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Thomas Cook brand name in India to stick

Acquiring rights to retain brand name a “good deal” in the wake of Thomas Cook’s collapse, says Thomas Cook India’s chief

By Xinyi Liang-Pholsena

Some three months after expressing his indecision as to whether or not to retain the Thomas Cook brand name in the wake of Thomas Cook UK’s fall, Madhven Menon, chairman & managing director of Thomas Cook India (TCIL), is “absolutely elated” that he had listened to his heart to “hold on to the brand”.

TCIL earlier this week sealed an agreement with AlixPartners, Thomas Cook UK’s appointed special managers, to acquire the rights to the Thomas Cook brand in India, Sri Lanka and Mauritius

for a one-time payment of 1.5 million pounds (US\$2 million).

Instead of paying an annual royalty fee of Rs20 million until 2024, which would amount to Rs100 million over the five-year period, the agreement ensures TCIL the rights in perpetuity to use the Thomas Cook name on a royalty-free basis, while also preventing other possible new entrants into these South Asian markets using the brand name.

“I think I’ve got a good deal

considering the circumstances,” Menon told TTG India in a phone interview. “The most important thing is that the November 2024 deadline (the annual brand license agreement that TCIL was previously contracted to with Thomas Cook UK) no longer exists, and there’s no more time pressure on how we want to refresh the brand.”

The travel chief also sees this new acquisition of rights as potential savings made for TCIL,



Menon: time and costs savings

as the detailed roadmap that the company previously laid out in preparation for a potential name change is no longer needed.

Moving forward, Menon believes there still remain plenty of opportunities to use the storied travel service brand name that is Thomas Cook, which has operated in India for 138 years.

Asked if China-based Fosun’s recent announcement to acquire the global rights to the Thomas Cook name would affect the branding and identity of TCIL, Menon said he did not foresee both companies to “interfere or come in the way of each other” as they both operate in different markets.

While they both share the use of the Thomas Cook name, he said the branding, logos and identities would be different between the two companies, although he foresees that “we would need to sit down with Fosun and try to understand what their plans are”.

The last few months, however, have brought “many ups and

downs” for Menon. Not only did he have to reinforce the separation of identities between TCIL and the erstwhile Thomas Cook UK, he also had to grapple with the “trust deficit” in the travel marketplace following the collapse of Cox & Kings and Jet Airways in India.

But all these “one-season impacts” shall pass, Menon stated, as he projected the uncertainty and confidence plunge that characterised 2019 would likely fade away in 2020. Once traveller confidence in tour operators picks up, TCIL and other major players are set to benefit from the vacuum left from Cox & Kings’ fall, he added.

While 2019 has been “a mixed bag”, Menon affirmed that purchasing the branding rights for Thomas Cook in India, Sri Lanka and Mauritius was one of the best business decisions he has made.

“This is probably my proudest achievement in the 20 years of my career (at Thomas Cook),” he declared.

India riding on experiential travel boom

By Pamela Chow

To step up greater awareness of its vast offerings in the South-east Asian markets, India’s travel operators are joining forces with India’s Ministry of Tourism (MOT) to promote lesser-known experiences in the country.

The majority of travel agents in South-east Asia currently sell tours focusing on the Golden Triangle, the Himalayas, Rajasthan, Ladakh and Kerala, but “more and more agents are growing interested in other places to visit around the year in India”, observed Pronab Sarkar, managing director, Swagatam Tours.

He shared: “With the new e-visa and fee reduction (for immigration), more and more people are now interested in coming to India. In September, we brought a group of 12 from Singapore to Ladakh, and now they’ve booked another tour next year for 22. They liked it so much that they’re bringing their friends and relatives.”

As interest in India rises, local operators are taking the opportunity to push more diversified products. For instance, Swagatam Tours is hawking authentic activities such as village visits and dining with a local family, and religious tourism specialist

Lotus Trans Travel is spreading the word about luxury sleeper trains that traverse India.

Lotus Trans Travel general manager (sales), J Jeyendran, told TTG India: “Buddhism tours have always been popular among Singaporeans and Malaysians, but not many people know about the luxury trains. They can sleep overnight and dine in a luxurious cabin, and it’s a great way to experience India.”

To extend their outreach to South-east Asian agencies, these tour operators participated in an Incredible India trade roadshow that made its rounds in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok in November.

“South-east Asia is an important market for us because of its growing tourism (volume) and affluence in the past couple of decades. We want many more (South-east Asian travellers) to travel to India,” shared Rupinder Brar, additional director general, MOT, Government of India.

However, the lack of awareness of its

diverse attractions is a primary challenge the country is grappling with, confided Brar. She said: “Travellers who want to

visit India can feel at a loss as to where to start and where to go. The feedback that we get from a lot of people is that one visit (to India) is not enough. The challenge is how to strategically pitch the right products for the right customers.”

Brar added that India is also seeing increasing interest in cruising, as well as golf tourism with the opening of more resorts and clubs across the country. The Incredible India roadshow is therefore part of the MOT’s strategy to widen India’s presence in South-east Asia.

Next year will bring big plans for the destination, with the International Buddhist Conclave set to attract traveller interest from the region when it takes place from late September to early October. Brar revealed that the local operators are working to “try some mixing of itineraries” with the event.

India to promote lesser-known attractions in South-east Asia, beyond major tourist spots like the Himalayas (pictured)



Brar: SE Asia key source market

Eye on the regional pie

India turns to SE Asia, China to boost inbound tourist arrival numbers



India eyes more regional tourists; Chinese tourists at Manikarnika Ghat pictured

By Rohit Kaul

As India looks to double its international tourist arrivals to 20 million in the com-

ing years, it is putting a stronger focus on courting visitors from Asia in order to meet the target.

A section of the trade feels that India should adopt a more aggressive approach in promoting the country in regional markets like South-east Asia and China, while not losing sight of its traditional feeder sources like the US and Europe.

“I always believe that we need a two-pronged strategy for inbound tourism. We need to focus on our core markets of the UK, Germany, the US and Russia, and double our business from these markets,” said Dipak Deva, managing director, Travel Corporation (India).

“At the same time, we need to see which other markets we should target. China is a great market that we should focus on, apart from our other neighbouring markets,” he stated.

Subhash Goyal, chairman, STIC Tavel Group, agreed: “Outbound markets like China, Malaysia and Indonesia should be an integral part of our international marketing to enhance inbound tourist arrival figures.”

Despite China’s booming outbound tourism, the number of Chinese tourists

visiting India reached only 247,000 in 2017, a mere two per cent of the total 10.2 million foreign tourist arrivals that year, according to data from the Ministry of Tourism (MOT).

The MOT is hence looking at strategies to significantly boost tourist arrivals from China. A Chinese tourism delegation recently visited the country to engage with its Indian counterparts on ways to tap the Chinese outbound market, while the ministry has in the past conducted roadshows in Chinese cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Wuhan and Guangzhou.

Meanwhile, the private sector has embarked on its own efforts to attract more travellers from the region.

“We on our part are participating in tradeshows in China and South-east Asia to explore opportunities with trade partners there. We have also come up with brochures and other marketing materials in Chinese,” said Arun Anand, managing director, Midtown Travels.

Nakul Anand, chairman, Federation of Associations in Indian Tourism & Hospitality, stressed “the importance of the multibillion dollar South-east Asian travel market”, which is driven by a rising middle class with a young population that is keen to explore the world.

“We need to understand the aspirations of South-east Asian tourists and market India accordingly,” he urged.

Brand USA to grow SE Asia, India markets

By Kenneth Goh

South-east Asia remains an integral market for Brand USA, the destination marketing organisation for the US, as the company looks to further grow their tourist numbers from the region.

Inbound arrivals from South-east Asia to the US totalled 810,000 in 2018, and is slated to grow by 44 per cent to 1.2 million by 2023. This is also bolstered by increasing air connections, with Singapore Airlines having launched non-stop flights from Singapore to Seattle in September 2019, on top of flying direct to New York and Los Angeles.

Speaking to *TTG India* on the sidelines of the South-east Asia Travel Exchange at ITB Asia, Brand USA’s Asia strategy advisor Jason Pacheco said: “If we are looking at where the new businesses are coming from, it’s Asia and we have to build a strong part of our strategy around it.”

Pacheco also hopes to attract more corporate incentives from the region.

One of Brand USA’s strategies for the South-east Asian market is developing travel products that are tailored to travellers.

Brand USA’s senior global trade devel-



Brand USA’s representatives Jason Pacheco and Louis Lu says South-east Asia remains a key source market for the company

opment manager Louis Lu said: “We are not trying to sell packages, but are putting forth experiences and ideas for tour operators to tailor (their packages) to the requirements of their customers.”

Besides South-east Asia, Brand USA is also keen to tap the Indian tourism market. Pacheco said: “India is one of the fastest growing travel markets in the world with (an estimated) 50 million outbound tourists by 2020. There is also a lot of stopover arrivals there. The US government also has a good relationship with India’s government, which (paves the way for) establishing economic business that includes tourism (between the two countries). Plus, India has a mainly English-speaking audience.”

Marriott seals six-hotel deal with Prestige Group for India expansion



The upcoming W Bengaluru will be India’s third W-branded property after W Goa (pictured) and the slated opening of W Mumbai in 2022

Marriott International and Indian real estate firm Prestige Group have signed agreements to open six new hotels across India.

Under these agreements, Prestige Group will build new hotels bearing the W, JW Marriott, Tribute Portfolio and Moxy brands across India’s Southern belt, representing nearly 1,000 rooms.

The six properties in the pipeline include the 185-key W Bengaluru (opening in 2025), the 102-room Tribute Portfolio Resort Bengaluru (opening in 2021), the 32-key Tribute Portfolio Hotel Kochi Maradu (opening in 2022), the 299-room resort JW Marriott Bengaluru

Prestige Golfshire Resort & Spa (opening in 2022), as well as the 125-room Moxy Chennai and 200-room Moxy Bengaluru (both opening in 2024) – of which the latter two will mark the millennial-oriented Moxy brand’s debut in India.

“This agreement marks a new chapter in our plan to expand in India, a critical growth market for Marriott International where we currently have 120 hotels across 16 brands. We are especially thrilled to have signed two Moxy locations – which will introduce our 17th brand in South Asia,” said Rajeev Menon, president, Asia Pacific (excluding Greater China), Marriott International.



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India gains ground as key market for the Maldives

By Feizal Samath

A combination of several positive factors including endorsement from Bollywood celebrities, growing air connectivity between the two countries, and aggressive promotion, has led to a surge in Indian arrivals to the Maldives, culminating in the powerful South Asian neighbour becoming its second largest source market.

While China reigns as the Maldives' top source market, India overtook Italy as the second largest source to record 82,140 arrivals in 1H2019, compared to 41,082 in the same 2018 period and reflecting a near 100 per cent increase year-on-year from 90,472 arrivals for the whole of 2018.

According to Thoyyib Mohamed, managing director of the Maldives Marketing and PR Corporation – the country's main state tourism promotion agency – the appointment of the new government in the Maldives has brought about the launch of aggressive destination promotion campaigns in India and elsewhere.

As well, the commencement of new services from Indian carriers, IndiGo and GoAir, is also driving the spike in arrivals from the Indian market, he said, adding to existing scheduled flights to the Maldives operated by major airlines

such as Air India and SpiceJet.

The country's tourism marketing budget has tripled to US\$6.7 million in 2019 from US\$2.2 million in 2018, following calls by the industry for greater destination promotion efforts, given the proliferation of new resorts opening over the last two years.

Dillip Rajakarier, CEO of Minor Hotel Group, which owns the Anantara and Niyama resorts in the Maldives, believes that the surge in numbers from India is driven by increased air connectivity, which enhances the Maldives' value proposition to budget travellers attracted by the growing room supply in the three- to four-star categories as well as local guesthouses.

"At the luxury end of the market, we have also seen significant increases of 26 per cent in guests from India," he said.

A current major trend attracting more Indians to the Maldives, according to Andrew Ashmore, CCO at Coco Collection Hotels & Resorts/Sunland Hotels, is Indian travellers wanting to emulate Bollywood stars in their social media sharing of holidays in the Maldives.

Furthermore, there is also growing spending power among the Indian middle classes, he observed.

IndiGo becomes IATA member



IndiGo becomes member of global airline body IATA

India-based LCC IndiGo has joined global airline body IATA as a member, as the airline plans for global expansion, according to a report by The Economic Times.

The carrier's move follows its recent entry into Vietnam, Myanmar, China and Saudi Arabia, as well as its largest-ever order for 300 Airbus aircraft.

"This membership will help IndiGo align to global practices developed by IATA and will further strengthen the airline's partnership portfolio," the re-

port quoted a media statement as saying.

"IndiGo is our fourth member from India – a market with huge potential and many challenges. We look forward to working with the IndiGo team to help shape industry standards, best practices and policies that ensure the safe, efficient and sustainable growth of aviation in India and globally," Alexandre de Juniac, IATA's director general & CEO, said in a statement.



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Scaling new heights

A new crop of attractions and hotels, plus an upcoming mega event, is reframing the Middle East – traditionally regarded as transit hubs – as a desirable holiday destination, with the Asian market a prime target. By **Marissa Carruthers**

Home to several major transit hubs between Asia-Pacific and Europe, the Middle East is pushing hard to change its reputation from a stopover spot to a standalone travel destination.

Several Middle Eastern cities already offer transit visas for passengers passing through to extend their trip and spend more time in the destinations. In 2017, a free transit visa for travellers with a layover of five to 96 hours (four days) in Doha was extended to all nationalities. Abu Dhabi offers a 14-day transit visa, and Dubai offers a 96-hour stopover visa.

While the region is still predominantly regarded as a transit destination, perceptions are shifting with the launch of new attractions and hotels, as well as an increase in flights and marketing campaigns, observed industry players at the Arabian Travel Market (ATM) in Dubai in April.

A new roster of attractions are also helping to fan travel interest to the Middle East. For example, the Louvre Abu Dhabi

opened in November 2017 as the largest art museum in the Arabian peninsula.

Expectations are high that the Expo 2020 Dubai, a six-month mega event that will see a diverse array of activities, entertainment and events take place at a 438ha purpose-built site, will boost the region's profile and attract more visitors into the future, John Williams, director of business development at Al Hadaf Travel & Tourism in Dubai told TTG India.

Said Williams: "We expect Expo 2020 to increase traffic. We are already seeing very strong interest from India and we are trying to (conduct more promotion in) Asia. Expo 2020 will play an important role in raising the UAE's profile in these destinations and we expect to see a boost (in Asian arrivals) on the back of it."

Yasser Moussa, deputy general manager at Al Bustan Centre and Residence in Dubai, said Expo 2020 is already proving to be a game changer. "We are already starting to feel the positive effects of Expo 2020 and are receiving a lot of big enquir-

ies looking at longer stays of up to six nights. We expect this to be maintained with an increase in tourists after the expo," he remarked.

Warner Bros World Abu Dhabi, which opened last year on Yas Island, as well as the existing Ferrari World, are especially well received among Asian families, according to Marina Cipriano, general manager of Experience Hub (Yas Island's trade arm). Upcoming attractions such as Sea-World Abu Dhabi and a Warner Brothers' hotel are set to elevate Yas Island's popularity among the Asian market further, she added.

At the same time, the growing roster of attractions and visitor-friendly policies appear to have the combined effect of encouraging longer stays from the Asian markets.

Cipriano noted: "From Asian countries, a lot of people currently stay in the UAE for three to five days. Many will spend time in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, and include Yas Island in (their itineraries). It

seems to be a key draw for tourists from Asia, especially China and India."

Not only is the average length of stay for Asian travellers increasing, Cipriano also observed that seven-day integrated packages are now becoming more popular.

Similarly for Moussa, China is emerging as a strong market, as Al Bustan has recorded healthy bookings between October and April, peaking for Chinese New Year in January 2020. He noted too that interest from South-east Asia is growing, with the UAE appealing as an "all-round destination".

He added: "(The UAE) is a great place for families and shopping. You have the beaches, desert, entertainment and world-class attractions. We are now seeing people stay for an average of three to four nights."

Meanwhile, as more Asian hospitality companies expand overseas and introduce familiar homegrown hotel brands to Arabian shores, they also help to bring the Middle East onto the radar of Asian travellers.

Thailand's Centara Hotels & Resorts recently opened Centara West Bay Residences and Suites in the Qatari capital of Doha, and is poised to roll out a second 509-key Centara Grand property in the city before 1Q2020.

Markland Blaiklock, Centara's deputy chief executive, said: "We want to develop in the region as we see a great opportunity. (The Middle East) is the gateway between two continents, and it has an exotic nature. Taking buggy rides to bash the dunes isn't something you can do anywhere." It

Furthermore, the appetite of the Qatari government to push the destination on the global stage has also made the country an attractive investment opportunity, he added. The country already hosts an annual tennis tournament, and is gearing up to host the FIFA World Cup in 2022.

Said Blaiklock: "We realise Qatar is still in the early stages of development, not unlike Thailand a few decades ago. Qatar has two million annual visitors so it will take some time (to grow more arrivals), but the elements for success are there."

Likewise, Thai hospitality company Dusit International also made its first foray into Qatar in April, opening a 264-key property in the heart of West Bay.

Gerhard Stutz, general manager at Dusit Doha Hotel, said: "Qatar is one of the fastest-growing countries in the world in terms of tourism, and its reputation as a destination of choice is only set to be cemented further when the FIFA World Cup is held here in 2022."

As huge investment continues to pour into the region, coupled with stabilising political climes and constant rejuvenation, the industry remains hopeful of the potential the Middle East holds as a leisure and business destination for Asian travellers.

The Middle East looks to revamp its reputation from transit hub to desirable destination; Dubai skyline and busy highway pictured



We expect Expo 2020 to increase traffic. We are already seeing very strong interest from India and we are trying to (conduct more promotion in) Asia.

John Williams
Director of business development,
Al Hadaf Travel & Tourism

Getting a great show on the road

The Emirate is determined to make Expo 2020 an unforgettable, record-breaking event on many levels.

By **Xinyi Liang-Pholsena**

With just a year to its launch, Expo 2020 Dubai stakeholders are leaving no stone unturned in promoting the city for “the world’s greatest show” that will be held from October 20, 2020 to April 10, 2021.

Sumathi Ramanathan, director of destination marketing at Expo 2020, hopes the six-month-long mega event will be a showcase of “the Olympics of culture, innovation, design and human excellence” and position Dubai as “a destination with a purpose”.

Expo 2020 is also set to be “a record breaking expo” in many parameters, Ramanathan said. As the first World Expo to take place in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia region in the event’s 168-year history, Expo 2020 is set to welcome 192 participating countries and 25 million visitors – 70 per cent of which is projected to be international.



Ramanathan: an expo like no other

Big architecture names the likes of Santiago Calatrava, and Foster and Partners are some of the creative forces behind the globe-trotting range of pavilions, which have been themed along the lines of *Opportunity, Mobility and Sustainability* across the 4.4km² site.

The site’s centerpiece will be the Al Wasl Plaza, which will boast a dual projection screen, while other landmarks include the Al Forson Park, which is conceived as a venue for major entertainment events and concerts. Additionally, the site will also house a new metro station.

A roster of 60-plus live events each day, from A-list concerts to light shows, will guarantee that Expo 2020 is “bustling” year-round. Joining that is a collection of 200-plus F&B venues serving up world cuisine. In addition, National Day celebrations of the 192 participating countries every day from January 13 to



Artist’s impression of the Al Wasl Plaza

April 8, 2021 is set to be another “draw-card” for international visitors.

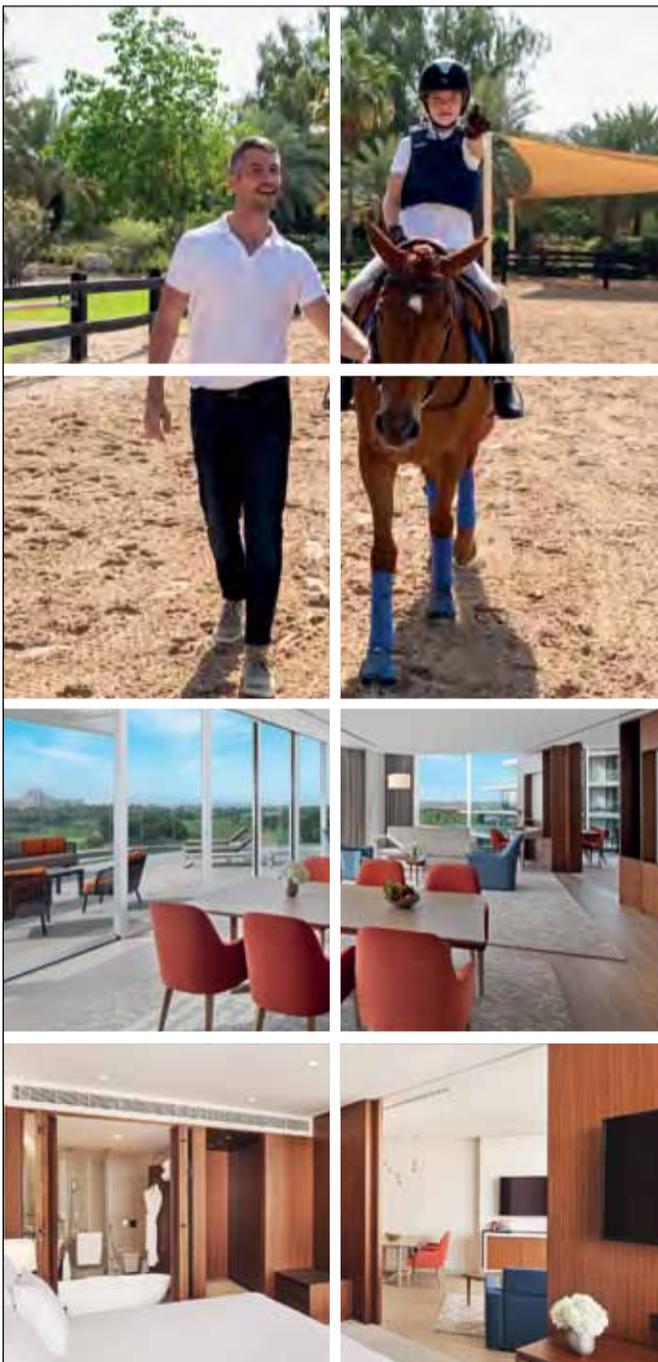
A raft of experiences also await business travellers at the mega site, which will set the stage for a best-in-class business week featuring TED-style talks, exhibitions, forums and workshops.

Ramanathan is hopeful that Expo 2020 will overturn perceptions of world expos as “tradeshows or for business travellers only”.

Working with tourism entities in the

UAE, Expo 2020 has mapped out a two-pronged global strategy to drive international visitation, with a global consumer marketing campaign launched across 30 key markets last year, while a B2B2C approach will be undertaken to collaborate with some 4,000 industry partners across key source markets worldwide.

Corporate visitation will be another market Expo 2020 is keen to attract, with several venues designed for private team-building, incentives and meetings.



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Tackling Delhi's pollution problem



As hazardous levels of air pollution in Delhi casts a pall over inbound tourism, Indian tour operators are finding ways to fight confidence crisis in the face of falling arrivals and flight of tourists to other cities in the country, writes **Rohit Kaul**

The recent toxic smog that engulfed Delhi and grabbed global headlines may not have had a dire impact on inbound arrivals to the country but have kept tourists away from the national capital, reported a number of Indian tour operators.

Some international tourists have also shelved their travel plans. "It is the peak travel season and the decline in New Delhi's air quality has raised concerns among travellers but not to an alarming level. However, solo and business travellers are looking at postponing their business trips," said Rohit Walter, brand leader, FCM Incoming.

"Some foreign tourists are cancelling or shortening their stay in Delhi as hazardous smog envelops the capital, disrupting normal life and causing a spike in respiratory illnesses. Inbound tourism from Singapore and Japan have been majorly affected as they are very particular about their health," added Walter.

Last November, air pollution in New Delhi and surrounding towns reached the worst levels so far in 2019. According to a few tour operators, many inbound travellers opted for alternative destinations in India to shun the smog in New Delhi.

"The inbound figures for October/November were higher than the previous years, meaning that what-

ever the media or foreign press said (about New Delhi's air pollution) had very little impact on the inbound tourist arrival numbers," said Subash Goyal, chairman, STIC Travel Group.

Foreign tourist arrivals in India for last October grew by 6.1 per cent to 944,233 from 890,223 in October 2018, according to statistics from India's Ministry of Tourism.

"Tour operators change the itineraries to include South India and other parts of country, and change the stay in Delhi to only a day. The Indian trade associations also created awareness in the market about the reduction in e-tourist visa fee to reduce any impact that the Delhi smog will have on inbound tourist arrivals," added Goyal.

Tour operators also built up confidence among their foreign associates by informing them on how it was business as usual in New Delhi as well as the government's initiatives to reduce the smog in the city.

"We keep our clients informed of events that have successfully taken place in Delhi during such periods. For instance, the India-Sri Lanka cricket match and the visit of German chancellor Angela Merkel were both conducted smoothly, indicating that the situation in Delhi was manageable. By convincing our foreign clients that this is a temporary phase which the Indian

government is actively working on to sort out soon, we are able to take care of their confidence," said Walter.

As part of the nation's anti-pollution push, the Delhi government deployed environmental officers to stop garbage burning and also imposed restrictions on construction work in the capital city. An odd-even road rationing plan was also launched by the government to reduce air pollution and traffic congestion on Delhi's roads.

"We have responded (to Delhi's pollution crisis) by sending photographs of the clear skies to our overseas partners to instill confidence in them. Thanks to the rainfall, the smog cleared. Had it lasted longer then, yes, tourism would have been affected. We must ensure that both the Delhi government and the central government take care of crop burning in the next season, otherwise tourism can be affected," said Goyal.

"If the spiralling pollution level in Delhi is not permanently addressed in the near future, the inbound tourism arrivals to the country will take a beating," said Arun Anand, managing director, Midtown Travel.

"Perception is key to tourism and international travellers may look at alternative tourist destinations if the pollution levels in Indian cities don't go down."



The inbound figures for October/November were higher than the previous years, meaning that whatever the media or foreign press said (about New Delhi's air pollution) had very little impact on the inbound tourist arrival numbers.

Subash Goyal
Chairman, STIC Travel Group



Tourism in Goa is among the hardest hit from the economic slowdown and the collapse of Thomas Cook UK

Weathering the headwinds

A worsening economic slowdown has thrown up challenges for Indian hoteliers, with the effects rippling across both domestic and international markets.

Reeling under pressure too are Indian business sectors like automobile which have been plagued with declining sales.

“The slowdown in the automobile sector has impacted the hospitality industry in Pune, with demand going down by about four per cent,” said Pankaj Saxena, general manager, Radisson Blu Pune Hinjawadi.

It is a double whammy for markets like Goa who have also been hit by the closure of Thomas Cook UK, noted industry players.

“The market sentiments are certainly down, and it has affected both domestic and international guests. Hotel occupancies have declined. Destinations like Goa are among the hardest hit with more declines in international business than any other destination,” said Sarbendra Sarkar, founder and managing director, Cygnett Hotels and Resorts.

“Hospitality players are facing a tough time because of the current economic slowdown. Besides a drop in demand from international tourists, corporate travellers are also shortening their stay or curtailing their expenses,” said Victor Soares, senior general manager, Radisson Blu Resort Goa Cavellissim.

On the bright side, domestic tourism is throwing a lifeline to the majority of hospitality players in India, especially those in

the non-metro markets. “Tier II markets are becoming the key focus, especially in leisure segments. Domestic travellers with disposable income are looking forward to exploring new cities apart from traditional places,” said Sarkar.

A section of hoteliers remain positive about the growth both in inbound and domestic markets.

Sanjeev K Nayar, general manager, WelcomHeritage, said: “After the liberalisation of the e-visa scheme, inbound tourism hasn’t weakened. Nevertheless, the domestic market is definitely very buoyant and coming up really well. Domestic travel is seeing steady growth as the middle class continues to travel for religious and festive reasons.”

Helping Indian hoteliers to weather the economic headwinds too is the recent move by India’s GST Council to cut tax on room tariffs of Rs7,500 (US\$105) and above from 28 per cent to 18 per cent, and tax on room tariffs of less than Rs7,500, from 18 per cent to 12 per cent.

“The GST cut was a very big step for boosting tourist numbers and creating widespread publicity for Indian tourism. There has been an increase in queries and subsequent bookings,” said Nayar.

Sarkar agreed: “This landmark move will act as a catalyst to revive the slow-growing Indian hospitality industry. It will help hotels win back guests and receive traction that was not evident over the past months.” – **Rohit Kaul**

Products

Treasure trove of new offerings

WelcomHeritage Inderpura Resort

WelcomHeritage (WH) recently opened the WH Inderpura Resort, which is situated at Udaipurwati of Jhunjhunu district in Rajasthan. The 0.7ha property sits on the foothills of the Aravalli mountains, boasting stunning sunset vistas and 21 keys across three room types: Super Deluxe, Deluxe and Standard.

Hyatt Regency Dharamshala Resort

Hyatt Hotels’ first mountain resort property in India, Hyatt Regency Dharamshala Resort, has opened in the scenic Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh. Surrounded by mountains and lush forests, the resort is spread across 2.6ha of land.

It offers 80 keys, including 10 Regency Club guestrooms, three suites, four deluxe villas, ranging from one- to five-bedroom properties. Each guestroom is well-equipped with modern amenities and provides views of the gardens, cedar wood trees or the snowcapped Dhauladar range of the Himalayas.

Courtyard by Marriott Amritsar

Marking the brand’s 18th property in India, Courtyard by Marriott Amritsar opened with 104 guestrooms in the revered city of the Golden Temple. Guests can enjoy Indian and international cuisine at Amritsar Kitchen, the hotel’s all-day dining outlet, unwind at the rooftop bar Vue Bar & Grill that overlooks the cityscape, or go for a dip in the rooftop pool.

The Marketplace

Get a taste of the world’s cuisine at this casual buffet-style dining restaurant situated in Kirti Nagar, West Delhi. Serving up 11 global cuisines from Indian street food to American burgers and steamy Nepalese momos, this restobar has something to tickle everyone’s taste buds.

With vibrant neon-lit decor and graffiti walls in a fun bar set-up, this F&B venue boasts Instagrammable interiors and the buzz of an actual market place with appealing food stations.

More Vietnam-India connections

VietJet has started direct flights from New Delhi to Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. The New Delhi-Ho Chi Minh City route will be operated four times weekly every Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. Meanwhile, the Hanoi-New Delhi route will be operated three times weekly every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday.

Port Muziris, a Tribute Portfolio Hotel, Kochi

Marriott International has opened Port Muziris, a Tribute Portfolio Hotel, in Kochi, marking the brand’s debut in India. Situated in the port city of Kerala, this art-centric hotel boasts 54 rooms, including two Executive Suites, and stands a mere 300m from the Cochin International Airport. Amenities include a swimming pool, pool bar, fitness centre, two F&B venues, and 1,649m² of banquet and meeting space.



Hyatt Regency Dharamshala Resort



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Exciting new chapter unfolds

TTG India rounds up a list of to-watch destinations in Asia-Pacific for 2020, from spanking new developments to game-changing attractions aimed at breathing new life into familiar tourist spots

AUSTRALIA

Hayman Island in the Whitsundays reopened with great flair this year after Cyclone Debbie ravaged the holiday destination in 2017. The island's sole accommodation, InterContinental Hayman Island Resort, has undergone a luxurious multimillion-dollar makeover into a 166-room private resort accessible via catamaran, helicopter or seaplane. The island is known for the colour of the water at Hayman's lagoon and Whitsunday Passage which sparkles in hues of gold, turquoise, emerald and sapphire.

BRUNEI

Dubbed the "Venice of the East", Kampong Ayer (which means water village in Malay) in Brunei's capital figures prominently in the country's history, heritage and culture. Launched in May, the Kampong Ayer Walking Trail aims to showcase daily life in the world's largest floating village that is home to about 30,000 inhabitants. The walking tour, which can be done sans guide, gives visitors access to abodes of residents in five villages who have opened their homes up for this trail.

CAMBODIA

In a bid to showcase Cambodia's diversity and develop fresh destinations, the remote north-eastern province of Ratanakiri is being preened as a strong contender. Way off the beaten track, it is home to Yeak Laom volcanic lake, gem mines, waterfalls and dense jungle perfect for trekking. Homestay and community-based tourism products are emerging and the Ministry of Tourism has earmarked it for development as an ecotourism zone.

HONG KONG

Making waves in Hong Kong's culture scene is game-changer Victoria Dockside, a US\$2.6 billion art and design district along the Tsim Sha Tsui waterfront. This mixed-use development is home to Grade A office space K11 Atelier; Rosewood Hong Kong; luxury residence K11 Artus; and the art-meets-retail K11 Musea, a 10-storey com-



Clockwise from above: Hpa-An, is hugged by dramatic limestone karsts; Hayman Island in the Whitsundays and art-meets-retail K11 Musea

Below: Chao Phraya River



plex spanning 111,000m². Billed as "Hong Kong's new Silicon Valley of Culture", this art, design and business destination features works by 40 contemporary artists, 4,600m² of green walls, and a dramatic spherical event space, among others.

INDIA

Situated in the Narmada district of Gujarat, the 182m-tall Statue of Unity has made headlines for being the world's tallest statue, dwarfing China's 128m-high Spring Temple Buddha and the 93m-tall Statue of Liberty. Built as a tribute to Indian freedom fighter Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the four-years-in-the-making Statue of Unity is India's newest tourist landmark. Two high-speed lifts zip visitors to the attraction's viewing gallery, which offers panoramic vistas of the Sardar Sarovar Dam and its surrounds.

INDONESIA

Indonesia's government is focusing on the development of five super priority destinations in the country, with basic infrastructure and utilities expected to finalise in 2020. New destinations to watch are the areas around Lake Toba (North Sumatra), Borobudur (Yogyakarta and Central Java), Mandalika (Lombok), Labuan Bajo (East Nusa Tenggara), and Likupang (North Sulawesi). Major developments

include airports, toll roads, piers and harbours. Construction of new hotels and other attractions by the private sector are expected to follow suit.

LAOS

The addition of eco-adventure activities on Phou Phamarn hill is set to whet visitors' appetite for the central province of Khammouane. Eco-tourism specialist Green Discovery Laos has pushed out tour packages offering activities like ziplining, treetop canopy walks and guided wildlife hikes that will appeal to adrenaline junkies and nature lovers. The area is also home to a bounty of natural beauty, including caves, tropical forests and majestic waterfalls.

MALAYSIA

Desaru Coast, Malaysia's first premium integrated destination resort in Johor, spans over 1.6ha along a 17km beachfront facing the South China Sea. Developed by Desaru Development Holdings One, the new attraction is home to a slew of hotels, a conference centre, a waterpark, a retail village, and two championship golf courses. The destination is easily accessible from Singapore in the south, and by air and road from Kuala Lumpur and other major cities in Malaysia. Built to attract more midscale and high-yield regional

tourists, Desaru Coast will also be hosting events and festivals to boost visitorship.

MALDIVES

Crossroads Maldives, the country's first multi-island integrated leisure and entertainment resort, is billed as a game-changer in the Maldives tourism landscape. Located just a 15-minute speedboat ride away from Malé International Airport, the mega development comprises The Marina, an 11,000m² retail and entertainment space; Hard Rock Hotel Maldives; and a transit hotel, SAii Lagoon Maldives, Curio Collection by Hilton; among other assets. Crossroads, in which the first phase was launched in September, also boasts a variety of lifestyle attractions including luxury shopping, fine dining, a state-of-the-art event hall, a PADI-certified watersports and dive centre, integrating leisure and entertainment in one destination.

MYANMAR

Kayin State's laidback capital, Hpa-An, is hugged by dramatic limestone karsts, towering Mount Zwegabin, winding waterways and farmland sprinkled with rural communities, positioning it as a top community-based tourism spot in the country. The development of locally-driven initiatives, such as kayaking through flooded paddies, making rice wine with villagers and cruising in traditional wooden boats, have helped opened the area up, alongside a trickle of international-standard accommodation.

PHILIPPINES

Emerging destination Iloilo in the Visayas boasts an international airport considered one of Asia's best, linked by a 10-lane, 15km highway to the city – an exemplar of its well-connected infrastructure that pegs it as prime investment destination. A sustainable urban development plan also helps clean up the city, preserves heritage sites, and builds roads and other infrastructure. The city is also being pushed as a premiere MICE destination, thanks to its easy accessibility and connectivity, good infrastructure and facilities, and diverse tourism sectors running the gamut from cultural tourism to culinary offerings.

SINGAPORE

Jewel Changi Airport is once again the talk of the town with the newly opened Changi Experience Studio and Canopy Park. The Changi Experience Studio spanning 3,000m² features a singing garden, a runway race, a quest to collect airport trolleys, and a battle of smiles, among others. Elsewhere, the Canopy Park is a 14,000m² space featuring seven play attractions and creative gardens. Guests can navigate through the Mirror Maze and Hedge Maze, bounce on Manulife Sky Nets, explore the sculptural playscape of Discovery Slides, and relish the view atop the glass-floored Canopy Bridge, 23m above the ground. There are also eight F&B outlets at Canopy Park.

SRI LANKA

Unlike other cities in Sri Lanka, Jaffna, which was the hub of a Tamil insurgency against the state, is just awakening to new hotels and resorts and welcoming local and foreign tourists alike to its myriad attractions. Lying 400km north of Colombo and accessible by road, rail or air, the city, which is mostly populated by the minority Tamils and is the Tamils' cultural capital, is home to a Portuguese-built fort, a multitude of ancient Hindu temples, a grand public library that was rebuilt after being destroyed during the war, and several other attractions.

THAILAND

The arrival of a modern metro system some 20 years back turned much investor and visitor attention towards Bangkok's bustling downtown, but the city's Chao Phraya River is ready to wrestle the attention back. The River of Kings has undergone a renaissance in recent years, as a new crop of developments – from luxury hotels like Four Seasons and Capella to the landmark IconSiam – has injected a new sense of vibrancy and altered the city's skyline along the historic lifeblood.

Riverside enclaves are also springing up, with many colonial buildings and historic warehouses getting a new lease of life as art galleries, restaurants and events hubs.

VIETNAM

Ho Tram is quickly emerging as Vietnam's latest beach destination. Located about a 2.5-hour drive from Ho Chi Minh City, it is positioning itself as a convenient coastal getaway, with swathes of development underway as many local and international brands look to set up shop along Ho Tram

Beach. Five-star Meliá Ho Tram Beach Resort is one of the newcomers. InterContinental Hotels Group is also planning to open two new hotels next year in the area, including the Holiday Inn Resort Ho Tram Beach.

Marissa Carruthers, S Puvaneswary, Feizal Samath, Pamela Chow, Xinyi Liang-Pholsena, Mimi Hudoyo, Prudence Lui, Rosa Ocampo, Adelaine Ng and Rohit Kaul contributed to this column

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Putting Nepal on global map

Binod Chaudhary, Nepal's sole billionaire, plays the role of entrepreneur, industrialist and philanthropist in his country. The chairman of Chaudhary Group (CG Global), a multi-dimensional conglomerate spanning hotels, real estate, banking and food businesses, tells **Rohit Kaul** why through building up a global hospitality empire, he seeks to bring the world to Nepal, and Nepal to the world

CG Global has a vast number of companies and brands under its portfolio. How is your hospitality business growing?

Our hospitality business, which is housed under the aegis of two arms, CG Hotels & Resorts and CG Hospitality, has done extremely well. One deals with our hard asset investments, while the other deals with operating capabilities on our own or in partnerships.

Recently, we opened The Fern Residency in Bharatpur, Nepal, an iconic asset with tremendous reviews. We brought the Taj brand back to Nepal after a spell of over 20 years, as Taj Hotels & Resorts had to stop operations in Nepal during the Maoist insurgency. Meghauli Serai, a Taj Safari Lodge in Chitwan National Park, opened last year, and Vivanta Kathmandu, opened earlier this year.

At the moment, we are working towards Taj Dubai, a very prestigious project for us (which opened in November 2019).

After the buyout of The Farm at San Benito in the Philippines, what is your expansion strategy for the wellness brand?

We have a well-thought-out expansion strategy for The Farm brand. We want to introduce The Farm in other destinations like South and South-east Asia, the US and Europe. We have already almost finalised our presence in Phuket through a joint venture.

We are exploring the possibility of an appropriate location in Europe, some place within a one-hour flight time from major cities in the continent and yet highly flexible in terms of providing top-notch services. We zeroed in on a region called Istria in Croatia, and we expect to have The Farm in Europe in 18 months' time.

We don't want The Farm to be in every nook and corner like other wellness brands. We want to be selective. We are happy if we can have five properties under the brand in five different destinations across the globe.

Do you think the market sees you more as a hotel investor, rather than someone who has played a key role in establishing brands owing to your association with names like the Taj, Fern and The Zinc Journey?

That's not really true. Our role in the growth of the hospitality industry is reinforced by the prominence we get at trade events. We are considered perhaps as one of the most versatile hospitality groups which has its own investment arm, owns properties, and has its own management companies across the business, economy and upper-midscale segments. We own and

operate globally known brands like The Farm. We also take pride in our partnerships and joint ventures with globally acclaimed names like the Taj.

Investment is a very important part of our strength. Most operators don't want to invest. We are happy to invest if we see the opportunity. We are ready to have skin in the game. To an investor or a developer, that is a very good news – that there is somebody who is not just happy to manage a property but also ready to invest.

You had plans to expand your portfolio of hotels under The Zinc Journey brand. Can you tell us more?

The Zinc Journey is going through a phase of consolidation. We have three Zinc Journey hotels in Sri Lanka, two in China and one in Nepal. We are opening one in Bhutan. We are in the process of taking the brand to the next level through standardising the offering and then presenting it on a much bigger scale in the market. Once that happens, we will open this portfolio for joint ventures, co-investment and co-development.

We will also put together a very high-end management team. At present, these properties are managed by different partners. We want to create a new version that is younger and vibrant in its approach while also making money.

We are working to have three properties in Rajasthan to create a Zinc Journey circuit. I see potential for an experiential brand like The Zinc Journey in markets like Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Myanmar. Asia offers immense vast experiences from culture to adventure. I view many Asian destinations well placed for a brand like The Zinc Journey.

You have spoken about the potential of inbound tourism and your plans to enter this market. What are you doing on this front?

Our interest in inbound is presently con-

finned to our partnership with &Beyond South Africa. We used to have a majority stake but now we have a stake of 26 per cent in the partnership. The company handles high-end inbound business as well as conference business. They are doing a great job.

We have been trying to associate with an inbound tour operator with a presence in key source markets of the Indian subcontinent. At one point, we were talking to a Turkey-based tour operator but that somehow didn't materialise. We are not going to (earn billions) by having an inbound operation but we are going to make our properties comfortable. Inbound tour operators can at times open unexpected new avenues and new channels of distribution.

How are you helping in the development of Nepal's tourism sector?

I call myself a very small man from a very small country. The only thing I had was a big dream – and that's what helped me. I should not say I am helping Nepal. Nepal is my name, my identity. People know me as Binod Chaudhary of Nepal. I want to see Nepal as the most prosperous country in the region; it is not though, but it has the opportunity to be one.

Nepal can create brands and entrepreneurs that are recognised worldwide. I am showcasing Nepal as a high-end tourism and hospitality destination by opening world-class tourism products like Meghauli Serai, A Taj Safari. Our conglomerate of businesses spread across the world has also brought global attention to Nepal and helped to grow corporate travel in some way.

We are working together with Melinda Gates Foundation to provide opportunities to youngsters who have ideas but no capital. We have also created a spiritual destination in Nepal with Shashwat Dham where already 2.7 million people have visited.

10 need to know's about Binod Chaudhary

■ **Who's in your family?** I am blessed with three competent boys, all grown up and married with two kids each

■ **What do you do for fun?** I play golf and travel

■ **Your ideal vacation?** I am a trekker, not a city person, so I like mountains and the countryside. The places I visit need to have some kind of energy that draws me, so I like places like Rajasthan, Sri Lanka and the Balkan region

■ **How do you book your own leisure trips?** My team manages my bookings

■ **What are you reading right now?** *A License To Steal* by Benjamin J. Stein

■ **How do you stay healthy?** I work out whenever I get time

■ **Favourite food?** I like Thai, Indian and Sri Lankan food

■ **A bad habit you cannot kick** I expect a lot from everybody

■ **Your pet peeve, something that never fails to annoy you** When people promise and not deliver

■ **Most people don't know...** that I am very spiritual



TTGmice India

Getting ready for Muslim MICE

It is no longer enough to just provide halal-certified food to be a welcoming destination for business event groups with majority Muslim attendees, planners tell Mimi Hudoyo, Rachel AJ Lee and Marissa Carruthers

THAILAND Event planners from Muslim-majority countries are urging destinations and event suppliers to quickly broaden their understanding of Muslim travellers if they wish to benefit from the burgeoning segment.

According to the *Mastercard-CrescentRating Global Muslim Travel Index 2018*, South-east Asia will welcome more than 18 million Muslim visitors by 2020 – accounting for 15 per cent of total visitor arrivals in the region.

Buyers at IT&CMA 2019 in September said that necessities for Muslim MICE groups go beyond halal-certified food.

A buyer from Dubai who has requested anonymity, said a place to pray in between meetings, and a meeting or conference programme that provisions for prayer breaks on Friday are important as well.

These needs are echoed by Willy Sihombing, CEO of Sedona Holidays Touri & Travel based in Medan, Indonesia. He added that some Indonesian Muslims even prefer staying in a Syariah hotel should there be such an option in the event destination.

“Otherwise, the minimum requirements are halal food and guestrooms with the Qibla sign (indicating the direction to pray),” Willy said.

While hotels are generally more aware of Muslim needs, convention centres (in non-Muslim destinations) have some catching up to do, opined Andre Christian, managing director of Talenta Tour, Malang, Indonesia.

When asked which destinations have done well in welcoming events with majority Muslim participants, Willy and Christian named Japan and South Korea.

Willy said both destinations have been “very serious” about attracting Muslim travellers, demonstrated by the growing availability of halal-certified restaurants



and prayer rooms at public places as well as mosques in the city.

Muslims currently make up of about 20 per cent of Japan’s total arrivals, and most tend to visit for leisure. Regardless, Susan Maria Ong, MICE director, Asia-Pacific, Japan National Tourism Organization, said Japan’s keenness on capturing the Muslim MICE segment is evident, having opened an office in Kuala Lumpur in March 2017. The office has published a Muslim guidebook detailing restaurants and hotels in commonly visited locations in the country.

Taiwan, which has stepped up efforts to draw Muslim travellers, was recently ranked third in the world for being Muslim-friendly, up from the fifth position in 2017.

Jerchin Lee, executive director, Taiwan External Trade Development Council, said: “We have everything from restaurants and halal vending machines to prayer rooms in convention centres.”

Lee shared that Taiwan welcomed 60 per cent more Muslim leisure and MICE travellers in 2018 than the previous year. A 1,300-pax incentive group from an auto parts company in Indonesia visited Tai-

wan in 2019, and Lee said they felt “very comfortable” when travelling around the island.

“Muslims make up about one-fifth of the global population, and we are keen to capture the market, especially outbound travellers from Indonesia, Malaysia and the Middle East,” he noted.

Another destination that has made significant progress in this capability is Thailand, according to Christian. He found Thailand to be a convenient destination for his travellers and one where Muslim-friendly hotels can be found in the popular downtown Pratunam area.

This year, Thailand’s Ministry of Sports and Tourism hosted a series of halal-tourism training sessions with tour operators, tourism-related government and private agencies. The Institute of Asian Studies at Chulalongkorn University has also been recruited to research on specific market demands.

Senior lecturer Ismah Osman of Malaysia’s Universiti Teknologi Mara pointed to Chiang Mai as an example of how a destination can become more Muslim-friendly. The province is preening itself as a prime Muslim MICE hub, offering 12 Muslim-owned hotels.

The Thailand Halal Tourism Association is carrying out training with a range of tourism-related organisations. Halal food advisors are also on hand to concoct more creative menus at events and conferences.

Products are being developed in Chiang Mai to appeal to the Muslim MICE market. This includes Ping Luang village, home to a Thai Muslim community which boasts a bamboo meeting room as well as a range of community-driven activities – such as halal cooking classes, traditional weaving and fishing – aimed at incentive and teambuilding groups.

India ramps up bleisure offerings for growing SE Asia market

SINGAPORE India’s Ministry of Tourism is hedging on the bleisure trend among incoming MICE travellers to promote longer stays and travel to attractions surrounding the primary cities.

“For example, if you’re coming to Mumbai for a business meeting, you could take an hour’s flight to Jodhpur and visit the beautiful palaces,” said Rupinder Brar, additional director general, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India.

However, the primary challenge that the country is grappling with is the lack of awareness of its numerous attractions, opined Brar. She said: “Travellers who want to visit India (tend to) feel at a loss of where to start and where to go. The feedback that we get from a lot of people is that one time is not enough. The challenge is how to strategically pitch the right products for the right customers.”

Local tour operators are well aware though, and are jumping at the opportunity to build up greater awareness in South-east Asian markets, with several joining forces with the tourism ministry to promote lesser-known activities in the destination.

For instance, Swagatam Tours is hawk-ing unique group experiences such as village visits and dining with a local family, and religious tourism specialist Lotus Trans Travel is diversifying into arranging group travel via luxury sleeper trains that traverse India.

This year will bring big plans for the destination, with the International Buddhist Conclave in late-September to early-October set to become a ripe bleisure opportunity. Brar revealed that local operators are working to “try some mixing of itineraries” with the event.

This bleisure push is a timely move, after India relaxed its visa requirements for business travellers, explained Brar.

“Goods and services tax rates have also been lowered, which we believe is a huge boost for MICE arrivals to India,” commented Brar. - **Pamela Chow**

Catch some waves Down Under

Opening this January, URBNSURF Melbourne is Australia’s first man-made surf park offering visitors of all abilities an authentic surfing experience regardless of weather conditions. Here, visitors can ride waves up to two metres high for as long as 32 seconds in a 320-metre pool, all made possible by wave-generating technology capable of shooting 1,000 high-quality, ocean-like waves every hour.

The park’s LED lighting makes night surfing possible, and guests can even choose from different types of waves, from identically perfect waves to a random selection which more closely mirrors the ocean. The park includes a fully equipped pro-shop for board and gear hire, licensed café, and training programmes for all ages.

A “freestyle” session can take an hour, while a group or private surfing lesson can go for 105 minutes.

URBNSURF hosts groups of several hundred visitors onsite and can also tailor experiences for small groups. Surf aside, the park offers event spaces, lagoonside hot tubs, day beds, and landscaped spaces for relaxation.



New mega conference venue joins Phuket’s events portfolio

Angsana Laguna Phuket, located at the Angsana Laguna Phuket resort complex in Thailand, has unveiled a brand new, 1,500m² multipurpose space named the Angsana Convention and Exhibition Space (ACES).

ACES can accommodate up to 1,500 guests for a multinational business conference or a MICE seminar in a theatre-style sitting. Other configurations include seating 850 guests in a classroom setting, or 225 guests in U-shape and boardroom arrangement. The venue is also ideal for welcome receptions and gala dinners, accommodating up to 800 guests for banquets or 1,500 guests for standing cocktails.



Light and sound themes are customised for each event, while catering is offered along with the use of the venue, with options ranging from themed coffee breaks to fine-dining banquets. Planners have the added advantage of personalising menus with any one of Angsana Laguna Phuket’s six restaurants and bars, covering local and international cuisines.

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