

# MYSTIC EAST

...an unexplored horizon

A Bi-monthly Magazine by HRAEI | Vol 7 | Issue 1 | January - February 2021



## NEW WAGE CODE

Wage rules with a simpler approach may have made payroll structures friendlier for both employers and employees

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# R

Recently some hospitality associations have launched the #Godirect Campaign to counter the dominance of certain online travel agents (OTAs). This is certainly a judicious move expected to eliminate intermediaries and save exorbitant commissions to hotel aggregators, especially when the hospitality sector is going through a critical situation. We at HRAEI have been fighting against the arm-twisting tactics of the aggregators for quite some time. Last year we had decided to stop taking bookings from, two top online travel portals for charging heavy commissions from hotel owners and offering indiscriminate discounts to customers through their platforms. These online booking portals initially charged between 15 and 18 per cent as commissions, but the figure climbed to over 40 per cent last year-end.

It's time for our industry to realize that

“

We have a huge advantage over the OTAs when it comes to nurturing a relationship with the guest.

”

we're in control of our own destiny and we must implement a proven marketing strategy. This will not only maximize the number of direct bookings that a property is driving through its own website, but also a strategy that uses OTAs for their intended purpose to find new guests. In other words, if you have used OTAs in the past to find and book new guests, now tap those guests directly. We have a massive advantage over the OTAs when it comes to developing and nurturing a relationship with the guest. The relationship between the OTA and the guest exists only online or through calls via phone, but we have the distinct privilege of actually hosting the guest and the opportunity to build a real and meaningful relationship. This should be followed up through regular communication with the guest and build brand loyalty.

**Mr Sudesh Poddar**  
President, HRAEI



66

Plant-based meat is on its way to becoming the fifth protein, in with beef, chicken, seafood and pork

It wasn't that long ago that the only green, plant-based food generally spotted in fast-food restaurants was the shredded lettuce separating a hamburger from its mayonnaise slathered bun. But as the vegetarian and vegan community rapidly grows, even fast-food fans are becoming less afraid of eating their greens. Last November, McDonald's announced that it is offering a meatless burger called the McPlant, and Pizza Hut became the first national pizza chain to partner with leading vegan meat producer Beyond Meat to introduce plant-based meat pizzas across US and Europe. Some industry watchers believe that plant-based meat is on its way to becoming the fifth protein, in with beef, chicken, seafood and pork.

Meanwhile, in a country like India, where major food giants are forced to introduce vegetarian options on their menu, including plant-based meat options might not be a bad idea. Although we see a few vegan restaurants coming up across the country, particularly in the metros, fast food chains here are yet to tap this segment of plant-based meat. Researchers from the University of Bath, the Good Food Institute, and the Center for Long Term Priorities collaborated on the first quantitative comparison of consumer attitudes towards plant-based and clean meat across China, India, and the U.S.

The report by Deloitte found out that the three most populous countries in the world have robust consumer interest in plant-based and clean meat. Interest in clean meat is expected to grow once there is a product on the market and consumers are more familiar with it.

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Vol 7 | Issue 1 | January - February 2021

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Hotel and Restaurant Association of Eastern India, 18A/1,  
Everest, 18th Floor, 46C,  
Chowringhee Road, Kolkata- 700 071;  
Telephone- +91 33 2288-1742/43, 40035993.  
E-mail: info@hraei.co.in  
Website: www.hraei.co.in

## THIS ISSUE OF MYSTIC EAST CONTAINS 56 PAGES INCLUDING COVER AND BACK COVER

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The definition of wages continues with the age-old formula of stipulating broadly worded inclusions

The new and common definition of 'wages' under the recently passed labour codes has got most organisations to take yet another look at their payroll structures to determine what impact they will face. The new codes have been passed by Parliament to "amalgamate, simplify and rationalise" existing laws on various subjects like payment of wages, minimum wages, bonus, social security, etc., and are anticipated to become a binding law from April 2021. Is this the change the industry had wanted and hoped for?

No doubt a common and consistent definition is good, and that is certainly a positive one. PF, ESI, statutory bonus, leave encashment (for factory workers), gratuity, retrenchment compensation, etc. will all be calculated using a common definition of 'wages.'

The definition of wages continues with the age-old formula of stipulating broadly worded inclusions along with vaguely worded exclusions, and then adds a layer of complexity on top by setting out exceptions for situations where the excluded components would also have to be treated as wages. No doubt, there could be certain entitlements, such as the construct of CTC - such as statutory bonus, overtime, etc., which may or may not be treated as 'wages' based on the circumstances. It could have been a lot simpler and in tune with the compensation practices being followed today - internationally and in India.

**Mr Mohammed Azhar**  
Honourary Secretary

**Cover Story**

January - February 2021

23

**NEW WAGE CODE**

Wage rules with a simpler approach may have made payroll structures friendlier for both employers and employees



8



▪ **UNION BUDGET: OUR WISH LIST**

Expectations are increasing from all sectors before the Union Budget, particularly the hospitality sector, that was hit the hardest by to the lockdown restrictions



▪ **THINGS TO STAY**

14

The ever-resilient hospitality industry rose up to the challenge, reinvented itself and bounced back

18

▪ **READY FOR FAKE MEAT?**



Plant-based meat selections appeal to meat eaters in a way traditional vegetarian substitutions haven't

28

▪ **GO DIRECT, BYPASS OTA**



An important goal for both large hotel chains and smaller, individual hotels, is to encourage guests to book directly through their websites

32

▪ **NEW NORMAL TRAVEL**



The current pandemic has ensured that travelling won't be the same as before. Some trends are going to stay even after normalcy returns



38

▪ **STELLAR REVIVAL**

Odisha Tourism has undertaken a drive to sensitise hospitality service providers across the state in COVID-19 safety protocols. Innovative schemes are drawing tourists in hordes

# OUR WISH LIST

As we inch closer to the much-awaited Union Budget 2021, the expectations are increasing from all sectors, particularly the hospitality, travel and tourism segments that were directly impacted due to the lockdown restrictions



**T**HE coronavirus pandemic and the consequent lockdown in India crippled the Indian economy and disrupted the lives of millions in an instant. Out of the sectors that were the most affected, hospitality and travel and tourism had to face the wrath of calamity in the absence of any safety net. The hospitality sector has

continuously asked the government for several concessions, 'industry status' being a continuous demand. The sector contributes almost 10 percent of the GDP to the economy and employs around 9-10 per cent. It's time the government gives some attention to this sector. Following are some of the demands of the hospitality sector.

## Industry status

The hospitality sector contributes almost 10 percent of the GDP to the economy and our employment is around 9-10 per cent. Hence, we have been demanding that hotels, resorts and restaurants need to be accorded industry status. We need to get the industry status which helps in reducing our costs. It helps in making the





business more viable and profitable. That is the long-standing demand which we have been seeking. There is so much tourism potential in this country it actually would be simply wonderful if the government considered this and gave the industry this privilege. It would change things considerably

In the past few months, several

state governments have been proactively lending a helping hand to the tourism & hospitality sector in their respective states, providing various relief measures to help the sector stay afloat during these trying times. Last month, in a move to reboot the sector, the Maharashtra government conferred 'industry' status to the state's hospitality sector.

The industry status allows hospitality establishments in the state to be levied electricity rate, electricity charges, water charges, property tax, development tax, increased carpet ratio and non-agricultural tax at industrial rates (with effect from 1st April 2021). As a result, operating costs for hospitality players in Maharashtra are expected to reduce significantly

as industrial tariffs are much lower than the commercial tariff that they currently pay.

Earlier in October 2020, the state had also reduced pre-establishment licenses for the sector from 70 to 10, which along with the industry status is expected to boost the growth in the hospitality sector in Maharashtra.

We now hope that other states will take cognizance of what Maharashtra has done and follow the same. This could then be the harbinger of change for the industry, one that could significantly impact its fortunes in a much-needed positive manner.

### Infrastructure-lending status

India is one of the fastest growing travel & tourism economies in the world thanks to its diverse landscape,

**The hospitality sector contributes almost 10 percent of the GDP to the economy and our employment is around 9-10 per cent. Hence, we have been demanding that hotels, resorts and restaurants need to be accorded industry status**

rich heritage, and cultural diversity, which attracts tourists from across the country and the world. However, we have still not tapped into the full potential of tourism in the country, especially leisure tourism, mainly due to the lack of good quality hotel infrastructure.

The hospitality sector is highly capital intensive and the high cost of capital often makes investments in this sector seem less attractive. The sector is a significant contributor to the country's GDP growth and employment and granting infrastructure-lending (infra) status to the sector - a long-pending request by key stakeholders - will be the next frontier in its growth path.

The government has granted infra status to three-star or higher catego-

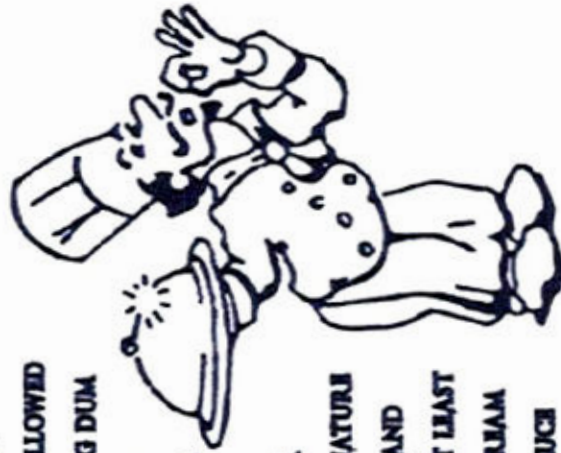


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ry hotels outside cities with a population of over one million and to hotels with a project cost of more than INR 2 billion (excluding land costs). However, this has not provided any significant fillip to the sector as the benefits have been limited to a minuscule proportion of projects.

In the recent past, there have been several successful examples of sectors, such as hospitals, logistics and affordable housing to name a few, which have witnessed exponential growth in investments after they were accorded the infrastructure status.

Similarly, infrastructure status will provide the Indian hospitality sector with several benefits and concessions, including longer loan repayment tenure and lower borrowing rates, which will help in attracting substantial fresh investments and will go a long way in improving the health of the sector, which is currently struggling due to the ongoing pandemic. The growth of the hospitality sector will in turn fuel the economy in the post-COVID world, making a compelling case for the sector being granted infrastructure status.

## Extension of EPCG Scheme

The Export Promotion Capital Goods scheme (EPCG) is an initiative by the Government of India and is a part of the Foreign Trade Policy (FTP) 2015-20. It was first operationalised on 1 April 2015 and under this scheme, capital goods imported for the manufacture of export products enjoy zero or concessional rates in the customs duty. The imported capital goods include spare parts for production, that is pre and post-production. The scheme also covers merchant exporters associated with supporting manufacturers, manufacturer exports

with/without supporting vendors/manufacturers, and designated service providers or a certified Common Service Provider.

We request for treating payments received from international tourists as Foreign Exchange for the purpose of EPCG scheme and that the time to perform export obligation under the scheme be extended by 5 years. In other words, we request grant of extension in export obligation fulfillment period by an additional three years beyond 6 years for all the licences expiring during current and next 2 financial years, without attracting any penalty or interest.

## GST, SEIS & direct taxes

We seek a cut in GST rates charged on services offered by hotels. For instance, GST on room bookings should be reduced from 18% to 12% which

will improve occupancy and help Indian hotels be more competitive and on a par with other Asian economies such as Hong Kong, Thailand and Singapore, where tax rates range from 0 to 7%. GST for restaurants located in hotels where room tariff exceeds ₹7,500, is currently pegged at 18%.

It should be brought down to 12% with full benefit of input credit. Bringing liquor under GST will ensure single tax and will eradicate multiple state taxes and duties, it said. The body also suggested increasing licence timelines from the existing one year to 3-5 years.

Secondly, the amendment in section 17(5) of GST Act and respective State Acts had led to an unfavourable position by denying credit to hotel buildings/structures. This defeats the objective of GST law principles of free flow of credit when the output is in



the course of furtherance of business.

Therefore, input credit should be allowed on civil structures that will result in an 8-10% savings in overall cost.

If the government allowed the ability for hotels to bill on IGST for corporations for the MICE business, that would again bring a lot of cheer to the industry.

We also need enhancing funding limits to raise the SEIS rates to 10 per cent for the hospitality industry to enhance the quality of accommodation and to enable discharging GST liabilities. SEIS is a way to set off indirect tax levied to reduce our cost of exports. It was also allowed to discharge service tax liabilities through the scrips. This will enable the discharge of GST liabilities through the SEIS scrips. It will also

enable investments into developing more globally acceptable products and will help in earning higher foreign exchange. Also IGST billing to the hotels for corporate bookings and MICE must be allowed. This will enable the companies to avail GST input credit which will incentivize them to spend their annual budgets in Indian cities instead of turning to holiday destinations of South East Asia.

To ease direct taxes, such as lowering income tax rates (nearly 34.94%) for hotels to help increase cash flows. It recommended that business losses be allowed to be carried forward for up to 12 years instead of eight financial years owing to the unprecedented circumstances brought by the coronavirus pandemic. Hotels should be charged power rates applicable to industries.

### Encourage spending

To get the economy kicking, the government needs to encourage spending. We need to have policies where business companies, corporates allow their employees, and it is all tax deductible." In order to boost domestic tourism, citizens should be allowed to avail LTA benefits for hotel stays too for a period of two years. One way is by rolling back LTCG tax. To incentivise Indians to travel within India.

All associations in the hospitality, travel and tourism business sincerely hope this year's Budget to take our industry most seriously. This Budget will make or break our dream of Incredible India. We hope that the Government considers us as an inclusive part of the economy, one which cannot be ignored.

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# THINGS TO STAY

One of the oft-repeated quotes during the time of pandemic was Winston Churchill's "Never let a good crisis go to waste." The ever-resilient hospitality industry rose up to the challenge, reinvented itself and bounced back. Some changes are going to make the sector stronger



▶ Set aside a small portion of your marketing budget in 2021 for influencer marketing

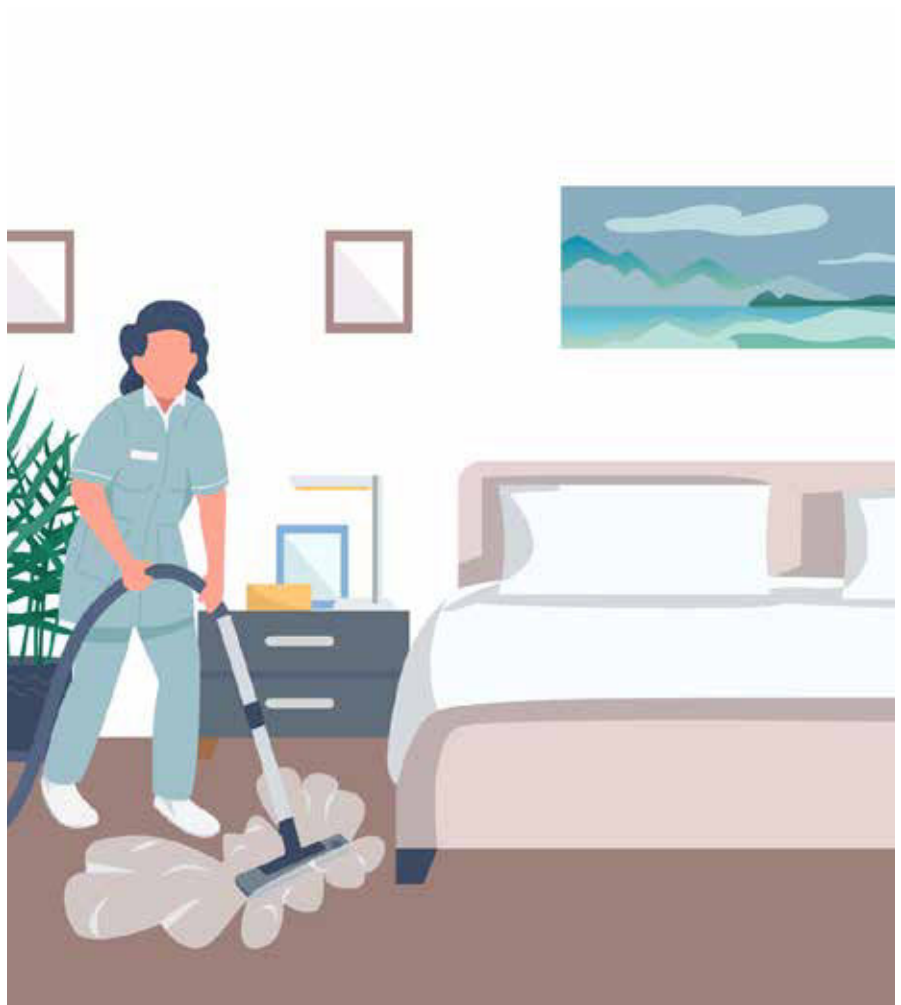
**A** LOT has changed in 12 months. A year that began with hotels competing for Instagram-worthy moments is finishing off in a much different space. It's a space that's double disinfected, a space where contactless guest experiences are the new normal, and a space where even the most adventurous travelers are thinking twice about going somewhere over the holidays. Despite its challenges, some silver linings have emerged out of the chaos.

### 1. Housekeeping staff, the new star

Prior to the pandemic, housekeeping was an element of the hotel experience that wasn't meant to be seen. The bulk of housekeeping was completed prior to arrival, post departure, and between guest use. During the day, housekeeping would navigate hotel corridors like magicians, popping in to tidy a guest room and vanishing just in time for a guest to return.

The unexpected shift to bring housekeeping staff to the front of house is important for a number of reasons. The change to make housekeeping more visible came as a result of needing to disinfect high touch and frequently used guest areas more regularly. With cleaning efforts now front and centre, hotels unwittingly shined a spotlight on these historically hidden employees whose role has never been more critical.

Some hotel owners and managers also realised that outsourcing housekeeping work is not always beneficial and compromises protective efforts amid an increased risk of COVID-19. In some cases, it was observed, when the job was outsourced they were found dirtier than those that were serviced daily by regular housekeeping staff. In fact, the time and



► **With cleaning efforts now front and centre, hotels unwittingly shined a spotlight on these historically hidden employees whose role has never been more critical.**

products it took to clean a guest room almost doubled. During times of unpredictability, it is important to maximize the efficiency of staff hours to reduce labour costs and make sure resources are being allocated in the best possible way.

In addition to dirtier rooms, there can be other downsides to opting-out of daily hotel room cleaning. Having a roving team of room attendants provides several significant benefits that may otherwise go overlooked. Since housekeepers are often first to catch maintenance and security issues, it's good to have someone checking on a

hotel room every day.

Lastly, since hotel room cleanliness is one of the most common complaints from guests on travel review sites, the need for a well-organized cleaning process is an absolute must for every hotel. When health concerns like Coronavirus are more prevalent, guests may be on high alert when it comes to meeting their cleanliness standards.

### 2. Drive Market and Meta Search

As airlines struggle to convince travelers to book flights, and as frequent

flyers shift away from in-person meetings to video conferencing, target markets are shrinking. We're seeing paid search campaigns, which until recently included targeting based on factors like airline data, now focused within local and drive markets.

With road trips and staycations becoming the preferred method of travel this year, it's not surprising that hotels have tightened up their advertising spend. Smart hotels aren't pausing paid advertising completely, they're simply reallocating.

Update pay-per-click ads with keywords that speak to today's travellers. Many prospective guests are seeking out hybrid vacation experiences, stays that incorporate remote work space for grown-ups, remote learning space for students, and an atmosphere that allows them to unplug when the day is done. If you're able to offer a hybrid staycation, make it known.

Meta search is another great place to allocate budget meta search encompasses search engines within search engines including online travel agencies (OTAs). Many travellers begin their search for hotels on these sites because of the convenience of an aggregated list to comparison shops. Love them or hate them, OTAs are a part of your marketing mix, and you can use the billboard effect of OTAs to your advantage. Prospective guests visit OTA sites to narrow their search before returning to Google to review their short list and with any luck, book direct. Entice your new website visitors with an offer they won't find on the OTAs: your flexible cancellation policy.

### 3. No Deep Discounts

Lowering rates too much isn't going to convince a person who is afraid to travel, to book a trip. This downturn is different. COVID-19 is the reason



► **Hold strong to your rate and instead focus on adding value to the guest experience**

people aren't traveling at the same pace. COVID-19 is what's crushed our economy and threatened our industry. While the gut reaction to loss of business might be to drop rates, dropping rates won't convince people to travel. Prospective guests aren't price shopping, they're holding out for a time when travel feels safe again.

According to a report in Skift, hotels that are the fastest to drop their rates and who drop their rates the deepest can be the last ones to recover when demand comes back. The loss of pricing power can contribute to a slow recovery in revenue.

It will take the US hotel industry approximately five years to achieve the occupancy, revenue, and profitability of 2019, forecasted HotelAVE, an asset manager. The hotels who took the most desperate measures with their revenue management strategy in the short run will have the toughest time recovering in the long-run.

Also, discounts are useless if people aren't traveling for safety concerns. Hotels must make sure that when demand does come back, we're sure not to be missing any dollar by having gone too low.

Hold strong to your rate and instead focus on adding value to the



guest experience. Guest reviews have never been more important as prospective travellers weigh perceived risks with the rewards of vacation time. Instead of spending millions on marketing trying to find new customers, reach out to your past guests who know what to expect, and will be more likely to rebook. When it comes to guests who've recently checked out, ask for reviews on Tripadvisor, Facebook, Expedia, even Instagram. These testimonials will serve you again and again. Word of mouth advertising is a powerful tool.

#### 4. Small is Beautiful

Across the country, we've seen a major shift away from tourist traps and city center destinations to off the beaten path experiences. Travelers are choosing country drives over interstates, longstanding city dwellers are migrating to the suburbs, and high rise hotels are grappling with an uncertain fate. Meanwhile in less populous areas, particularly where the outdoors is the major draw, independent hotels are facing a much different outlook: more interest than ever, sold out shoulder seasons, and extended stays.

Small hotels in northern West Bengal are welcoming travellers at rates they'd never seen before. Gangtok and other small towns of Sikkim had a record fall season, and it's impossible to find a place to stay on the coasts of Digha, Puri and Gopalpur on weekends, nearly at the double last year's rates. With fewer places to jet off to, small towns and forest resorts are breaking records.

Regardless of location, independent hotels are poised to navigate these tricky waters more easily than the big box variety. With fewer levels of management and brand standards to meet, independent hotels are

adapting quickly, rolling out packages, updating outlets, and creating content that speaks to the moment. Look to independent hotels in your neck of the woods to lead the way.

#### 5. The Rise of Micro-Influencers

With marketing budgets slashed as a result of lower occupancy and traditional media outlets unsure of the travel stories worth sharing, smart marketers are turning to social media to reach their audience with little cost and decent returns. We're talking about influencers. While the name itself connotes a certain disdain, influencers are proving their value during these uncertain times.

When it comes to influencer partnerships, it's important to find partners with real influence over your target market. Influence that extends beyond social media channels. If influence is limited to Instagram, while you may see an uptick in followers, you can't take followers to the bank. It clicks to your website you're after, that is if you want to put heads in beds, so choose an influencer who's willing to write and publish a blog post with links to your website.

**From pulling back the curtain on housekeeping, to shifting advertising budgets to drive markets, from holding strong to rates, and by harnessing the power of word of mouth advertising, hotels continue to beat the odds.**

While mainstream, well-known influencers command thousands of rupees per social media post, a new crop of influencers, known as micro influencers, are ideal partners for independent hotels. Their following is typically smaller but more engaged, and their focus is typically more defined. Choose a micro influencer that speaks to, looks, and sounds like your target market. The influencer will come to your property, stay with you, deliver on the agreement, and share the experience across their social and digital channels.

When it comes to influencer agreements, don't be afraid to ask for what you need. Many influencers are skilled photographers, writers, or graphic designers, and micro influencers in particular are eager to show value. Lay out the deliverables in your agreement, and provide examples of the visuals and content you hope to receive in return.

While big influencers don't typically work for trade, micro influencers are more willing to negotiate. Set aside a small portion of your marketing budget in 2021 for influencer marketing. Be sure to track and measure the effectiveness of these campaigns as you would any other marketing program.

#### What's Ahead

It's pretty amazing to look back at all the ways our industry has adapted in the wake of the pandemic. From pulling back the curtain on housekeeping, to shifting advertising budgets to drive markets, from holding strong to rates, and by harnessing the power of word of mouth advertising, hotels continue to beat the odds. The ability to respond to guests' needs has never been more important, and it's positioned small and independent hotels as the ones to watch.

# GET READY FOR MOCK MEATS

Plant-based meat selections appeal to meat eaters in a way traditional vegetarian substitutions haven't. Fast food chains in several countries abroad have begun to tap this sunrise segment



► **Recent embrace of plant-based meat by big fast-food brands brought their recognition to another level**

It wasn't that long ago that the only green, plant-based food generally spotted in fast-food restaurants was the shredded lettuce separating a hamburger from its mayonnaise slathered bun.

But as the vegetarian and vegan community rapidly grows, even fast-food fans are becoming less afraid of eating their greens. Past November, McDonald's announced that it is

offering a meatless burger called the McPlant, and Pizza Hut became the first national pizza chain to partner with leading vegan meat producer Beyond Meat to introduce plant-based meat pizzas across the country. The fast-food giants are following in the footsteps of rivals Burger King, Carl's Jr. and White Castle, which have partnered with the rival fake meat producing company Impossible

Foods to offer plant-based burgers. Dunkin' and Del Taco have also introduced plant-based substitutes with Impossible's rival firm Beyond Meat. But the recent embrace of plant-based foods by McDonald's and Pizza Hut brought their recognition to another level.

Some industry watchers believe that plant-based meat is on its way to becoming the fifth protein, in with

beef, chicken, seafood and pork.

### Fake meat market in India

Meanwhile, in a country like India, where major food giants are forced to introduce vegetarian options on their menu, including plant-based meat options might not be a bad idea. Although we see a few vegan restaurants coming up across the country, particularly in the metros, fast food chains here are yet to tap this segment of plant-based meat.

Researchers from the University of Bath, the Good Food Institute, and the Center for Long Term Priorities collaborated on the first quantitative comparison of consumer attitudes towards plant-based and clean meat across China, India, and the U.S.

The report by Deloitte found out that the three most populous countries in the world have robust consumer interest in plant-based and clean meat. Interest in clean meat is expected to grow once there is a product on the market and consumers are more familiar with it.

### Flexitarian consumer

A major factor in the growth of the plant-based industry, especially in the UK, is the increased ethical focus of the consumer. This is partly led by the millennial generation and the emergence of the 'flexitarian' consumer. The 'flexitarian' consumer is an individual who still consumes meat and dairy but wishes to reduce the quantity on ethical, environmental and/or health grounds. The flexitarian's alternative consumption could take the form of specific substitutes or meat/ dairy free meal choices. In the past, plant-based diets were mostly consumed by the relatively small market of vegetarians and vegans. In recent years the number of vegetarians and vegans has increased – for

example, the Vegan Society estimated that the number of vegans in the UK increased by a factor of 2.6 times in the ten years to 2016. However, the significant growth in the plant-based market is driven by the flexitarian consumer. There are various factors driving the switch towards plant-based products, including:

- significant media coverage of the impact of meat and dairy product production on global warming and resource consumption in relation to greenhouse gases
- animal welfare rights groups have gained significant traction and the ways in which animals are treated in the production of products has caused a switch in consumer preferences
- numerous reports on the potential links between high consumption of processed or red meat and cancer.

Notwithstanding the above health and environmental drivers, it is worth noting the growing awareness that certain plant based products also have potential negative impacts, such as: high levels of water use (almond milk); use of genetically modified crops (soy); and high salt content (meat based alternatives). Negative media coverage could potentially have an impact on the future growth of certain products

Widening range of ingredients and flavours As the market for plant-based alternatives grows, a wider range of ingredients are being used to broaden the product range. These ingredients are often identified because of their ability to provide the consumer with high levels of protein and nutritional value. In the dairy alternatives market, there has been a significant increase in the variety



► Rival fake meat companies Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods have sparked off the trend of plant-based burgers



► **Plant-based meat analogues are made from plants such as soy, wheat, fungi and pea proteins.**

of ingredients used to produce milk alternatives, including, for example, soy, oat, coconut, almond, rice, and hemp etc

The wider variety of ingredients allows the consumer more choice and more exciting flavours, as well as ensuring that their dietary requirements are met. This also means that some ingredients will become more popular and others less. Ingredients such as tempeh, pea, almond and seitan are increasingly in demand, whereas soy products are to some degree challenged because of concerns about genetic modification. As part of any investment decision in the plant-based sector, careful consideration of the particular plant-based protein source will be important.

New product development: The

rising demand for innovative products has driven a significant increase in new product development across chilled, ambient and the frozen segments. This innovation gives the consumer a wider choice of products and brands, and allows plant-based products to gain increased shelf space and recognition. According to a recent Mintel press release, the UK is now the global leader for vegan food launches. In 2018 approximately 16 percent of new food launches were vegan.

### **New strategy**

The existing industry players, and in particular the multinational branded food and drinks companies, have increasingly become aware of the small disruptor brands innovating in the plant-based market space, and

are moving both to protect their market share and to capitalise on the growing market. One example of this is Unilever's acquisition of The Vegetarian Butcher in December 2018 for an undisclosed amount. Established meat-based protein manufacturers as well as dairy producers have also expanded into the plant-based meat and dairy-free space. For example Danone acquired leading plant based dairy alternative producer Alpro in the purchase of The Whitewave Foods Company in 2017, for a value in excess of £9bn. This deal was Danone's largest acquisition since 2007, and offers a fast way to gain significant market share in the growing market.

### **Direct to consumer models**

Direct to consumer (D2C) models



► **Plant-based meat is on its way to becoming the fifth protein, in with beef, chicken, seafood and pork.**

have become increasingly important in the food and beverage sector, allowing processors to gain valuable insights into consumers' behaviour and a more tailored approach to marketing and differentiation. When executed well, this model also allows higher margins to be obtained. This growth in the D2C business model has been facilitated by the increase in online shopping and the increase in social media use, which allows businesses, including start-ups, to reach a wide market from a relatively low cost base, while avoiding the need to route products through traditional wholesale and retail operators. 9 Plant-based alternatives Driving industry M&A Furthermore the increase in D2C has been driven by the fact that consumers are

demanding a better experience, and more tailored and personable service. D2C allows the companies to build a direct relationship with the consumer that would not be available through grocery channels. Examples of D2C models being used in the plant-based alternatives sector include:

- All plants, a UK meal-kit delivery service of healthy, plant-based, frozen and ready to eat meals, which raised £7.5m in a Series A venture capital funding in September 2018
- Daily Harvest, a US plant-based vegan frozen fast-food company, backed by Serena Williams and Shaun White, which provides a build-your-box service which delivers your order to your doorstep
- Amy's Kitchen, a US-based manufac-

turer of vegan and vegetarian foods, launched "Amy's Drive Thru" which is the first plant-based fast-food restaurant.

### **Global market**

Despite the rise in the availability of plant based alternative products, the industry is still in a relatively early stage of its lifecycle and therefore offers significant room for further growth. The industry's global reach is expected to be enhanced by new product development and rising consumer demand. European dominance The European plant-based alternatives market leads the way in terms of market size, with the European meat substitutes market accounting for around 40 per cent of the global market. The market is forecast to grow to €2.4bn by 2025 from €1.5bn in 2018. The European market, of which the UK is the largest sub-market, is the leader currently by value. This reflects the wealth of the average European customer, particularly in Western Europe, as cost is often a key barrier to buying plant-based alternatives due to the premium price attached to many products.

### **Significant investment**

There has been significant investment aiming to meet consumer demand. The market has received investment from a number of high-profile individuals, as well as financial investors and companies, including, for example:

- Tyson Foods Inc. £41m investment in Beyond Meat Inc. in December 2017, for an undisclosed stake. Beyond Meat is a US-based plant-based meat alternatives producer
- Bill Gates & Li Ka-Shing invested in Impossible Foods, a US-based start-up creating a "bleeding" plant-based burger. The company raised \$75m in

the most recent funding round

- Richard Branson & Tyson Foods Inc. invested in Memphis meat, a US-based company which produces “clean meat” by culturing animal tissue from cells
- Serena Williams and Shaun White invested in Daily Harvest, a US-based frozen plant-based foods company
- Google co-founder, Sergey Brin, provided \$330k to fund the world’s first lab-grown hamburger produced by Dutch start-up, Mosa Meat. These investors have tended to invest in plant-based start-ups as they have recognised the shifting trend in the market and the need to produce more sustainable food. The public prominence of a number of the individuals has created additional media coverage for plant-based alternative industries.

Anyone in the foodservice or restaurant business in India must understand that plant-based is more than a trend, it has created a paradigm shift in how the world eats meat.

Since 2018 Beyond Meat™ and Impossible™ emerged and disrupted the meat industry by creating (with their plant-based burgers) a whole new plant-based-meat food category known as meat analogues.

### Meat analogues are designed to:

- Have the aesthetic qualities and/or flavor/textural characteristics of meat
  - Display alongside meat on the grocery store shelves
  - Appeal to meat eaters
  - Directly compete with meat to get people to eat less meat
- Almost overnight plant-based meats gained impressive traction. Unlike the often frozen plant-based meat substitutes marketed directly to

vegetarians, these new products directly targeted meat eaters.

### COVID-19 accelerates trend

COVID-19 magnifies health, climate, and meat supply-chain concerns that plant-based meats aim to correct and has created a surge in demand for plant-based products in grocery stores. Burger King and Starbucks launched plant-based breakfast sandwiches with Impossible Foods’ new plant-based pork a year ago. With the onset of COVID-19, and questions about animal protein supplies, plant-based meats and other plant-based foods have a role to play to help rebuild the restaurant industry. It’s a way to recapture growth, build-up check average, appeal to younger consumers, and overall help restaurants rebound.

Plant-based meat analogues are made from plants such as soy, wheat, fungi and pea proteins. Health experts advise to eat less meat and eat more plants to improve overall health. But do plant-based meats fit that bill? The answer is complicated. On one hand, the answer leans toward “yes” if you’re occasionally

substituting a plant-based meat for traditional meat because plant-based burgers do not contain cholesterol and have fiber and antioxidants animal meat does not contain (and which American diets often lack). On the other hand, the answer leans towards “no” because they often have about the same number of calories, total fat, and saturated fat as their traditional meat counterparts. They’re featured in indulgent menu items such as burgers and can contain ingredient formulations that our bodies have not encountered before.

So, for now the answer is balance. Plant-based meats are still new and are in their first and even second recipe revisions; they may become healthier to help people be healthier. But there is no denying that plant-based meat is on its way to becoming the fifth protein, in with beef, chicken, seafood and pork. So anyone in the food business should take this trend seriously and gear up for creating recipes with fake meat.

**Courtesy:** Plant-based alternatives, a report by Deloitte, UK



► Health experts advise to eat less meat and eat more plants to improve overall health

## NEW WAGE CODE

Rather than a lengthy definition with several inclusions, exclusions, and explanations, a simpler approach may have made payroll structures friendlier for both employers and employees



The definition of wages continues with the age-old formula of stipulating broadly worded inclusions along with vaguely worded exclusions, and then adds a layer of complexity on top by setting out exceptions for situations where the excluded components would also have to be treated as wages.

► **The new code could have been a lot simpler and in tune with the compensation practices being followed today - internationally and in India.**

**T**HE new and common definition of 'wages' under the recently passed labour codes has got most organisations to take yet another look at their payroll structures to determine what impact they will face. The new codes have been passed by Parliament to "amalgamate, simplify and rationalise" existing laws on various subjects like payment of wages, minimum wages, bonus, social security, etc., and are anticipated to become a binding law from April

2021. Is this the change the industry had wanted and hoped for?

No doubt a common and consistent definition is good, and that is certainly a positive one. PF, ESI, statutory bonus, leave encashment (for factory workers), gratuity, retrenchment compensation, etc. will all be calculated using a common definition of 'wages.'

However, consistency seems to have come at the cost of unnecessary complexity. The definition of wages

continues with the age-old formula of stipulating broadly worded inclusions along with vaguely worded exclusions, and then adds a layer of complexity on top by setting out exceptions for situations where the excluded components would also have to be treated as wages. The definition still looks and reads like it belongs to a statute from the 1950s and not 2021. It could have been a lot simpler and in tune with the compensation practices being followed today

- internationally and in India.

Most organisations follow the concept of CTC (cost to company), which has become almost customary in terms of practice and implementation. The CTC is typically split into (i) fixed or guaranteed components of salary (like basic salary, dearness allowance, HRA, etc.), (ii) variable or conditional components (such as performance-linked incentives, commissions, etc.), and (iii) other costs such as the employer's cost of contribution towards social benefits like the provident fund (PF), employee's state insurance (ESI), etc.

No doubt, there could be certain entitlements outside the above-mentioned construct of CTC - such as statutory bonus, overtime, etc., which may or may not be treated as 'wages' based on the circumstances. A simpler approach would have simply been to define wages as including all fixed elements of pay and excluding variable or conditional components, with limited exceptional rules for items like overtime and other statutory entitlements.

The new definition ignores this easy to comprehend construct in favour of vaguely drafted inclusions and exclusions. In the process, it creates ambiguities and concerns such as the following:

\*HRA is counted as wages to check if an employer has paid its employees on time, but not counted to determine whether employees are receiving minimum wages. This is manifestly unfair, since HRA is normally guaranteed in nature. Even the current Minimum Wage Act includes HRA, and this appears to be a poorly thought through result of wanting to maintain a consistent definition.

\*"Remuneration payable under any award or settlement between the parties" is not counted as wages. In a

## EMPLOYEES, EXPECT BIG CUTS

The government has come out with new compensation rules to increase the social security benefits for employees. According to the new wage definition, in effect, at least 50 per cent of the gross remuneration of employees should form the basis to calculate benefits such as gratuity, retrenchment compensation and provident fund, etc. in situations where the sum of basic salary and other fixed allowances (such as dearness allowance) is less than 50 per cent of the gross remuneration.

The new definition is part of the Wage Code 2019 that was passed by the Parliament last year and also reflects in the more recently passed codes on Social Security.

The new wage definition is an attempt to simplify the various regulations related to wages with the promise of easier implementation. However, India Inc still awaits the details. The Bill is anticipated to get enforced by April 2021. Some of the wage thresholds for laws such as Bonus, Provident Fund, Employees State Insurance, etc. have not been decided yet.

Several laws that had their own definition of Wages have been consolidated under the Labour Codes. There were different definitions under Minimum Wages Act, Provident Fund Act, Bonus Act, etc. All of these laws were meant to extend certain benefits to employees or give them certain rights. This is an attempt to make the definition of wages uniform, as proposed in the Wage Code, 2019 which has been duplicated in the other Codes as well.

While it will simplify the nomenclature, it will have significant cost repercussions for firms. As the base to calculate PF and gratuity increases, employers will have to shell out more as part of their workforce cost. Also, there will be a one-time cost increase for employers to audit their current base of employee pay structure and align with the new system. It may also result in rising

compliance cost burden and penalties, if any.

One area where the firms will certainly see an impact is the increased gratuity cost. As of now, it is applied to all employees, management and otherwise. Also, it is calculated on 15 days of basic pay and dearness allowance. Now, with the new calculation, gratuity will have to include the other allowances of wages such as travel, special allowance, etc.

So, in the long run employees might gain higher retirement benefits, but low-paid employees who may want more cash in hand may have to suffice with lower take home salary.

But, these are broad generalisations and there are several grey areas that remain unclear. It is not clear whether this rule will apply to all wages or will be applicable above a certain wage threshold. Also, the other Acts, such as PF Act have their wage threshold, it remains to be seen whether those wage thresholds will apply or not.

Moreover, labour is a concurrent subject in the constitution and hence, the Act related to wages will have to be amended by the state governments as well. The Labour department in the State and the Law enforcement bodies in the Central Government have to be restructured to make sure that there's clarity and harmony while enforcement. These must happen over the next three-four months when the implications will be clear. For instance, minimum wages and overtime rates for employees are to be administered by state governments but it is not clear if overtime hours will be applicable for all employees in an enterprise and how they will be tracked, verified and complied with. Besides, the rates for minimum wages are yet to be published by the government bodies. So it's not known whether the wages will rise or remain the same as a result.





► **Several laws that had their own definition of Wages have been consolidated under the Labour Codes**

unionised environment, all wages are agreed under settlements between the employer and unionised workers, which often span 2-3 years or more. It is quite meaningless to say that none of these mutually negotiated and settled elements of pay would be treated as "wages" for certain purposes, such as minimum wage compliance.

\*The definition states that all excluded components must also

be counted as wages till 50% of the gross remuneration. This appears to have been picked up from what the PF department proposed many years ago to ensure that PF contributions are made on a larger portion of pay (even though there is no discernible legal rationale for this 50% stipulation). While it made some sense in the PF context, it appears that this 50% limit is now also acting as a backward partial fix to the convoluted defini-

tion discussed above, which excludes many components that would normally be considered wages.

\*Another flipside to creating consistency is that the wages for calculating gratuity will no longer be limited to basic salary and dearness allowance alone. This will mean that the gratuity costs for organisations will go up significantly.

Therefore, rather than a lengthy definition with several inclusions, ex-



**Another flipside to creating consistency is that the wages for calculating gratuity will no longer be limited to basic salary and dearness allowance alone. This will mean that the gratuity costs for organisations will go up significantly.**

► **In the long run, employees might gain higher retirement benefits, but low-paid employees may get lower take home salary.**

clusions, provisos, and explanations, a simpler approach may have been to tackle the definition of "wages" based on core principles (and if necessary, through illustrations and examples, as several other statutes do) - in other words, any component that is fixed or guaranteed in nature is wages; anything which is conditional, contingent, or discretionary is not; along with other obvious exclusions towards pension contributions, benefits in kind, expense reimbursements, and end of service payments. Few components like overtime, which deserve to both be

treated as wages and not based on context, could have been dealt with in the specific chapters dealing with payment of wages and minimum wages/payment of bonus, respectively.

That said, there is still an overall improvement and organisations will also stand to benefit as follows:

\*Organisations will retain the ability to structure wages as tax efficient as possible, with the caveat that if excluded components exceed 50% of the gross, they'll be counted as wages till the 50% limit.

\*PF contributions for International

Workers (about whom the Social Security Code is completely silent at present) which are currently uncapped can now potentially be limited to 50% of the gross.

Some issues the codes could have addressed, but have missed the opportunity to do so:

\*The codes could have stipulated a comfortable wage threshold beyond which overtime payments wouldn't be mandatory. Currently, there is a risk that even well-paid employees could seek overtime payments despite earning in multiples of the stipulated minimum wages.

\*Currently, many components of pay tend to be front or back-loaded for tax planning purposes. For e.g., many companies only pay allowances like LTA as a lump sum at the year-end. The codes could have clarified that such components should only be considered on a pro-rata basis to calculate the end of service payments and benefits like retrenchment compensation, maternity benefits,

etc., and shouldn't result in undue advantage to the employee merely because of the timing of the amount for tax planning purposes.

\*The codes could have clarified the manner in which entitlements would be pro-rated for part-time workers, which is currently subject to certain ambiguities, depending on the manner in which part-time work is structured.

\*While the coming few months will show what shape the final codes and underlying rules will take, the government could certainly have taken a more progressive approach to the new definition of wages, to better address ambiguities and legal uncertainties resulting in fewer disputes and litigation.

Source: Atul Gupta/Trilegal

## How salary structures will change

Currently, most employers have a wage structure in which the basic salary ranges from 25% to 40% of the CTC of the employee, and this forms the basis for both provident fund and gratuity contributions.

The four labour codes subsume 29 legislations. The purpose of each of these regulations was varied and hence the definition of wages under many of these regulations was also different. The codes are aimed at unification, simplification, and consolidation of these regulations, and hence have a common approach, which includes having a uniform definition of wages across all these regulations.

This is a significant change, and while the intent of having a singular approach is welcome, it would mean that the industry needs to analyse and understand the impact of the same under each of these subsumed legislations.

The term "wages" as defined under the codes today, envisages that "all remuneration" provided to the employee is to be considered, and is subject to certain specified exclusions, such as statutory bonus, conveyance allowance, travel concessions, housing benefit, or house rent allowance, contributions to PF and pensions, overtime, commission, etc.

The aggregate of these exclusions is limited to 50% of remuneration, and hence the wages as ultimately calculated would be at least 50% of total remuneration. Clearly, the intent of the codes is to ensure that contributions to PF, gratuity payouts, etc. are made on at least

50% of the total remuneration. The definition also provides for certain termination related payouts such as gratuity etc. and these are not subject to the 50% limit. Further, the valuation of benefits in kind is also provided for.

Currently, most employers have a wage structure in which the basic salary ranges from 25% to 40% of the CTC of the employee, and this forms the basis for both provident fund and gratuity contributions. With the wages under the codes moving to at least 50% of the CTC, there is going to be an impact from both PF and gratuity perspectives. Let us take a simple example of an employee having a monthly salary of Rs. 25,000.

In the above scenario, the gratuity would be computed under the current payment of gratuity act provisions on the basic salary of Rs. 10,000 per month. From a PF perspective, given the principles that arose from the Supreme Court (SC) ruling in the case of Vivekananda Vidya Mandir and others, the employer would have contributed PF on Rs. 15,000 per month (which is the statutory wage ceiling for PF).

Under the codes, the wages for this employee would amount to Rs. 17,000 per month, and hence this needs to be considered for calculating gratuity. If this employee quits the organisation from the codes become effective, and let us presume has put in 15 years of service, the gratuity payable (calculated as last drawn pay /26\* 15\* no of years of service) would be Rs. 147,115 as against the earlier amount of Rs. 86, 538 a clear increase of 1.7 times.

This will not only impact the financials of the company since corporates are required to provide for the increased liability through an actuarial valuation but also impact the take-home of the employee.

Unlike the above simplistic example, in practice, most companies would include both the employer contribution to PF as well as gratuity entitlements as part of CTC. Hence, an increase in gratuity payout will reduce the quantum of special allowance and the take home pay of the employee.

From a PF perspective, contributions to PF on wages beyond the statutory wage ceiling are not mandatory. This is based on the provisions of the PF scheme as they stand today, as well as the principles arising from the Supreme Court ruling in the case of Marathwada Grameen Bank.

Hence, where employers are contributing PF on wages up to Rs 15,000 per month, companies may adopt a view that there is no increase in contribution required.

However, there is definitely a need to look at the employment contract and the internal policy of the organisation to ensure that these are aligned with the position being adopted. There would be an impact on PF in respect of employees with wages below the statutory wage ceiling as well as international workers.

Overall, it is important for organisations to analyse the impact of the change in the definition of wages.



► Surely cutting out the middle man wherever possible and encouraging direct hotel bookings makes the most sense from a revenue management perspective

## GO DIRECT, BYPASS OTA

An important goal for both large hotel chains and smaller, individual hotels, is to encourage guests to book directly through their websites

**R**ECENTLY several hotel associations launched the #Godirect Campaign to eliminate intermediaries and save exorbitant commissions to hotel aggregators, especially when the hospitality sector is going through a critical situation.

The Hotel & Restaurant Association

of Eastern India has been fighting against the arm-twisting tactics of the aggregators for quite some time. Last year we had decided to stop taking bookings from, two top online travel portals for charging heavy commissions from hotel owners and offering indiscriminate discounts to custom-

ers through their platforms. Other hospitality industry associations across the country also have been opposing major OTAs who charge heavy commissions from hotels and restaurants and offer hefty discounts to guests. These online booking portals initially charged between 15

and 18 per cent as commissions, but the figure climbed to over 40 per cent last year-end.

### BEAT THEM SMARTLY

The competitive landscape for hotel and property managers has shifted so much in the last 10 years with the emergence of the OTAs (Online Travel Agents). As they continue to dominate the online booking landscape, finding ways to lower the cost of guest acquisition has become a significant priority for most hotels. While commission costs are beginning to come down as the larger hotel chains fight their corner, the share of customers booking through OTAs continues to grow. So what can smaller hoteliers do to drive more direct hotel booking and win back business?

Many hoteliers now realise that they will not be able to beat the OTAs at their own game. And while including them in your hotel booking strategy can help you maximise your exposure, the best route to growing profitability is increasing your online direct bookings. So what other benefits of driving direct bookings can you expect?

### GAME OF DATA

When a guest makes a booking directly with your hotel rather than through a third party booking agent, you have all your guest details, including email addresses and phone numbers, right from the very beginning. Hotel owners really should not under-estimate the value of this information. The data hoteliers have in their own PMS (Property Management System) is probably the single biggest competitive advantage they have over the OTAs and should be fiercely protected.

It's important for hoteliers to understand how they can leverage

this data to minimise their rates being continually driven down. By using all of your customer data, including historical performance and on-property spending, you can set your rates for maximum profit. This means you can better understand how your pricing is affecting demand for your rooms, not your competitors.

Because OTAs do not have access to this data, they are forced to rely on competitors prices to gauge demand. This feeds into the ongoing cycle of hoteliers being pitted against each other to undercut one another on price and offer the lowest rate. This race to the bottom isn't really beneficial to anyone, even the OTA's. The lower the rate, the less they earn too.

Building a comprehensive profile of your guests from the moment of direct booking online enables you to build a more seamless and personalised booking experience. Leveraging the data you hold in your CRM (Customer Relationship Management) system enables you to make the best decisions on pricing and promotions.

### DIRECT BOOKINGS

When you sell your hotel inventory through an OTA or using a channel other than your own website, you are losing revenue in the form of the fees you are paying to these distribution partners. Surely cutting out the middle man wherever possible and



► When a guest makes a booking directly with your hotel rather than through a third party booking agent, you have all your guest details



► **When you start delivering a better customer experience, you also begin to build brand loyalty and draw more customers directly**

encouraging direct hotel bookings makes the most sense from a revenue management perspective.

Having direct contact with your guests from the outset and using your data wisely also enables you to begin building rapport and offer enhanced customer service. Making the right offer to the right guest at the right time will not only wow your customers but increases the likelihood of driving more profitable repeat bookings through your lowest-cost channel.

Also keeping a current customer is much cheaper than finding a new

one. When you start delivering a better customer experience, you also begin to build brand loyalty.

Consider offering value-add deals as a 'thank you' to guests booking your hotel direct online. It can be anything from rental deals, free wifi, personalised recommendations for local day trips to a 'best price guarantee'. They will all go a long way to ensuring that a guest feels personally looked after.

Then when their stay is over, follow up with them reminding them how much you enjoyed having them stay

with you and offer them a deal for a future stay or to share with family and friends.

## **POSITIVE REVIEWS**

Delivering great personalised customer service and building your brand loyalty means you are far more likely to attract those all-important positive guest reviews. So make sure that they know how and where they can leave these reviews to show potential new customers the benefits of booking direct.

So what can independent hotels

and motels do to increase their chances of winning that all-important booking confirmation through your own direct booking site?

## MAKE IT SIMPLE

Before we even get into how to get more bookings and the potential marketing strategies that you could adopt, take a look at your current website and booking engine. Many of us have become so distracted by the battles for our marketing dollar from third parties that we have forgotten to invest in our own hotel websites. When you consider that fewer than half of all travellers visit the hotel's direct booking portal, it's vital to maximise the conversion rate among those that do.

How attractive is your website?  
How easy is your booking process?  
Is it mobile responsive – does it work the same way on a mobile device? Do you have great photos of your different room types?

Among the key things to focus on are the consistency and simplicity of the booking process. Ideally, it should take no more than three clicks to convert 'lookers to bookers'.

So what other direct booking strategies should you consider?

**Improve Website Visibility:** Increasing organic traffic to your website and ensuring it can easily be found when potential guests are searching for a hotel in your area is imperative. Invest in search engine optimising your website so that you appear for the most relevant, commonly searched and valuable search terms. Our recent series of blogs outlined more about what SEO is and how to do it.

**Consider Meta Search Advertising:** With meta search advertising, you can pay to display your book direct rate in the metasearch results. You are not selling your rooms directly as you

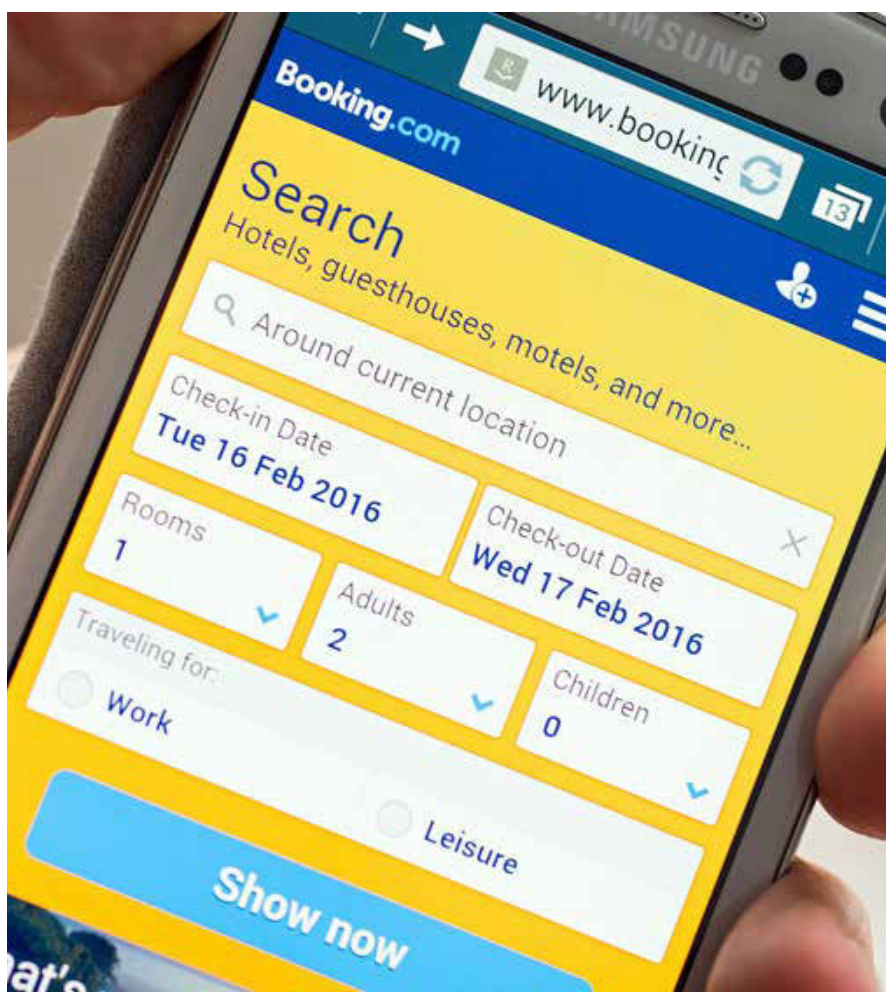
would with an OTA. You are effectively paying to display your own hotel website or booking engine alongside the OTA's. Make sure you work with an authorized Google integration partner to help you get this set up.

**Social Media Strategy:** Ensure you are making the most of the opportunity that social media offers to present your hotel in the best light possible. This includes highlighting what the local area has to offer as well as encouraging engagement with current, previous and potential guests. Again, you can work with a trusted partner to ensure your hotel

marketing is the best it can be.

**Email Marketing:** Make sure you have a well thought through email marketing strategy. Ongoing regular communication is vital to encourage direct hotel bookings. By segmenting your guest data you can engage people before they arrive and re-engage previous guests.

Developing special offers targeted at the right people at the right time creates that wow factor. Make real use of the data that you have to send promotions for their birthdays, anniversaries or any other important occasion.



► **Make your website attractive. The booking process must be easy and ensure it works the same way on a mobile device**

# TRAVEL IN NEW NORMAL

The current pandemic has ensured that travelling won't be the same as before. Some trends are going to stay even after normalcy returns



**T**HE current pandemic has ensured that the travel trends won't be the same as before. With around 90 per cent people keen to resume travel, more and more travellers have been exploring the myriad beauty of India, leading to a rise in domestic travel. Top hotels

and some online booking companies have listed out these three trends that will be carving the path ahead in 2021, and beyond

## **WORKATIONS**

With the lines between work and play blurring in the past months, there

has been a rising urge to escape the four walls of home and maximize work from rejuvenating environs like a beach, palace, mountains or by the pool. People are booking longer stays at hotels to balance time with family and inspire a burst of professional creativity. Digital nomads with





► **The workcation concept wasn't invented by millennials, but they were the ones who embraced it and perfected it**

a tendency to blur the lines between work and play, the often-misunderstood generation known as millennials, just might be saving parts of the U.S. hotel industry during Covid-19 lockdowns.

For the past decade, hoteliers have been preparing for the many ways in which millennials were predicted to change the hotel industry. Radically different in values and behavior than those in early generation who had defined the modern travel industry,

millennials were viewed through a lens of curiosity and circumspection by a hotel industry that had grown to a staggering \$218 Billion in the US alone by 2018.

The astronomical growth of the hotel industry had been driven largely by catering to the needs and desires of the older generation: affluent travelers who liked their creature comforts and prized consistency above all. Industry touchstones such as personalized interactions at check

in/check out, bell and concierge service, a variety of in-house F&B outlets, room service, twice daily housekeeping service (with turndown for luxury hotels), business centers (where work could be done outside of one's hotel room), 500 thread count bed linens – all of these innovations spoke to the generation's desire for comfort and convenience, ideally wrapped in the trappings of luxury, whenever the budget permitted.

Millennial travellers, on the other



► **New age travellers are willing to forgo all luxury, with the only requirement being that the wireless internet signal must be fast and strong**

hand, were willing to forgo each of these things in favor of authenticity, local experiences, flexibility, and spontaneity, with the only requirement being that the wireless internet signal must be fast and strong. Hoteliers, realizing that the old values and rules no longer applied to this up-and-coming mega-generation of customers began scrambling to redesign the guest experience.

With varying degrees of enthusiasm and success, hotels slowly began adapting to this new breed of travelers. Internet access, at first limited to ethernet cables and sometimes hidden behind a paid firewall (with some brands even tier-

ing speed to pricing) soon became the most important and desirable hotel amenity, surpassing luxurious bath products and the foil-wrapped chocolate on the pillow. Hotel lobbies were transformed from stately, serene showcases that proclaimed "you've arrived" to buzzing hives of work and socialization, a place where millennials could tap into a wireless network, sip a local fair-trade coffee, and post a selfie on their social media. Some of these social media posts began being hashtagged #workcation as early as 2015.

The workcation concept wasn't invented by millennials, but they were the ones who embraced it and

perfected it. The notion of working while on vacation was considered so unusual as late as 2014 that CNN interviewed several top hotel brand leaders to learn more about this phenomenon. One senior hotel executive gamely described the "work-cation" as the logical extension of baby boomers' 'time is money – no time that is not work time' ethic.

This perspective overlooked the rising tide of digital nomads from the booming, well-paid technology and internet industries; employees at companies such as Google and Facebook, campuses where the culture of nine to five and office cubicles had been jettisoned from the beginning.



► **Stacycation is an increasing trend because it's an easy way to take a break without travelling too far**

Millennials increasingly lived, worked, played, and stayed wherever they could maximize efficiency, experience life to the fullest, and get a strong internet connection.

Then Covid-19 happened and practically overnight, entire industries had to come to terms with the unique and unexpected challenges of working remote, something millennials had long championed as a requisite job perk and indeed, demanded as part of their employment (often to the chagrin of their baby boomer employers.) Boomers themselves, by this time largely in an age bracket deemed at "high risk" for infection, and by generational nature averse to

uncertainty, immediately shelved any vacation plans and cancelled their discretionary travel.

Long haul flights were suspended; international travel to major tourist destinations in the United States dried up. Corporations issued "essential travel only" directives; groups and associations postponed contracted events to future years, or even cancelled bookings outright. Hotel occupancies and forecasted revenues plummeted accordingly.

Hotels awoke to a radically new environment and quickly realized that the bulk of their business during the global pandemic would have to come from their own backyards; boarding

an airplane for leisure travel was strictly off the table for most travelers. Hotel rates and promotions were re-targeted towards the so-called "drive market" and urban hotels looking for a lifeline in the absence of corporate and group business quickly pivoted to hyper-local marketing strategies.

Despite these quick reactions and immediate measures, many hotels failed see a return of their usual guests. Instead, the guest age demographic at hotels began to fall squarely into the millennial range of mid-twenties to late thirties. And, something even more unusual happened. The average length of stay began to slowly increase.

Less obvious and predictable was the appetite of millennials for taking advantage of historically low hotel occupancies and rates by extending the typical one-to-two night weekend stay into four and five nights. These extended "workcation" stays were seen as an opportunity to experience a new environment, get out of the apartment, condo or house, and possibly see other millennials from a safe distance. When the hotel or resort came with amenities such as poolside cabanas, 24-hour room service and free Wi-Fi, the remote work situation was perfected. Long accustomed to working from remote locations, millennials quite naturally made the transition to working from hotels and resorts when remote work was no longer optional, but required by employers.

## STAYCATIONS:

A staycation means 'stay' and 'vacation' – A vacation that you take near your home for a slightly longer period of time than a regular holiday. Guests want to surround themselves with greenery and nature and get some fresh air with good weather after being locked inside their homes for months now. They also look forward to diversity in cuisines including immunity booster drinks or dishes and indulge in outdoor physical activities including in Yoga and Meditation.

Staycation is an increasing trend because it's an easy way to take a break without travelling too far. It is a wonderful way of spending joyful vacations while aiding one's pocket and the environment. In fact, staying close to house eradicates the budget for accommodation (15% of the funds of average households on vacation) and transport. There are no burdened or work-load days, you do what you feel like doing (with leisure-activities

and without consistently falling into temptations such as Netflix) and there is no hurry to go from one activity to another just to remain busy all the time.

The wider hotel and hospitality market has long been occupied by business travellers and conferences. Before Covid-19 struck, half of all Preferred Hotels guests were corporate travellers, while leisure guests made up between 20% and 30%, but now the situation has altered. As the rules of work and play are fading, professionals are discovering creative ways to spend leisure time with family and friends. Owing to the time-crunch experienced by people, spontaneous staycations in their own cities with leisure breaks is becoming highly popular.

Staycations have become increasingly popular at city hotels across Mumbai, Bangalore, Delhi and Kolkata among others. Combined with minimal required travel, low on holiday planning time, cost and carbon footprint, staycations are perfect for travellers of all generations.

While it might take time for the industry to fully recover, Hoteliers have come up with innovative solutions to generate revenues. As a result, the Hotel Industry is presently witnessing a surge in demand for Staycations' – The answer to weary millennials and work from home employees who are in dire need for a vacation but want to be assured of the best hygiene standards. Restaurants are focusing more on takeaways with contactless delivery services.

However, in the near future with mass vaccination, we expect domestic leisure to pick up wherein people would travel in their own cars to areas where there are limited cases or chances for exposure. Prasad believes that small boutique properties would

be attractive for customers due to their layout which provides privacy and protection. The hill areas of Himachal and Uttarakhand have many such properties in close proximity to Delhi/NCR, Western UP, and Punjab.

Lessons from the ongoing pandemic are loud and clear. Social distancing, the importance of hygiene, and sanitation cannot be overstressed. It is also now deeply ingrained in the human psyche at large how large-scale meddling was the precursor of the crisis and people want to move more towards nature. In these times, sustainable travel assumes a depth and meaning which were absent before. People want to reduce their carbon imprint and staycations out of cities are becoming one of the most popular trends.

Staycations are ideal options for families that are deciding what to do for their holidays; trying to balance concerns about their finances and their fear of Covid-19, with their desire for fun and relaxation. The pandemic may instead be pushing a revival of creative holiday making nearer to home, with potentially huge benefits for crisis-hit local economies.

In order to stimulate your curious mind and push yourself to find out new tracks and new things to do, here are some of the benefits of a staycation:

Staycation limits the stress related to organizing a trip: from finding accommodation to preparing multiple suitcases filled with clothes that many times aren't even used.

- It allows carrying out activities that you never do because of a busy schedule during the year – such as visiting the permanent collections of museums, taking benefit of the good weather to play some sports in the nearby parks.
- Staycation also promotes the local

economy. You leverage the time of vacations to take a tour on the local markets, visit the farm to pick fresh fruits and vegetables, be a part of the seasonal competitions or artistic courses; or even to spend a night in an amazing hotel nearby.

- Discovering or rediscovering the beauty of your city or region, which we often forget to notice due to stress and the power of habit is another potential benefit of staycation;
- Last but not least: staycation allows you to learn how to take advantage of the pandemic situation.

### DRIVECATIONS

Over 80 per cent people indicated interest in traveling with family and loved ones, resulting in the growth

of driving holidays as people were keen to travel to destinations within close vicinity of their homes, leading to the discovery of offbeat locations. Some travellers were even comfortable driving slightly longer distances to ensure that they could maintain a comfortable level of social distancing. Destinations such as Goa, Rajasthan, Kerala, Uttarakhand and Karnataka, all driving distance from key cities, saw a rise in leisure travel in recent months.

Drivecation is actually a Covid-driven upgrade of the staycation where the check-in essentially begins at your doorstep because, literally, the hotels go to the guests. The tour packages hotels offer are door-to-door to avoid exposure and create

a travel bubble—a car picks up the guests, takes them to the hotel, and drops them back home.

The industry assessment is that travel is primarily local and hotel-centric—budget, premium or luxury as long as reaching it is easy, sanitation protocols are convincing, and the location of the hotel is attractive—until the infection rate drops off or mass vaccination is introduced.

This is the reason people have been opting for road trips and holidays within drivable distance in the safety of cars. Also, people choose places close to home to escape their daily routine yet be at the beck and call to attend domestic responsibilities, if needs arise.

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STATE SURVEY

# STELLAR REVIVAL

Odisha Tourism has undertaken a vast and inclusive drive to sensitise and train service providers across the state in COVID-19 safety protocols. Especially, the newly launched Eco Retreats and concept of glamping are drawing tourists in hordes



**R**ICH culture, glorious history, virgin beaches, bounty of nature and wildlife, abundance of spirituality and a hint of royalty. When in Odisha, there is no dearth of options to explore. Set on the eastern coast of India with the waters of the Bay of Bengal swirling along its boundaries and wedged between the states of West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh, the coastal state of Odisha is the one-stop destination for all kinds

of travellers. With a footfall of nearly a million tourists every year, it is called the 'Soul of India'.

In its long-spanning history, Odisha has been known by several names including Kalinga and Utkala and ultimately rose to become the cultural trove of the country, as we know it today. As you delve deeper into the rich history, you can find several museums across the state that stand testament to its glorious past. Be it the lush

green and hilly terrain or its coastal plains, its rich cultural festivals or the Buddhist legacy, its palm-fringed silver beaches or the numerous rivers, there's an elusive Odisha waiting to be explored.

#### **EARLY ADOPTER OF SAFETY PROTOCOLS**

In anticipation of resumption of post-monsoon tourist activity, the Department of Tourism, Government



► Odisha is richly endowed with nature, wildlife and biodiversity

of Odisha, has been working with the state's tourism and hospitality sector through the representatives of the hospitality sector to ensure high standards of hygiene and tourist safety. District-level teams plan to familiarise management and employees of tourist destinations and service providers across the spectrum, based on the COVID-19 Preparedness Protocols for Tourist Destinations issued by the Department of Tourism.

In organising the Jagannath Rath Yatra 2020, the Government of Odisha undertook comprehensive preventive measures, including screening of over 2,000 servitors and about 30 police platoons for COVID-19 prior to deployment, besides imposing a curfew across Puri to prevent crowding. Prime hotels and resorts in the state have brought in technology-leveraged sanitisation mechanisms to implement safety & hygiene protocols and operational recommendations for tourism service providers issued in May 2020 by the Ministry of Tourism.

Odisha Tourism Development Corporation (OTDC) was among the early adapters to these protocols. These practices that were put in place while servicing the lodging, boarding and transport requirements of healthcare service providers and tourists have been maintained diligently.

### **BOUNTIFUL NATURE**

Odisha is richly endowed with nature, wildlife and biodiversity, thereby making it an ideal escape for a sustainable getaway. The ecotourism camps and corridors in the state often make it a traveller's first choice for a nature trail. One can choose from a variety of activities such as trekking, sightseeing, boating and birding when in Odisha.

Some of the most preferred destinations for ecotourism in Odisha





► **Odisha's eco retreats are nothing less than a veritable carnival**

include the Similipal Tiger and Biosphere Reserve, the Bhitarkanika National Park and the Satkosia Tiger Reserve. Set in Mayurbhanj, Similipal is where you can experience the calmness of nature. Sprawling over an area of 2,750 sq kms, this tiger reserve is among the first nine designated tiger reserves that were established in 1973. Apart from boasting of a rich vegetation, meandering rivers and cascading waterfalls, it also holds the highest tiger population in the state.

Spread along the Satkosia Gorge along the Mahanadi River, Satkosia Tiger Reserve is a wildlife photographer's delight. The reserve comprises two wildlife sanctuaries—Satkosia Gorge Sanctuary and Baisipalli Sanctuary. Go on a river cruise to catch a

glimpse of the many elusive beasts in their natural habitat. Known for its splendour, the ChandakaDampara Wildlife Sanctuary is a colourful blend of semi-evergreen forests, thorny bamboo brakes and sal forests. There are two nature camps within sanctuary premises—the Deras Nature Camp and Godibari Nature Camp, located within the same vicinity and just five kilometres apart. A night stay at Chandaka-Dampara Wildlife Sanctuary, away from the chaos of city life, is precisely what one needs to tune into nature.

When it comes to birding, Chilika, without a doubt, is the ideal choice. Do not miss the annual National Chilika Bird Festival held during the winters. After the riveting success of

the first two editions, the state is all set to host the 3rd edition from 8th to 10th January, 2021. Another delightful experience in store for travellers is a visit to the Nalabana Bird Sanctuary, which is open only during the National Chilika Bird Festival. For a unique experience, travellers can also head to the houseboats at Chilika Lake and Bhitarkanika National Park and surrender to their serene surroundings. These houseboats are run by private operators on operation and management basis. One of the largest freshwater lakes, the Tampara Lake is also a great avenue for all kinds of watersports. This beautiful lake along with the nearby Chilika Lagoon speaks volumes about the ecological diversity of Odisha



► The scenic roads of Odisha can put many states on the eastern coast to shame

### BIRDWATCHER'S PARADISE

Birdwatching is an activity reserved only for the well seasoned; for enthusiasts who can practice utmost patience and perseverance. If you are a wildlife photographer, or simply love spotting new types of species, there's no better place than Odisha. The state is home to over 400 unique avian species, making it one of the best birding places to visit worldwide.

The Chilika Lake Sanctuary near Puri, has Asia's largest inland sea water lagoon. It is a pear-shaped lake, spread over an area of 1,100 sq km and serves as the largest wintering

**The tourism board has mapped all the important destinations which can be explored by road and has curated driving itineraries for interstate and intra-state tourists**

ground for migratory birds in India. Bird Watcher's keep coming back to this destination as it is home to some of the most unique species like sea eagles, greylag geese, and purple moorhen. Chilika proudly hosts the world's largest breeding colonies of flamingos as well.

**Mangalajodi:** haven for birders: The lake has many marshlands, of which Mangalajodi is labelled 'birder's haven' and is a must-visit for a spectacular view of some beautiful winged guests. Until over a decade ago, the primary livelihood of nearly a hundred families in Mangalajodi was

based on killing, selling and eating birds—many of them migratory. However, eventually the poachers assembled in a local temple motivated by a local gentleman and pledged against killing their winged guests. Several organisations joined hands to train the poachers to become birding guides and impart knowledge about the ways of the hospitality industry. Madhu Behera, one of the guides, is known widely in the birding circle of India .

**Kuldiha Wildlife Sanctuary:** Located in the southwestern part of Balasore district, the sanctuary covers an area of 272 sq km. The topography of the region supports deciduous, thick sal forests. This area is home to a wide variety of wildlife species including Indian elephants, tiger, leopards, Indian bison, sambar deer, spotted deer, mouse deer, nilgai, chousingha, sloth bear, etc. The sanctuary also serves as the abode to a variety of avifauna. Mr Manoranjan Das, a guide and resort owner from Kuldiha, is a well-known snake rescuer and an avid birdwatcher.

He has recorded 253 species of birds including Malabar trogon, Indian heart-spotted woodpecker and yellow-rumped flycatcher.

**Mundali Dam, Cuttack:** The Mahanadi River is about 900 kilometres long and flows through Chhattisgarh and Odisha. From Chhattisgarh, the river first flows eastward and reaches Odisha. In Odisha, it first reaches Sambalpur, then the Satkosia Gorge, finally entering Mundali on the Cuttack-Athgarh Road.

Every year Mundali lures thousands of migratory birds, including many diving ducks. Almost 71 species of birds have been identified from this place. The most important species found here are the rare Indian skim-

mers. Flocks of endangered Indian skimmers have also been found nesting along the sands of the Mahanadi riverbed in Mundali during the summers.

After the Cyclone Phailin, which hit the coast of Odisha in 2013, three species of oceanic birds from the Atlantic region were spotted here, which was a rare sight.

**Bhitarkanika National Park:** The Bhitarkanika National Park is one of India's biggest estuarine crocodile habitats and a major coastal ecosystem. It was declared as a national park because of its ecological, faunal, floral, geomorphological, zoological association and conservation efforts in 1998. In August 2002, it was designated as the second Ramsar site. Besides the mass nesting of Olive Ridley turtles and saltwater crocodiles, Bhitarkanika is also known for

residential and migratory species of birds. Till now, 320 species of birds have been identified.

**Hirakud Reservoir:** Hirakud is the longest earthen dam in the world and stands across the Mahanadi River in Sambalpur. It was the first major multipurpose river valley project after India's independence in 1947. This man-made structure is located 15 kilometres north of Sambalpur. Every year, thousands of birds migrate to the reservoir, which spans over an area of 746 sq km and has a shoreline of over 640 km, for four months. Migratory birds like common pochard, red-crested pochard, great crested grebe and pond heron can be spotted here during the winter season.

## ECO RETREATS

Ecotour Odisha, renowned for its game-changing model of commu-



► **Satkosia Sand Resort serves as the ideal escape for nature lovers and those seeking solitude**



► **Hirakud is the longest earthen dam in the world and stands across the Mahanadi River in Sambalpur. It's one of the sites of Eco-Retreats**

nity-managed ecotourism camps across the state's protected areas, has instituted specialised training for its staff, in collaboration with reputed institutions such as Institute of Hotel Management Catering Technology & Applied Nutrition (IHM) and Indian Institute of Tourism & Travel Management (IITTM) Bhubaneswar. The ecotourism workforce has been uncompromising in its commitment to responsible tourism, and has helped preserve visitors' confidence in quality.

The Department of Tourism has also engaged with all the stakeholders and has provided training on COVID-19 protocols. Consistent with Odisha's stellar management of the pandemic, the Eco Retreats are being implemented in complete compliance with guidelines and SOPs prescribed by the Ministry of Health &

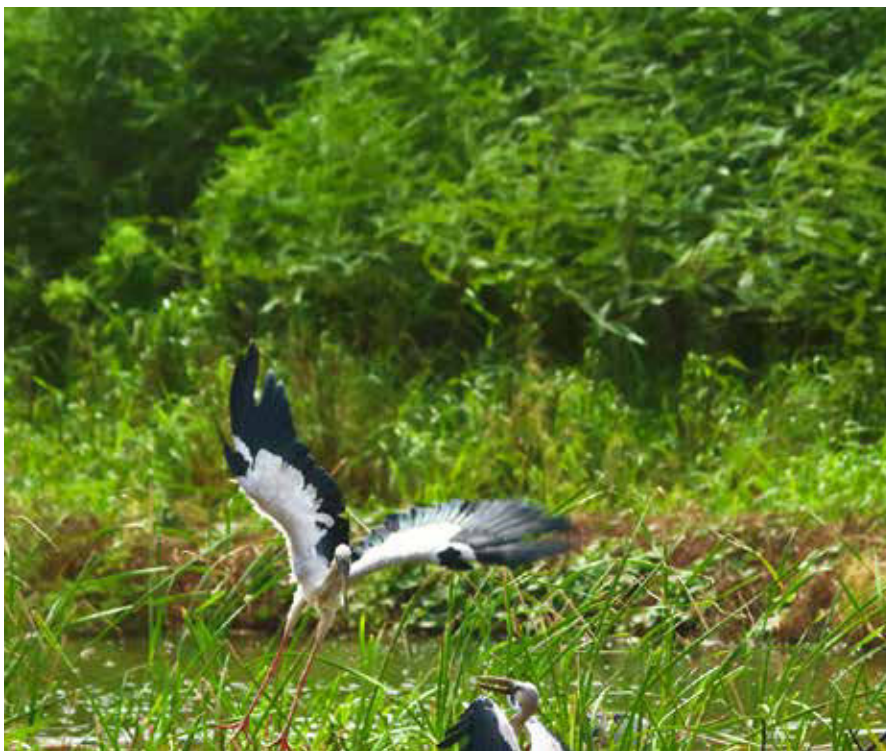
Family Welfare. Even at the highly anticipated Eco Retreat Odisha the SOPs are being implemented including contactless check-in and check-out, PPE kits for staff, safe procurement of consumables, regular disinfection of

**The Odisha tourism department introduced glamping events at five destinations, namely Konark, Bhitarkanika, Hirakud, Satkosia and Daringbadi**

all rooms, thermal screening, provision of a comprehensive sanitation package for each checked-in guest, luggage sanitisation, social distancing norms, etc.

Odisha's eco retreats are nothing less than a veritable carnival. A celebration of culture, adventure and food, the eco retreats offer travellers an opportunity to explore the state's diverse tourism offerings. After the success of the first edition of Eco Retreats, which was held last year between December 15 and February 15, the Odisha government is all set to organise the second edition during the winters. The tourism department will introduce glamping events at five destinations, namely Konark, Bhitarkanika, Hirakud, Satkosia and Daringbadi.

The Eco Retreat glamping—luxury camping—site at the idyllic Konark



► **The state is home to over 400 unique avian species, making it one of the best birding places to visit worldwide**

Beach, overlooking the Sun Temple continues to leave many spellbound. There are several eco-friendly yet luxurious camps installed in various national parks of the state. The Bhitarkanika National Park, perhaps the most well-known of the lot, boasts of quite a few camps. The River Brahmani and Kharasrota meet at Nalitapatia in Bhitarkanika National Park, making the site spellbinding and ideal for glamping adventures.

Other luxury camping sites include Dangamal, Habalikhshi, Gupti nature camps in this sanctuary. One could also head to the Hirakud Dam in Sambalpur, which holds a unique significance. The luxury camps here offer all the five-star facilities along with the serenity of nature. Many of the camp sites are set in picturesque locales such as the Satkosia River bed and the hill station of Daringbadi.

While the Satkosia Sand Resort serves as the ideal escape for nature lovers and those seeking solitude, Daringbadi with its verdant valleys and plateaus is a pleasant break from the otherwise humid climate of Odisha.

### COMMUNITY MANAGED

Of the total population of Odisha, around 83 per cent live in rural areas and their role in preserving and conserving the natural resources of the state is vital. Realising their role in forest and wildlife conservation, during the year 2016, the Forest and Environment Department launched an innovative scheme 'Community Managed Nature Tourism' for providing alternative livelihood to the forest dependent communities.

The new scheme has proven to be beneficial for the rural economy of the state. More than 600 locals in different

regions of Odisha are employed in 42 ecotourism nature camps and a majority of them are women. This has been an alternative income for them, as earlier they used to rely on forest produce for their survival by poaching, smuggling, fishing, collecting honey, mahua, firewood, etc

The local folks have raised the revenue of state ecotourism from 47 lakhs during 2015-16 to 6.85 crores during 2019-20. More than 46,000 visitors from different parts of the world have visited the nature camps during 2019-20. Even during the difficult times of COVID-19, they have displayed an enterprising spirit by performing all their duties and following all the guidelines as issued by the government for the pandemic.

It is praiseworthy that Odisha is the only state to have adopted the innovative model of community-based ecotourism, where 80 per cent of the share of revenue goes back to the community. Nature tourism has not only reduced the pressure on forest resources but is also an important tool for converting every tourist into a guardian of nature. It has combined experiences from the wild with responsible travel and sustainability and has increased awareness among tourists about the conservation efforts.

### TRAVEL BY ROAD

Odisha has hitherto been known primarily for its beautiful Golden Triangle of Bhubaneswar–Puri–Konark, pivoted on Lord Jagannath's seat. Several other treasures nestled in the state's hinterland are waiting to be explored. The state boasts of an excellent road network that is not being sufficiently utilised. The scenic roads of Odisha can put many states on the eastern coast to shame. Largely unexplored, these routes have secrets



► **The Eco Retreat glamping—luxury camping—site at the idyllic Konark Beach, overlooking the Sun Temple continues to leave many spellbound.**

hidden in every corner. In order to boost tourism, the Odisha Tourism Board recently announced the launch of the 'Odisha By Road' campaign. The tourism board has mapped all the important destinations which can be explored by road and has curated driving itineraries for interstate and intra-state tourists.

The Cascade Trail from Ranchi to Keonjhar not only takes you on a journey across a picturesque route, where you get to see miles and miles of nature on both sides of the road, but also offers a glimpse into the rich heritage and culture of the region. Make a pit-stop at Ghatagaon to pick up a few terracotta handicrafts.

The Tiger Trail beginning from Jamshedpur and Ranchi to Similipal Tiger Reserve is a delight for wildlife

enthusiasts and nature lovers alike. Replete with cascading waterfalls like Sitakund, Joranda, Devkunda, and Dudma, the drive promises to be relaxing and enriching. Reaching for the Hills, an itinerary modelled by the tourism board starts from Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh and ends at Daringbadi. Set at an altitude of 3,000ft, it is the only destination in Odisha that witnesses snowfall during the winters. Dotted with pine trees, waterfalls, coffee and pepper gardens, it is the home of one of the most ancient tribes of India called 'Kuthia Kondas'. Often known as the 'Kashmir of Odisha', Daringbadi offers an eclectic mix of cultural, tribal and nature tourism.

One can also head to Mandasaru from here. Often called the 'Silent

Valley of Odisha' due to its frequent weather changes, mesmerising beauty and rich biodiversity, it's a trekker's paradise. The Mandasaru Gorge ecosystem is located in the eastern part of Kandhamal district of Odisha and is surrounded by dense tropical moist deciduous forest on all sides. One could also drive up to the Hirakud Reservoir from Raipur or Bilaspur, as part of the 'Quest for Odisha's Wild West' trail. Hirakud is the world's longest earthen dam and stands across the Mahanadi River. One can make one's way to the several minarets nearby. The Gandhi Minar, a watchtower located on top of a hill, offers a bird's-eye view of the Hirakud Dam. The beauty of the Hirakud Dam is best experienced through a stunning 21-kilometre drive across the dyke. Hit NH-26 from Visakhapatnam to head to Koraput via the Deomali Hills. This monsoon escape itinerary allows you to make a pit stop at Mangalajodi and enjoy the scenic beauty of the Araku Valley. Dotted with forests, waterfalls, terraced valleys and darting springs, Koraput is a treasure trove of nature, tribal life and history.

Nestled between the Eastern Ghats and some breathtaking scenery, Koraput has some of the major rivers of Odisha passing through it, namely Machhakunda, Vamsadhara and Kolab. The district is primarily dominated by the indigenous or tribal communities. The Puri-Konark Marine Drive is among the most popular long-drive routes in the state. While one side of the road is covered in a lush green canopy, the other side witnesses the crashing waves of the sea. The 'Deep into the Mangroves' route from Kolkata to Bhitarkanika National Park and the 'Cruising along the Circars' from Visakhapatnam to Chilika Lake are also an integral part of the 'Odisha By Road' campaign.

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