Government of Uttar Pradesh to beautify the State prior to the arrival of the pilgrims and tourists with Kalakriti projects. - Anil Menon ■

Sadhus, those ascetic warriors who embody a unique blend of spiritual devotion and martial prowess, and who play such a prominent role in the Kumbh's grand processions. It is recounted that in the year 1565, during the Maha Kumbh held at Prayag, Akbar, driven by a thirst for knowledge and understanding, sought to comprehend the significance of the Naga Sadhus and their integral role in the sacred pilgrimage. The Naga Sadhus, with their austere lifestyle, their bodies smeared with sacred ash, and their adherence to ancient martial traditions, deeply impressed Akbar with their unwavering discipline and profound dedication.

In a historic accord, a testament to the power of mutual respect and understanding, Akbar bestowed upon the Nagas the right to lead the procession of the royal entry

into the Maha Kumbh Mela. This momentous gesture stands as a powerful symbol of the harmony that has, at times, transcended religious and cultural divides during the Maha Kumbh Mela, underscoring the inclusive spirit that lies at the heart of this grand and ancient gathering.

The arrival of the colonial era, with its influx of European observers, brought with it a new perspective, a different lens through which to view the Kumbh Mela. The British, intrigued by the sheer scale, the vibrant diversity, and the profound spiritual significance of this ancient pilgrimage, meticulously documented their observations, leaving behind detailed accounts that provide invaluable insights into the historical evolution of the Maha Kumbh Mela.

Notable figures such as James Prinsep, a prominent British co-

lonial administrator and scholar, dedicated his efforts to documenting the Maha Kumbh Mela in the 19th century, offering detailed descriptions of the intricate ritualistic practices, the vast congregations of pilgrims, and the complex socio-religious dynamics that played out on the sacred grounds. These historical records, preserved through the passage of time, contribute significantly to our understanding of the Kumbh Mela's enduring significance.

With India's hard-won independence in 1947, the Kumbh Mela was imbued with a new layer of meaning, transforming into a potent symbol of national unity and a celebration of a newly independent nation's rich cultural heritage. The government of independent India, recognizing the profound cultural and spiritual importance of the Maha Kumbh, supported



Etched in Myths

The Maha Kumbh Mela has its origins in the tapestry of Hindu mythology, from the titanic clash between the Gods and Asuras (demons) for possession of the 'Kumbh', the sacred pitcher, brimming with Amrit, the nectar of immortality, a coveted prize from the churning of the primordial ocean (Samudra Manthan). This churning, a cosmic endeavor of immense scale, involved the mighty Mount Mandara as a churning rod and the serpent Vasuki as the churning rope, a spectacle that shook the very foundations of the cosmos. Legend has it that Lord Vishnu, the preserver of the universe, assuming the enchanting guise of Mohini, the divine enchantress, outwitted the Asuras, deftly spirited away the

Kumbh from their grasp. This pursuit across the heavens is believed to have spanned 12 divine days--each divine day being equivalent to 12 human years.

As she ascended towards the heavens, a few drops of Amrit fell at four places on the banks of the rivers Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari and the now-unseen Saraswari, consecrating these locations as the four sacred sites of today's Kumbh Mela. The rivers that grace these sacred locations are believed to have been transformed into Amrit itself, their waters infused with the very essence of immortality. The term 'Kumbh' is derived from the Sanskrit root "kumbhak", signifying the sacred pitcher. The Rig Veda, in verse 10.89.7, provides an early reference to the 'Kumbh' and the profound benefits of bathing at the Sangam during this auspicious period. Prayers dedicated to the Kumbh can also be found in the Atharva Veda and Yajur Veda. Chinese traveler

Hsuan Tsang has documented the grandeur of the Kumbh Mela in his travelogue. His accounts also shed light on the generous patronage of the Kumbh Mela by King Harshvardhan (c. 590-647 AD) and his gifts and donations to scholars and sannyasins at the confluence of the holy rivers. Adi Shankaracharya is stated to have played a pivotal role in establishing the 10 Akharas (religious orders) and played a significant role in the organization of Ardh Kumbh and Kumbh Melas. - Anil Menon ■



the event's organization.

Cultural Treasure

In the contemporary era, the Kumbh Mela has transcended national borders, transforming into a global phenomenon, drawn not only millions of domestic pilgrims from across the Indian subcontinent but also attracting the attention and participation of international seekers from around the world. The prestigious UNESCO recognition of the Kumbh Mela as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity in 2017 further cemented its historical and cultural significance on the world stage, acknowledging its profound importance to human heritage. The Kumbh Mela today, in all its splendour and grandeur, stands as a living testament to India's rich cultural and religious heritage, a vibrant expression of its ancient traditions. It serves as a powerful reminder of the resilience of these traditions, their ability to endure and thrive in the face of modernity's relentless march. The historical evolution of the Maha Kumbh Mela, from its mythical roots in ancient scriptures to its contemporary status as a globally rec-

With roots in ancient mythology and centuries of history, the Maha Kumbh Mela has evolved into a global cultural phenomenon, recognized by UNESCO for its profound spiritual and cultural significance.

ognized cultural treasure, reflects its remarkable ability to adapt and evolve, while simultaneously preserving its sanctity, its spiritual essence, and its profound connection to the past. The timeless legacy of the Maha

Kumbh Mela, like a river flowing through the landscape of time, continues to nourish the spiritual landscape of humanity. It remains a living testament to the enduring power of faith, the unwavering pursuit of spirituality, and the unbroken thread of cultural continuity that binds generations together. The historical significance of the Maha Kumbh Mela cannot be confined to a particular era or dynasty; it spans millennia, its echoes resonating within the collective consciousness of the millions who partake in this sacred pilgrimage. It is a powerful reminder that, within the ever-changing tapestry of human history, certain traditions endure, serving as timeless beacons of spirituality, cultural identity, and the enduring human quest for meaning and connection. The Maha Kumbh Mela stands as a testament to the transcendence of time itself—a pilgrimage that seamlessly weaves together the intricate threads of history, spirituality, and cultural heritage into a grand and magnificent tapestry that continues to unfold, vibrant and alive, with each passing Maha Kumbh. ■



Kerala to extend carrying capacity studies to more destinations

The Kerala government will extend the carrying capacity studies to more destinations to promote eco-friendly and sustainable tourism practices that protect Kerala's natural beauty, Governor Rajendra Vishwanath Arlekar said during the policy address at the Kerala Assembly. The government is also committed to positioning Kerala as a premier global destination by operationalising the Heli Tourism Policy approved in 2024 to create new avenues for aerial tourism. Additionally, a Cruise Tourism Policy will be unveiled to establish Kerala as a key player in the cruise sector.

The policy address also says that, in alignment with the UN-mandated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the government will intensify efforts to promote Responsible Tourism practices across the State. The climate-resilient elements of the Design Policy adopted in 2024 will be integrated wherever feasible, ensuring that tourism development aligns with environmental preservation, he said. Under the Malinya Muktha Kerala initiative, the State government will prioritise waste management and cleanliness at tourist destinations in collaboration with local self-government institutions,

NGOs, and tourism clubs. The establishment of Destination Clubs will foster public awareness and deeper engagement with Kerala's cultural and natural attractions, he said. To enhance visitor experiences, thrust will be given to developing tourism infrastructure and launching mega entertainment projects through public-private partnerships. Innovative tourism products will be introduced leveraging technology, making Kerala a model for sustainable and tech-driven tourism that balances growth with environmental stewardship, the Governor said. ■

Kerala's Kappad, Chal beaches get global Blue Flag certification

Civilians can soon visit theatres of India's major wars, thanks to a new initiative of the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Tourism. Places related to the 1962 War, such as Ladakh's Rezang-La and Arunachal Pradesh's Kibithoo and Bum-La, Pangong Tso in Ladakh, and the site of the Galwan clash will be opened up. Tourists can also visit Doklam, the site of the 73-day stand-off between India and China in 2017.

Modalities are being worked out to open some parts of Kargil, Batalik and Drass on the western sector for trekkers to get a first-hand feel of the Kargil conflict in 1999. The operational areas will be off-limits, but the idea is to open up as many of the forward locations as possible, so that citizens get a feel of the pitched battles that were fought at various loca-



tions in inhospitable terrain and harsh weather conditions. Tourists can also visit the base camp at Siachen, the world's highest battlefield, but going beyond could be tough due to challenges in acclimatisation. Chief of Army Staff General Upen-dra Dwivedi said the initiative was part of broader efforts to promote holistic development of border

areas.

The Ministry of Defence has launched an app and website as a one-stop solution for all information on travelling to the battle-ground destinations. Titled "Bharat Ranbhoomi Darshan", the app was launched by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh at Pune on January 15 to coincide with this year's Army Day celebrations.

"The Indian Army is transforming border areas and historic battlefields into tourist destinations, offering citizens a chance to witness valour up close. Explore the hallowed grounds where gallant soldiers fought and serve the motherland, even today," the Army posted on X ahead of the launch. The Army Chief said the initiative would focus on four pillars: infrastructure, communication, tourism, and education. ■

Kerala tourism sector has overcome post-pandemic crisis, says Chief Minister

Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said that Kerala's tourism sector has successfully overcome the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Speaking at the inauguration of Gateway Bekal Premier Five Star Resort at Mullankunnu in Uduma panchayat of Kasaragod district, he highlighted the State's achievements in tourism through government-led initiatives such as the revolving fund package, tourism employment support scheme, and tourism houseboat service scheme.

The Chief Minister said that the projects had delivered measurable results. In the first half of 2024, Kerala welcomed 1.5 crore domestic tourists, marking a 20% increase compared to previous years. Ongoing projects like Responsible Tourism, biodiversity initiatives,



the North Malabar tourism circuit, pilgrim tourism, and heritage tourism also have been attracting significant attention, he said. In Bekal, the number of visitors has increased from 50,000 annually to over 5 lakh. The newly inaugurated five-star resort built on 32 acres with an investment of ₹150 crore is expected to further boost the region's appeal. Tourism Minister P.A. Mohamed Riyas, who presided over the resort's

inauguration, said that developing North Malabar will play a key role in boosting Kerala's tourism growth. The completion of National Highway 66 by December 2025 and the hilly highway connecting 13 districts would improve connectivity, remove travel barriers, and enhance tourism potential, he said. He also pointed out that Bekal would become the first region in the country to house three five-star hotels within a single panchayat. ■

Kerala to roll out bio-bottles for packaged drinking water

The Kerala Irrigation Infrastructure Development Corporation Ltd (KIIDC), the largest producer of packaged water in the government sector, is set to replace plastic bottles with bioplastic bottles, the first initiative of sorts in the country. The plan is to use bioplastic bottles made from polylactic acid (PLA). These bottles are produced from starch found in materials like corn and sugarcane. The bottles are transparent and resemble plastic bottles in appearance. The packaging, including the cap and label, will also be biodegradable. Experiments for this are currently underway. These bottles will decompose in soil within six months, and even if incinerated, they will not cause environmental pollution. Initially, one-litre bottles will be produced.

KIIDC has signed an agreement with Kochi-based startup company '8 Specialists' to manufacture the bottles. The raw materials for production will be supplied by the startup company. The bottles will be manufactured at KIIDC's Thodupuzha and Aruvikkara plants



using bio-foam provided by the startup.

The cost of bio-bottles is expected to be five times higher than plastic bottles. Currently, a plastic bottle costs about Rs 2.50. KIIDC

sells packaged water for Rs 15 per bottle. The price of the eco-friendly water may double, but the final cost will be determined once the experimental production is completed. ■

Centre approves two Kerala tourism projects



The Ministry of Tourism has approved two significant tourism projects proposed by the Kerala

Tourism Department, Minister P.A. Mohamed Riyas has said. The approved projects are: Kollam

Biodiversity and Recreational Hub, a ₹59.71-crore project aimed at expanding on an existing concept of a biodiversity circuit linking tourism centres in Kollam district; two, Sargalaya Global Gateway to Malabar Cultural Crucible, which is a ₹95.34-crore project that envisions a tourism chain connecting Sargalaya Art and Craft Village to Beypore in Kozhikode district. This includes the expansion of the Sargalaya Art and Craft Village itself. These projects, with a combined value of ₹155.05 crore, have been approved under the 'Development of Iconic Tourist Centres to Global Scale' scheme. ■

Kerala to host international surfing, paragliding and mountain biking events

Kerala is set to host a series of international adventure sports championships in February and March, showcasing its growing reputation as a global adventure tourism destination.

The International Surfing Festival will take place at Varkala, Thiruvananthapuram, on February 27 and 28. The International Paragliding Festival will be held in Vagamon, Idukki, from March 19 to 23. The Mountain Terrain Biking Championship (MTB Kerala 2025) will be held in Mananthavady, Wayanad, on March 28 and 30.

All three events are being organized by the Kerala Adventure Tourism Promotion Society (KATPS) under the Tourism Department, in collaboration with the respective District Tourism Promotion Councils (DTPCs).

"These events firmly establish Kerala on the global adventure tourism map, attracting tourists and adventure sports enthusiasts and boosting the long-term growth of the tourism industry," said Tourism Minister P.A. Mohamed Riyas.

Surfing Festival, Varkala: Surfers from across India will compete in various categories, including SUP Technical Race, Paddle Board Technical Race, and SUP Surfing. The Surfing Federation of India and the International Surfing Association (ISA) will provide technical support.

Paragliding Festival, Vagamon: Around 75 gliders, including 40 international participants from 25 countries (including France, Italy, the US, Spain, New Zealand, Australia, the UK, Belgium, Turkey, Sweden, Denmark, Peru, the Czech Republic, Norway, and Canada), and various Indian states, are expected to compete.

A highlight of the festival will be the Vagamon International Accuracy Cup 2025, featuring top-tier paragliding pilots from around the world.



Mountain Biking Championship, Wayanad: Cyclists from approximately 25 countries will participate in the eighth edition of MTB Kerala 2025. The event will also include amateur competitions for Indian cyclists. The five-kilometer race track, located over 3000 feet above sea level, will challenge cyclists with muddy, rocky, and puddled terrains.

MTB Kerala is recognized by the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI), the governing body of sports cycling.

KATPS is organizing the event in collaboration with the DTPC Wayanad and the Cycling Federation of India (CFI).

KATPS in association with Kerala Institute of Tourism and Travel

Studies (KITTS) will be conducting a training programme to increase workforce in the adventure tourism sector, in the wake of increasing relevance of this segment in tourism.

Training will be in Adventure Activity Assistant (7 days), Adventure Activity Supervisory (8 days) and Nature Interpreter (8 days) categories. The first batch of 25 candidates will commence their training at Thenmala in January, followed by others in Wayanad and Idukki. The training fee for Adventure Activity Assistant and Supervisory categories is Rs 14,000 and Rs 16,000 respectively. Application forms are available on the websites of KATPS and KITTS. ■

GCDA launches online platform for 200+ historical sites in Kochi

The Greater Cochin Development Authority (GCDA) has launched a comprehensive website that maps and details approximately 200 historical sites in Kochi, including Fort Kochi and Mattancherry. This initiative, a part of the 'GIS-based mapping of heritage sites in Fort Kochi and Mattancherry' project aims to preserve and promote the city's rich cultural heritage. The website has detailed information on each historical site, including its historical significance, architectural features, current condition, and exact location using GIS technology.

It has an interactive map which allows users to easily locate and explore various heritage sites. The vi-



sual content includes geo-tagged photos, videos, and descriptions that enhance the user experience.

The website has been designed for easy navigation and access by tourists, researchers, and the general public. Even as it documents and highlights historical sites, contributing to their preservation, the website provides a valuable resource for researchers, government agencies, and the public. For the tourists, it is an easy-to-access database on Kochi's cultural heritage by effectively transforming Kochi into a "living digital museum."

The information for this project was meticulously gathered by historian and cartoonist Bonnie Thomas through extensive research and review of books, articles, archival records, newspaper reports, oral histories, and personal records. The website will be officially launched in the first week of February by Tourism Minister P.A. Mohamed Riyas, making it accessible to the public.

Kozhikode Railway Station to get airport-like upgrade



The Kozhikode Railway Station is undergoing a major renovation costing an estimated ₹500 crore that would provide travellers airport-like ambience, modern amenities and improved connectivity with the city. The renovated station will feature 6

platforms, 9 tracks, 20 lifts, and 24 escalators, along with a spacious 48-metre-wide concourse connecting the east and west terminals, offering panoramic views and housing cafes, retail outlets and ATMs. Notably, even those without platform tickets can access this

walkway and its amenities.

The station will also cater to the needs of the modern traveller with a multiplex, office spaces, retail outlets, and even star hotels within the complex. A dedicated 5-acre plot will be developed into a 1 million square feet IT space, further boosting the region's economic growth.

The station will be seamlessly integrated with the city's transportation network, with improved road access and plans to connect it with the proposed metro system. A 12-metre wide foot overbridge will ensure safe and convenient access across the tracks. The project also envisions the establishment of a pit-line for Vande Bharat, Vande Sleeper, and Vande Metro trains at West Hill, the development of Kozhikode North Station, and the conversion of Feroke station into Kozhikode Airport Station.

These initiatives will facilitate the commencement of long-distance trains from Kozhikode, contributing to the overall development of the city.



Kerala to go in for online licensing for tourism enterprises

Kerala government is set to introduce an online facility for processing applications for tourism enterprises, Industries Minister P. Rajeev has said.

Addressing a sectoral meeting of the tourism and hospitality sector convened by the Kerala State Industrial Development Corporation (KSIDC) as a prelude to the Invest Kerala Global Summit, scheduled for February 21 and 22 in Kochi, Mr. Rajeev said the move is aimed at streamlining the licensing process

and enabling businesses to link up with existing panchayat approval portals.

Tourism Minister P.A. Mohamed Riyas told the meeting that a single-window system to issue various permits for tourism enterprises, similar to other industries, would help the tourism sector to get off the ground without delay. The present liaison system at the Tourism Department would be brought under a single-window system, he said.

Mr. Riyas highlighted the department's efforts to establish an 'investment desk' for evaluating further activities and suggested linking it with the industry's single-window system for greater efficiency. He also announced that a unified system to start an incubator for tourism sector startups will be ready soon.

Mr. Rajeev, acknowledging the tourism sector's high investment potential, emphasized its capacity to generate "maximum employment with minimum investment." He encouraged entrepreneurs to develop innovative ideas and products within the tourism sector, assuring them of full government support.

Kerala Tourism's App for Caravan travel soon

Kerala Tourism and the Kerala Startup Mission (KSUM) are collaborating to launch innovative projects, including a dedicated caravan application, to boost caravan tourism in the State.

The app will provide detailed information about caravan trails, similar to hiking trails, along with the locations and availability of caravan parks and facilities.

KSUM CEO Anoop Ambika said that the app will also feature a crowd-sourced map highlighting popular hangout spots across Kerala. Developed with the support of the State's startup ecosystem,



the app aims to popularize caravan tourism among both domestic and international travellers. The Tourism Department officials

confirmed that the app will list details of all available caravans within the State, serving as a one-stop platform for caravan users.

KSINC launching new boat cruises off Kochi, Alappuzha



The Kerala Shipping and Inland Navigation Corporation (KSINC) is launching three new cruise routes, catering to the growing

demand for backwater tourism in the State. Of these, two are luxury cruises, one from Marine Drive to Kad-

amakudy Island off Kochi and another from Marine Drive to Panavally in Alappuzha. These cruises will feature water sports, allied activities, and lunch, and are priced at ₹1,799 per person. This is yet to take off, according to KSINC officials.

The second is a budget-friendly tour to Poothotta, on the southern side of Kochi city, featuring a resort with amenities like a swimming pool and pet interactions. It has been priced at ₹1,199 per person. This cruise has begun.

KSINC vessels, including the solar-powered 'Sooryamshu,' currently operate Kochi backwater cruises and tours to Kadamakudy, Njarakkal, and Palaikari. ■

Kerala Tourism gets revamped website

Kerala Tourism has launched a revamped website, marking a significant step in enhancing its global appeal. The user-friendly and interactive portal, available in over 20 languages, aims to showcase the State's unique attractions, culture, and heritage to a global audience.

Tourism Minister P.A. Mohamed Riyas said the website will leverage technology to create a comprehensive digital guide, providing all necessary information to tourists from around the world.

"Kerala is competing with countries like Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnam and Australia in the tourism sector. We must utilize cutting-edge technology to showcase Kerala as a premium destination," he said.

The upgraded website, built using modern web applications like ReactJS and Python Flask, boasts features such as a travel planner, live webcast, video quiz, e-newsletters, and a user-generated content (UGC) facility where travellers can



share their experiences. Other key features include short video clips, a 360-degree video gallery, and a picture gallery for use by tourism stakeholders.

The previous website had recorded

over one crore visitors and more than two crore page views in 2023-24. The revamped website is expected to further enhance Kerala's global tourism presence. ■



Kerala's heli-tourism policy proposes four heliports

Kerala government has granted in principle approval for the State heli-tourism policy that proposes establishment of heliports at the Thiruvananthapuram, Kochi, Kannur and Kozhikode airports. These heliports will act as major hubs, connecting a network of helistations and helipads located near such prominent tourist destinations as Varkala, Jatayupara, Ponmudi, Kollam, Munnar, Ku-

marakom, Alappuzha, Thekkady, Palakkad, Bekal, and Wayanad. Helistations, requiring 3-5 acres of land and an estimated investment of ₹5 crores, can operate in smaller areas. Heliports, on the other hand, require a minimum of 10 acres and an estimated investment of ₹20 crores, and will offer comprehensive facilities including passenger terminals, hangars, parking bays, Air Traffic Control, fire fighting

facilities, and MRO facilities. Heli-tourism operators will be required to provide helicopters and support services, including manpower, for emergency situations such as natural disasters, disaster relief, and the rapid transportation of human organs.

The government will explore various models for developing these facilities, including direct development on government-owned land, private entity involvement through competitive bidding, and the Viability Gap Funding model. Revenue streams for the government may include passenger fees and land lease charges. ■

Kerala Tourism ready with new summer holiday products



Kerala Tourism is ready with a new package of products in preparation for the upcoming

summer holidays. The products, focused on domestic tourists comprising mainly fami-

lies, are focused on North Kerala, especially Bekal, Wayanad and Kozhikode, besides lesser-known destinations with vastly improved infrastructure, says Tourism Minister P.A. Mohamed Riyas.

Addressing the Kerala Tourism Partnership Meet 2025 in Bengaluru, the Minister said the attempt this time is to enhance the visibility of destinations and unique tourism products that have largely remained in the background. Sikha Surendran, Director, Kerala Tourism, said the curated products for the summer holidays would be marketed through a series of travel trade networking events and roadshows in the coming weeks. ■

മാടായിപ്പാറ ഋതുഭേദങ്ങളുടെ കുടമാറ്റം

കണ്ണൂർ നഗരത്തിന് 25 കിലോമീറ്റർ വടക്ക് ഏകദേശം 600700 ഏക്കറുകളിലായി പരന്നുകിടക്കുന്ന മാടായിപ്പാറയെന്ന ശിലാസഞ്ചയം സസ്യസമ്പന്നതയും ജീവിവൈവിധ്യവും നിരവധി മിത്തുകളും ചരിത്ര സങ്കീർണതകളുമെല്ലാം ചേർന്ന സ്വപ്നഭൂമിയാണ്. - **പി.കെ. ശ്യാംസുന്ദർ**



തീർപ്പ് വരുത്തണമെന്ന് നോക്കിയിട്ടില്ലാത്തതിനാൽ കണ്ണൂർ. ചായിലുത്തിൽ മുഖമെഴുതിയ തെയ്യങ്ങളും, ഇരുട്ടിനെ കിറ്റിമുറിച്ചുയരുന്ന തോറ്റം പാട്ടുകളും, വിസ്മയിപ്പിക്കുന്ന ഹരിത തുടർച്ചകളും ചേർന്ന് കണ്ണൂരിനെ കേരളത്തിലെ തന്നെ ഏറ്റവും മനോഹരമായ ഭൂവിടമായി മാറ്റിയിരിക്കുന്നു. ഈ സ്വപ്നഭൂമിയിൽ മണ്ണിൽ ഒട്ടിപ്പടർന്നും എന്നാൽ ആകാശത്തേക്ക് നെഞ്ചുവിരിച്ചും കിടക്കുകയാണ് മാടായിപ്പാറയെന്ന വിസ്മയലോകം.

ഇവിടെ പരമമുന്നൂറുവരെ വേനലിലും വർഷത്തിലും ഭിന്നഭാവങ്ങളോടെ വരവേൽക്കുന്ന ഈ ശിലാപ്രപഞ്ചത്തിൽ ഋതുഭേദങ്ങൾ കുടമാറ്റം നടത്തുന്നു. നീലരാശി കലർന്ന കാക്കപ്പുക്കൾ കൊണ്ട് പുടവയായണിഞ്ഞ മാടായിപ്പാറ വർഷത്തിൽ നല്ലൊരു സമയവും ഒരു നീല ജലാശയത്തെയാണ് ഓർമ്മിപ്പിക്കുക. ആകാശനീലിയും ഭൂമിയിലെ നീലരാശിയും തമ്മിൽ ഇണചേരുന്നതിനും വെള്ളയിൽ നീലം കുടഞ്ഞതു പോലുള്ള അളിയാൻപുക്കളും എള്ളിൻപുക്കളും

വകഭേദങ്ങളുടെ സമ്പന്നത വിളിച്ചോതുന്ന മട്കപ്പുക്കളും താഴ്വാരങ്ങളിലെ വെള്ളിലക്കാടുകളുമെല്ലാം ചേർന്ന് ഇവിടെയാരുണ്ടെന്നത് മാധ്യമമായ ഒരു അന്തരീക്ഷവും. ഓണക്കാലം തുമ്പപ്പുക്കാലമാണെങ്കിൽ പുരക്കാലം ജടപ്പുക്കളുടെയും ചെമ്പകപ്പുക്കളുടെയും വസന്തകാലമാണ്. വർഷഋതു നൂൽമഴയും പെരുമഴയുമായി ഭാവസഞ്ചാരത്തിന്റെ വിസ്മയക്കാഴ്ചകൾ സമ്മാനിക്കുമ്പോൾ മാടായിപ്പാറ ഏതൊരു യാത്രികയുടെയും സ്വപ്നഭൂമിയായി മാറുന്നു. ഏകദേശം 600700 ഏക്കറുകളിലായി പരന്നുകിടക്കുന്ന ഈ ശിലാസഞ്ചയം സസ്യസമ്പന്നതയുടെയും ജീവിവൈവിധ്യത്തിന്റെയും മാത്രമല്ല നിരവധി മിത്തുകളുടെയും ചരിത്ര സങ്കീർണതകളുടേതുമെല്ലാം ഇടമാണ്. ജന്മ കുടിയേറ്റം കോട്ട കെട്ടിയെന്ന വിശ്വാസമാണ് അതിലൊന്ന്. മാടായിപ്പാറയുടെ നടുവിലുള്ള ദീർഘചതുരാകൃതിയിൽ ഒരു വാലോടെ കൊത്തിയെടുത്ത 'ജന്മകുളം' അതിലൊന്നുമാത്രം. ഇത് കുടാതെ ഇരുപതോളം വരുന്ന ചതുരക്കിണറുകളാണിവിടെ ഉണ്ടായിരുന്നത്. പാറയിൽ ചിലപ്പോൾ കാക്കപ്പുവിന്റെ വസന്തം മറ്റുചിലപ്പോൾ കൃഷ്ണപുവിന്റെത്, അമ്പിലുറുമ്പുകൾക്കാകമാനം തുമ്പകൾ ചോറുവിലൂമ്പി നിൽക്കുന്ന മറ്റൊരു നിറവും പാറയ്ക്കുണ്ട്. നാടിന്റെയും നാട്ടാരുടെയും ആധിപത്യധികൾ കടലിലെറിഞ്ഞ് നാടിന്റെ ഓജസ്സും വീര്യവും ഉണർത്തുന്ന മാരിത്തെയ്യങ്ങൾ ഉറഞ്ഞാടുന്ന പാറ. ജന്മകുളം, ചതുരക്കിണർ, പൂക്കൾ, പക്ഷികൾ, തുമ്പികൾ, കാവ്, പള്ളി, വടുകുനാടകപ്പുത്രം, സുൽത്താൻ തോട്... എന്തല്ല ഈ പാറ!? അലസവിസ്മയത്തിൽ പരന്നു കിടക്കുന്ന ചരിത്രത്തിന്റെയും മനുഷ്യസംസ്കാരത്തിന്റെയും ഈ ഈടുവയ്പിലേക്ക് സൂക്ഷിച്ചു നോക്കിയാൽ ഇരപിടിയൻ ചെടികളെയടക്കം കാണാം. തീർന്നില്ല, വെള്ളച്ചാട്ടങ്ങൾ, മത്സ്യങ്ങൾ, ഉഭയജീവികൾ, അസംഖ്യം പുൽച്ചാടികൾ, യാത്രികരെ തൊഴുകുകയോടെ സ്വീകരിക്കുന്ന തൊഴുകയ്ക്കൻ പ്രാണികൾ വരെ. ഏതുകാലത്തും പ്രകൃതി എന്ന നിത്യകൃത്യകയെ തേടി 45 മീറ്ററിലേറെ ഉയരമുള്ള ഈ പാറയിലെത്തിയാൽ എല്ലാവരും കൈകുപ്പി പറയും 'നമസ്കാരം, നമസ്കാരമേ' എന്ന്.

അന്വേഷകർക്ക് വിസ്മയം



കണ്ണൂർ നഗരത്തിൽ നിന്നും 25 കിലോമീറ്റർ വടക്ക് പരന്നുകിടക്കുന്ന മാടായിപ്പാറയിൽ മനുഷ്യർ രണ്ടായിരം വർഷങ്ങൾക്കു മുമ്പെങ്കിലും കാലം കുത്തിയെന്ന് കരുതപ്പെടുന്നു. മാടായിപ്പാറയിൽ വനനം ചെയ്തപ്പോൾ വെള്ളാരംകല്ലുകൾ കൊണ്ടുണ്ടാക്കിയ സൂക്ഷ്മ ശിലായുഗ ഉപകരണങ്ങൾ കണ്ടെടുത്തിട്ടുണ്ട്. മുളളൻപന്നി, മുയലുകൾ തുടങ്ങി സുലഭമായി പാറയിൽ മേഞ്ഞു നടന്ന ചെറിയ മൃഗങ്ങളെ കൊന്നു കാലം പൊറുത്ത മനുഷ്യന്റെ കഥാവശിഷ്ടങ്ങൾ. ഒരു ഭാഗത്ത് രാമപുരം പുഴ. മറുഭാഗത്ത് കുപ്പം പുഴ. എങ്ങിനെയാണ് ഈ പ്രദേശത്തിന് മാടായി എന്ന പേര് വീഴുന്നത്? വെള്ളം നീങ്ങി ഉയർന്നുവന്ന കര ഭാഗത്തിന് 'മാട്' എന്ന് പേരുണ്ട്. അങ്ങിനെ 'മാട്' ആയ പാറയാണ് മാടായിപ്പാറ എന്ന് പുഴുപെറ്റത് എന്നതാണ് ഒരു വിശദീകരണം. ഏഴിമല രാജാക്കന്മാരുടെ ഭരണ സിരാ കേന്ദ്രമായിരുന്നു മാടായിപ്പാറയെന്നും, കോലത്തുനാട്ടിലെ രാജാവായ ഉദയവർമന്റെ ആസ്ഥാനമായിരുന്നു ഇവിടെ

മെന്നും, കോലത്തിരി രാജവംശത്തിലെ വല്ലഭ രാജാവ് ഇവിടെ മാടായി കോട്ട പണിതുവെന്നും പ്രാദേശിക ചരിത്രത്തിന്റെ ഏടുകൾ കണ്ടവർ പറയുന്നു. കോലത്തു രാജാവിന്റെ സദസ്യനായിരുന്ന 'കൃഷ്ണഗാഥാ' രചയിതാവ് ചെറുശ്ശേരി ഇവിടെ ജീവിച്ചിരുന്നുവെന്നും വിശ്വാസമുണ്ട്. മാടായിയിലും പരിസരത്തും ഇന്നും കൃഷ്ണപ്പാട് വായന പതിവുണ്ടെന്നത് ഇതിന് തെളിവായി ചൂണ്ടിക്കാട്ടപ്പെടുന്നു. മാടായിപ്പാറയുടെ അരികുകളിൽ മഞ്ഞുകാലത്ത് പൂക്കുന്ന അസംഖ്യം പറങ്കിമാവുകളുണ്ട്. ഇവ നട്ടുനമച്ച് വളർത്തിയത് ഒരുകാലത്ത് മാടായിപ്പാറയുടെ അധിപരായിരുന്ന പോർച്ചുഗീസുകാർ അഥവാ പറങ്കികൾ ആണെന്നും മാടായിപ്പാറയിലെ പാളയം മൈതാനത്ത് ടിപ്പുവിന്റെ പടയോട്ടകാലത്ത് യുദ്ധം നടന്നിരുന്നുവെന്നും ചരിത്രത്തിനും ഐതിഹ്യത്തിനുമിടയിൽ നിന്ന് നാം കേൾക്കുന്നുണ്ട്. ഭാരതത്തിൽ ആദ്യമായി ജന്മകുടിയേറ്റം നടന്ന ഇടങ്ങളിൽ ഒന്നാണിതെന്ന്

പറയപ്പെടുന്നു. താഴെ രാമപുരം പുഴയിലൂടെയും കൊപ്പം പുഴയിലൂടെയും വനോൽപ്പന്നങ്ങളുമായി ജൂതരുടെ ഉരുക്കൾ സഞ്ചരിച്ചിരുന്നിരിക്കാം അവർ മാടായിപ്പാറയുടെ പരിസരങ്ങളിൽ അവരുടെ 'ജനീസ്' (ആരാധനാലയങ്ങൾ) പണിതുയർത്തിയിരിക്കാം. അതിന്റെയെല്ലാം തുടർച്ചയായി അവർ നിർമ്മിച്ചതാണ് പാറമുകളിലെ 'ജൂതക്കുളം' എന്നാണ് പറയപ്പെടുന്നത്. അത് ചരിത്രമാവാം, വെറും വിശ്വാസമാവാം. രണ്ടായാലും മനുഷ്യജിജ്ഞാസക്ക് ഏറെ അന്വേഷണ സാധ്യതകൾ നൽകുന്ന വിവരങ്ങളാണവയെല്ലാം. 'ജൂതക്കുളം' എന്ന പേരിന് മറ്റ് വിശദീകരണങ്ങൾ നൽകുന്നവരുമുണ്ട്. മാടായിപ്പാറയിൽ സമൃദ്ധമായി വളർന്നിരുന്ന, ചുറ്റുമുണ്ടാക്കാൻ ഉപയോഗിച്ചിരുന്ന 'ചുത്ത്' എന്ന പൂല്ലിന്റെ പേരിനോട് 'കുളം' ചേർന്ന് 'ചുതക്കുളം'മായെന്നും അത് പിന്നീട് 'ജൂതക്കുളം'മായതാണെന്നും വാദിക്കുന്നവരുണ്ട്. പക്ഷെ ചരിത്രവും വിശ്വാസവുമെല്ലാം കൂടിക്കുഴഞ്ഞ ഒരു ഭൂഭാഗത്ത് 'ജൂതക്കുളം' എന്നുപറയുന്നതിലെ മായിക ലാവണ്യം ഒട്ടിപ്പടർന്നതിൽ എന്തദ്ഭുതം? ഒരുകാലത്ത് മാടായിപ്പാറയും അതിനോട് ചേർന്ന തീരവും വലിയൊരു കച്ചവട കേന്ദ്രമായിരുന്നുവെന്ന് സത്യം. ജൂതരും അറബികളുമൊക്കെയടക്കം പരദേശികളും വിദേശികളും നാട്ടുകാരും ഇവിടെ കച്ചവടം നടത്തി. കുരുമുളക് തുടങ്ങിയ സുഗന്ധദ്രവ്യങ്ങൾ മലബാറിൽ നിന്നും യൂറോപ്പിലേക്ക് യാത്ര തുടങ്ങിയ ഇടങ്ങളിലൊന്ന് മാടായിയാണ്. അങ്ങനെ ഇവിടെ തമ്പടിച്ച അറബികൾ മാടായിപ്പാറയുടെ ചെരിവിൽ പന്ത്രണ്ടാം നൂറ്റാണ്ടിൽ പണിത താണത്രേ മാടായിപ്പള്ളി.



കൊട്ടക്കണകിന് ഐതിഹ്യങ്ങൾ
കർക്കിടകത്തിൽ മാരിത്തെയ്യങ്ങൾ ഇന്നും ഉറഞ്ഞാടുന്ന മാടായിപ്പാറ വിശ്വാസികൾക്ക് അനുഷ്ഠാന കേന്ദ്രമാണ്. പെരുമഴയത്ത് കുരുത്തോലയിൽ ശരീരം മുടി, മുഖപാള അണിഞ്ഞ് ആടിത്തീർത്ത്, ദുരിതങ്ങളെ രോഗങ്ങളെയും കടലിലെറിഞ്ഞ് നാടിന് ആയുരാരോഗ്യം നേരുന്നു മാരിത്തെയ്യങ്ങൾ. വടക്കേ മലബാറിലെ ശാക്തേയ ആരാധനാ കേന്ദ്രങ്ങളിൽ പ്രധാനമായ മാടായിക്കാവും മറ്റൊരു പ്രധാന ആരാധനാ കേന്ദ്രമായ ശിവക്ഷേത്രവും മാടായിപ്പാറയിലാണ്. മത്സ്യമാംസങ്ങൾ ഭക്ഷിക്കുന്ന ഒരിയ ബ്രഹ്മണരാണ് മാടായിക്കാവിൽ പൂജ നടത്തുന്നത്. പുലയരുടെ ദൈവമായ കാരി ഗുരുക്കൾ പൂലിവേഷം മറിഞ്ഞ് ദൈവക്കരുവായ കഥ തുടങ്ങുന്നതും മാടായിക്കാവിൽ നിന്ന് തന്നെ. ഋതുഭേദങ്ങളുമായി ബന്ധപ്പെടുത്തിയാണ് മാടായിക്കാവിലെ ആരാധനാക്രമവും ഉത്സവ

വുമെല്ലാം. മാടായിക്കാവിലെ പൂരം കൂടി ഉത്സവം ചരിത്രപ്രാധാന്യമുള്ള ഉൽസവമാണ്. വേനലിന്റെ അവസാനം സംക്രമ കാലത്ത് കലശോത്സവം നടക്കുന്നു. കർക്കിടകത്തിലാണ് മാരിത്തെയ്യങ്ങൾ ഉറയുക. വറുതി കാലമായാൽ കർക്കിടകത്തിലെ ആധിത്യം വ്യാധിത്യം രോഗങ്ങളും മാരിത്തെയ്യങ്ങൾ ആവാഹിച്ച് കടലിൽ ഒഴുകുന്നതിന്റെ വിശ്വാസവും ബലവും പുണ്യവുമാണ് നാടിനെ നിലനിർത്തുന്നതെന്നാണ് വിശ്വാസം. പുതുവൈതന്യമായി ജനസഞ്ചയത്തിത്തിന് നടുവിലെത്തി അനുഗ്രഹവർഷം ചൊരിയുന്നു തെയ്യങ്ങൾ... കോയ്ത്തുകാലം തുടങ്ങുന്ന ദിവസം ഇവിടെയുള്ള കതിരൂവെക്കും തറയിൽ നിന്ന് പൂജിച്ച നെൽക്കതിരുകൾ ഗ്രാമീണർ ഏറ്റുവാങ്ങുംതങ്ങളുടെ വീടുകളിൽ ഐശ്വര്യം കൊണ്ടുവരാൻ. കവി ഭാഷയിൽ പറഞ്ഞാൽ, മാരുതിയുടെ വിരലുകൾക്കിടയിലൂടെ ഉതിർന്നുവീണ കനകമലയായ മരുതമല അഥവാ ഏഴിമല മാടായിപ്പാറയുടെ പടിഞ്ഞാറ് മറ്റൊരു കോട്ട കെട്ടിയിരിക്കുന്നു. ഏഴിമലക്കു മുകളിലെ സുര്യാസ്തമയം മാടായിപ്പാറയിൽ നിന്നുള്ള മനോഹര കാഴ്ചയാണ്. മാടായിപ്പാറയിലെ തീവ്രമഴക്കാലം മാസ്മരികമായ അനുഭവമാണ്. ഇവിടുത്തെ മഴയാണ് മഴ. അസംഖ്യം കുഞ്ഞുമാലാഖമാർ വിണ്ണിൽ നിന്ന് പറന്നിറങ്ങും പോലെ മഴനാറുകൾ മണ്ണിലേക്ക് പെയ്തിറങ്ങി നിഴൽ നൃത്തം ചവിട്ടുന്ന കാഴ്ച ഏതൊരു കാമുക (കാമുകി) ഹൃദയങ്ങളെയാണ് ഇവിടേക്ക് ആകർഷിക്കാതിരിക്കുക!



കണ്ണൂർ നഗരത്തിന് 25 കിലോമീറ്റർ വടക്ക് ഏകദേശം 600-700 ഏക്കറുകളിലായി പരന്നുകിടക്കുന്ന മാടായിപ്പാറയെന്ന ശിലാസഞ്ചയം സസ്യസമ്പന്നതയും ജീവിവൈവിധ്യവും നിരവധി മിത്തുകളും ചരിത്ര സങ്കീർണതകളുമെല്ലാം ചേർന്ന സ്വപ്നഭൂമിയാണ്.



ഒരുകാലത്ത് മാടായിപ്പാറയുടെ വെള്ളി യരഞ്ഞാണങ്ങളായിരുന്നു പാദസരങ്ങൾ നിർത്താതെ കിലുങ്ങുന്നെന്ന് കവികൾ വാഴ്ത്തുപാട്ടുകൾ എഴുതാൻ പോന്ന ചെറിയ ചോലകളും അരുവികളും വരണ്ട വേനൽ പറയെ മരതക പൊന്നണിയിക്കുന്നു; മഴക്കാലങ്ങളിൽ കരിയാനക്കുട്ടങ്ങൾ മാടായിപ്പാറയുടെ നിഴലായി ആകാശത്തിലലയുന്നു. ശ്രീഷ്മസായാഹ്നങ്ങളിൽ മരതക പൂൽമേടുകളുടെ തന്ത്രികളിൽ നിർത്താതെ പാടുന്ന പടിഞ്ഞാറൻ കാറ്റിൽ ചിലപ്പോൾ കന്യാ ഗന്ധവും കലരും. മാടായിപ്പാറയുടെ ഭാഗ്യനിർഭാഗ്യങ്ങളുടെ ചിഹ്നമാണ് ഇറ്റിപ്പുളങ്ങ് എന്ന പക്ഷി. കാലത്തിൽ കൊത്തിയ മരതക പറയിൽ ചെറിയ കല്ലുകൾ കൂടി അതിൽ അത്ഭുത പക്ഷിയായ ഇറ്റിപ്പുളങ്ങ് മുട്ടയിടുന്നു. മുട്ടകാരികിൽ ശത്രു എത്തി എന്ന് തോന്നിയാൽ അമ്മപ്പക്ഷി 'ഇററിറ്റി... ഇറ്റിറ്റി' എന്ന് വിളിച്ച് കുറുച്ച് അകലേക്ക് പറക്കുന്നു. പിന്നെ നിസഹായത അഭിനയിച്ച് അവിടെ നിൽക്കുന്ന ഇറ്റിപ്പുളങ്ങ് അങ്ങനെ തന്ത്രപരമായി ശത്രുവിനെ തന്റെ മകളിൽ നിന്ന് അകലേക്ക് കൊണ്ടുപോകും. ഒരേസമയം നിസ്സഹായതയുടെയും വിപദിയെ ഭയത്തിന്റെയും മാതൃസ്നേഹത്തിന്റെയും തോറ്റംപാട്ടാണ് ഇറ്റിപ്പുളങ്ങിന്റെ കരച്ചിലും ചലനവും. മാടായിപ്പാറയുടെ ബട്ടർഫ്ലൈ പാർക്ക് എന്ന് പറയപ്പെടുന്ന പടിഞ്ഞാറെ ചെരുവിലേക്ക് എത്തിയാൽ കേൾക്കാം അസംഖ്യം പക്ഷികളുടെ ചിറകുകൾ, കലമ്പലുകൾ... പക്ഷികൾ മാത്രമല്ല അത്ഭുതങ്ങളെ ഗർഭത്തിൽ പോരുന്ന

ഈ പറയിൽ എന്താണ് ഇല്ലാത്തത് എന്ന് കണക്ക് എടുക്കേണ്ടിയിരിക്കുന്നു! ഇരുന്നൂറിലേറെ ശുദ്ധജല മത്സ്യങ്ങൾ ഇവിടെയുണ്ടെന്ന് പറഞ്ഞാൽ തെളിഞ്ഞിട്ടുണ്ട്. മുപ്പതോളം ഉഭയജീവികൾ ഇവിടെയുണ്ട്. മുപ്പതിലധികം ഉരഗങ്ങളെ അടുത്ത കാലത്ത് ഇവിടെ കണ്ടതിൽ 'പ്രസാദി പല്ലി' എന്ന അപൂർവ ജീവിയെ കണ്ടെത്തിയിട്ടും കാലമേറെ ആയിട്ടില്ല. കുറുകന്മാരുടെ ഓരിയിടലിന്റെ ഗന്ധം താഴ്വര കൂടെയാണ് ചില രാത്രികളിൽ മാടായിപ്പാറ. 150ലേറെ ചിത്രശലഭങ്ങൾ ഇവിടെയുണ്ട്. നിശാശലഭങ്ങൾ ഇരുന്നൂറോളം ഉണ്ടെന്ന് കണക്കുകൾ പറയുന്നു. കേരളത്തിൽ ഇതുവരെ കണ്ടെത്തിയ 188 ഇനം തുമ്പികളിൽ നാല്പതിലേറെ തുമ്പികൾ മാടായിപ്പാറയിൽ ചിറകടിക്കുന്നു. ഇരുപതിലേറെ പൂൽച്ചാടികൾ ഉണ്ട്. എന്തിനേറെ നിത്യവും എത്തുന്ന സന്ദർശകരെ തൊഴുത കെയോടെ സ്വീകരിക്കുന്ന തൊഴുതകെയൻ പ്രാണികളിൽ 15 ലേറെ ഇനങ്ങൾ ഈ പറയിൽ ഉണ്ട്.

തീരാത്ത കാതുകും
പണ്ടേ നാവികർക്ക് വഴികാട്ടിയായ ഏഴിമലക്ക് കിഴക്ക് നിലകൊള്ളുന്ന ഈ സുന്ദരിപ്പാറ ഐതിഹ്യം കൊണ്ടും ചരിത്രം കൊണ്ടും മാത്രം അടയാളപ്പെടുത്തേണ്ട ഒന്നല്ല. ഇത് ജൈവവൈവിധ്യത്തിന്റെ കലവറയാണ് കൃഷ്ണനെയ്തൽ, ഏകസുമം, പാറമുളങ്ങ്, മൂലചുരത്തി, മലബാർ റൊട്ടാല തുടങ്ങി അപൂർവ്വസസ്യങ്ങൾക്ക് വീടാണിത്. 2016ൽ പറയിൽ 'പൊക്കുടക്കീച്ചിപ്പുല്ലി' എന്ന ഒരിനം

പൂല്ല് കണ്ടെത്തിയിരുന്നു. കണ്ടൽ സംരക്ഷകനായ കല്ലേൻ പൊക്കുടനോടുള്ള ആദരവായി ഇതിന് 'പൊക്കുടാനിയാൻ' എന്ന പേരും നൽകി. മാടായിപ്പാറയിൽ ഇനി മുളക്കാറിരിക്കുന്ന പേരറിയാപ്പുക്കൾ എത്രയെന്ന് ആരറിയുന്നു ഒരിക്കലും വറ്റാത്ത മാടായിപ്പാറയിലെ വടുകുന തടാകം പോലെ ഈ പാറ തുണയാരുള്ള ഇനിയെത്ര കാതക്കാഴ്ചകൾ നമ്മെ കാത്തിരിക്കുന്നു! ഒക്കെ പറഞ്ഞാലും മാടായിപ്പാറയുടെ ആവാസവ്യവസ്ഥയെയും പരിസ്ഥിതിയെയും തകർത്തുള്ള ഖനനം പാറക്ക് ഭീഷണിയാക്കിയിട്ടുണ്ടെന്ന് കാണാതെ വയ്യ. കയ്യുറ്റങ്ങൾ അതിലേറെ ഭീതിഭമായിരിക്കുന്നു. പാറയുടെ തെക്ക്പടിഞ്ഞാറ് നടക്കുന്ന കളിമണ്ണ് ഖനനമാണ് ഏറ്റവും വലിയ ഭീഷണി. അടുത്തുള്ള തോട്ടിലേക്ക് പലപ്പോഴും മലിനജല പ്രവാഹമാണ്. പക്ഷെ അതിശയകരമായ അതിജീവനമാണല്ലോ പ്രകൃതിനിധമം? ചുറ്റും വസിക്കുന്ന മനുഷ്യർ ആ പാറങ്ങൾ കുറെയൊക്കെ ഉൾക്കൊണ്ടുകഴിഞ്ഞു. അവരുടെ പ്രതിരോധം മാടായിപ്പാറക്ക് പടച്ചട്ടയാവുകയാണ്. പാറ കണ്ടിറങ്ങുമ്പോൾ മനസ്സ് ചോദിക്കും കാരണങ്ങളെല്ലാം കണ്ടുവോ എന്ന്. പേരറിയാപ്പുക്കൾ ഇനിയും ഏറെയുണ്ടിവിടെ. പ്രകൃതിസ്നേഹികളായ യാത്രികരെ കാത്ത് അവയിനിയും ഇവിടെ വീടും, പേരറിയാ പക്ഷികൾ പാടും. മാടായിപ്പാറ വിളിക്കുകയാണ് അമ്മയെപ്പോലെ നിങ്ങളെ ആ ചരിത്രവും വിശ്വാസവും പ്രകൃതിനീലിമയും ചുരത്തുന്ന മാറിൽ ചേർത്തുപിടിക്കാൻ... ■

KOCHI WATER METRO VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY!

The Kochi Water Metro is a testament to the power of innovative thinking and a commitment to sustainability. It's a model for other cities, a beacon of hope in a world grappling with urban challenges. And, tourists have found a new way to see Kochi, where life throbs amidst several must-experience historical touchpoints, writes **Umasankar**

Forget the gridlock, ditch the diesel fumes – Kochi has found a way to travel that's as cool as the coastal breeze: the Water Metro. For one year now, Kochiites have been gliding across the backwaters, past the ships docked at the Cochin Port, little islands that resemble mangrove outgrowths in the water and the Chinese fishing nets silhouetted against the western sky on the Kochi Water Metro. And, tourists have found a new way to see Kochi, where life throbs amidst several must-experience historical touchpoints. It's not as if Kochi has suddenly stumbled upon a new (water) way to showcase its charm. Water transport has always been integral to life in Kochi. Time was when large Kettuvallams slowly drifted sedately across the Kochi backwaters, used mostly to transport rice,

spices, various food articles, coir, tiles, etc. They defined the Kochi waterline for long. And then came the motor boats, noisy and, as time went by, run down. All through these transitions, the ordinary folk travelled across the islands using a country craft or a machuva, native skiffs. Enter Kochi Water Metro, and daily commutes and sightseeing in Kochi backwaters has suddenly become fast, clean, silent, sophisticated--and multi-dimensional. As many as 32,35,027 passengers used the Water Metro in December. Nothing surprising there, because for the denizens of Kochi, this isn't just transportation; it's a lifestyle upgrade, a delightful blend of practicality and pleasure. For the visitor, it is a journey where the destination is as enchanting as the voyage itself. The Water Metro offers the air conditioned com-

fort of the metro cabin, with clear views of the backwaters and everything in and around it. The touch of professionalism in its operation is evident in the high standards of maintenance and the trained staff who are courteous and helpful. The Water Metro, a fleet of sleek electric ferries, seamlessly weaves into the urban fabric, making every commute, be it for hurried late morning journey to the workplace or a leisurely jaunt, a vacation. It is so relaxing for even the daily commuters, who also get to mingle with the visitors to the city from far-off places. "The Water Metro project was conceptualized to revive the once prominent mode of transportation in the Kochi area with most modern facilities and updated technologies in keeping with the country's latest urban transit facilities, thereby increasing comfort, reliability,

safety and security of commuters," points out Mr. Loknath Behera, Managing Director of Kochi Water Metro Limited (KWML), which is the water transport wing of the Kochi Metro Rail Limited (KMRL). Although conceptualized as a feeder service to the rail metro system in the mainland, the Water Metro has today become a stand-alone intermodal public transport system, which would soon link up important end-points of the city of Kochi. Blending itself with various other modes of transport, the Water Metro has brought in definitive change in the quality of life in the city, Mr. Behera says. Anyone who has taken a ride on the Water Metro would nod in agreement. For, every journey on the Water Metro an experience worth cherishing--simply because Kochi is a rare gem on the Indian shores, blending as it does a unique fare of historical heirlooms and signature creations of contemporary life and culture. Kochi, the commercial capital of Kerala, is surrounded by an agglomeration of about 10 islands. Most of these islands, separated by short distances, are densely populated and the islanders are hugely dependent on the mainland for their livelihood, healthcare, education, employment, trade and business. For decades now, they were dependent on the motor boats of the State Water Transport Department to commute among the islands and Kochi's business district.

Lifestyle leap

The islanders are finding the switchover to the Water Metro beneficial in more ways than one. Gone are the days of dust and noise, journeys are now a quick, scenic hop across the waters. This has not only reduced congestion and pollution on the roads. And they have now been joined by the tourists who would earlier hire a boat at exorbitant rates to move around. Now they glide past or towards Fort Kochi, its Dutch and British-era architecture basking in the



golden afternoon light, the iconic Chinese fishing nets, silhouetted against the horizon, or the island shores where life has its unique rhythm. The Water Metro currently connects 8 destinations: High Court, Fort Kochi, Vypeen, Vyttila, Kakkanad, South Chittoor, Eloor and Cheranalloor. It's only a matter of time before the KWML begins operations from Mattancherry with connections to Willingdon Island. From High Court to Fort Kochi, it is a 20-minute hop. From there, it is actually walking distance to Mattancherry with its vibrant explosion of colours. The Jewish Synagogue and the little space around it with

Kochi Water Metro offers a sustainable, eco-friendly transportation alternative. With electric ferries cruising through scenic backwaters, it reduces pollution and provides a peaceful ride for commuters and tourists alike.

The Water Metro delivers comfort with air-conditioned ferries and modern terminals featuring cafes and local shops. It's set to seamlessly integrate with buses and metro services, creating a smooth multi-modal transit experience.

several shops selling souvenirs, antiques and artefacts, is under 2 kilometres from the Water Metro jetty. Once the Mattancherry jetty becomes operational, it would be a mere three minutes' walk. The journey from Vyttila, the city's mobility hub, to Kakkanad, where all the IT companies are located, is a 25-minute journey through the tranquil waters of the Kaniyampuzha river. While on this journey, you will think that the city is far away. The tall apartments stay far off your waterway, which is dotted with small outgrowths full of shrubs and wild growth. And then there are the Chinese fishing nets, which appear to be in some deep meditation by the river bank. The Water Metro operates on all

routes every 30 minutes. There is order all over as the number of passengers who can join each trip is regulated by an automatic passenger control system. That also addresses overcrowding, a common cause of accidents in water transport.

Touch of class

The touch of class is evident everywhere. terminals are modern and well-equipped, with comfortable waiting areas, little cafes offering local delicacies, and, at the bigger ones, souvenir shops showcasing the best of Kerala crafts. And the fares? Surprisingly affordable, making it a viable option for both locals and visitors. A student can hop across one

of the islands to Kochi city for a fraction of the cost of a time-consuming bus ride, while tourists can enjoy a unique and memorable experience without breaking the bank. Imagine exploring the city's hidden gems – the serene backwaters, the quaint fishing villages, the hidden temples – all the while enjoying a comfortable and affordable mode of transport! The Kochi Water Metro project has been designed to connect 15 routes across the 10 islands, covering a total of 78 kilometres using a fleet of 78 fast, electrically propelled hybrid ferries serving 38 jetties. These electric boats, with their low-wake and low-draft designs, minimize disruption to the waterways while ensuring safe, comfortable, and reliable services. Management of the fleet is centralized. At the operation control centre coordinates operations, tracks boats in real-time, monitors passenger safety, and handles disaster management, ensuring a seamless and secure ferry service. Kochi Water Metro's safety features include state-of-the-art navigation systems that adhere to stringent





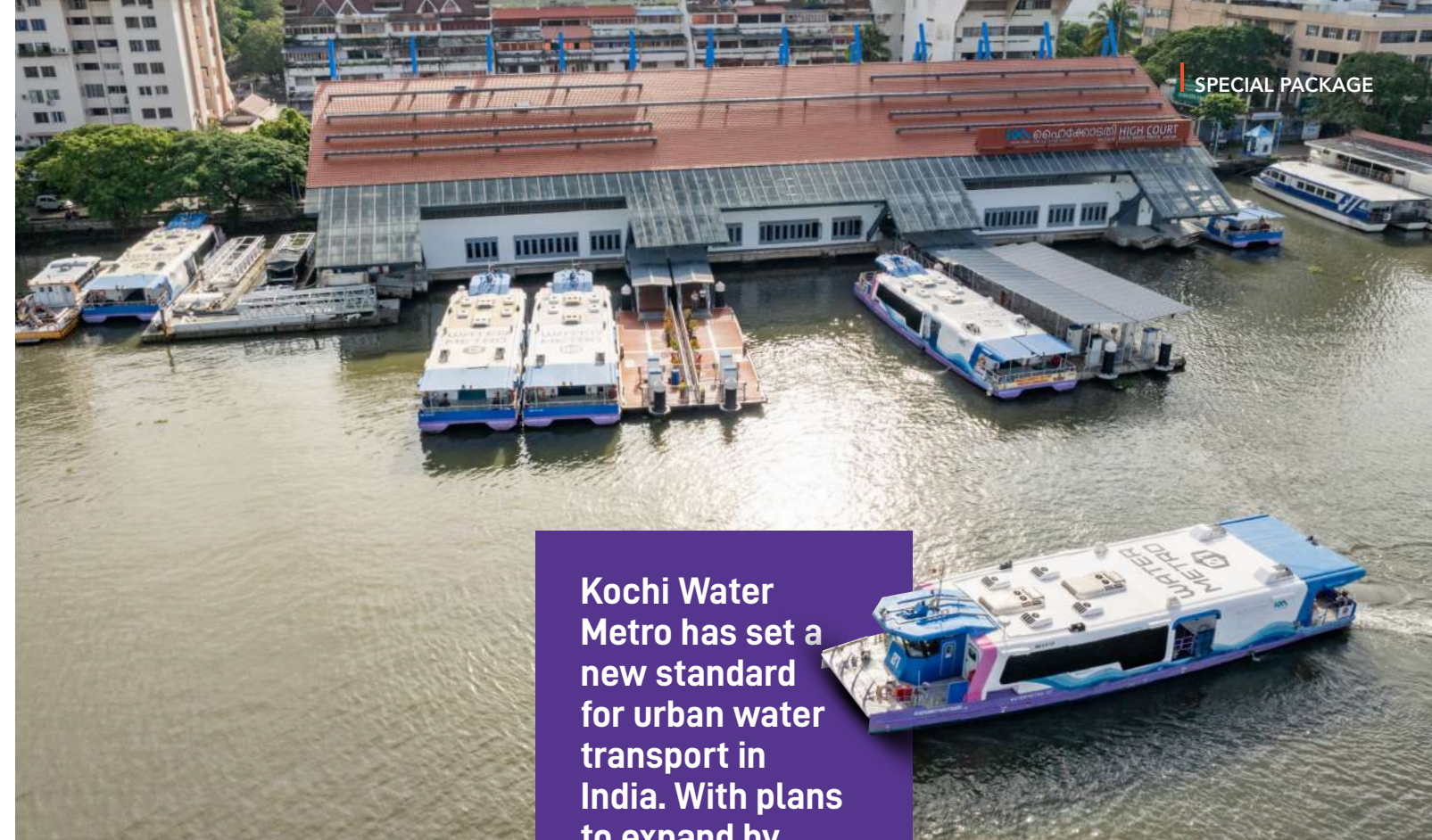
safety standards, well-lit terminals with covered walkways, accessible locations, and enhanced security measures such as CCTV cameras and comprehensive surveillance and communication systems. But in all candour, Mr. Behera reminds every patron that the Kochi Water Metro is just little over a year old and it is still a work in progress. "There are several factors affecting project expansion like land acquisition, statutory approvals, consent to operate, ferry and pontoon availability, etc. Ferry availability depends on logistic timelines since some vital components are being imported. Despite the limitations

of different kinds, efforts are being taken to fully commission the project with all routes and ferries by 2027," he told Swagat. As on date, Kochi is the only city in India with an operational water metro system. And, its teething troubles notwithstanding, Kochi Water Metro has set a new benchmark for urban water transport in India. With its modern facilities, comparable to metro rail systems, and environmentally sustainable design, the Water Metro has also emerged as a sought-after water transport solution for other parts of the country. To new frontiers

The project is transforming Kochi's waterfront, turning neglected areas into lively public spaces. It boosts tourism and supports the local economy, blending modern infrastructure with the city's historical charm.

The Union Ministry of Ports, Shipping, and Waterways has asked the KMRL to conduct a feasibility study to assess the potential for similar water metro systems in 15 cities across the country. The idea appears to be to marry water metro's tourism potential with commuter convenience wherever possible. The will naturally focus on the possibility of establishing water metro services in cities with rivers, lakes, backwaters and coastal regions. Some of the potential locations under consideration are the Brahmaputra River in Guwahati, the Dal Lake in Jammu and Kashmir and the islands in Andaman and Lakshadweep, but it is early days still.

Recognising the project's dual role as both a commuter lifeline and a tourism magnet, the State and Central governments have invested heavily in the development of the Kochi Water Metro as a special purpose vehicle. The Government of Kerala has 74 per cent equity and the Kochi Metro Rail Limited holding the remaining 26 per cent. The KMRL itself is a joint venture between the Government of Kerala and the Central government, both having equal equity share. "Given the huge capital investment required for land acquisition and the high construction cost/km for rail metro project, water metro project stands apart with minimal

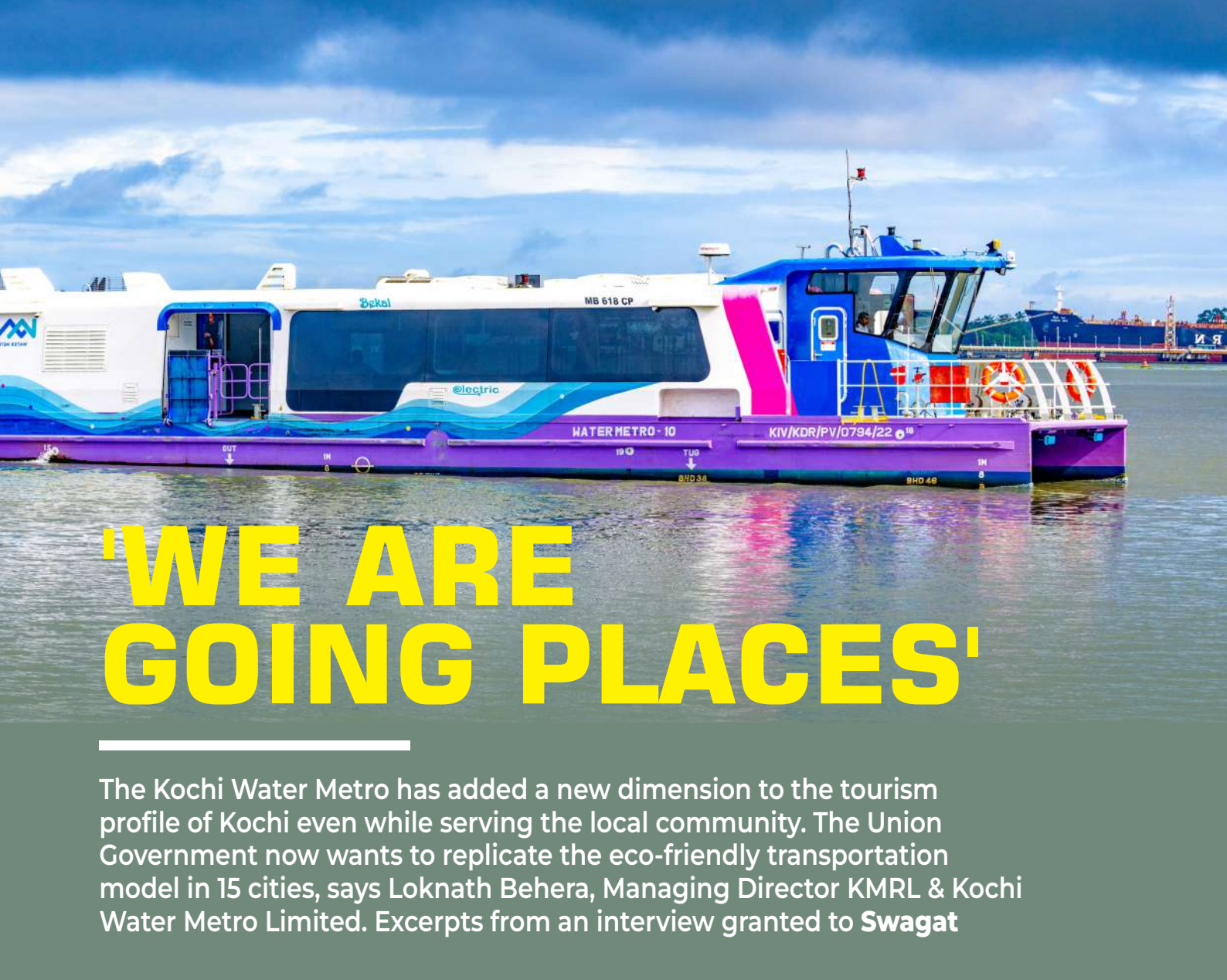


Kochi Water Metro has set a new standard for urban water transport in India. With plans to expand by 2027, other cities are looking to replicate its success, making it a model for future coastal transport systems.

capital expenditure and all modern metro-like commuting facilities being offered at rock bottom rates," says Mr. Behera. Beyond the Ride The Water Metro is more than just a transportation system; it's a social and environmental success story. Kochi holds great promise not just in terms of urban mobility but also its potential for revitalizing the city's waterfront. The project, when completed, would bring about transformative change in the once neglected areas, turning into vibrant public spaces. The environmental impact is equally significant. By opting for electric propulsion, the Water Metro has significantly reduced greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution. The serene silence of the electric ferries, a stark contrast to the cacophony of the city, has brought a newfound peace to the waterways. The dolphins, once shy of the noisy engines, are now frequently spotted frolicking in the waves, a testament to the project's positive impact on the marine ecosystem. The Kochi Water Metro is constantly evolving. New routes are being

added, connecting more and more parts of the city. The fleet is expanding, with more modern, energy-efficient vessels joining the ranks. Both Kochi Water Metro and Kochi Rail Metro are also working on ways to ensure last and first-mile connectivity. To achieve this, the integration of various modes of transportation are being explored. Kochi Metro provides feeder bus, autos, and 'MYBYK' options for commuters. The Water Metro has taken into primary consideration its integration with other modes of transport, thereby setting up its terminals in areas where bus stands/stations, metro (rail) stations, feeder networks, and other public transport

modes are available. As many as 15 feeder e-buses are envisaged to augment first and last mile connectivity from metro stations and another 20 e-buses from water metro terminals. At present, a fleet of 50 e-autos operate feeder trips from metro stations. Once integrated well with other modes of transport, Kochi would have a completely seamless and integrated public transport network. The time is not far off when one would be able to reach the Cochin International Airport, hop on to the Kochi Metro, and then seamlessly transfer to the Water Metro for a scenic ride to one's hotel in Fort Kochi. The Kochi Water Metro is a testament to the power of innovative thinking and a commitment to sustainability. It's a model for other cities, a beacon of hope in a world grappling with urban challenges. By embracing its unique character and investing in sustainable solutions, Kochi has transformed commuting into a delightful experience, proving that progress and environmental responsibility can go hand-in-hand. ■



'WE ARE GOING PLACES'

The Kochi Water Metro has added a new dimension to the tourism profile of Kochi even while serving the local community. The Union Government now wants to replicate the eco-friendly transportation model in 15 cities, says Loknath Behera, Managing Director KMRL & Kochi Water Metro Limited. Excerpts from an interview granted to **Swagat**



LOKNATH BEHERA
Managing Director
KMRL&Kochi Water Metro Limited

Swagat: Kochi Water Metro appears to have two simultaneous objectives: one, to provide connectivity to places where the Kochi Metro is yet to reach and two, to be a standalone transport mode best suited for Kochi, which virtually lies in the lap of the backwaters. Which of these is truer to the soul of Kochi Water Metro? Why?

Mr. Loknath Behera: Both are true. Urban transport solutions are to be designed and planned keeping in mind the geography of

the area being catered to. Kochi, the commercial capital of Kerala, is surrounded by an island agglomeration of about 10 islands. Most of these islands are densely populated and islanders hugely depend on the mainland for their livelihood, healthcare, education, employment, trade and business. Given the huge capital investment required for land acquisition and the high construction cost/km for rail metro project, water metro project stands apart with minimal capital expenditure and all modern

metro-like commuting facilities being offered at rock bottom rates. Water metro was conceptualized as a feeder mode of service to the rail metro system in the mainland. However, it has today become a standalone-cum-intermodal public transport for the city of Kochi. Today, rail and water metro along with other feeder options like buses, taxis, autos and bicycles together complete the transport circle of Kochi city. All these modes are well integrated to ensure a hindrance free commuting experience for the travelers.

In what way has Kochi Water Metro added to the character of the city of Kochi? What new dimension has it brought to the city experience?

Oh, not just to Kochi city! The project has brought a new dimension to waterborne transportation in the country as a whole! As on date, Kochi is the only city with an operational water metro system. Most modern battery-electric metro-like air-conditioned passenger ferry, passenger friendly terminals with washrooms, waiting areas, passenger announcement and information display systems, automatic fare collection, customer care centres, floating concrete pontoons for hindrance free commuting of the disabled and the elderly citizens

are all innovative and unique features of our water metro project. Kerala, also known as 'God's own Country' in the world tourism map, is among the list of top 50 recommended destinations to visit across the globe by Time Magazine and many others. Water metro brings in a safe, reliable and secured mode of commuting to tourists, providing air-conditioned comfort with panoramic views at lesser fares and promises to connect all major island locations of tourist importance in short duration in comparison to other options. Kochi today boasts of a unique water metro in Asia – not a small achievement!

Within a short span of time, Kochi Water Metro has made an impact as both an enhancing experience for tourists and a great way to commute for the Kochi-ites. Still, much more remains to be done. What are your plans for Kochi Water Metro, going forward?

As per our DPR, the water metro will have 38 terminal locations. The project has already moved half way by establishing around 15 terminals, of which 10 are already under operation and the remaining 5 in the last stages of construction. There are proposals to connect services to Infopark, the IT hub of

Kochi, which shall hugely benefit the IT community. We are also planning tourism-specific activities such as circuit tours, chartered cruises in association with the Tourism Department and the Cochin Port (yes, it's still Cochin Port, located in Kochi City!) authorities. This would happen once sufficient ferries are available for day-to-day operations and as spares. Kochi Water Metro aspires to be a frontrunner in offering urban transport solutions for the entire nation. The expertise gained in setting up the first of its kind world-class water transport infrastructure with battery-electric ferries, emergency rescue-cum-work boats, floating pontoons, modern terminals, intelligent transport management systems, etc., positions KMRL as an ideal consultant for upcoming similar concepts inside and outside the Country. Approximately 40 cities with navigable water bodies in India can adopt the idea for sustainable urban transport. Now, the Government of India has requested KMRL to do techno-feasibility studies in respect of 15 cities in India.

How's the ridership now and what are the expected numbers in the coming months and years? Any guess on the rider profiles? Average daily ridership with 16



boats and 10 terminals operating in 5 routes are 5k-6k/day. Total ridership since the start of revenue operations is approximately 3.23 million as of December 2024. Rider profiles are dependent on routes being served currently; for eg., in the Vytilla-Kakkanad route, IT professionals, students and daily commuters contribute to the majority of ridership. Whereas in the High Court-Fort Kochi route, the percentage of tourists stands out. The projected initial ridership once all the routes become operational is 34000/day. On December 29, the water metro set a record with 15,225 with traveler footprints and a total footfall of over 19.72 lakh users in 2024.

What are your deadlines for adding new vessels, enhancing trip frequencies, and commissioning new jetties and pontoons so that there can be better and smoother connectivity for the people of Kochi as also unmatched experiential outing for the tourists?

There are several factors affecting project expansion like land acquisition, statutory approvals, consent to operate, ferry and pontoon availability, etc. Ferry availability depends on logistic timelines since some vital components are being imported. Once sufficient ferries are available, every route can be served in 20-30 minute-frequencies ensuring reliability of the services with continued patronage. Despite the limitations of different kinds, efforts are being taken to fully commission the project with all routes and ferries by 2027.

How do you propose to add value to the travelling experience, particularly for the tourists who reach the various jetties of Kochi Water Metro? Any plan to convert the exquisitely designed spaces into cultural hubs?

With fares starting at a minimum of Rs. 30, water metro offers affordable yet luxurious experience to commuters as well as tourists. Reliable timings, stress-free ticketing, air-conditioned metro like interiors with aircraft like safety demonstra-



tions, etc. are unique experiences. Terminal locations have been selected in such a manner that easy integration with other modes of travel like bus, rail metro, taxi, auto are easily possible (e.g. Vytilla). At the islands, the terminals are very closely situated to iconic heritage sites and tourist spots so that travelers can easily walk by (for e.g. Fort Kochi, Mattancherry, Kadamakkudy, etc.). Cultural hubs are also planned at terminals with land availability like for e.g. Fort Kochi.

Efforts are also being made to make terminals places of social gathering by improving access roads, provisioning well-lit streets with street furniture. We also have plans to have art galleries in some terminals.

Safety is a major concern when it comes to boat travel all over the world. What measures are we taking to ensure safety of the passengers, especially women

and children?

Safety is of paramount consideration in all components of the project, starting from ferries to terminals to floating pontoons. As a matter of abundant caution, we focusing particular attention on the following aspects:

Use of Catamaran twin-hull design for enhanced stability and safety and Lithium Titanate Oxide (LTO) batteries which are considered safest among all similar batteries; and provision of adequate number of life jackets at accessible locations in the ferries to cater all types of people, including children.

Passengers are not permitted to move outside of the passenger area during the trips. Floating pontoons have been installed to enable hindrance-free access for the disabled and the elderly commuters between boat and terminals. The pontoons ensure that the same level is maintained between boat and jetty at all times, including times of tidal variations and floods.

On the ferries, we have positioned an array of safe navigational mechanisms and measures such as radar, echo-sounder, DMR, VHF, fire alarm systems, Vessel Automation System (VAS), Passenger Announcement System (PAS), Passenger Information Display System (PIDS), CCTV, panic buttons, manual emergency call points, all-round cameras, night navigation assistance using thermal camera, etc. At the terminals, we have Automatic Fare Collection (AFC), PAS, PIDS, CCTV, floating pontoons, fire alarms, UPS and DG backup, and, for the first time in India, Passenger Control System (PCS) to avoid overcrowding.

We also have Workboat-cum-Ambulance boats to handle emergencies and well-equipped, manned Operation Control Centre (OCC) to monitor the movement of every boat, to attend to any emergency that may occur and give directions to the boats. Each ferry is equipped with 21 CCTV cameras which can be monitored from the OCC.



Is Kochi Water Metro thinking of doing things that none of us have thought of before, something out of the box?

The project itself is an out of the box initiative in public transport infrastructure within the country. The water metro is conceived in-line with the geographical specificity of the Kochi city.

We have already achieved many firsts as part of this project. We are the first-of-its-kind integrated water transport system in Asia. We operate like a metro on the waters. We have introduced state-of-the-art air-conditioned modern electric boats with LTO battery chemistry. Water Metro will have the largest fleet of electric boats anywhere in the world under a single command-and-control centre when the entire project is commissioned. We have adopted CCS2-based standard charging protocol for marine crafts. We have the biggest network of superchargers in the marine sector. Our Passenger

Counting system (PCS) ensures complete safety by avoiding overcrowding in ferries.

The modern jetties with green building technology and the disabled-friendly floating pontoons for universal and equitable access are being implemented for the first time in the public transport system in India.

Our state-of-the-art boat navigation system and Intelligent transport management system are well integrated with other modes of transport in Kochi city. We have also introduced common mobility cards for our water transport and other modes of transport. We also have interoperable tickets for Water Metro and Rail Metro. Our sustainable design approach and technological innovations have minimized water pollution and reduced ecological impact. Ferries with hybrid electric propulsion systems were chosen for reduced carbon emissions and improved air quality. The shift

from road to water transport has reduced overall noise pollution, enhancing the city's environmental quality.

State of art Catamaran Boats are deployed to minimize the wake, wash conditions and create very low waves on travel, thus protecting the flora-fauna and creating minimum disturbances to the river banks, preventing any shore erosion. The project was conceptualized to revive the once prominent mode of transportation in the Kochi area with most modern facilities and updated technologies in-line with the country's latest urban transit facilities, thereby increasing comfort, reliability, safety and security of commuters. With many limitations in expansion of city roads, ever-growing traffic congestions and attributed pollution levels, the relevance of the water metro project remains understated. Our plan for the future is to introduce hydrogen ferries, AI based operational controls, etc.

SAUDI ARABIA



Saudi budget airline flyadeal eyes India

Saudi budget airline flyadeal is looking at the prospect of expanding its operations to India in the next 12 months, according to flyadeal CEO Steve Greenway. flyadeal, a subsidiary of flag carrier Saudia, operates from bases in Jeddah, Riyadh, and Dammam to a domestic and international network covering about 30 destinations. The airline has now set its sights on travellers from India, China, and Southeast Asia.

"China is on the radar, but India, in particular, is key due to the prevalence of worker traffic and religious traffic from the sub continent," said Greenway at the Skift Global Forum East in Dubai. "That's certainly something we are looking at over the next 12 months. The market size in India is huge."

"What many people don't realize is that we already codeshare with Saudia. This means we connect to Saudia's hubs in Riyadh and Jeddah, and passengers flying from the sub continent can connect with Saudia's European routes.

"This complementary network benefits both of us. As we expand into India, we'll be bringing passengers not only to the Kingdom but also to Saudia."

flyadeal, an all-Airbus operator, will have a fleet of 38 aircraft by the end of the year. It plans to grow to 88 within the next three years, with a mix of aircraft in the Airbus A320 family.

"We'll be adding 320s, and soon, the A321s will start joining us in Q1 of 2026. These fantastic aircraft will allow us to operate longer routes," he said.

Last May, flyadeal placed its biggest order for 51 Airbus A320 family aircraft, including 12 further A320neos, with a delivery schedule beginning in 2026. The overall goal is to reach 100 aircraft in its fleet by 2030.

"There's a massive mandate from the government (of Saudi Arabia) to bring pilgrims, workers, and high-volume, low-yield traffic into the kingdom. To cater to that market, we need widebody aircraft," said Greenway.

"We are targeting long-haul routes for pilgrims coming from the UK for Hajj or Umrah, as well as worker traffic from Southeast Asia - places like Thailand - and beyond." He said it makes sense to operate the bigger aircraft in some Indian markets, such as Kolkata. "We have five this year and seven next year. We're expanding our fleet and already operating widebodies on certain routes. There are specific markets in the Subcontinent where widebodies make sense, especially for cargo. A widebody can carry 20-25 tons of cargo, which we can't do with narrow bodies," he said.

THAILAND

Thailand targets record-breaking tourist arrivals in 2025



Thailand's tourism industry has set its sights on a significant rebound in 2025, aiming to welcome a record-breaking 40 million visitors. This ambitious target reflects the industry's determination to recover momentum lost during the COVID-19 pandemic. The plan incorporates several key strategies such as diversifying destinations so that tourists are attracted to lesser-known destinations so as to spread the economic benefits of tourism throughout the country; expanding flight capacity to improve accessibility and cater to the anticipated surge in visitor numbers and highlighting Thailand's rich cultural heritage to enhance the visitor experience and position the country as more than just a beach getaway. Mainland China is a major source of tourists for Thailand, with the

tourism industry catering extensively to Chinese preferences. The 2023 temporary visa-free entry for Chinese tourists significantly boosted arrivals, with over 5.2 million visiting between January and September 2024. An estimated 8 million Chinese tourists are believed to have visited Thailand during the full year. As Thailand gears up for a potential influx of visitors, tourism operators are actively discussing strategies to manage over-tourism in popular destinations. A white paper presented by Adith Chairatananon of the Federation of Thai Tourism Associations had proposed several solutions to mitigate the negative impact of excessive tourist numbers. One of these proposals was a 300-baht tourism tax (approximately \$8.90) to fund infrastructure

improvements that can handle the increased demand. Experts also advocate for a more balanced distribution of tourism across the country, ensuring that benefits extend beyond major cities and tourism centres like Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Phuket. Thailand's ambitious target for 2025 reflects a multi-pronged approach to revitalize the tourism industry. By attracting more visitors, diversifying destinations, and promoting cultural experiences, Thailand aims to not only regain its pre-pandemic momentum but also achieve sustainable and economically beneficial growth in the tourism sector. Thailand has launched e-Visa for Indian passport holders starting January 1, 2025, even as it kept the existing 60-day visa exemption for Indian travellers in effect.

SINGAPORE

Singapore looks forward to surge in Indian tourists

Singapore is looking forward to a significant increase in Indian tourist arrivals in 2025, driven by strong air connectivity, innovative attractions, and a growing preference for experiential travel among Indian visitors.

Markus Tan, Regional Director of the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) for India, Middle East, South Asia, and Africa, says that the Singapore-bound travel from India should show a surge thanks to 17 direct air routes connecting major Indian cities to Singapore and offering 280 weekly flights. Singapore's close proximity to India, with flight times ranging from 3.5 to 5 hours, makes it an easily accessible destination, he points out. Singapore currently offers a streamlined visa process for Indian travelers, with approvals typically granted within 3-5 business days. Indian tourists are increasingly seeking immersive experiences



beyond traditional sightseeing. This shift in preference is evident in the growing popularity of attractions that offer interactive and engaging experiences. Post-pandemic, Singapore has introduced unique venues like the Museum of Ice Cream, attracting diverse traveller demographics and further bolstering its appeal. Singapore emphasizes sustainability in its tourism development. Initiatives such as Gardens by the Bay, showcasing solar-powered Supertrees and advanced cooling systems, and Sentosa Island's com-

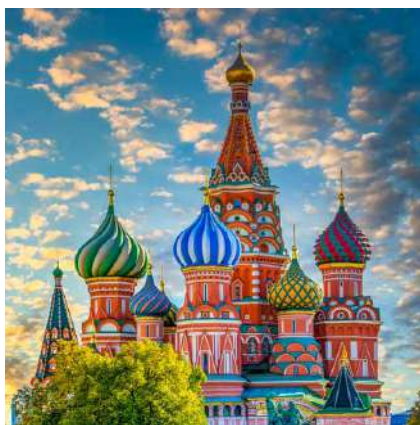
mitment to carbon neutrality by 2030 through solar power generation, highlight this commitment. Furthermore, Singapore Airlines and Scoot aim to replace 5% of their fuel needs with Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) by 2030. Key attractions and upcoming projects further enhance Singapore's appeal to Indian tourists. These include Bird Paradise, Asia's largest bird park, opened in 2023; Sensoryscape, a 30,000 sq. m. attraction at Sentosa Island; Harry Potter: Visions of Magic, a multi-sensory exhibition at Resorts World Sentosa; the upcoming Singapore Oceanarium; Minion Land at Universal Studios, set to open in early 2025; the Mandai Rainforest Resort, offering sustainable luxury accommodations; and the launch of the Disney Adventure Cruise Line exclusively in Singapore in 2025.

Indian tourists' spending patterns also reflect the growing popularity of Singapore. In 2023, Indian tourists spent SGD 1.52 billion (approx. Rs 95.6 billion) with an average stay of 6.53 days. In 2024 (Jan-June), spending reached SGD 776.5 million, with shopping accounting for 28%. ■

UAE

Moscow, London and Baku top European destinations of UAE travellers

Wego, the travel App, has revealed that the most in-demand European destinations among UAE travellers during Christmas and New Year Eve were Moscow, London and Baku. The other top destinations were Tbilisi, Prague, Vienna, Paris, Yerevan, Milan, Sarajevo and Munich. According to Wego, the most popular events in these destinations revolved around holiday festivities and Christmas markets. Topping the list is Moscow as



the city offered festive highlights such as the Journey to Christmas event, featuring shows, concerts, and workshops across Moscow. Visitors also were keen to explore the Christmas markets in the Red Square or attend opera and ballet performances, including the seasonal favourite, The Nutcracker.

London remained a top choice for UAE travellers, offering iconic Christmas markets, ice skating, and classical concerts at St Mary Le Strand. Baku drew visitors with its "Cold Hands, Warm Hearts" winter event at Fountain Square, featuring stalls, live music, and fireworks. Similarly, Tbilisi City captivates with Christmas markets at Orbeliani Square and festive villages in Dedoplistskaya Park. Other destinations on the list included Prague and Vienna with festive celebrations across several spots in the cities. Paris remained popular with Jardin des Tuileries Christmas Market, light displays at the Champs-Élysées, and Seine riverboat dining for New Year's Eve. The other European destinations on the list were also in-demand for festivities, fireworks, concerts, Christmas markets and more. ■

SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia moves to third place in global tourism rankings



Saudi Arabia has firmly established itself as a top global tourism destination, now ranking third in the world for international arrivals. According to a recent UN Tourism report, the Kingdom experienced an impressive 61 percent increase in tourist arrivals during the first nine months of 2024 compared to 2019, as reported by Saudi Press Agency (SPA). This growth reflects Saudi Arabia's growing appeal and highlights its significant strides in the global tourism sector. The success is the result of the Kingdom's concerted efforts to diversify its economy and attract international visitors. With the Ministry of Tourism at the helm, Saudi Arabia has rolled out ambitious plans under 'Vision 2030' to

transform its tourism landscape. Key investments in infrastructure, a focus on cultural and historical landmarks, and the development of new attractions have positioned the country as a vibrant and unique destination for travellers from around the world. Saudi Arabia has also seen a remarkable rise in inbound tourist spending, advancing 15 places in global rankings from 2023, now sitting in 12th place. This shift marks the Kingdom as one of the fastest-growing tourism economies, outpacing many other nations in terms of attracting high-spending visitors. Further cementing its place as a tourism leader, Saudi Arabia also led the G20 countries in growth in

international tourist arrivals in the first seven months of 2024, compared to 2019. This surge underscores the Kingdom's increasing popularity and the success of its tourism strategies in enticing visitors from all corners of the globe. This rapid rise in tourism is not just about numbers; it's part of a broader economic transformation outlined in 'Vision 2030'. As the Kingdom invests heavily in sustainable tourism infrastructure, from ancient sites like AlUla to the futuristic city of NEOM, the tourism sector is becoming a driving force in diversifying the economy, creating jobs, and offering visitors unforgettable experiences. ■

Orange Minivet ▼

WINGED WONDERS OF KERALA

Neighbourhood
birdwatching
adventure awaits all
comers in Kerala



Dr. K.M. Anand

Kerala, a land of lush greenery and serene backwaters, is a haven for bird lovers. Even within its bustling neighbourhoods, a vibrant avian tapestry unfolds, offering glimpses into the lives of some truly fascinating creatures. Witness the flash of a blue-tailed bee-eater as it performs its aerial ballet, tossing its prey – bee, butterfly, or insect – high in the

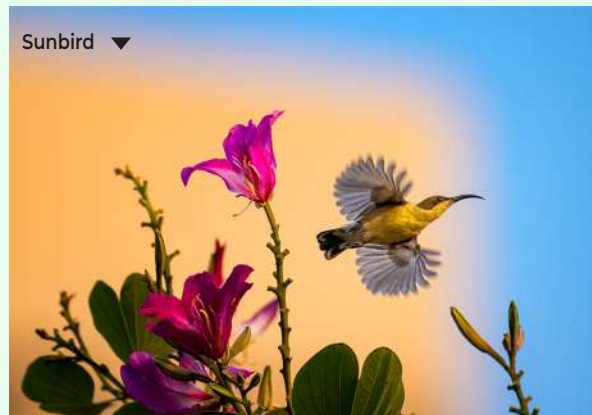
air before a swift, precise catch. These colourful hunters, with their dazzling plumage, are a common sight, their hunting rituals a captivating spectacle. Anyone who has taken a boat ride in Kerala would have seen a cormorant, sleek and dark, perching patiently, a silhouette against the iconic Kerala scenery. The monsoon season paints a different picture, transforming the



Cormorant ►



Green bee-eater ▼



Sunbird ▼



Nilgiri fly catcher ▼



Great Indian Hornbill ▼



Paradise fly catcher male ▲

landscape into a lush, emerald paradise. During this time, the green bee-eater truly shines, its vibrant green feathers glistening amidst the falling rain.

You might even catch a pair sharing an intimate moment, offering a unique insight into their lives. For a truly special encounter, keep an eye out for the majestic Great Indian Hornbill, Kerala's 'State Bird'. This endangered beauty, with its striking casque and impressive size, is a symbol of the State's rich natural heritage. Spotting a pair, bonded for life, is a privilege, a reminder of the importance of conservation.

Even the simplest scenes can hold a touch of magic. A lone kingfisher, perched atop a bare tree,

Kerala's lush landscapes offer bird lovers a chance to witness colorful creatures like the blue-tailed bee-eater and the graceful green bee-eater in action.

embodies a quiet dignity, while a Nilgiri flycatcher, endemic to the high ranges, seems unfazed by the monsoon's downpour. The vibrant orange minivet, framed by a splash of yellow, adds a dash of colour to the scene.

Witness the drama of life unfold as a male Asian paradise flycatcher, with its flowing tail, takes a refreshing dip in a local pond, emerging with a flourish. And finally, like a miniature hummingbird, a sunbird hovers delicately, sipping nectar from a vibrant pink flower before darting away in a blur of motion. These are just a few of the feathered residents that grace Kerala's neighbourhoods, each with its own story to tell, waiting to be discovered by those who take the time to look up. ■



Dr. K.M. Anand

A paediatrician by profession and a photographer by passion, Dr. K.M. Anand, MD, is a two-time winner of the Kerala State Wildlife Photography Award (2021, 2024) and international awards instituted by Nature inFocus, Bengaluru-based media & production house focused on natural world

stories, and The Journal of Wildlife Photography (JoWP), an educational platform for wildlife photographers. The 62-year-old Kochi-based paediatrician took to wildlife photography as a major pursuit during the days of Covid-19 lockdown. He has shot thousands of amazing frames of wildlife across India and abroad ever since. Born to Mohan Rao, a former official of Travancore Titanium

Products (TTP) Limited in Thiruvananthapuram, and Radha Mohan, Dr. Anand did his MBBS at the Government Medical College, Thiruvananthapuram, and MD in Paediatrics at Jaipur. He enjoys spending hours in the wild for some rare frames, but is equally happy framing life in its myriad forms in his homestead. The pictures on these pages have been taken from his courtyard and nearby backwater suburbs of Kochi city. ■

കാറ്റ് കഥ പറയുന്ന രാമക്കൽമേട്

കല്ലിന്റെ മേടല്ല, കാറ്റിന്റെ മേടാണ് രാമക്കൽമേട്.
രാമക്കൽമേട്ടിലെ കാറ്റ് ജീവിതം തന്നെയാണ്
അവിടെ തഴുകലുണ്ട്, തലോടലുണ്ട്,
രൗദ്രഭാവങ്ങളുണ്ട്...

ഒരു കൊച്ചു യാത്ര... കൊച്ചിയിൽ നിന്നും രാമക്കൽ മേട്ടിലേക്ക്... വലിയ പ്ലാനിംഗുകളില്ലാതെ ഇടക്കെല്ലാം ഒരു ചെറിയ യാത്രകൾ ആവശ്യമാണ്. ജീവിതത്തിന്റെ തിരക്കുകളിൽ നിന്നും ഒരൽപ്പം ആശ്വാസം തേടി നമുക്ക് ഇടയ്ക്കൊരു ബ്രേക്ക് വേണമല്ലോ? അങ്ങനെ തീരുമാനിച്ചതാണിത് യാത്ര. കൊച്ചിയിൽ നിന്ന് ഞങ്ങൾ നാലു പെണ്ണുങ്ങൾ കാഴ്ചയുടെ വൈവിധ്യം തേടി രാമക്കൽ മേട്ടിലേക്ക് യാത്ര പുറപ്പെട്ടത് ഒരു വാരാന്ത്യത്തിലാണ്.

ഇടുക്കി ജില്ലയുടെ മനോഹരതകളിൽ ഒന്നു മാത്രമാണ് രാമക്കൽമേട്. കാര്യത്തിലേക്ക് കടക്കും മുൻപ് അല്പം കഥ പറയാം. സീതാസ്തോത്രത്തിനിറങ്ങിത്തീരിച്ച രാമൻ യാത്രാമധ്യേ വിശ്രമിക്കാനായി ഇവിടെയിരുന്നുവെന്നാണ് ഐതിഹ്യം. ശ്രീരാമ പാദം പതിഞ്ഞ കല്ലാണത്രെ രാമക്കല്ല്. ആ കല്ലിരിക്കുന്ന മേട് പിന്നീട് രാമക്കൽമേടായി.

ഇടുക്കിയിൽ നെടുങ്കണ്ടത്ത് നിന്ന് 15 കിലോമീറ്റർ കിഴക്കായി കരുണാപുരം പഞ്ചായത്തിലാണ് രാമക്കൽമേട്. സമുദ്രനിരപ്പിൽ നിന്ന് 3500 അടി ഉയരെ. തിരുവനന്തപുരത്തെ പൊന്മുടിയുടെ ഉയരവുമായി താരതമ്യം ചെയ്യുമ്പോൾ ഒരു പൊടിക്ക് താഴെ. പക്ഷെ, പൊന്മുടിയിൽ നിന്ന് ഏറെ വ്യത്യസ്തമാണ് രാമക്കൽമേട്. ചിതറിത്തരിച്ചു കിടക്കുന്ന ചെങ്കുത്തായ ഈ പാറക്കെട്ടുകളിൽ വിശ്രമിച്ചാതെ വിശിയടിക്കുകയാണ് കാറ്റ്. സത്യത്തിൽ ഇത് കല്ലിന്റെ മേടല്ല, കാറ്റിന്റെ മേടാണ്. അത്ര ശക്തിയിലും ഇടതടവില്ലാതെയാണ് ഇവിടെ കാറ്റ് വീശുന്നത്. മണിക്കൂറിൽ 35 കിമീ വേഗതയിൽ വരെ.

രാമക്കൽ മേടിന്റെ നെറുകയിൽ നിന്നാൽ തമിഴ് നാടിന്റെ ഗ്രാമഭംഗി ആവോളമാസ്വദിക്കാം. കൊച്ചിയിൽ നിന്ന് തൊടുപുഴകാഞ്ഞാർകട്ടപ്പന വഴി രാമക്കൽ മേട്ടിലേക്ക് ഏതാണ്ട് ആറര മണിക്കൂർ വരും യാത്ര. ഞങ്ങളെത്തിയപ്പോഴേക്കും ഉച്ചയ്ക്ക് രാമക്കൽമേടിനെ ബാധിച്ചു കഴിഞ്ഞിരുന്നു. കുന്നിൻമുക്കിൽ കുറവന്റെയും കുറാത്തരിയുടേയും ഭീമാകാരമായ ശില്പം നിലാകാശത്തിന് കീഴിൽ അലസമായി സഞ്ചരിക്കുന്ന മേഘപാളികൾക്കിടയിൽ ഫ്രെയിം ചെയ്തുവെച്ചതുപോലെ കാണാമായിരുന്നു.

അൽപനേരത്തെ വിശ്രമത്തിനുശേഷം ഓഫ്റോഡ് സവാരിക്കുള്ള ജീപ്പ് എത്തി. തമിഴ് നാടൻ ഗ്രാമമായ കമ്പംമേട് ലക്ഷ്യം വെച്ച് ഞങ്ങൾ ഹെയർപിന്നുകൾ ഓരോന്നായിറങ്ങിത്തുടങ്ങി. അടക്കും ചിട്ടയുമുള്ള കൃഷിയിടങ്ങളുടെ ദൂരക്കാഴ്ച... മനസ്സ് ആദ്യം അവിടെയുടക്കി. അപ്പോഴേക്കും രാമക്കൽമേടിന്റെ സ്വാഭാവിക കുളിർമ വിടുകലാൻ തുടങ്ങിയിരുന്നു. വരണ്ടമണ്ണിൽ നിന്നുള്ള പൊടിക്കാറ്റിനൊപ്പം ചൂട് ഉയർന്നുപൊങ്ങുന്നു.

മുന്തിരിത്തോട്ടങ്ങൾക്കിടയിലാണ് ജീപ്പ് എത്തിയത്. അതൊരു കാഴ്ചയായിരുന്നു! നോക്കും ദൂരത്തോളം മുന്തിരിപ്പന്തലുകളിൽ പാകമായ മുന്തിരിക്കുലകൾ... 'സോളമന്റെ മുന്തിരിത്തോട്ടം കൾ' ഞങ്ങളെ ആവേശഭരിതരാക്കി. പത്മരാജൻ സിനിമയിലെ ഡയലോഗുകൾ മാറി മാറിയുരുവിട്ട് മുന്നോട്ട്...

സ്മാർട് ഫോണുകളും ക്യാമറയും വിശ്രമിച്ചാതെ മിഴിതുറന്നടച്ചുകൊണ്ടേയിരുന്നു. സ്പീലകാ ലബോററി തെല്ലും തീണ്ടാതെ കുറേ മുന്തിരി വയറ്റിലാക്കി. മുന്തിരിത്തോട്ടത്തിൽ കഴിയാൻ അനുവദിക്കാത്ത വിധിയെ പഴിച്ച് കമ്പം മേട്ടിൽ നിന്നും തിരിച്ച് രാമക്കൽ മേട്ടിലെ കാറ്റാടിപ്പാടത്തേക്ക് നീങ്ങുമ്പോൾ മനസ്സിൽ നിറയെ മുന്തിരി സ്വപ്നങ്ങൾ...

കുന്നിൻമുക്കിൽ തല ഉയർത്തി നിരനിരയായി കാറ്റാടി യന്ത്രങ്ങൾ. ഇന്ത്യയിൽ തന്നെ ഏറ്റവും കൂടുതൽ കാറ്റ് കിട്ടുന്ന സ്പീലമാണിത്. മണിക്കൂറിൽ 45 കിലോമീറ്റർ വേഗതയിൽ ഇവിടെ കാറ്റ് വീശുന്നു. ദൂരക്കാഴ്ചയിൽ ചെറുതായി തൊന്നാമെങ്കിലും ഇരുനൂറ്റമ്പതോളം അടി ഉയരമുള്ള തൂണുകളിൽ എഴുപതടിയിൽ കൂടുതൽ ഉയരമുള്ള മൂന്നിരട്ടുകുളോടു കൂടിയ ഭീമന്മാരാണ് ഓരോ കാറ്റാടിയും.

കാറ്റിന്റെ കടൽ

ഇടുക്കി ജില്ലയിലെ പ്രധാന വിനോദ സഞ്ചാര കേന്ദ്രമാണ് രാമക്കൽമേട്. സമുദ്രനിരപ്പിൽ നിന്ന് 3500 അടി ഉയരത്തിലാണ് ഈ മനോഹര കാഴ്ചയുള്ളത്. ഇത്രയും ഉയരം കീഴടക്കി രാമക്കൽമേടിന്റെ ഉച്ചയിലെത്തിയാൽ തമിഴ് നാടിന്റെ സാമ്പ്രദായിക പൂർണ്ണമായും ആസ്വദിക്കാനാകും. ഒരു സുന്ദരമായ ഫ്രെയിം ഒരുക്കിയ പോലെയാണ് രാമക്കൽമേടുള്ളത്. കാറ്റിൻറെ കടലാണ് രാമക്കൽ മേട്. രാമക്കൽമേട്ടിൽ നിൽക്കുമ്പോൾ നാമനുഭവിക്കുന്നത് കാറ്റിന്റെ പല ഭാവങ്ങളാണ്.

രാമക്കൽ മേട് ഒറ്റ നോട്ടത്തിൽ

വന്യജീവി സങ്കേതങ്ങൾ, അണക്കെട്ടുകൾ, പശുവി
ഘട്ടങ്ങളുടെ ഭാഗമായ ഉയർന്ന മലനിരകൾ എന്നി
വയാൽ സമ്പന്നമായ ഇടുക്കി ജില്ലയിലെ ഒരു ചെറിയ
വീനോദ സഞ്ചാര കേന്ദ്രമാണ് രാമക്കൽമേട്.
തമിഴ് നാട് അതിർത്തിയിലെ കമ്പം താഴ്വരയെ
നോക്കി നിൽക്കുന്ന വലിയൊരു പാറക്കെട്ടാണ്
യഥാർത്ഥത്തിൽ ഇത്. ഏലത്തോട്ടങ്ങൾക്കും ചായ
ത്തോട്ടങ്ങൾക്കും മുകളിൽ വിശാലമായ കുന്നിൻപ
രപ്പിലാണ് കിഴക്കു നോക്കി നിൽക്കുന്ന ഈ
പാറക്കെട്ടുകളുള്ളത്.
ഇതിലൊരു പാറയിൽ വലിയൊരു കാൽപ്പാദത്തിന്റെ
പാട് കാണാം. സീതാസ്നേഹണ കാലത്ത് ഭഗവാൻ
ശ്രീരാമൻ ചവിട്ടിയ പാടാണെന്ന വിശ്വാസത്തിൽ ഈ
സ്ഥലത്തിന് രാമക്കൽമേട് എന്ന പേര് വീണുവത്രേ.

എങ്ങനെ യെത്താം?

എറണാകുളത്ത് നിന്ന് 150 കിലോമീറ്ററും തേക്കടി
യിൽ നിന്ന് 37 കിലോമീറ്ററുമാണ് ഇവിടേക്കുള്ള
ദൂരം. കട്ടപ്പനയിൽ നിന്ന് 20 മിനിറ്റിൽ രാമക്കൽ
മേട്ടിലെത്താം. തേക്കടിയിൽ നിന്നും വടക്കുകിഴ
ക്കായി കുമളി മൂന്നാം റോഡിൽ നെടുങ്കണ്ടത്ത്
നിന്ന് 16 കിലോ മീറ്റർ ഉള്ളിലാണ് ഈ മനോഹര
സ്ഥലം സ്ഥിതി ചെയ്യുന്നത്.

വിൻഡ് എനർജി പ്ലാന്റുകൾ

ഇന്ത്യയിൽ ഏറ്റവുമധികം കാറ്റ് വീശുന്ന സ്ഥലങ്ങ
ളിൽ ഒന്നാണ് രാമക്കൽ മേട്. മണിക്കൂറിൽ ശരാ
ശരി 32.5 കിലോമീറ്റർ വേഗത്തിലാണ് ഇവിടെ കാറ്റ്
വീശുന്നത്. ചില വേളകളിൽ അതിന്റെ പലമടങ്ങ്
വേഗതയിൽ കാറ്റ് വീശുമെത്ര.
പ്രവചനാതീതമാണ് ഇവിടത്തെ കാറ്റും
കാലാവസ്ഥയും. കാറ്റിൽ നിന്നും വൈദ്യുതി
ഉൽപ്പാദിപ്പിക്കുന്ന വിൻഡ് എനർജി ഫാമുകൾ
നിരവധിയാണിവിടെ. സദാ കറങ്ങിക്കൊണ്ടിരി
ക്കുന്ന നിരവധി കാറ്റാടി പ്ലാന്റുകൾ ഇവിടെ കാണാം.
ഇടക്കൊക്കെ ഇത്തരം യാത്രകൾ ആവശ്യമാണെന്ന്
മനസ്സിൽ ഉറപ്പിച്ചാണ് എല്ലാ യാത്രകളുടേയും
മടക്കം. കാണാക്കാഴ്ചകൾ തേടി വീണ്ടും ഇറങ്ങാ
നുള്ള 'ഗുജോസ് പൊടി' പോലെ വേണം ഇതെല്ലാം
ആസ്വദിക്കാൻ...



സ്നേഹത്തോടുകൂടുകൾ, പരിഭവകലമ്പലുകൾ, തീഷ്ണമായ ആശ്ലേഷങ്ങൾ... വിശ്രമമില്ലാതെ വീ
ശിയടിക്കുന്ന കാറ്റ് രാപ്പകലില്ലാതെ നമ്മെ തൊട്ടും, തലോടിയും, ഉലച്ചും ഒപ്പമുണ്ടാകുംചെറിയ
നനവോടെ.

നീളൻ പൂലുകൾ വളർന്ന് വളഞ്ഞു നിൽക്കുന്ന ഒറ്റയടിച്ചാത കയറിവരുമ്പോൾ കുന്നുകൾ
നിറയെ കടും നിറത്തിലുള്ള കാട്ടുപൂക്കൾ കാണാം. മഞ്ഞിനെ വകഞ്ഞ് മാറ്റി മുന്നോട്ട്
നടക്കുമ്പോൾ ദൂരെ താഴ്വാരത്ത് ഗ്രാമങ്ങളും നീണ്ടു പരന്നുകിടക്കുന്ന കൃഷിയിടങ്ങളും കാ
ണാം. വിരലുകളുടെ പ്രെയിമിൽ ഒതുക്കാവുന്ന ദൃശ്യവിസ്മയം.

എപ്പോഴും വീശിയടിക്കുന്ന കുളിർകാറ്റും തമിഴ് നാടിന്റെ വിദൂരക്കാഴ്ചയുമൊക്കെയായി അതി
മനോഹരമായ അനുഭവമാണ് സഞ്ചാരികൾക്ക് രാമക്കൽമേട് സമ്മാനിക്കുന്നത്. വിമാനയാത്ര
യിലെ ആകാശക്കാഴ്ചകൾ പോലെ അതിസുന്ദരമാണ് ഇവിടെ പകലും രാത്രിയുമുള്ള ദൃശ്യ
ങ്ങൾ.

ഇവിടെ നിൽക്കുമ്പോൾ പാലക്കാട്ടെ നെല്ലിയാംപതിയെക്കുറിച്ചോർത്തുപോയി. അവിടെയും കാ
ണാം വിശാലമായ പാടങ്ങൾ, പാലക്കാടിന്റെയും കൊല്ലങ്കോടിന്റെയും വിദൂര സാമ്പ്രദായ സഞ്ചാ
രികൾക്കായി തുറന്നുവയ്ക്കുകയാണ് നെല്ലിയാംപതി. അതുപോലെ നിറവുള്ള കാഴ്ചകളാണ്
ഇടുക്കിയുടെ സ്വന്തം രാമക്കൽമേടും നമുക്ക് സമ്മാനിക്കുന്നത്. മഞ്ഞുകാലത്ത് കൂടുതൽ സു
ന്ദരിയാണ് രാമക്കൽമേട്. കുന്നിൻ ചെരുവുകൾ കടന്ന് മഞ്ഞലകൾ ഒഴുകിയെത്തിക്കൊണ്ടേയി
രിക്കും.

മലയുടെ അറ്റത്ത് താഴ്വാരത്തേക്ക് കണ്ണും നട്ട് ഇരിക്കുന്ന കുറവൻകുറത്തി പ്രതിമയും മഴമുഴ
ക്കി വേഴാമ്പലിന്റെ രൂപത്തിലുള്ള വാഴ്ചവും മനുഷ്യ നിർമ്മിതിയുടെ വിസ്മയങ്ങളായി ഇതിനെ
ല്ലാം പുറമേ...

ജിപ്പ് ഡ്രൈവർ ഷാജിചേട്ടൻ ഡ്രൈവിംഗിൽ ഒരു പുലിയാണ്. ചെങ്കുത്തായ കയറ്റിറക്കങ്ങൾ
അനായാസം അതീവ ശ്രദ്ധയോടെ, അതിലുപരി സാഹസികന്റെ ആവേശത്തോടെ, കൈകാര്യം
ചെയ്ത് രാമക്കൽമേടിന്റെ വേറിട്ട ഉൾക്കാഴ്ചകൾ ഞങ്ങൾക്ക് കാട്ടിത്തന്നുകൊണ്ട് ഷാജിചേട്ടൻ
ഒരു കുന്നിൽ നിന്ന് മറ്റൊന്നിലേക്ക് ജിപ്പ് പായിച്ചുകൊണ്ടിരുന്നത് എത്ര മണിക്കൂർ!

ആമുഷാറയും പേരില്ലാ കുന്നുകളും സാഹസികമായിതന്നെ ഞങ്ങൾ കീഴടക്കി. ഈ കുന്നിൻ മു
കളിൽ നിന്നാലും തമിഴ് നാടിന്റെ വിവിധ ഭാഗങ്ങൾ കാണാം. ഒരു സർവ്വേക്കല്ലിനപ്പുറം ഭാഷയും
സംസ്കാരവും വേഷവും രുചികളും വ്യത്യസ്തമായ ഒരു ജനത. പ്രകൃതിക്കുപോലും അതിർത്തി
ക്കപ്പുറം മറ്റൊരു ഭാവമാണ്.

രാമക്കൽമേട് ഒരാവേശമായി സിരകളിൽ പടർന്നു തുടങ്ങിയപ്പോൾ രാത്രിയുടെ അഴ
കാസ്വദിക്കാൻ കുറവൻകുറത്തി ശിൽപത്തിനു ചുവട്ടിൽ ഞങ്ങൾ വീണ്ടുമെത്തി. കാറ്റി
നൊപ്പം കോടമഞ്ഞ് അരിച്ചിറങ്ങിക്കഴിഞ്ഞിരുന്നു. അതിർത്തിക്കപ്പുറവും ഇപ്പുറവുമുള്ള ഗ്രാ
മങ്ങളിൽ വിളക്കുകൾ അണഞ്ഞു തുടങ്ങിയിരുന്നു. കൂടിന് രാത്രിയുടെ മങ്ങിയ വെളിച്ചവും
നിരന്തരം ഏതെല്ലാമോ നാടുകളിലെ അജ്ഞാതരഹസ്യങ്ങൾ കാതിൽ മന്ത്രിച്ച് മറയുന്ന കാറ്റും
മാത്രം...

സാഹസികതയും മനോഹാരിതയും നിറഞ്ഞ രാമക്കൽമേട് യാത്ര അല്പമൊക്കെ സാഹസി
കതയും വിശാലമായ പ്രകൃതിയുടെ സാന്നിധ്യവും ഇഷ്ടപ്പെടുന്നവരെ ഹരം കൊള്ളിക്കും. മട
ങ്ങും മുൻപ് രാമക്കൽമേട്ടിലേക്ക് നോക്കുമ്പോൾ കോടമഞ്ഞ് കാഴ്ച മറച്ച് ഇടയിൽ വന്നു രാ
മക്കൽമേടിന്റെ ഹൃദയരഹസ്യങ്ങൾ അടുത്ത യാത്രയിൽ പങ്കുവെയ്ക്കാമെന്ന് പറയും പോലെ.
അവിസ്മരണീയമായ ഒരു അനുഭവം മനസ്സിന്റെ കോണിൽ ഒതുക്കിവച്ച് രാമക്കൽമേട്ടിൽ നിന്ന്
വാഗമൺ ലക്ഷ്യമാക്കി വീണ്ടും ഞങ്ങൾ നാലു പെണ്ണുങ്ങളും യാത്ര തുടർന്നു...

CIAL & TAJ

Redefining luxurious travel

Cochin International Airport Limited (CIAL) has once again raised the bar, unveiling the Taj Cochin International Airport, a five-star landmark that promises to redefine luxury travel in Kerala. This strategic initiative, located just 500 meters from the airport terminals, marks a significant step forward in CIAL's vision to integrate world-class infrastructure and hospitality under one roof. Thoughtfully designed to reflect Kochi's culture, every detail—from intricate Kolam patterns to saree-in-

spired decor—immerses you in the spirit of the region. With serene gardens, modern amenities, and exceptional service, the hotel provides a harmonious blend of tradition and contemporary comfort, ensuring a stay that lingers in memory. The Taj Cochin International Airport boasts 111 elegantly appointed rooms and suites, offering discerning travelers a haven of comfort and sophistication. These are rooms with a view—each having a panoramic view of the airport premises. It has signature restaurants, including the renowned House of

Ming, that cater to diverse palates, while expansive banquet and conference facilities make it an ideal destination for business and social gatherings. The hotel also features a state-of-the-art wellness centre, complete with a swimming pool and gymnasium, ensuring guests can rejuvenate and unwind before or after their journey. Speaking at the grand inauguration, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan lauded CIAL's innovative approach, emphasizing the importance of adapting to the evolving needs

of modern travelers. "Providing the best services is not enough in today's world," he stated. "CIAL's meticulous planning and effective marketing strategies, as exemplified by the successful launch of the 0484 Aero Lounge, demonstrate a deep understanding of the market." The '0484' Aero Lounge, launched late last year, has already garnered praise for its "Art of Affordable Luxury," offering a range of amenities at competitive prices. This, coupled with the Taj's premium offerings, ensures that CIAL caters to a di-

verse spectrum of travelers, from budget-conscious leisure seekers to discerning business executives. CIAL Managing Director S. Suhas IAS, echoed the Chief Minister's sentiments, highlighting the project's significance in reinforcing Kerala's position as a global travel destination. "The Taj Cochin International Airport sets new benchmarks in premium hospitality," he said. "This development, along with our ongoing master plan, including terminal expansions, commercial complexes, and green initiatives, will further enhance passenger experiences and solidify CIAL's role as a gateway to India." The inauguration of the Taj hotel is just one facet of CIAL's ambitious master plan. Over the next few years, the airport is poised to undergo a significant transformation, with projects including: Expansion of the International Terminal: To accommodate the growing demand for air travel and enhance passenger flow. Development of Cutting-Edge Commercial Complexes: To create a vibrant and engaging airport experience, offering a range of retail, dining, and entertainment options. Innovative Green Hydrogen Initiatives: To minimize the airport's environmental impact and con-

tribute to a sustainable future. An Exclusive Golf Tourism Venture: To leverage Kerala's natural beauty and attract discerning travelers with a passion for the sport. These initiatives, combined with the airport's focus on digitization, enhanced security systems, and advancements in MRO services, will not only boost regional connectivity but also attract more airlines and position CIAL as a major hub for air travel in India. The success of the Taj Cochin International Airport underscores the potential of public-private partnerships in driving economic growth. By leveraging its land resources strategically and collaborating with renowned hospitality brands like the Taj, CIAL has created a win-win situation, enhancing passenger experience even while generating revenue. Furthermore, the project serves as a model for other airports across the country, demonstrating how innovative infrastructure development can contribute to sustainable tourism and economic growth. As Kerala continues to evolve as a global travel destination, the Taj Cochin International Airport stands as a testament to CIAL's commitment to excellence and its vision for a brighter future. ■



Andhra Pradesh SHOWS THE WAY

Andhra Pradesh bets big on tourism with 'Industry Status' recognition

In a move poised to significantly bolster the State's economy, Andhra Pradesh has accorded 'Industry Status' to its tourism and hospitality sector. This landmark decision, outlined in the Andhra Pradesh Tourism Policy 2024-29, acknowledges tourism's pivotal role in driving economic growth, creating jobs, and fostering regional development. The policy's core objectives centre around incentivizing investments,

nurturing a favorable business environment, enhancing competitiveness, and ensuring the long-term viability of tourism enterprises. The Tourism Policy was released at a 'Tourism Investors' Conclave', jointly organised by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and the AP Chambers of Commerce and Industry Federation in Vijayawada.

Key objectives
The key objectives of industry

status are:

- 1. Incentivize Investments:** Attract significant capital inflows by offering targeted fiscal and non-fiscal incentives.
 - 2. Foster Growth:** Create a favorable business ecosystem to stimulate innovation and excellence in tourism offerings.
 - 3. Improve Competitiveness:** Align with global best practices to position Andhra Pradesh as a premier destination for tourism and hospitality.
 - 4. Sustain Long-Term Development:** Ensure the viability and profitability of tourism enterprises by reducing operational challenges.
- Strategic approach
The strategic approach aims to benefit the tourism sector in multiple ways that may include:
- a. Cost of Doing Business: Fiscal incentives to reduce operational

- costs for Tourism businesses.
 - b. Ease and Speed of Doing Business: Non-fiscal enablers, such as regulatory efficiency, to streamline processes and improve business operations.
 - c. Attracting Investment: One-time incentives, including tax breaks and subsidies, to encourage initial investments in the sector.
 - d. Sustaining Investment: Recurring benefits, such as tax rebates and ongoing operational support, to ensure long-term viability and growth.
- The policy also envisages the following fiscal incentives:

One-time Incentives Stamp Duty

- a. 100% of stamp duty and transfer duty paid by the projects on purchase or lease of land meant for Tourism use will be reimbursed for all categories.

- b. 100% of stamp duty for lease of land /shed/buildings, mortgages and hypothecations will be reimbursed for all categories.

Land Conversion Charges

- a. Private investors shall follow the due approval process for conversion of land for Tourism Infrastructure projects as required by the Revenue Department or Urban Development Authority.
- b. If conversion of land is permitted by the relevant Government authority, Government of Andhra Pradesh will waive 100% of Land Use Conversion charge for all categories.

Quality Certification

- 100% reimbursement of expenses incurred for getting quality certification capped at ₹2 Lakhs for National and ₹10 Lakhs for International Certification for Micro, Small and Medium enterprises.

Capital Subsidy

- a. 25% of the fixed capital investment (FCI) for MSMEs, capped as per below:
 - 1. ₹25 Lakhs for Micro Enterprises in 2 equal annual instalments from the Date of Commencement of Commercial Operations.
 - 2. ₹1.5 Crore for Small Enterprises in 3 equal annual instalments from the Date of Commencement of Commercial Operations.
 - 3. ₹7.5 Crore for Medium Enterprises in four equal annual instalments from the Date of Commencement of Commercial Operations.
 - 4. An Additional Subsidy of 5% capped at ₹10 Lakhs will be provided for Women, SC/ST, and disabled entrepreneurs.
- b. 10% of Fixed Capital Investment (FCI) for Large, Mega and Ultra Mega Tourism Projects, capped at
 - (1) ₹ 10 Crore for Large Tourism Project;
 - (2) ₹ 25 Crore for Mega Tourism Project;



(3) ₹ 40 Crore for Ultra Mega Tourism Projects; and

(4) Incentives shall be disbursed in 5 equal annual instalments from the Date of Commencement of Commercial Operations .

Recurring Incentives

Power

a. Power will be provided to all tourism projects on par with industry rates for all categories

b. Reimbursement of electricity duty for a period of 5 years from the Date of Commencement of Commercial Operations for all categories.

Net SGST

a. 100% of net SGST accrued and realized in the State will be reimbursed for a period of 7 years from the date of commencement of commercial operations or up to realization of 100% fixed capital investment, whichever is earlier for MSMEs

b. 100% of net SGST accrued and realized in the State will be reimbursed for a period of 7 to 15 years on case-to-case basis from the date of commencement of commercial operations or up to realization of 100% fixed capital investment, whichever is earlier for Large, Mega and Ultra Mega projects Employment Subsidy In order to support employment intensive Tourism Projects, it is proposed to incentivize them appropriately, based on Employment-to-Investment (in Crore) (E/I) ratio. Government will issue separate orders indicating categorywise eligible employment subsidies.

Special Incentives

Speed of Doing Business Incentive

a. An additional Capital Subsidy @ 2% of Fixed Capital Investment will be provided for the projects commencing commercial production within one (1) year of the Government Order issued in the name of the project by the Government.

b. An additional Capital Subsidy @ 1% of Fixed Capital Investment will be provided for the projects commencing commercial production

within two (2) year of the Government Order issued in the name of the project by the Government Incentive for Geographic-spread An additional Capital Subsidy @ 5 % of Fixed Capital Investment will be provided for the projects in locations - 'Known but Unexplored Gems' on case-to-case basis.

Utility Services and Property Tax a. The Government will provide essential services like water supply charges, sewage tax, and property tax to tourism-related projects at

industry rates for all categories b. This reduction in operational costs aims to attract investment, lower financial burdens for tourism businesses, and stimulate growth in the sector.

Tailor-Made Benefits

The Government will provide tailor-made benefits to Mega and Ultra Mega projects on a case-by-case basis, considering factors such as the gestation period, innovative nature, locational advan-

tages, the project's contribution to the State's Tourism growth, and its potential to generate large-scale employment or significant revenue for the State.

Overall Cap

All the above incentives shall be limited to 100% of Fixed Capital Investment for each eligible project.

Non-fiscal Incentives

a. Clearances under Single Desk-

All the required clearances will be processed through online Portal under Single Desk within a set-timelines, without any physical touch points.

b. The Investment Facilitation Cell (IFC) set up under the Chairmanship of the District Collector will act as a one-stop solution for investors to obtain necessary clearances.

c. A dedicated Investment Tracker will be developed to monitor and end-to-end facilitation.

d. Destination Management Or-

ganisations (DMOs) will be established to oversee the end-to-end management and promotion of anchor hubs and thematic circuits. These DMOs will operate under aPPP model, ensuring a collaborative approach between the Government and private sector. They will have operational autonomy, with a clear order of processes, to facilitate efficient decision-making and implementation. The funding for these organisations will be sourced from both public and private entities, ensuring sustainable financial support for the effective management and promotion of tourism destinations.

e. Speed of Doing Business: The current framework and processes will be re-evaluated and re-engineered to reduce bureaucratic delays, enhance regulatory frameworks, and streamline administrative procedures. The goal is to enable quicker, more efficient business operations and improve the overall ease of doing business in the State.

Unveiling the Tourism Policy, Andhra Pradesh Tourism Minister Kandula Durgesh said that the AP government is eyeing investments of ₹25,000 crore in PPP mode over the next five years. The government is keen on tapping the potential of temples, adventure, wellness, agri and ecotourism and is willing to extend all possible help to private investors interested in the development projects in the tourism sector, he said.

Welcoming the government's decision FHRAI Andhra State president K. Syama Raju stated: "Andhra Pradesh has taken a giant leap in Tourism and Hospitality. Recognising tourism as an industry, combined with substantial incentives for private investors and a focus on thematic circuits, will elevate the state's appeal to tourists. With its emphasis on sustainability and community empowerment, this policy has the potential to create significant economic and employment opportunities. FHRAI is keen to collaborate with the state government to achieve these ambitious goals." ■





WORLD
TRAVEL &
TOURISM
COUNCIL

'India Poised to Become a Tourism Powerhouse'

India is one of the most beautiful and amazing countries in the world," says World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) President and CEO Julia Simpson, acknowledging the country's historical and cultural significance, even as flags the need for the country to push for sustainable tourism practices, writes **Jyothish R.**

The global tourism industry is experiencing a robust resurgence, and India is set to play a leading role in its future. The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) predicts a period of explosive growth for the Indian tourism sector, forecasting its value will more than double in the next decade. This optimistic outlook was shared by Julia Simpson, WTTC President and CEO, in a recent interview, highlighting India's rich cultural heritage, diverse landscapes, and the government's commitment to sustainable development as key drivers of this expansion. "The travel and tourism sector employs 45 million people in India, and is going to double in its value.

In 10 years, the sector is going to be worth \$523 billion in India, more than double the present size of \$256 billion," Simpson said, emphasizing the sector's significant contribution to the Indian economy. This growth is projected to translate into a substantial increase in employment, with Simpson adding, "In 10 years, the tourism sector in India will be providing jobs to 63 million people." India's allure as a tourist destination is undeniable. "India is one of the most beautiful and amazing countries in the world," Simpson affirmed, acknowledging the country's historical and cultural significance. "Tourists and visitors across the centuries have been attracted to its shores and wonderful cities. India continues to welcome the world with open arms and the Indian hospitality is incredible."

While acknowledging the sector's growth, Simpson also addressed the environmental impact of tourism, particularly in a country as vast and diverse as India. "Tourism represents about 7 per cent



Julia Simpson
President & CEO
World Travel and
Tourism Council (WTTC)

of the Indian economy and in 2019 it was about \$211 billion. Now it is about \$256 billion and gives jobs to 45 million people in India," she explained.

"If you look at the impact of tourism in terms of the greenhouse gas emissions on India, it represents about 5 per cent of all India's greenhouse gas emissions and that's probably about 250 billion kilos of carbon (dioxide) every year. That is actually the biggest greenhouse gas emission in the tourism sector after the US and China."

However, Simpson noted a positive trend: "The good news is that while the tourism sector has been growing, the greenhouse gas emissions haven't been growing as fast," indicating increased efficiency within the sector.

She stressed the importance of sustainable practices, particularly in the aviation sector, stating, "We are also keen to talk to the Indian government to ensure that it is reaching out to the aviation sector to help produce more sustainable aviation fuel because we can't really do tourism without aviation." The government, she said, must

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provide incentives to promote the production of sustainable aviation fuel, saying, "We need the aviation sector. We will have more people travelling by air and we need to do that more sustainably. And the only real opportunity right now is through sustainable aviation fuel. So we really encourage the Indian government to incentivize its

production."

The WTTC engages with the Indian government on a regular basis, raising these crucial issues, Simpson confirmed. "Well, we do meet Indian Ministers on a regular basis, mostly at the big events like the World Travel Market, and I always raise these issues," she said. Simpson also highlighted the diverse employment opportunities within the tourism sector, noting, "The great thing about the travel and tourism sector is that it employs high-end people like engineers, AI experts, technology, experts, financial and marketing experts. We also employ people for whom it may be their first job or it may be an opportunity to lift them out of an informal economy and work in a formal sector."

With nearly 50% of global tourism concentrated in coastal areas, Simpson acknowledged the vulnerability of these regions to climate change. "Almost 50% of global tourism happens near coastal resorts and areas close to the sea," she explained. "People want to see the pristine beaches and go for amazing water sports. However, coastal areas are very vulnerable



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She cited examples of proactive measures taken by other nations, such as Miami's investment in coastal reinforcement and early warning systems, emphasizing the importance of infrastructure resilience. Simpson expressed her vision for India's coastal tourism, saying, "Tourists don't want to see a lot of concrete; what they want to see is the natural India around its coastline, with beautiful natural beaches, flora and fauna." She expressed the WTTC's willingness to collaborate with the Indian government on initiatives to restore natural flora and promote sustainable coastal development.

Decarbonizing road transport is another critical area Simpson highlighted, aligning with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's focus on combating air pollution. "One big message for India is about decar-

bonizing road transport as quickly as possible," she asserted.

"I know Prime Minister Modi has made it one of his top priorities to try and clean up air pollution. And a part of that includes moving away from coal fired plants and investing more in solar and renewable energy. Under PM Modi's leadership, India is going to be one of the most advanced developing economies in the world," Simpson concluded.

The WTTC's predictions paint a promising picture for India's tourism future, emphasizing the sector's potential for economic growth, job creation, and cultural preservation. However, this growth must be carefully managed to ensure sustainability and minimize environmental impact, a challenge that Simpson acknowledges and is actively addressing through dialogue with the Indian government and collaboration with industry stakeholders. (With inputs from PTI)



PAMBAN BRIDGE

A BRIDGE BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE

The newly-constructed Pamban Bridge, which would replace the old bridge commissioned in 1914 by the British, is set to be opened in mid-February, writes Jyothish R.

The azure waters of the Palk Strait, separating the mainland of India from the island of Rameswaram, have long been witness to a remarkable feat of engineering – the Pamban Bridge.

For over a century, the iconic structure has served as a lifeline, connecting the island, revered for its sacred Ramanathaswamy Temple, to the rest of the nation. Now, as India prepares to inaugurate a new, state-of-the-art vertical lift sea bridge alongside its venerable predecessor, the Pamban Bridge is poised to enter a new chapter, promising to further boost connectivity, tourism, and the island's significance.

The original Pamban Bridge, a testament to British engineering prowess, was commissioned in 1914. This cantilever bridge, with its intricate network of steel girders, was a marvel for its time, braving the harsh marine environment and facilitating the movement of people and goods to and from Rameswaram for half-a-century. However, time takes its toll on even the most robust structures. The bridge was damaged in the 1964 Rameswaram cyclone and required extensive repair work. The adjacent road bridge was opened in 1988. Still, the bridge continued to be an integral part of Rameswaram's identity, a landmark recognized across the nation, and a vital artery for pilgrims visiting the holy island.

In recent years, the ageing bridge began to show signs of wear. Severe corrosion, exacerbated by the saline environment, weakened the structure, raising concerns about

its safety and operational efficiency. In December 2022, train services across the bridge were suspended after sensors detected critical levels of corrosion, bringing an end to an era of rail connectivity across the Palk Strait. The suspension highlighted the urgent need for a modern, reliable alternative. Recognizing the importance of Rameswaram and the necessity of restoring rail connectivity, the Indian Railways embarked on the ambitious project of constructing a new Pamban Bridge. Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the foundation stone for the new bridge in November 2019, marking the beginning of a new chapter in the island's connectivity. The project, undertaken by the Rail Vikas Nigam Limited (RVNL), aimed to create a structure that not only addressed the safety concerns of the old bridge but also incorporated modern engineering advancements to enhance efficiency and longevity.

The new Pamban Bridge is thus a marvel of modern engineering. Unlike its predecessor, the new bridge features a vertical lift span,

Unlike its predecessor, the new bridge features a vertical lift span, a 72.5-metre long, 16-metre wide, and 550-tonne section that can be raised automatically up to 17 metres, allowing ships and other vessels to pass through.

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Improved connectivity will significantly enhance the travel experience, making it easier for people to access the sacred Ramanathaswamy Temple and other attractions on the island.

vessels to pass through. This eliminates the limitations of the old bridge, which had a less flexible system for accommodating marine traffic. The vertical lift mechanism not only enhances navigational efficiency but also ensures smoother and faster rail traffic. The 2.08-kilometre long bridge, built parallel to the existing structure, is also designed to accommodate higher train speeds, reducing travel time to Rameswaram and improving overall connectivity. The bridge is expected to last for at least 100 years, a testament to the advanced materials and construction techniques employed in its creation.

RVNL has emphasized the robustness of the new structure, highlighting the 250-micron level coat applied to protect against corrosion, a concern that plagued the old bridge. They have also stated that the design, while innovative, has been thoroughly vetted and approved by leading institutions like IIT Madras and IIT Bombay. The construction of the new Pamban Bridge, with a project cost of Rs 535 crore, faced some delays, primarily due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the project team persevered, overcoming challeng-

es and ensuring the successful completion of this critical infrastructure project. Following rigorous testing and inspection by the Commissioner of Railway Safety, the bridge has now been cleared for operation. Trial runs with empty train rakes have been successfully conducted, demonstrating the smooth functioning of the new bridge and its readiness to handle regular train traffic. Now, the inauguration of the new Pamban Bridge is eagerly awaited, not just by the residents of Rameswaram but also by millions of pilgrims and tourists who

visit the island each year. The improved connectivity will significantly enhance the travel experience, making it easier for people to access the sacred Ramanathaswamy Temple and other attractions on the island. The bridge is expected to give a fillip to tourism, boosting the local economy and creating new opportunities for growth. The Pamban Bridge is more than just a structure of steel and concrete; it is a symbol of connection, a bridge between the mainland and the island, between the past and the future. The new bridge, with its modern design and advanced features, carries forward the legacy of its predecessor, while also ushering in a new era of enhanced connectivity and progress for Rameswaram. It stands as a testament to India's engineering capabilities and its commitment to developing world-class infrastructure. As the first vertical lift sea bridge in India, the Pamban Bridge is set to become a landmark in the Indian travel and tourism landscape, attracting visitors from far and wide and further cementing Rameswaram's position as a prominent destination on the map. ■



Thai AirAsia to launch direct Kochi-Phuket flights in April

Thai AirAsia (FD) is set to launch a non-stop flight between Kochi (COK) and Phuket (HKT) starting in April 2025, enhancing connectivity between India and Thailand. The airline plans to operate the new route thrice weekly on Wednesdays, Fridays, and Sundays, utilizing its Airbus A320 aircraft. AirAsia had come out with a special promotional fare starting from only 3,690 Thai Baht (THB) one way to celebrate the launch. The promotional offer is valid for travel between April 11 to October 14. Mr. Santisuk Klongchaiya, CEO of Thai AirAsia, said: "AirAsia sees huge potential in the Indian market and we are ready to push with our route expansion, not only from Bangkok, but also from Phuket that is already a top destination for Indian travelers. The airline looks forward to connecting more



visitors from India with even more direct trips to Phuket. "We are ready to fully pursue the Indian market this year as demand continues to rise. For Kochi, we will now offer a direct route from Bangkok (Don Mueang), which has already been well received with an average load factor of 90 percent, and from Phuket, which we expect to be just as popular amongst travelers."

Phuket is a popular destination for Indian travelers with its beautiful sea views, plentiful seafood, and array of unique local features. Famed among Thai and international tourists, the new direct flight to Phuket will make visiting significantly more convenient for travelers from India, an AirAsia release said. AirAsia currently flies to 13 Indian cities via 16 routes, from Bangkok (Don Mueang) to Kolkata, Chennai, Jaipur, Kochi, Bengaluru, Gaya, Lucknow, Ahmedabad, Guwahati, Visakhapatnam, Tiruchirappalli, Hyderabad and Delhi, and from Phuket to Chennai, Kolkata and now Kochi. Recently, the airline earned recognition as the only Thai airline ranked among the top five most punctual airlines in the Asia-Pacific region in 2024, as assessed by Ciri-um. ■



U.S. Tourism Rise of the Indian Traveler

Indian tourists are fuelling U.S. tourism's revival after a sharp fall in the number of visitors from China, Japan and South Korea, writes Harishankar

The aroma of freshly brewed chai wafts through the lobby of a bustling hotel in downtown Chicago. A group of Indian travelers, fresh off a flight from Mumbai, exchange smiles and settle into plush armchairs. This scene, once a rarity, is now a common sight across the United States, as Indian tourists emerge as a key driver of the nation's tourism resurgence. Gone are the days when U.S. tour-

ism relied heavily on visitors from East Asia. While those numbers have dipped, a new wave of travelers is arriving – vibrant, curious, and eager to experience the best of America. The Indian traveler, fueled by a burgeoning economy and a growing desire for global exploration, is leading this charge. "It's a remarkable shift," observes Laura Lee Blake, CEO of the Asian American Hotel Owners Association, which represents the owners

of 60% of hotels in the U.S. "Just a few years ago, Indian travelers were a niche market. Now, they are a significant force, reshaping the very landscape of U.S. tourism." This isn't just about numbers. It's about a cultural exchange, a vibrant tapestry woven from diverse threads. Indian travelers are venturing beyond the iconic landmarks, seeking authentic experiences that go beyond the typical tourist trail. They're explor-

ing hidden gems in smaller cities, immersing themselves in local communities, and savoring the unique flavors of American cuisine. Data from the U.S. National Travel and Tourism Office (NTTO) reveal that nearly 1.9 million Indians visited the U.S. in 2024, marking an impressive 48% increase from 2019 levels. The surge in Indian tourists comes as a result of several factors, including a 50% jump in business visas and a 43.5% increase in leisure travel. The growing number of Indians visiting the U.S. is helping fill the gap left by a decline in visitors from countries like China, Japan, and South Korea, whose numbers

have decreased substantially compared to pre-pandemic levels.

Adapting to Indian preferences

In response to this boom in Indian visitors, U.S. hotels and travel companies are adapting to cater specifically to the needs and cultural preferences of Indian travelers. Leading hotel chains and hospitality groups are introducing a range of amenities designed to make Indian tourists feel more at home during their stay. These include elements of Indian cuisine and Indian TV channels in the rooms to provide familiar entertainment

Indian tourists are venturing into smaller U.S. cities like Chicago and Houston, diversifying the nation's tourism recovery and offering new experiences.

options for guests. These initiatives are seen as essential to attract more visitors from India, which is poised to become one of the largest outbound tourism markets in the coming years.

"It's important to make Indian travelers feel welcomed and appreciated. A little bit of home, like chai and samosas, goes a long way," says Blake.

India's increasing outbound travel is supported by a variety of factors. The country's rising middle class, fueled by economic growth, has greater disposable income, making international travel more accessible. Additionally, India has seen a substantial increase in the availability of direct flights to the U.S., with airlines ramping up services to accommodate the demand. These flights, combined with the growing wealth of Indian travelers, have contributed to the rising number of tourists visiting the U.S.

In contrast, tourism from East Asia has faced a decline. The NTTO data shows that visitor volumes from China, Japan, and South Korea dropped by 44.5%, 50.8%, and 23.9%, respectively, in comparison to 2019. This trend reflects a shift in travel patterns, with more travelers from East Asia choosing regional destinations in Southeast Asia over long-haul flights to the U.S. Indian tourists are not just visiting major cities like New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. There has been a noticeable shift



toward exploring smaller cities and secondary markets across the country. U.S. destinations like Chicago, Houston, and even less traditional places are seeing a significant rise in Indian visitors. This shift is helping spread the recovery of U.S. tourism to a broader range of destinations, as Indian travelers look to experience diverse aspects of American culture beyond the usual metropolitan hubs.

A Bright Future Beckons

The surge in Indian travelers is not going unnoticed. Travel companies are capitalizing on this burgeoning market with innovative offerings. Viator, a TripAdvisor company, reported a staggering increase in U.S. bookings from Indian tourists in 2024 – a surge of more than 50% compared to the previous year, a remarkable tripling compared to 2019 figures. Airbnb, a leader in the home-shar-

ing space, has also witnessed a dramatic rise in bookings from Indian travelers. Dave Stephenson, Airbnb's Chief Business Officer, observed a significant increase in nights booked by Indian travelers in the U.S. over recent years, exceeding 45%. This surge, he explained, reflects a growing demand for authentic, immersive travel experiences.

"Indian tourists are seeking more than just a place to stay," Stephenson emphasized. "They're looking for personalized journeys, opportunities to delve deep into local culture, and experiences that extend far beyond the typical tourist trail. This shift is fundamentally reshaping the way the U.S. tourism industry operates." With the influx of Indian visitors exploring the diverse tapestry of the United States, the tourism industry is poised for a period of sustained growth. Hotels, airlines, and travel agencies are proactively adapting

to cater to the evolving needs and preferences of this dynamic market segment.

From offering unique cultural amenities like Indian tea and cuisine to curating bespoke travel experiences, businesses across the U.S. are embracing the changing landscape of tourism. This proactive approach ensures that the U.S. remains a top destination for Indian travelers, contributing significantly to the nation's ongoing tourism recovery.

As we enter 2025, the positive trajectory of Indian tourism in the U.S. shows no signs of slowing down. With increasing travel budgets, enhanced flight connectivity, and an insatiable appetite for new and exciting experiences, the number of Indian visitors is projected to continue its upward climb. This dynamic segment is poised to become an integral and indispensable component of the U.S. tourism ecosystem for years to come. ■

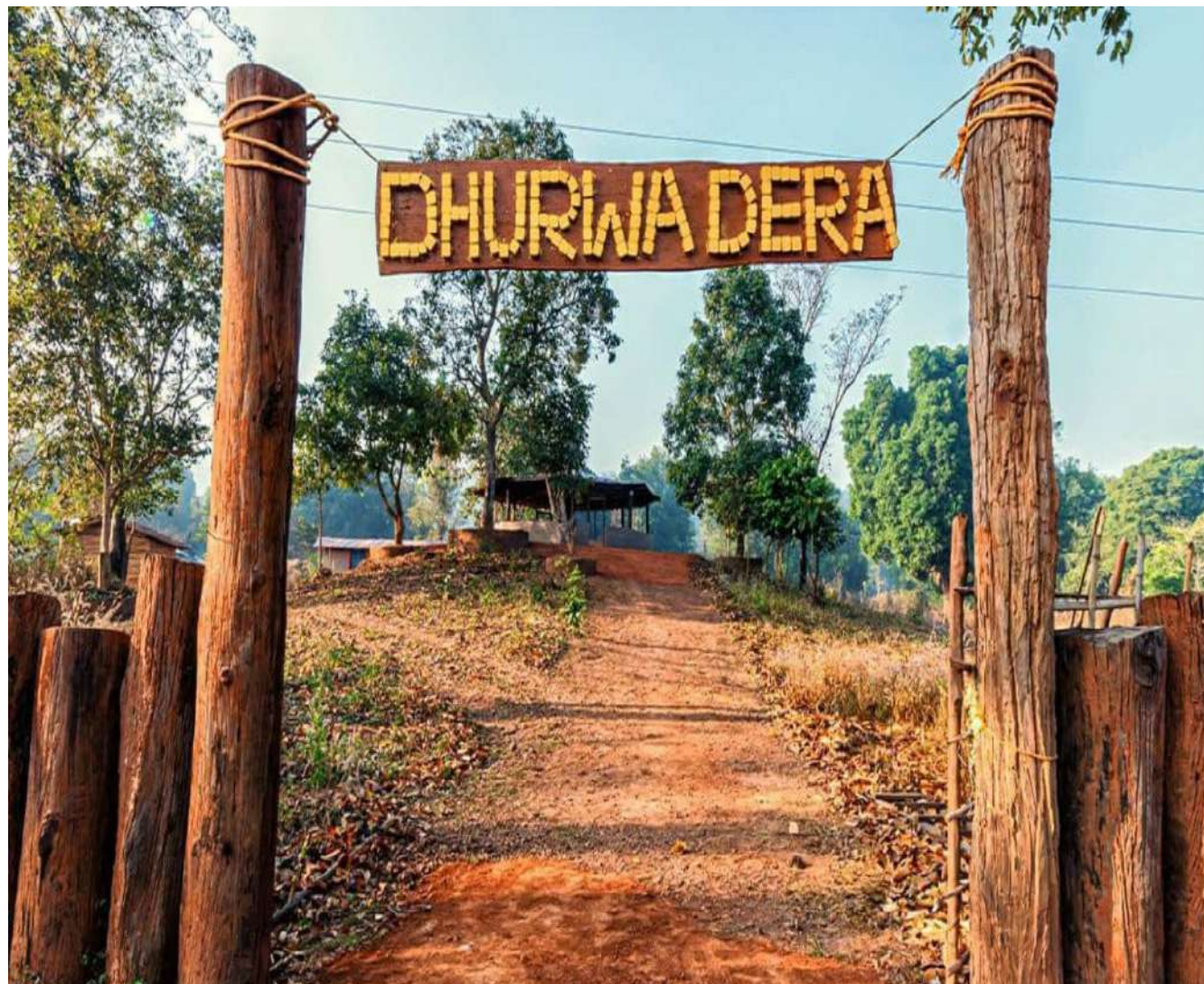


Global honour for **Paragon Restaurant**

Paragon Restaurant is one of the two Indian restaurants chosen by Taste Atlas, the popular food and travel guide, among world's top 10 most legendary restaurants. Paragon is ranked 5th while Peter Cat in Kolkata is ranked 7th. The list was published as part of the Taste Atlas Awards 2024-25. Indian cuisine has also received mentions in several other categories, including top spots among the best breads, best vegetable dishes, best food regions and best food cities in the world. Paragon Restaurant was established in Kozhikode (Calicut) in 1939. It went on to open outposts in other regions in India and in Dubai. Initially, the restaurant used to serve "a fusion of the Malabar region's Moplah and Thiyya cuisines". It now has a more expansive menu. Its biryani remains the most iconic dish. Taste Atlas has also named Punjab the 7th "Best Food Region" in

the world. The first three positions have been secured by Campania (Italy), Peloponnese (Greece) Emilia-Romagna (Italy), Sichuan (China) and Cyclades (Greece). According to Taste Atlas, the rankings are based on 477,287 valid ratings for 15,478 foods in its database. The regions on the list have been arranged according to the highest average scores they have earned. Some of the must-try dishes in Punjab recommended by Taste Atlas are Amritsari kulcha, Tikka, Shahi paneer, Tandoori murg and Saag paneer. Maharashtra also figures in the list at 41st rank, with Taste Atlas noting widely consumed dishes such as misal pav, aamras, shrikhand and pav bhaji. West Bengal is ranked 54th with popular delicacies like chingri malai curry, shorshe ilish, ras malai, and kathi roll finding special mention.

The 59th position has been secured by "Southern India" as a single entry. Taste Atlas has cited masala dosa, madras curry, Hyderabad biryani, etc., as South Indian must-taste specialties. Two Indian delicacies have topped the year-end list of Best Vegetable Dishes in the World. Malai kofta made with crumbled paneer and potatoes and dipped in a rich, creamy sauce has been ranked first in the list of top vegetable dishes worldwide. The second Indian vegetable dish on the list is Misal pav, a renowned speciality from Maharashtra. Apart from Indian dishes on the global Taste Atlas list, Mumbai has secured the fifth spot in the "100 Best Food Cities in the World" ranking. The four cities ahead of it are Naples, Milan, Bologna, and Florence -- all in Italy. Following Mumbai in the top 10 are Rome, Paris, Vienna, Turin, and Osaka. ■



Chhattisgarh village in UN World Tourism List

Dhudmaras, a small village in Chhattisgarh's Bastar district, has been selected by the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) for its Best Tourism Village Upgrade Programme, highlighting its potential for sustainable tourism development. As many as 55 villages from across the world have received the recognition of Best Tourism Village under the UNWTO initiative. Dhudmaras belongs to another set of 20 villages which were chosen for the Best Tourism Village Upgrade Programme, under which they will receive support to enhance

tourism infrastructure, promote cultural heritage, and improve the quality of life for residents. Dhudmaras is situated in the heart of Kanger Valley National Park. Nestled in dense forests with the Kanger River flowing through it, Dhudmaras offers an idyllic setting for eco-tourism. It is known for its natural beauty, biodiversity, traditional lifestyle, and local cuisine. "Dhudmaras was selected from more than 260 applications from more than 60 countries for the upgrade programme because of a clear demonstration of its cultural and natural richness and high po-

tential to become an outstanding example as a top-tier rural destination," said Vivek Acharya, MD of Chhattisgarh Tourism Board. The Union Ministry of Tourism had awarded four villages, including Dhudmaras, in the Adventure Tourism category of the Best Tourism Village competition in early 2024. Residents of Dhudmaras offer homestays and other accommodation facilities, and also serve as guides, showing tourists around the area as well as offering traditional food, camping, trekking, and bird watching. ■



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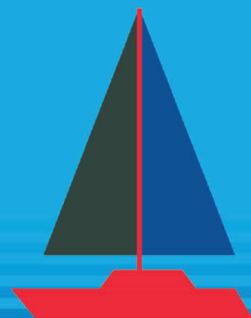
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