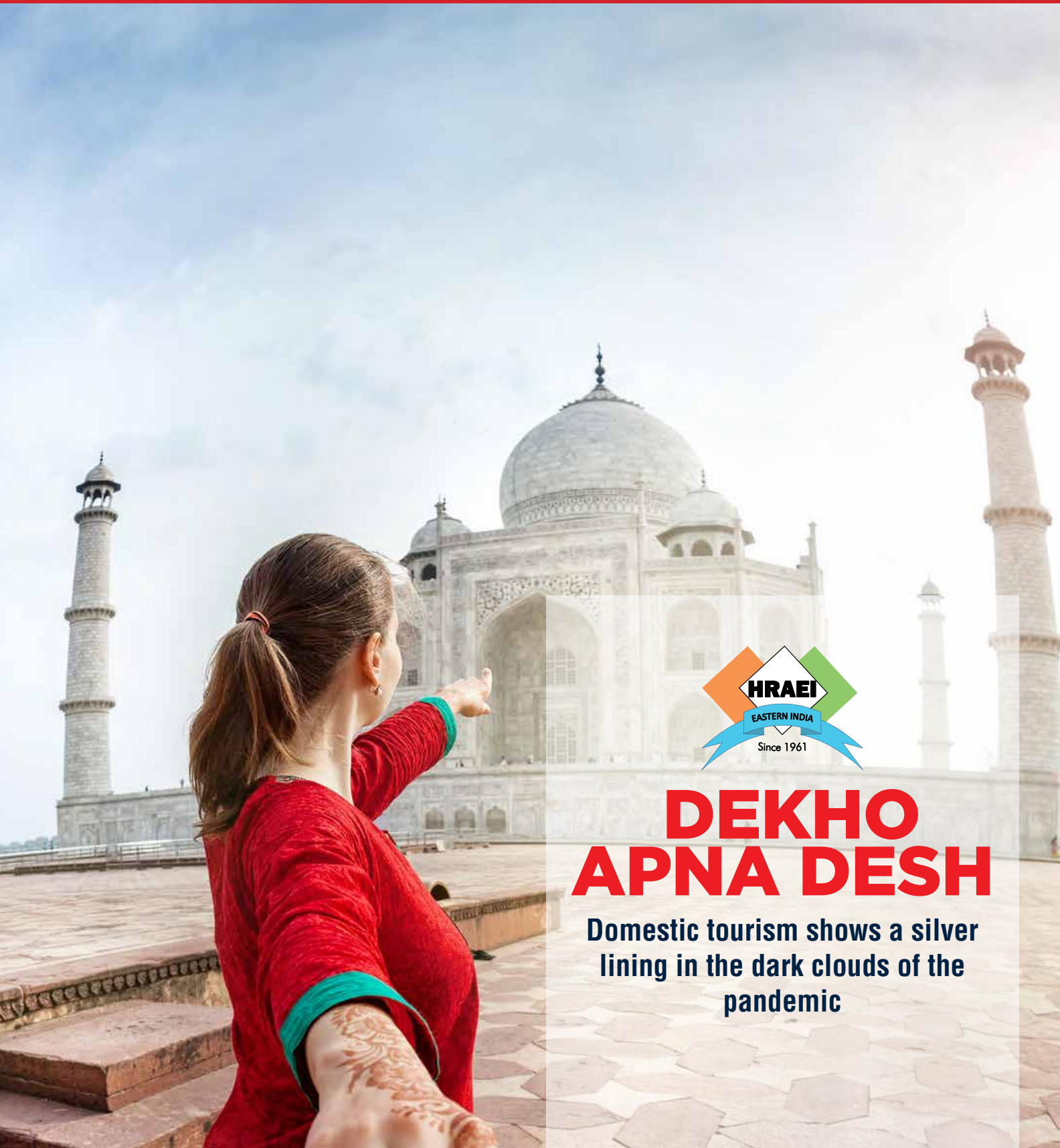


MYSTIC EAST

...an unexplored horizon

A Bi-monthly Magazine by HRAEI | Vol 6 | Issue 4 | November - December 2020



DEKHO APNA DESH

Domestic tourism shows a silver lining in the dark clouds of the pandemic



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Hotel & Restaurant Association of Eastern India

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Royal*

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T

The Indian hospitality sector, including organized, unorganized and semi-organized operators, is expected to incur an estimated total revenue loss of approximately INR 90,000 Cr in 2020, according to a study by HVS Anarock. In other words, the hospitality business is in deep trouble, an unprecedented one ever since the World Wars.

The situation is worse for those entrepreneurs who invested in the tourism and hospitality projects just before the pandemic. With zero business they had a hard time paying their staff, rentals for their property and even the utility bills. The HRAEI has been appealing for moratoriums on loan repayment and relaxation on interest rates on loans for them to the central and all state governments in eastern India. Unfortunately, we have not received any response from any governments.

Mr Sudesh Poddar
President, HRAEI

“

The industry needs a specific relief package to prevent an imminent collapse

”

The industry immediately needs a specific relief package to save the sector from an imminent collapse. The industry is facing an existential crisis 'as the foreign exchange earnings are nil, and the domestic earnings are also not even 10 per cent of the pre-Covid revenues. We also need a complete review of the KV Kamath Committee proposed stringent guidelines on restructuring of Covid-19 impacted loans adopted by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).

The working capital requirement of the hospitality sector needs to be supported by the government through a soft loan with a low rate of the interest rate. It is necessitated because today the industry is finding it difficult to mobilise loans as the financial institutions have marked the industry in negative lists or put us under negative rating.



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65% travellers want to travel more in the future to make up for time lost in 2020

Digital travel leader Booking.com has combined research from more than 20,000 travellers across 28 countries to reveal trends for the 'Future of Travel' - in the coming year and beyond.

The most encouraging trend is that during recent lockdowns, two-thirds (63%) of Indian travellers reported being excited about travelling again; 65% travellers are wanting to travel more in the future to make up for time lost in 2020. What's more, over 50% intend to plan a trip to make up for a celebration missed such as milestone birthday or wedding anniversary due to Coronavirus.

Domestic trips will continue to dominate the travel space, with 52% of Indian travellers planning to travel within their own country in the medium term (7-12 months) and 41% planning to do so in the longer term (in over a year's time). When it comes to local travel, 49% plan to explore a new destination within their home region/country and 50% will take the time to appreciate the natural beauty of their home country. All these indicate a waiting boom of domestic tourism.

MYSTIC EAST

A BI-MONTHLY MAGAZINE BY HRAEI
Vol 6 | Issue 4 | November - December 2020

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

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Hygiene is the new luxury for most tourists now

The immediate travel trend we can see is that people have started travelling close to their home in their own private vehicles. Domestic tourism is expected to boom in the coming months. Hill- stations and beach destinations are already attracting many tourists. Until the embargo on foreign travel is completely lifted, people will keep exploring domestic destinations. This is an opportunity for the hospitality industry which has been hugely affected by Covid-19..

To attract more customers the hotels, restaurants and their ancillary sections must re-imagine, reboot and rebuild their operation and procedures. Hygiene is the new luxury for most tourists now. Those who have been able to reorganise themselves accordingly, have been able to draw guests via attractive staycation packages.

Establishing stepped up cleaning protocols are a visible measure of concern for hotels and are likely to be a big part of hotel marketing in the near future. Buying and stockpiling disinfection equipment and materials need to be done by hospitality operators. They have to focus heavily on contact-less technology making use of the guests' smartphones, such as contactless check-in, keyless entry and digital payments and travel information. Finally, wherever possible hotels and restaurants need to be redesigned with effective ventilation systems and air-filtration mechanisms. Those who can't overhaul the system due to financial constraints, must ensure that windows can be opened and there's a good exchange of indoor and outdoor air.

If we can gain the confidence of guests we can help rekindle the bottled up feelings of people confined at home—and travel across the country in a bout of “revenge tourism” after almost a year of quarantines, lockdowns and restrictions on their movement.

Mr Mohammed Azhar
Honourary Secretary

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Long neglected by even the most intrepid of travellers the states known as Seven Sisters have slowly come of age, and may soon grow into India's most sought-after travel destination

'GUESTS ARE VENTURING OUT TO THE SAFE AND SECURE HOTEL ENVIRONMENT'

Mr Sandeep Johri joined Novotel Kolkata Hotel and Residences four years ago at the time of Durga Puja as the General Manager. Johri passed out of IHM Taratalla in 1993 when New Town --the current location of Novotel-- was nothing more than a wilderness of paddy fields. Born and brought up in Rourkela (Odisha), Johri has a strong east India connection. He can speak both Odia and Bengali fluently. He is confident that the worst period in the pandemic time is over and the hospitality industry has adapted a positive outlook for next year.



What is your opinion about the role played by HRAEI during the lockdown induced by the pandemic?

The Hotel and Restaurants Association of Eastern India (HRAEI) has played a pivotal role in propelling the industry back into motion post the pandemic. Their efforts commenced as early as the first Vande Bharat Mission flights were given the nod to fly into Kolkata. Dedicated waiting areas specifically designed for the hoteliers inside the Kolkata Airport were put up by the HRAEI teams and micro managed to the last detail. Each day we experienced their skilful and boundless support while welcoming passengers to the City of Joy.

We have also seen the remarkable contribution of HRAEI to work for a social cause where hotels worked as 'satellite hospitals' under hospitals to fight the pandemic. Association went all out and ensured enough supplies of rooms in different hotels for the purpose of self-isolation of guests who arrived from abroad to Kolkata.

The "Dine out to Help Out" Model aimed to aid the industry was a noteworthy initiative by the HRAEI which saw a surge in table bookings at several outlets in the city. This unique measure offering lucrative discounts coupled with the monotony of citizens trapped indoors due to

the lockdown urged them to step out and bounce back to the good times of dining out at the best restaurants in the city.

Did Novotel Kolkata close down in the early days of lockdown? How did you cope in the early stage?

Novotel Kolkata was open throughout the tenure of the statewide lockdown. Though few in number, our teams ensured we welcomed each guest with the same level of enthusiasm and warmth. The core teams housed within the hotel premises were committed to deliver great services, expected from a brand such as ours.

This period posed new challenges for each department. We stepped up our game in every aspect of service and product design and delivery. Our ALLSAFE label enabled us to ensure our hotel was in line with all international sanitization norms and hygiene standards and our teams followed every protocol shared by the local authorities.

What are the innovations Novotel introduced to buck up ancillary revenue streams during the period? Do you wish to continue with these innovative ideas?

Novotel Kolkata introduced a series

of interesting concepts emerging out of the pandemic and will continue to do so in the future. We started 'Bakery (Delice) and 'Laundry at Your Doorstep' – the first of its kind in the city to be offered from a 5-star hotel. We offered our state-of-the-art banquet venues as office space for corporates to use as workstations.

Furthermore, our pet friendly apartments are equipped with work from home enabled features such as high-speed internet access, printer and high definition display on demand, work desk and ample connectivity options. During this period, we launched 'Pop Up Apartment' restaurant – an exclusive private dining opportunity in our well-equipped and ALLSAFE serviced apartment where we have ensured contact-less procedures are followed to enhance the dining experience. A personal butler and chef are around to assist guests with personalized meal preferences. The four-course menu has been digitized with QR code and UPI payment methods with a provision of 'Make Your own Cocktail Bar' feature to help choose the perfect drink for the occasion.

How has the situation changed after the hospitality industry was gradually unlocked?

A relief for hotels across the country, unlock 5.0 saw a gradual increase in footfalls at the hotel over the last few months. With all inclusive, full board deals, staycation and festive packages, we witnessed a surge from the domestic market. The sports segment has seen some positive vibes for the hotel supported with scattered, transient FIT guests opting for 5-star accommodations in the 4th quarter of 2020. Food and beverage being a focus area was in high demand, especially in the auspicious month of

October. Our patrons were greeted with exotic dishes prepared by our excellent team of chefs which took them on a memorable culinary journey post the lifting of the lockdowns.

The socials segment observed a great number of queries flowing into our banqueting specialists, with few weddings already conducted at the hotel in the months of June-July, 2020. The winter months of November-December too are seeing good traction in the form of small-scale weddings taking place at the hotel. The main challenge comes in the form of volume. Post pandemic weddings are restricted in size in line with guidelines received from local government authorities. As a practice, we will never compromise on guest experience. No matter the size, we always ensure to put our best foot forward towards a grand wedding ceremony.

Can you see green shoots after the festival season?

We are upbeat about the upcoming winter season with Diwali around the corner, soon to be followed by Christmas and New Year. Novotel Kolkata has been a pioneer in conducting awe-inspiring events and festivals in the winter months and we are focused on maximizing our resources and putting all our efforts in utilizing the positive signals we are receiving presently. Though we are still in the initial days of the new normal era, I am confident these signs will benefit the hotel in the longer run and we will be back stronger than ever.

With the Mecca of Football located in our very own, beautiful city, the football fever is expected to catch up soon. This will yield more guests in the upcoming days, very well backed by the strong emphasis we are imposing on our food & beverage offerings.

Are you expecting more MICE customers in the coming days? Are postponed weddings happening again?

MICE events would be picking up soon, with several reschedulings that have taken place in the first half of 2020. Several auspicious (wedding) dates are towards the latter half of 2020, and it has been observed that changed plans and pushed back ceremonies and reviving for a grand celebration. Novotel Kolkata has remained as a go-to wedding destination for families in the city, as we have always kept the promise of delivering food and service par excellence.

What is your projection for the hospitality business in 2021?

We are confident that the worst period is over and have adapted a positive outlook for next year. Though not at par with previous year's levels, in 2021 revenue stream is expected to reach at least 60% of that of 2019. Guests are venturing out more and coming to the safe and secure hotel environment, which gives us an opportunity to serve them with our best hospitality.

Do you think the industry will be back on its feet by 2022?

Without a doubt, 2022 would see a drastic revival for the Industry. Kolkata has been a hub for large scale doctors and medical conferences which were pushed back this year. MICE events, sports tournaments, exhibitions, roadshows, and several other pending conferences are expected to be executed in the crucial year of 2022. Till then, we are hoping for the best, and wishing our patrons, advocates, associates and partners a very safe and vibrant year ahead.

'GREEN SHOOTS HAVE DEFINITELY STARTED TO GROW'

Mr Subhash Sinha, the General Manager of The Westin Kolkata Rajarhat is a veteran in the business of hospitality. He is reputed for his appetite for the culinary arts which he has married with his nifty managerial skills to successfully lead and inspire highly performing teams. Prior to joining The Westin Kolkata Rajarhat, Subhash has achieved outstanding results in his role as General Manager of Marriott Suites Pune. He led this property boasting 199 suites since it was launched in May 2016. Armed with a Diploma in Hotel Management from IHM, Kolkata with a specialization in Catering Technology, his honesty and sincerity have been the stepping stones for the northward ascent in his career. In fact, his keenness for the industry was recognized early in his career when he was awarded with Marriott Global Chef of The Year Award 2012 and Award for Culinary Excellence 2011. Mr Sinha spoke to Mystic East in an exclusive interview. Here are the excerpts:

How did you cope in the early days of lockdown induced by Covid-19?

We had around 18-20 rooms (out of 303) occupied when the lockdown was announced. We shut down several floors and minimised the cost as much as we could manage. All the outlets were closed following the government norms. We had got everything quite centralised. We were providing services for only those 20 rooms. We shut down all kind of peripherals. But maintenance works went on as usual.

Did you introduce any innovation to buck up ancillary revenue streams during the period?

We introduced Kolkata Bread Company (KBC) that brings the best of bakery assortments and health breads. This included desserts, fresh bread, pastries, cakes and much more and Marriott on Wheels to take the products to different housing societies. There was a huge response for our fresh bread, pastries and all kinds of bakery items. People could experience 5-star confectionaries sitting at home.

We also introduced home deliveries. After the lockdown was lifted we



started looking at some other streams as travel for the corporate world has not started yet. So then we started tapping our property for many movie shootings. Movie crews from both local and outside camp in the hotel and carry out shooting. I can't tell you the production houses or the names of movies. This was a significant new stream of business.

Basically, there was a rethink of business. New ideas emerged.

Do you wish to continue with these innovative ideas?

Definitely. Since these are generating revenues. Every crisis and the human ability to fight it out gives you new opportunities. Crises inspires you to venture out into new areas.

How has the situation changed after the hospitality industry was gradually unlocked?

We had a good run in October. We could manage break even. Moving forward we will start building up the loss now. Struggle and the effort will go on. Right now the focus is that cost should be contained.

Can you see green shoots after the festival season? Do you expect a large number of customers in the Christmas and New Year?

Green shoots are definitely starting to grow now.

Are you expecting more MICE customers in the coming days?

Weddings have started to happen. Local guests are coming and staying, especially on weekends. Because we have been able to build the confidence in these people. That our hotel

is hygienic and we are following all our commitments to keep the premises clean and safe. This is part of a Marriott Bonvoy app, a worldwide initiative. We invite them to come and stay safely. We have introduced some attractive staycation packages.

In the coffee shop we have started special buffets. Seafood on the menus. A la carte style buffet in Japanese restaurants. Beverage packages in the 31 32, the highest rooftop lounge in the city.

What is your projection for the hospitality business in 2021?

Eventually by the Q3, we expect to reach the 2019 numbers. From thereon, things should start moving in a very positive direction. In Q4 the growth will be robust.

Do you think the industry will be back on its feet by 2022?

Yes. I have very positive vibes about it.



MARRIOTT BONVOY

Guests can unlock their stay with the Marriott Bonvoy™ App. The app requires either a telecommunications network or wireless internet connection because it uses current data for most of its functions. To get the app one has to go to the Apple App Store or the Google Play Store from your mobile device or tablet and download the Marriott Bonvoy App. It's free to download and is available in seven languages—English, French, Spanish, German, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean—with more on the way. One doesn't need to be a Marriott Bonvoy member to use the app. You can look up an existing reservation, or book as a non-member. However, members who book directly with Marriott get access to more enhanced features like Mobile Check-In and Mobile Key,

along with being able to track points and manage your entire account. As following are the benefits of this unique contactless service.

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Search more than 7,000 hotels across 30 brands and easily book right from your phone. Get our lowest rate and exclusive member benefits when you book with Marriott.

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Check in from anywhere with Mobile Check-In. Let us know when you're arriving, and we'll send you a notification when your room is ready so you can get there faster.

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With Mobile Key you'll never have

to worry about forgetting a key card. Use it to open your room, parking garage, fitness centre, lounge, pool and other areas around the hotel.

Manage Your Account

Easily manage your Marriott Bonvoy account with the app. Check your points balance and view your stay history, member card and more.

Mobile Requests

Need something? Mobile Requests gives you a list of amenities to choose from to customize your stay or to ask for something you forgot, like a comb, razor or toothpaste. Texting conversation helps customers ask the hotel front desk for a phone charger.

Mobile Chat

Mobile Chat works just like texting and lets you talk directly to your hotel. Ask for information about hotel features, receive local recommendations and more, all while on the go—before, during or even after your stay.

Mobile Dining

Want to order ahead while you're out exploring? Browse and order from your hotel's menu at participating properties, and your food will be ready when you return.

Shuttle Tracker

Track the location of your hotel shuttle in real time, right from the app. Live maps and estimated wait times allow you to get to and from your hotel with ease.

TRAVEL TRENDS 2021

Even though vaccines have been launched, the shots are not going to reach everyone soon and it will take months to understand how well they work. Social distancing and wearing masks is going to stay for some time



► **81% of travellers are willing to wear a mask in public**

DIGITAL travel leader Booking.com has combined research from more than 20,000 travellers across 28 countries and territories, including India, with insights from proprietary search, data as well as over 20 years of travel expertise to reveal nine for the 'Future of Travel' - in the coming year and beyond. From making travel plans to a familiar destination to being more price conscious - here is a look at what will be the future of travel in 2021, and beyond.

With 71% of Indian travellers

responding that they won't be comfortable travelling until a Coronavirus vaccine or treatment is in place, it may be a long time before we experience the world as freely as we did previously, but the industry will continue to adapt at pace, satiating our appetite to travel whenever it's safe to do so.

Ritu Mehrotra, Country Manager, India, Sri Lanka and Maldives at Booking.com said: "2020 has been a year like no other and while it will be some time before travel returns to pre-pandemic levels, all signs point to the

fundamental and enduring role that travel plays in all our lives and the joy and inspiration it brings to people during times of uncertainty. Enhancing our understanding of one another and our common desire to explore beyond the horizon, I believe that travel has a unique potential to come back stronger than ever in the years ahead as a primary driver of growth, equality and prosperity for people everywhere. In the meantime, with our mission to make it easier for everyone to experience the world, we will be there for our customers offering the

widest choice, great value and the easiest experience from anywhere and on any device so travellers can enjoy all of the unforgettable experiences this world has to offer."

Here are the 9 predictions by Booking.com that will shape future of travel:

1. Safety Cleans up: In the future, 86% of Indian travellers will take more precautions due to Coronavirus and will look to the travel industry to help them gear up for this new normal. 71% will avoid certain destinations and 78% expect tourist attractions to adapt to allow for social distancing. In parallel, 77% will only book a particular accommodation if it's clear what health and hygiene policies it has in place, with three quarters (79%) favouring accommodations that have antibacterial and sanitising products. 78% of Indian travellers will accept traveling to destinations that have health spot checks on arrival and 81% will accept wearing a mask in public.

2. Wandermust: Time at home has made people crave the world outside more than ever. During recent lockdowns, two-thirds (63%) of Indian travellers reported being excited about travelling again while 63% indicated they are more appreciative of travel and will likewise not take it for granted in the future. 65% Indian travellers are wanting to travel more in the future to make up for time lost in 2020. What's more, over 50% intend to plan a trip to make up for a celebration missed such as milestone birthday or wedding anniversary due to Coronavirus while 54% intend to rebook a trip they had to cancel.

3. Vital Value: Travellers will be scrutinising spend in 2021, with 70% of Indian travellers indicating they



► **While there are risks associated with flying, it is safer than you think. With the air volume in the cabin of an aircraft being completely refreshed every two to four minutes, the air quality on a commercial airliner is actually quite high**

will be more price-conscious when it comes to searching and planning a future trip. In addition, 64% are more likely to hunt down promotions and savings, behaviours that we predict will last years. The value consumers expect will go beyond price tags with 77% of Indian travellers stating they want travel booking platforms to increase their transparency about cancellation policies, refund processes and trip insurance options. The focus on flexibility will also remain at the forefront, with 38% of travellers considering refundable accommodation a must-have for their next trip as

do 36% when it comes to the flexibility to change dates without being charged.

4. Familiarists not Tourists: Domestic trips will continue to dominate the travel space, with 52% of Indian travellers planning to travel within their own country in the medium term (7-12 months) and 41% planning to do so in the longer term (in over a year's time). When it comes to local travel, 49% plan to explore a new destination within their home region/country and 50% will take the time to appreciate the natural beauty of their home country. 57% intend

to travel somewhere - locally or not - they've already been previously for its familiarity.

5. Bye Bye 9 to 5: Working remotely has irreversibly entered the mainstream during the pandemic with the knock-on effect that more people will look to take longer trips in the future that effectively combine work and pleasure than ever before. 68% of Indian travellers have already considered booking somewhere to stay in order to work from a different destination, while 63% would be willing to quarantine if they could work remotely. Almost two-thirds (63%) of Indian travellers say that they would take the opportunity to extend any business trips to also enjoy leisure time at the destination.

6. Impact Awakening: Travellers will have a more eco-conscious mindset next year and beyond, with 70% of Indian travellers wanting to travel more sustainability in the future. As a result, 78% expect the travel industry to offer more sustainable travel options, and travellers will consequently visit alternative destinations in a bid to avoid travelling during peak season (54%) and overcrowding (49%). Additionally, the impact of Coronavirus has inspired 55% of Indian travellers to consider reducing waste and/or recycling their plastic when traveling once all travel restrictions are lifted, showing that people are not just committed to protecting themselves, but also the places they visit.

7. Spontechnaity: Tech innovation will play a crucial role in rebuilding traveller confidence, and we will see the accelerated use of tech to adapt to a new type of traveller. Already, 79% of Indian travellers agree that technology will be important in controlling health risks when travelling

and 81% say that accommodations will need to use the latest technologies to make travellers feel safe.

Test, track and trace

To gain more insight into how the travel industry and governments can work to rebuild traveller confidence, Amadeus, a global leader in travel technology, commissioned research to learn more about traveller's top concerns and what types of technology would help travellers feel safe and comfortable enough to travel and help spur recovery of the travel sector. New consumer research reveals how technology can boost Indian traveller confidence and accelerate demand

Overall, the priorities Indian travelers wanted from technology were for it to:

- Minimize face-to-face or physical contact with others (34%)
- Reduce queues and congestion in public places (32%), compared to 45% in Singapore
- Protect financial data and personal information (32%), slightly less than Singapore (37%)
- Minimize the requirement for physical documents (31%)
- Ultimately, as stakeholders work to rethink travel, survey results show that the top five ways to build traveler confidence worldwide include:
 - Provide access to flexible change, cancellations policies and payment terms to avoid losing money (39%)
 - Limit the number of passengers on a plane (38%)
 - An ability for travelers to socially or physically distance themselves throughout the journey (36%)
 - Having visibility to and assurance of sanitization, hygiene and safety measures in hotels and accommodations (36%)
 - Effective test, track and trace programs in place (34%)

More than half (58%) will want tech options to make last-minute restaurant reservations and 63% will want more self-service machines instead of ticket desks.

8. Search Escapism: Seeking comfort and distraction during weeks in lockdown, the majority (94%) of Indian travellers spent time looking for vacation inspiration, with 56% looking at potential travel destinations as often as once a week. Social media is not the only source of inspiration for Indian travellers when day-dreaming about their next trip, with 49% also opting to have a good old-fashioned chat with friends and family to spark their travel creativity. In addition, 46% of Indian travellers feel nostalgic looking through old photographs from previous vacations to help them decide on a future trip, recognizing that analog inspiration will also have a recognizable resurgence on our social media feeds.

9. Simple Pleasures: 75% of Indian travellers will look to appreciate more simple experiences such as spending time outdoors or with the family while on vacation. 68% will seek out more rural, off-the-beaten-track experiences to immerse themselves in the outdoors. Considering the renewed emphasis on privacy, sufficient space and personal control over cleanliness and hygiene, we will see travellers look for accommodation 'closer to home' with 62% preferring to stay in a vacation home or apartment. 68% will opt to eat in more as opposed to eating out at restaurants. Relaxing trips will also be high on the travel agenda in the 'new normal', with 47% of saying it was their preferred type of trip followed by beach breaks (30%) and city trips (25%).

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LESSONS FROM CHINA

Learn how the hospitality industry in China was activated and revitalised during the post-pandemic era



► Airports wore a deserted look for months during the pandemic

THE effect on human health has been the most devastating and observable of all the effects of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). However, the unfolding economic catastrophe resulting from this pandemic sets apart the latter from any disaster in living memory. Since the outbreak of COVID-19 at the end of 2019, industries have been plagued by uncertainties, and this scenario is especially evident in the tourism and hospitality industry. As an industry based on human mobility and close interaction, the tourism and hospitality industry is the co-creator and main receiver of the pandemic

and its ramifications.

China's hospitality industry was the first to be hit by the devastating impact of the COVID-19. However, it has been presenting early signs of performance recovery since the end of March 2020. The overall effects of COVID-19 on China's hotel industry are depicted in the first section of the study. Depicted later in this study, the anti-pandemic experience and strategies of China's hotel industry would respectively help the hotel industry in other parts of the world to forecast the disastrous scenarios and industry recovery and undertake effective anti-pandemic actions (Valle, 2020). In

this regard, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to explore the COVID-19 management framework in the context of China's hotel industry; the framework addresses phases, principles, and strategies of the industry's anti-pandemic journey. This study contributes to practical implications by recommending the hotel industry to gain on the major trends that may follow the fundamental and permanent changes that COVID-19 is expected to bring to the industry; this discussion may shed light on the industry activation and revitalization during the post-pandemic era.

The Impact of COVID-19 on China's Hotel Industry

China was the first country affected by the health crisis, and thus its hotel industry has encountered severe challenges. These challenges have affected every stakeholder in the hotel industry. Owing to travel bans and social distancing norms, there has been a decline in tourists' willingness and access to travel. This has led tourists to cancel travel plans and hotel bookings, which has eventually affected the job and income security of hotel employees. The consequential shortage of labour and cash has led to the postponement of hotel renovation projects, decelerating the expansion of domestic hotel groups. In order to survive, many hotel owners, especially individual hotel owners, have temporarily shut down or transferred their properties. This scenario has led to a sharp decline in the market value of stocks in the hotel sector. In other words, the pandemic has been devastating hotel firms' market and performance.

The sudden outbreak of COVID-19 swept through Chinese lunar new year—the most important festival in China, casting a dark shadow over the until then thriving hotel industry. During the lunar year, the OCC used to be about 80% and 90%, respectively, in major cities and tourist and fourth- and fifth-tier cities. However, during this period, the pandemic led to a sharp decline in the OCC of major hotels. Several industry associations and consulting agencies have investigated the overall loss of China's hotel industry. As per the China Hospitality Association (2020), China's hotel industry lost over 67 billion Yuan (approximately US\$9.44 billion) in revenue, and 74.29% hotels in China were closed for an average period of 27 days in January and February

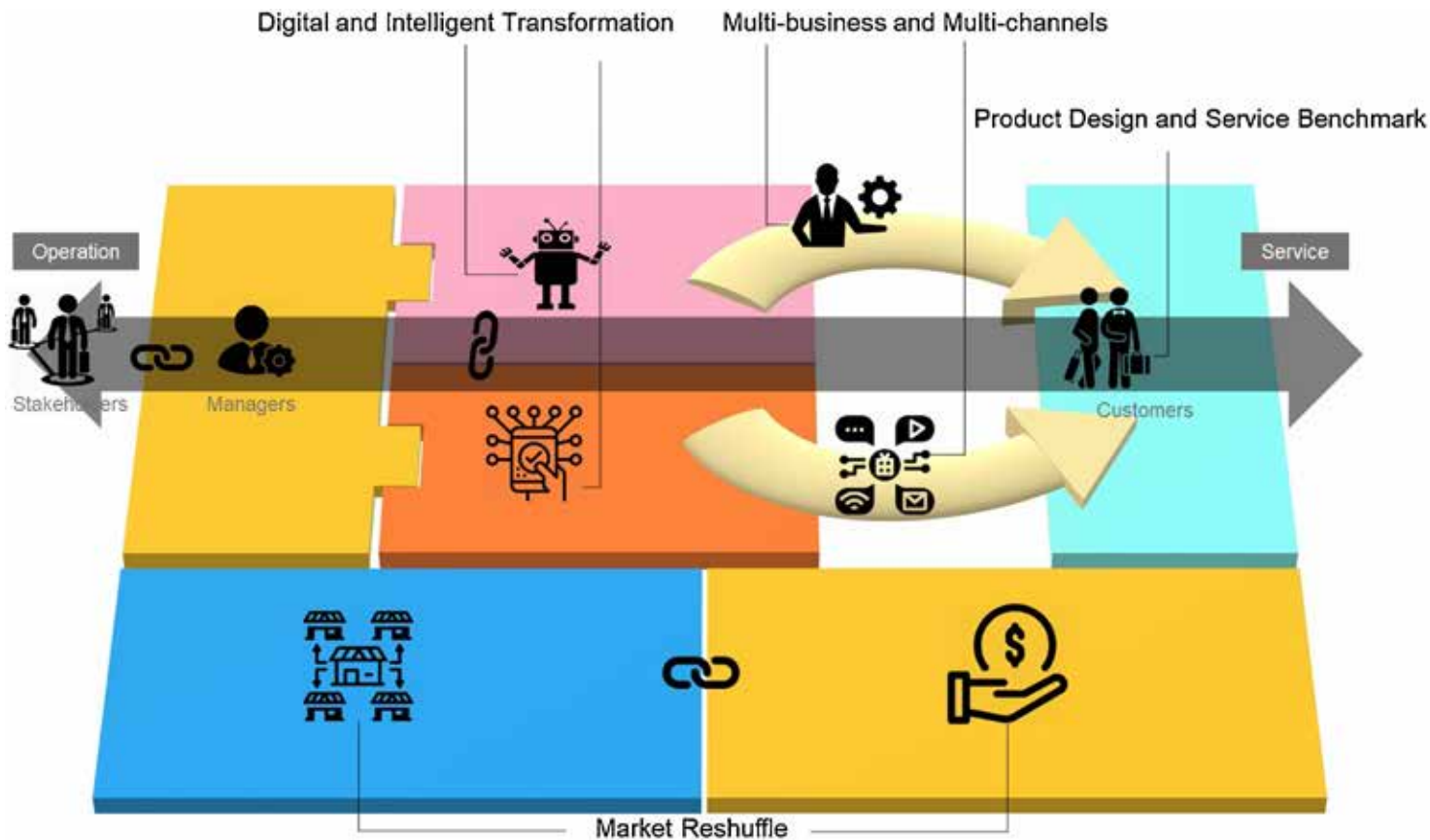
2020. As per STR (2020), from January 14 to 28, the occupancy (OCC) of the hotels dropped from around 70% to 8% and remained under 10% in the following 28 days. Almost 40% of the hotels were shut down temporarily in February. Zhang et al.'s (2020) study on 498 hotels revealed that the overall OCC dropped by 89% in two weeks between January 14 and 28 and, subsequently, remained at around 10% until the end of February. In major cities, hotels' revenue per available room (RevPAR) declined by over 85% year-over-year (YoY) in February.

As the pandemic intensified, the financial loss of China's hotel industry continued to the first quarter and its impact was evident in the financial reports of several hotel firms. For instance, concerning domestic brands, in the first quarter of 2020,

the second largest hotel group in the world and the largest in China, Jinjiang International, reported a net profit of 171 million Yuan (approximately US\$24.1 million), a YoY decrease of 42.3%. The world's 9th largest and China's 2nd largest hotel group, Huazhu temporarily closed few of its hotels, with the numbers declining from a peak of 2,310 hotels in mid-February to 369 in the subsequent month. The quarterly revenue of the BTG Hotel Group (10th largest in the world and 3rd in China) was 801 million Yuan (approximately US\$112.86 million), which indicated a 58.80% YoY decrease (Real Estate Opinion Network, 2020). The OCC of Dossen International Group, the 14th largest hotel group in the world and the 6th largest in China, fell by 50% and its revenue dropped by 80% YoY.



► The hotel market started witnessing positive signs after the pandemic slowed down in mid-March 2020



► Post- Covid19 business model for hospitality industry in China

Likewise, China's 7th largest hotel group, the Sunmei Group, closed 2,544 hotels, on the back of an average OCC of only 23.7% during February and a revenue loss surpassing 700 million Yuan during January and February (approximately US\$98.64 million). International hotel brands were not immune to the effects. IHG closed down 160 out of 470 hotels in China during February, and its OCC dropped by 90% to under 10% during the same period (K. Sun, 2020b). Meanwhile, Hilton closed about 150 hotels in China by February 11, 2020. Similarly, Marriott's RevPAR in Greater China by more than 80% and that of Accor fell by 67.7% in China.

Positive Signs of Recovery

The hotel market started witnessing positive signs after the pandemic slowed down in mid-March. During the Qingming holiday, the tourism packages featured one-day short excursions, and there was a relatively low hotel demand during the period. However, the five-day Labour Day Holiday was the first peak season since the outbreak. According to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, during this period, the total number of domestic tourists reached 115 million passengers, and the domestic tourism revenue reached about 47.5 billion Yuan (approximately US\$6.69 billion). According to data adopt-

ed from STR that is based on 4315 sample properties including 888,957 rooms in China, hotels have undertaken a devastating hit of COVID-19, especially during January to March 2020. Among seven different hotel scales, the luxury and independent hotels have suffered the most from the negative impact, whilst midscale chains and economic chains were least affected.

The long-term recovery of China's hotel industry seems to be promising, yet not without challenges. Several organizations forecasted the hotel's performance in 2020. Hilton forecasted a 6–12-month recovery period and revenue losses of around



► **After more than nine housebound months, more than a half billion travellers took a vacation**

US\$50 million (Lanjing Finance, 2020). Zhang et al. (2020) forecasted that the industry wide OCC in 2020 will drop to approximately 3.5%; however, if there is a rebound in the pandemic in China, then the decline could be around 5.5% (Zhang et al., 2020). As per the China Hospitality Association (2020), in the second quarter of 2020, OCC will rise gradually; the YoY revenue will decline to about 41.5%, with a revenue loss amounting to 40 billion Yuan (approximately US\$5.64 billion). The third quarter of 2020 will witness a gradual recovery of domestic business activities, a pick-up in exhibitions and business meetings, and the peak season during the summer holiday in July and August. This scenario will contain the decline in YoY revenue at around 8%, with a revenue loss of around 8 billion

Yuan (approximately US\$1.13 billion U.S. dollars). In the fourth quarter, the hotel industry may embrace a compensatory consumption growth, especially during the National Day Golden Week, eventually making up for the revenue loss. Notably, business recovery will still be influenced by the global situation. Owing to the economic recession, shortened vacations, and customers' pervasive post-disaster panic, it is less likely that a retaliatory growth will occur after a slowdown in the pandemic.

Multi-Business and Multi-Channel Platforms

The traditional hotel business model focusing on catering and accommodation has been severely challenged by COVID-19, which has driven proactive companies to restructure and

develop a more diversified business scope and distribution channels. Some of the changes will last through the post-pandemic era. Therefore, the hotel industry must renew services by deconstructing and reconstructing existing products, marketing strategy, distribution channels, delivery methods, and consumption points. The hotel industry will embrace reforms facilitating multi-business and multi-channel platforms. For example, hotels can maximize their space and utilize it for accommodation, catering, retail, and public activities as well as for the off-line demonstration of online shopping. Wanda Hotels and Resorts uses its public space to demonstrate consumption scenarios and exhibits commodities. A tour generates profits through commodity displays and e-commerce, in addition to room income, and thus e-commerce income has become an important source of Atour's income. Many IGH hotels launched a food delivery service. Jinling Hotels and Resorts extended its business scope and broadened the operating income structure by setting up a food retail platform, which integrates the commercial scale production of classic dishes, an online sales system, and the cold chain logistics system. Jinling received an order from the local government to provide food to its non-local COVID-19 medical crew; the hotel produced 10,000 pork bales and 3,000 brined ducks within 48 hours and delivered the products on time.

Hotels should also endeavor to update channels to contact, attract, and sell to customers (Valle, 2020). China's hotels depend heavily on OTAs as their primary e-commerce channel; these OTAs are based on the public domain—a huge customer base is shared by various OTA platforms through bidding. In the

past decade, all businesses, including hotel OTAs, had benefited from the rapidly increasing number of users on the public domain. In recent years, the saturation of users in the public domain increased the costs of acquiring user growth, which, in turn, increased the expenses of the OTA platform. In 2019, the private domain concept changed hotels' e-commerce ecosystem, allowing direct contact with the user pools attached to the brand/hotel. The growth of private domain has been promoted by the emerging social media channels in China, such as the WeChat group, online flagship stores, vlog, and live-streaming. Private domain forms a closed loop where users can be converted into consumers at lower costs, and these converted users will also share a stronger bond with the brand. In China, the emerging mobile applications for hotel marketing via private domain include Paipai (developed by Ctrip), Dianping (developed by Meituan), Xiaohongshu, Tiktok, and WeChat public account.

Triggered by the pandemic, in the Chinese mainland, the live streaming sale has become one of the most popular marketing and sales channels across industries. Live streaming sales have achieved phenomenal success (Ni & Wang, 2020). Hotels should seize the opportunity to use live streaming to display products, interact with customers, and promote sales. For instance, Fliggy made more than 7,500 live broadcasts in over 30 countries and regions and attracted 30 million users during February and March (Xu, 2020). Liang Jianzhang, the Chairman of the Board of Ctrip, turned himself into a key opinion leader (KOL) and conducted seven live broadcasts since March, which drove a total of 200 million Yuan (approximately US\$28.18 billion) gross

merchandise volume (Jenny, 2020). In April, through live streaming, 3,000 advanced sales packages of a Shanghai hotel were sold in half an hour; since then, the hotel has sold nearly 10,000 packages (Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China, 2020).

Product Design and Investment Preference

China's hotel industry has evolved rapidly in the past 40 years. While most hotels were poorly managed and state-owned independent properties in the 1980s, a diverse and thriving brand landscape emerged in 2010s. These successful brands emerged not only in the upscale sector but also in the economy and the upper-midscale ones. Recently, personalized, innovative, and non-standard hotel brands, such as Muji and Atour, have emerged as a trend. During the pandemic, some hotels exhibited their high competitiveness and good financial performance through excellent product design and investment preference. For instance, the 108-room upscale Shilifangfei Hotel (a member of Huazhu's VUE brand) achieved its key performance indicators for the entire financial year 2020 by the first quarter; this success was attributed to its attractive brand storytelling, keen market positioning, space utilization, highly educated customer community, rapid innovation, and iterative operational capabilities.

COVID-19 brought about enduring changes in customer preferences and consumption behaviours. Hence, hotels should identify customer needs and develop state-of-the-art products. For example, customers' concern for hygiene, health, and sustainability will continue during the post-COVID-19 era. New hotel

products should allow customers to maintain a healthy and balanced lifestyle, exercise at will, work effectively, ensure social distancing, and reduce close contact. Thus, functional private space, such as a private office, fitness centre, and recreation space and facilities, plays an important role within a hotel room. Homestays are also suggested to launch accommodation products with abundant private space, such as a balcony, private kitchen, and a washing room to reduce unnecessary interpersonal contact.

Owing to the epidemic's severe damage, future hotel investment and asset renewal will be more concerned with the return on investment and control of cash flow, and thus strive to maximize the value of a property and operating value. China's rapid development in the past 40 years has led to an unusual growth in the number of luxury hotels. Having experienced significant losses during the pandemic, hotel investors will become more rational and return-driven in regard to their future projects. The preference of investors will change from big and comprehensive to small and exquisite, and the return-optimization formula for hotels will focus on maximizing revenue per square meter per minute.

Digital and Intelligent Transformation

COVID-19 pandemic has enhanced the need for intelligent services in both the supply and demand sides of the industry. Changes in consumer demand are the fundamental drivers of digital transformation. In the current scenario, customers have developed a renewed preference for contactless service supported by the digital platform and intelligent technology; these services

are expected to continue after the pandemic. Several large-scale chain brands have hastened the digital transformation to sustain competitiveness in the post-pandemic world (China Hospitality Association, 2020). Hotels' investment in digital customer relationship management has endowed customer service with configurability and traceability; this is based on which hotels can predict the individual preference, provide customized services, improve membership conversion, and increase customer loyalty via various engagement schemes. Through big data and revenue management, hotels can analyse the composition, demand, travel distance of the target consumer, and carry out precision marketing.

The digital and intelligent tools will eliminate human error, increase service efficiency, stabilize service quality, and thus enhance customer satisfaction and improve hotel performance in the increasingly competitive business environment. In China, several technology companies (e.g., Puietel, Resthour, Xiezhu, and Yunji) with independent innovation capabilities have emerged to provide technical support to hotels. Industry giants such as Ctrip, Alibaba, Xiaomi, Baidu, and iFlytek have also shown high interest in developing artificial intelligence (AI) applications for hotels. For example, FlyZoo Hotel, which is developed and operated by Alibaba, is widely recognized as the leader of smart hotels in China. Based on the Internet of Things, FlyZoo adopted intelligent technologies such as smart control (e.g., access, lights, speakers, curtain, air conditioner, and TV), self-check-in and checkout, room service and food delivery robots, kiosks, face recognition, voice applications, and mobile payment. The digital, intelligent, and contactless service will



► **Through the first four days of the week-long holiday that started on October 1, 425 million domestic trips were taken**

reduce interpersonal contact and the risk of cross-infection, and thus boost customer's confidence in the service environment.

The implementation of digital and intelligent technologies can also improve a hotel's operational efficiency and achieve significant cost reductions. The pandemic has also accelerated the ad hoc implementation of video conferencing, cloud collaboration, and teleworking. In the post-COVID-19 era, hotels will be more agile and effective in attracting Generation-Y and Z customers and employees if they continue to implement digital and smart solutions. Given that the hotel industry is a labour-intensive industry relying on standardized manual inputs and operations, the implementation of digital and intelligent technologies, specifically process automation, will automate a considerable proportion of repetitive administrative work and

replace human labour. The digital and intelligent tools ensure uninterrupted hotel operations on the business side and service provision on the customer side. Hotel firms require an integrated management-marketing-service digitalization plan and extend the loop from marketing to operation management. Hotels can develop a digitalized operation system that connects the management scenarios with service scenarios throughout the lifecycle of a hotel.

Market Reshuffle

The pandemic will also significantly influence the market composition of China's hotel industry in the post-pandemic world. After the revitalization of the hotel business, rampant hotel brand expansion may assume a different pattern. China's hotel industry comprises almost 80% independent hotels (about 920,000) and only approximately 20% of the hotels are

operated by hotel chain brands (OYO, 2019). Owing to the pandemic, individual hotels are likely to suffer more severely than the other actors; this is because the former are intrinsically susceptible to disaster. They suffer from disorganized operation and management; unstable service quality; poor hygiene condition; high turnover rate; weak customer loyalty; unprofessional cost control; and even unqualified fire, sanitation and public security. However, during the pandemic, the branded hotel chains emerged more competitive due to their advantages in the business model, refined SOP, disaster management mechanism, and proficient operation.

The pandemic promoted the reshuffling of the small- and medium-sized hotels, and it is expected to push them to upgrade to high quality branded hotel chains. The rebranding of individual hotels will provide the hotel industry a major opportunity to shift from the new property market to the stock property market. China's hotel industry will see an increase in the ratio of branded properties and a focus on leading hotel brands. The pandemic helped hotel firms visualize this opportunity to promote the brands that can integrate individual hotels with the strong sales and marketing system of the hotel brands while maintaining the unique features of individual hotels, such as OYO, VOCO (launched by IHG), H Hotel (Huazhu), AARoom (Sunmei), Qingzhu (Meituan), OYU (Yilong) (Zhou, 2020). Hotel firms should seize the opportunity to increase market share, while individual hotels can actively cooperate with major firms to achieve transformation and upgradation.

Conclusions

The importance of this study is that it develops a COVID-19 management

framework comprising anti-pandemic phases, principles, strategies. It also offers original insights into major trends of China's hotel industry during the post-pandemic era, including the emergence of multi-business and multi-channels, product design and investment preference, digital and intelligent transformation, and market reshuffle.

Based on the disaster management literature and the experience and trends of China's hotel industry, the study aims to enable hotel practitioners reeling under the pandemic to live better for today and plan well for tomorrow. This study can inspire hotel firms globally to understand the disaster evolution scenarios, adopt effective anti-pandemic strategies, and strive for industry activation and revitalization. The COVID-19 management framework can be adopted for managing health-related disasters in a broader context, which enhances the generalizability of this study. Although China's hotel industry was the first receiver of the pandemic's ramifications, it took timely measures to cushion the economic loss and

secure its employees and customers. The industry undertook social responsibilities and actively participated in the anti-pandemic battle during a comprehensive and elongated lockdown. After witnessing positive signs, the industry adopted a series of innovative measures to revitalize performance. The effect of COVID-19 remains uncertain as the economic ramifications in the global hotel industry are existentially threatening. Against this background, the experience of China's hotel industry will provide systematic, albeit limited, solutions to hotel firms abroad who are suffering from the health and economic crisis. Besides, the pandemic will fundamentally change the economic environment of China's hotel industry. In this regard, the study provides scenarios and suggestions in the post-COVID-19 hotel industry context in China, which will shed light on industry transformation and upgradation.

Source: COVID-19 and China's Hotel Industry: Impacts, a Disaster Management Framework, and Post-Pandemic Agenda by Fei Hao, Qu Xiao, Kaye Chon; International Journal of Hospitality Management September 2020.



► Daily tickets at several sections of the Great Wall sold out in thousands

VISION 2021

DEKHO APNA DESH

Domestic tourism shows a silver lining amidst the dark clouds in the post-Covid scenario of India



► Tsomgo lake in Sikkim is no less beautiful than any Alpine lake in Switzerland

FEDERATION of Associations in Indian Tourism & Hospitality (FAITH), the policy federation of all the national associations representing the complete tourism, travel and the hospitality industry of India (ADTOI, ATOAI, FHRAI, HAI, IATO, ICPB, IHHA, ITTA, TAAI, TAFI) hosted the first virtual India Tourism Vision Day on 8th October, 2020.

On the occasion, Nakul Anand, Executive Director, ITC Limited & Chair-

man, FAITH, along with the board and the Presidents of the ten associations discussed the opportunities and challenges faced by Indian travel, hospitality and tourism industry.

Terming the tourism industry as the next growth driver for India, Anand highlighted that, "Alike the white revolution, the green revolution and the digital revolution, the time now, is for a Tourism revolution – leading to GDP growth, forex

earnings and job creation."

The conference revolved around the theme: For Indian Tourism to thrive tomorrow, it has to survive and revive today.

In his address to the fraternity, Mr Anand said that the association and their executive committees across the country have been undertaking countless initiatives to double the global tourism competitiveness ranking of the country.

He said that the association's first goal is to move India into the top-20 ranks in global tourism competitiveness in 5 years post-COVID and then in the top 10 ranks of world tourism competitiveness ranking in the next five years.

He also envisioned having a tourism economic footprint of \$ 500 bn in the post-COVID normal, which according to him would double the economic footprint of tourism and unleash major employment growth for India.

As per the latest report by Reserve Bank of India (RBI), each vertical of tourism industry - travel agents, hotels, tour operators, tourist transporters, restaurants, guides etc are facing worst ever crisis due to COVID-19. Given the situation, Anand said that



► **Kolkata's incredible Victoria Memorial a fascinating marble structure in which US Capitol meets Taj Mahal**

"It is essential for the industry to sustain tourism and talent, till the time the vaccine is developed."

For the industry's sustenance, the FAITH Chairman requested for a Tourism COVID-19 Fund set up by the Ministry of Tourism and a National Tourism Council comprising of all relevant ministries and all chief ministers. "The council will enable fast track centre state level tourism decision making and work on a 'One India One Tourism' approach leveraging and utilising full synergies of India's tourism potential across all states. This will raise the decibels for going Vocal with Local," he added.

"The tourism industry has been

identified as one of 26 most stressed industries by the RBI expert committee, eligible for restructuring. We thus need to ensure that an across the board moratorium is made immediately applicable for tourism enterprises till March 2022 or till complete recovery happens and there should be no interest on interest during that period," said Anand.

"As we restart tourism from a zero base today across all our verticals, we need revival policies in terms of GST correction, export status, infrastructure status, industry status, secured refunds, SEIS," he added.

Anand also expressed his vision to make India one of the most preferred

Tourism destinations both for domestic and international tourists offering best in class tourism experiences, infrastructure & services right here in India.

The Faith Chairman thanked both central and state governments for their continued support and guidance. Concluding his address, Anand said, "As Chairman FAITH, I will be failing in my duty if I do not bring to light the gravity of the situation that confronts us."

Shortly after this, FAITH submitted its pre-budget recommendations for the Indian Tourism, Travel & Hospitality Industry

The core vision laid out by FAITH



is that of Tourism - Made in India. As per their vision, India should aim to become one of the most preferred Tourism destinations both for domestic and international tourists offering best in class tourism experiences, infrastructure & services and to enable Indian tourism entrepreneurs to create value for all their stakeholders.

The policy federation of all the national associations representing the complete tourism, travel and hospitality industry of India submitted its pre-budget recommendations to the Union Budget FY 21 -22 for the Tourism, Travel & Hospitality Industry of India.

The core vision laid out by FAITH

is that of Tourism - Made in India. As per their vision, India should aim to become one of the most preferred Tourism destinations both for domestic and international tourists offering best in class tourism experiences, infrastructure & services and to enable Indian tourism entrepreneurs to create value for all their stakeholders.

As per the World Economic Forum, tourism 2019 competitiveness study, India was ranked at 34th among 140 countries. This ranking is up from 2013 when Indian tourism was ranked at 68th. The goal is to move India into the Top 20 rank in global tourism competitiveness in 5 years post COVID-19 normal.

In line with this vision, FAITH has proposed the following Budgetary themes for Indian Tourism for Union Budget FY 21 - 22:

- One India, One Tourism
- Export competitiveness
- Domestic leadership
- Capital Formation
- Removing inefficiencies

National Tourism Council is required since Tourism encompasses multiple ministries and takes place in and within states. The National Tourism Council must be chaired by the PM and co-chaired by the Tourism Minister and composed of Chief Ministers of all states and cabinet ministers of the Government of India and must be a legislative body on the lines of the GST council.

The Concurrent Industry Status is required for Hotels & tourism across all states as unlike commercial establishments tourism & hospitality doesn't just retail but creates and produces high quality service. Power and water utility rates and levies must be at industrial rates effectively. All existing licenses, permits, permissions will be thoroughly examined for redundancies and standardized at a

national level. There must be a level playing field in terms of compliances and entry requirements among all sub segments of conventional and alternative tourism organise the travel industry and protect it from fly by night operations.

Export Status is critical to double India's share of inbound tourism to 2.5% in 5 years. It is key to Treat at par foreign exchange earning members of tourism, travel and hospitality under export and deemed export status to promote forex earnings. It is important to make available the deduction in respect of earnings in convertible foreign exchange to all the tourism & hospitality units earning. Tourism forex earnings should be effectively zero rated for GST.

Accordingly SEIS duty credit needs to be made available to the tourism industry against their foreign exchange earnings and the rate must be pegged at 10% for both tour operators and hotels category and is made applicable on gross foreign exchange earnings for the policy period of the FTP 2020-25.

Global Mice Bidding Fund is required to be set up of ₹ 500 crs to double mice share to 2.5% of the global mice size of \$ 800 bn. In the global international congress associations rankings, this will also enable it to meet the goal will be to take India's rank to the top 10 in the world from 28 where we are currently.

To create structured global awareness of multiple Indian tourism verticals Corpus of least ₹ 2500 crores is required for global branding budget Sub Branding of three Tourism segments Indian MICE, Indian adventure, Indian Heritage under the Incredible India main brand. This will involve comprehensive global focus on creating segment brand ambassadors, country wise customised content,



► **Conceived as the cosmic chariot of the sun god Konark temple is a breathtakingly splendid creation**

mass and social media buying and significant creatives.

In the post-COVID normal, each of the Indian missions abroad in each country should be activated with tourism resources for enhancing Indian tourism brand and sales distribution in all countries and also host India tourism evenings in each of the top 100 cities of the world.

India's size of domestic tourism must be doubled to almost 4 bn domestic tourism visits in 5 years post normal and as such there needs to be made an income tax exemption on travelling within India income

tax credits for upto ₹ 1.5 lakhs when spending with GST registered domestic tour operators, travel agents, hoteliers and transporters anywhere within the country. It is also needed to incentive Indian corporates to undertake domestic MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences & events) by offering a 200% weighted income tax expense benefit to Indian companies which are undertaking mice events in India.

A Natural & Cultural Heritage Restoration Fund must be set up with a corpus of at least ₹ 2000 crores which encourages sustainable and respon-

sible development around each vertical of natural & cultural heritage tourism be it in Mountaineering, cruising, trekking, wild life & reserve forests based activities , snorkelling, paragliding, whitewater rafting, conservatories, paragliding, ballooning, desert safaris in natural heritage or our palaces & forts, our monuments & museums, our food, arts & crafts & our historical sites for our cultural heritage

To increase the intensity of high-quality hotel accommodation in India which is currently low which has a direct correlation to low global



► **The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway is listed as the Unesco World Heritage since 1999**

tourism share. To increase classified quality hotel infrastructure, that would imply a mammoth capital expenditure which can only come from the private sector and that requires a long term favourable low interest rate regime as Hotels are projects with a long break even period. Hotels thus require to be declared as an infrastructure sector so that long term funds are accessible at suitable interest rates to attract private capital hospitality, to create all India jobs and build quality accommodation supply.

To enable tapping of hotel land across states, a national hotel SPV is recommended on a tripartite model which enables state governments & PSUs to pool their land assets which can enable PPP based on lease structures and not sale. This will drive immense hospitality capital into India.

A structured mechanism is re-

quired to future secure travel agents' payments to ensure that security for travel agents & operators' survival. This is key as Travel agents' payments to principals is unsecured credit and some form of mechanisms whether escrow or guarantee or underwriting based mechanisms are needed to be in place to ensure that travel agents money stays secure. The recently formed ECLGS under MOF which is administering the emergency credit guarantee fund must be used to set up a travel agent underwriting fund.

To truly ensure a seamless tourist transportation experience it is needed to standardise all inter State road taxes and make them payable at a single point which will facilitate the ease of doing business. A national Tourism transportation policy must be laid out to that effect.

There are certain policy issues which need to be addressed for tour-

ism GST:

- The 18% GST category for hotels above room rates of ₹ 7500 must be abolished and merged with the category of 12% GST.
- Restaurants too have an 18% and also 5% slab but which is without setoffs. The 18% category needs to be abolished and there needs to be an option made available of GST at 12% with full set offs. Additionally, the needs to be no linkage to room tariffs above ₹ 7500 as it currently exists.
- Taxes on fuel, Inter- state transportation taxes, power cess, liquor excise and also property taxes, cess on parking charges, are all forms of very high cost input indirect costs on tourism, travel & hospitality. These need to be made available as input costs setoffs for GST to truly make us one country, one tax.
- The GST on Tour operators should be 1.8% with full set offs. Hotels need to be able to levy IGST to enable them to give GST credits to Indian corporates who do Interstate events and do not take these events international. This will streamline the complete GST chain and boost interstate corporate mice demand for hospitality.
- 100% tax exemption and permission to write back income / TDS/ GST etc when airlines windup or closedown must be provided for.
- TDS must be abolished, as it is an additional compliance hazard. Reduction in credit card processing charges by banks/ financial institutions is key towards 100% e-payments.
- It is important to bring overseas global OTA's operating in India into the tax net of GST and other taxes. The implementation of these measures will put Indian Tourism on the line of vision of Tourism - Made in India.

LIGHT AND AIR

The latest trend in hotel design is aimed at keeping away all pathogens and disinfect every corner of the property



► **Portable UV disinfection units emit full spectrum UV light to eliminate harmful microbes, including viruses, bacteria and fungi in rooms**

C OVID-19 pandemic has dramatically affected the entire hospitality sector as well as general tourism, air and cruise ship travel and all other travel-related industries. The hotel industry witnessed an abrupt plunge in reservations and RevPAR went down in the first weeks of March 2020 that has yet to recover.

The hospitality industry, like manufacturing, sales and services industry, were simply caught unprepared for the novel virus that brought the world to nearly a standstill. Gradually the hard-hit industry learned that

preparedness comes at a high price.

Even for luxury hotels, costs are weighed against the perceived benefit. Buying and stockpiling expensive disinfection equipment, materials and even deployment of employees, when not faced with a potential pathogenic threat is going to be an uphill, but not impossible task.

Germ free domains

Millions of deaths and infections in the past eight months have forced the hospitality industry, as well as other industries, to weigh the pros

and cons of efficiency vs. preparedness. And, as we consider the future of travel and hotel accommodations, the implications for hotel design and remodelling creates new opportunities for resiliency and survival in the months and years to come.

Technologies exist today that not only help in the short term, but can be powerful solutions in the future, if the hospitality world places more emphasis on being prepared for any future pandemic. And, it's important to consider that travellers, driven by concern and in search of peace of

mind and higher standards of safety, will be searching for accommodations that provide for higher levels of disinfection. The traveling public will not soon forget the impact and fear created by this pandemic. They will look for hotel interiors free from contagions. The hospitality operators have to ensure disinfection and deploy the best available technology to attract more guests.

UV Light disinfection

One such technology is UV light disinfection. Today, more and more hotels and resorts are turning to the germicidal properties of UV light to quickly disinfect guest rooms, fitness facilities, bathrooms and other public spaces in order to earn the confidence of re-emerging travelers searching for safety protocols that can protect them against the COVID-19 virus. UV light products, if powerful enough, can make spaces where people gather up to 99.9% pathogen-free.

Ultraviolet light is naturally present in sunlight and makes up roughly 10% of the total light generated by the sun. UV is a form of electromagnetic energy with a wavelength from 10 nm to 400 nm, but the germicidal effects are found on the wavelengths of UV-A, UV-B, and UV-C light.

By targeting the sensitive DNA of a pathogenic organism, various wavelengths of UV light can modify the genetic material of microorganisms by destroying nucleic acids and disrupting their DNA causing cell death as well as an inability to reproduce. This disinfection can occur on surfaces and in the air, making high-energy UV light disinfection products perfect for air handling units, food and water purification, surface disinfection and more. Additionally, UV-B and UV-A light causes oxidation of proteins

and lipids causing cell death. Broad spectrum (UV A, B and C) lamps are proven to inhibit photoreactivation, the process that can result in self-repair of damaged microbes. Powerful, clinical-level UV disinfection fixtures can produce strong enough UV light to irradiate microorganisms such as today's COVID-19 virus, as well as bacteria, moulds, and fungi up to a clinical level of 99.9%. This makes UV light disinfection technology also perfect for hotel properties that experience issues with water damage and general mould and fungi growth.

UV disinfection light technology, delivered through small yet powerful units integrated into rooms, restaurants, spas, event spaces and other public areas of a hotel, is one way of seamlessly bringing disinfection into the overall operation of a hotel. The disinfection qualities of UV light have been scientifically proven for well over 100 years. Recent innovations of this technology have made the delivery of UV light disinfection more powerful, flexible and affordable than ever.

From UV lighting products mount-

ed into the ceilings of bathrooms, to portable units that can disinfect all surfaces and the air in hotel rooms, to autonomous robots that follow predetermined paths throughout unpopulated halls and large public areas, hotels can build in clinical-level disinfection cycles to keep guests, staff and visitors safe from infectious diseases. And, unlike traditional housekeeping protocols that use harsh chemical cleaners to wipe down surfaces, UV light can literally inactivate up to 99.9% of viruses, including today's COVID-19 virus, but can destroy moulds, fungi and bacteria that plague so many hotels nationwide.

As architects and lighting specifiers consider helping their hotel clients be as prepared as possible for any future pathogen, as well as provide real solutions for containing the growth of bacteria, molds and fungi, building in UV lighting solutions from the very start will allow hotels to continue to operate responsibly and profitably come what may. The cost of this layer of preparation can be far less than the cost of operational shutdown. And,



► High efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters, essentially with the features of N-95 masks, can remove viral material from the air

in time, the overall cost of building in sanitation by UV light can be less than the constant cost of stockpiling additional chemical cleaners and the labor hours needed to do all disinfection by hand. UV light technology has been proven to kill up to 99.9% of Coronavirus, E. coli, Salmonella, Norovirus, MRSA, C. auris and C. diff. Using UV light technology in hotel rooms and other spaces can eradicate pathogens on surfaces including drapes, carpets, rugs, and bedding as well as irradiating the air inside the room.

For the hotel industry, and indeed from categories ranging from healthcare and sports facilities to restaurants and schools, the real future is being written right now. The worldwide pandemic itself has caused the adoption of UV disinfection technologies, and the search for new innovations, to accelerate by 5 to 10 years. Indeed, 8 months ago, most hotel GM's, executives and owners might not have ever heard of UV light disinfection, let alone considered it. Now, the market for this technology is growing quickly as hospitality companies search for methods to keep their guests and staff safe.

In fact, there's indication today that travellers will be asking for, perhaps even demanding, a higher level of hotel cleanliness than ever before. Today, UV disinfection lighting technology can play a big part in winning back travellers to a hotel and hotel brand. And, in the future, building in the layer of preparedness for any new pathogen or infection, can help to safeguard hotel properties from losing revenue, profits and reputation in the blink of an eye. As new hotel projects are being considered, or remodelling is being done, specifying UV disinfection products are a great way to stay operationally strong and

most importantly, resilient well into the future.

Ventilation system

As the world continues to adapt to the coronavirus pandemic, "ventilation" has become a buzzword in the travel industry. Early in the year, on coronavirus-plagued cruise ships, ventilation systems became a point of fear for passengers and crew alike. The effectiveness of air filtration and ventilation on airplanes is still not totally clear: While some studies suggest the chances of contracting coronavirus on a flight are low, some risk remains. For hotels, however, good ventilation has become a feature to promote to bring customers back.

Unlike when you open a window and allow air to pass through, air-conditioning recirculates a lot of the same air inside a building. Though the exact risks are still unknown, this has the potential to create a virus-laden stew in offices and, yes, hotels. Earlier this month, two researchers from Harvard Medical School argued

in JAMA that, beyond washing hands and wearing masks, "air disinfection" has been a largely missing element of the strategy to prevent coronavirus transmission. The issue could be especially important as we head into summer: Hotter temperatures will drive people indoors just as many places are reopening and we're supposed to go about our "normal life."

The airborne spread of the coronavirus has been well documented. Famously, outbreaks have emerged from choir practices and other indoor gatherings, with infection rates so uniquely high that it's unlikely everyone got infected by touching the same surface. Over a long period in an enclosed space, it seems, singing can spew virus into the air until it accumulates to the point of danger for people who are well over six feet away.

Once a virus is hanging in the air—and we know that the coronavirus can linger for hours—it will travel with air currents. One ominous study of a restaurant in Guangzhou,



► Full spectrum UV disinfection fixture installed in the ceiling can keep a large space clean

China, documented how air-conditioning appeared to spread the virus between tables at opposite sides of the room. The issue wasn't that the virus was traveling through the air-conditioning unit, but that it was getting pushed around the room by the stream of air. The takeaway is that while airflow is good when it's coming from open windows, it could make things worse when it's coming from an AC unit that's blowing air around a closed room. Coughing in a well-ventilated room is sort of like peeing in a river as opposed to a hot tub: Ideally you wouldn't do either, but one is definitely worse.

There's currently no clear evidence of this virus spreading from room to room through air-conditioning. But the presumption is that it could, and buildings should take precautions to prevent that possibility. In a high-functioning building with a well-conditioned HVAC, one shouldn't expect that there would be spread between different rooms. But that's only if things are up to code and working properly. For example, commercial building codes in many places require "negative-pressure ventilation" in bathrooms—meaning air is propelled outside by an exhaust fan. This is especially important during the pandemic because of something called "toilet plume." Basically, when you flush a toilet with the lid up, the rush of water can aerosolize the contents of the bowl and send some of them up into the air, kind of like an enormous cough. During the SARS coronavirus outbreak, in 2003, a cluster of cases in Hong Kong was attributed to one person with diarrhoea in a poorly ventilated apartment building.

In light of the pandemic, various professional organizations have issued new recommendations for

building ventilation, but how widely they'll be followed is unclear. The fixes aren't actually groundbreaking: They're mostly things that everyone was supposed to be doing all along, such as ensuring that bathrooms have exhaust fans and that air filters are changed regularly and of high-enough quality to catch the virus. That means they should be high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters or MERV-rated 13 or 14, which are essentially the N-95 masks of air filters.

Hotels, offices, restaurants, and commercial venues of all sorts could also augment their HVAC systems with localized air purifiers. They're incredibly effective at removing viral material from the air, and could be a useful tool when people have to share rooms. I could see them being placed between desks in an office or tables in a restaurant.

But these are just recommendations, not legally mandated standards. Sometimes recommendations are adopted by cities as building codes, and sometimes they aren't. And even if new codes are adopted, businesses won't be expected to meet them overnight. Nor are cities equipped to inspect and enforce them assiduously. Without more stringent government protections, the best you can do while traveling is look for third-party certifications such as LEED or WELL. Buildings that have gone through those certification processes are guaranteed to have ventilation systems that go well beyond the typical standards.

As you can tell, this is a problem that isn't going to be fixed by you or me: It's going to require investment by businesses and governments. On top of all the anxieties of pandemic life, no one should have to worry about the air filters in their hotel room or workplace. With proper reg-

ulations and enforcement, ideally we could just assume that the systems are properly maintained wherever we go. That's not the case now in many places, and the issue goes well beyond this pandemic: More than 1 million people die globally every year from exposure to indoor air pollution. All sorts of health benefits come from the exact upgrades that would help contain the spread of the coronavirus. Now would be a perfect time to set in motion a new standard for clean air.

Open the windows

Some experts believe the ventilation doesn't matter much, but who you're interacting with and where you're interacting with people is important. In other words, the risk is more from other individuals rather than it is from the environment itself. Your room is probably not that big of an issue, but it's when you're in the common areas — so if you're in the lobby or if you're in the restaurant — those types of areas where you want to be much more mindful.

Travellers should rather use common-sense precautions: Wear face coverings, wash your hands, and avoid areas that are crowded. Most hotels have done a lot to try to develop protocols to make it as safe as possible.

So the thumb rule is that if you can't overhaul the ventilation system in your hotel, ensure that windows can be opened and aired out. Make sure that there's a good exchange with outdoor air and indoor air. Travellers should also avoid unnecessary time spent in a hotel's lobby or other indoor common areas. This holds true not just for coronavirus, but the flu that transmits much more in the winter months, and the main reason is people are inside more.

TOUCHLESS TECH

Ready for the contactless era in hotels in the post-pandemic era?
Here are five hotel technologies for the COVID-19 world



► Guests with the Hilton Honors mobile app can participate in a contactless check-in process from start to finish.

FROM keyless entries to digital travel information, Covid-19 has accelerated the adoption of contactless technologies. Within the hotel industry, fewer contact points extend to the reconfiguration of public spaces and, of course, highlighting stringent new sanitizing protocols.

To help on the cleaning side, the World Health Organization has issued an extensive list of operational considerations related to sanitization. These guidelines include handling check-ins, dishware, and ill patients. Establishing stepped up cleaning protocols are a visible measure of concern for hotels and are likely to be

a big part of hotel marketing in the near future.

Of course, desire for less face-to-face contact and social distancing also leads to a complete rethinking of public spaces and many questions. For example, how can hotels minimize time at the concierge desks yet, provide excellent services and not lose revenue?

While this is an unfolding story, here's a peek into the hotel industry's contactless technology.

1. Contactless Check-In

Imagine a guest entering the lobby via a sliding glass door and holding their phone to a scanner. Automat-

ically checked in, they head to their room, never interacting with a desk clerk. Near Field Communication or (NFC) is a staple for anyone who uses Apple, Samsung, or Google Pay, and it's already in use in some hotels around the world.

Other types of technology that can allow contactless check-in include facial recognition software, passport information, or membership programs. For instance, guests with the Hilton Honors mobile app can participate in a contactless check-in process from start to finish.

Canary Technologies' contactless check-in solution lets you seamlessly check-in guests without exchanging



► **Canary Technologies' contactless check-in solution lets you seamlessly check-in guests without exchanging credit cards, IDs, or registration forms.**

credit cards, IDs, or registration forms. You can get started in 10 minutes and start checking in guests right away. The check-in happens in three easy steps:

- Automatically send check-in links via email or text message to all guests that are due to arrive
- Guests submit their credit card information, upload their ID, and sign the hotel's registration card all in one

place before they arrive

- Canary verifies the information and enables the hotel to check the guest in

2. Keyless Entry (and other Guest Services)

Eliminating room keys is environmentally friendly, and it's one less thing guests need to handle. Now, with a press of a button on their phone, guests can unlock their doors.

Melia Hotels International uses this technology in Mallorca. Resorts like Hotel Xcaret in Playa del Carmen, Mexico, embed a chip into a bracelet. This chip is linked to their credit card so guests not only don't need a separate room key but can also charge items by scanning their bracelet.

A digital key platform such as OpenKey allows a hotel to offer mobile check-in to guests. Using



► Now, with a press of a button on their phone, guests can unlock their doors

their smartphone, the guest is able to request check-in to the hotel prior to arrival. The hotel front desk is able to check the guest into the Property Management System and issue them a secure digital key directly to their smartphone.

The digital key contains the room number, WiFi network and password instructions as well as information about property amenities such as fitness room, dining options and check-out time. Using the OpenKey app, the guest is able to download their mobile key and proceed straight to their room upon arrival. The mobile key can also be programmed to automatically select the guestroom floor

in the elevator, eliminating the need to touch buttons.

3. Voice-Command Technology

A 2016 Fast Company article described Aloft's vision of voice command thermostats, light control, and tv viewing as the room of the future. Only four years later, voice-activated tools like Google Home and Alexa are giving guests the option to not only adjust the temperature but also order room service.

As the demand for contactless technology across all sectors of travel has accelerated due to COVID-19, Google is now making its contactless communication services using

Google Assistant and Nest Hub smart devices available to all hotels in the United States, with a broader roll-out later this year.

The solution has been a pilot since 2018 but Google says it expedited the global launch because of the pandemic. Offered in partnership with integrators including Volara and Sonifi to connect to hotel PMS systems, the Nest Hub functions are tailored to the hotel's needs and services.

Using simple voice commands, guests can ask Google Assistant things such as what time the pool closes or to request more towels. Guests can also use it as a media hub, accessing YouTube for news,

music and videos or connecting their phone via Bluetooth. Hotels can also configure the system to handle guest check-out, push out a guest survey, share promotions and handle in-room devices such as blinds and lights. And guests can use Google Assistant to access information about the area, such as about the weather and nearby restaurants and shops.

To maintain privacy, guests do not need to sign-in and none of the activity is linked to their personal account. The Nest Hub also does not have a camera and the microphone can be turned off.

4. Robots for sterilising

While some hotels have adopted robots delivering towels and room service to reduce contact with staff, others are using robots to sanitize. In Texas, the Westin Houston Medical Center hotel sprang into action in March, adding two virus-zapping robots. Used in hospitals, the Light-Strike Germ-Zapping Robots, made by San Antonio-based Xenex Disinfection Services and costing about \$100,000 each, emit broad-spectrum ultraviolet light to destroy viruses and bacteria within minutes. They do not replace the hotel's regular cleaning: They go in afterward and provide a super-sterilizing second blast without added chemical risk.

Sister properties Waldorf Astoria Beverly Hills and The Beverly Hilton in California are also using the Xenex LightStrike robots. They will run for eight to 10 minutes in each room and will also help clean public restrooms, elevators, kitchens, meeting rooms and to disinfect luggage.

Direct exposure to general UV light is dangerous to human tissue, so, after set-up, the robots work alone, overnight in the public areas and in each guest room after checkout. This

is, however, an expensive investment.

5. Digital payments and travel information

Payment technology has evolved at a rapid pace, which is preferable and sought after during an era when touching surfaces should be minimal if not completely avoided. This means making sure that the payment process is supported by a scalable and adaptive platform to allow guests to use their mobile devices to pay remotely on web-based applications, via a mobile-based payment method (Apple Pay, Google Pay, etc.), or in person via EMV technology such as chipped credit cards and debit cards to reduce contact.

Having the right technology in place to help do that is what makes the difference here. This is both for practical reasons and for cultural ones, too. Cloud technology that supports these kinds of payments

As the demand for contactless technology across all sectors of travel has accelerated due to COVID-19, Google is now making its contactless communication services using Google Assistant and Nest Hub smart devices available to all hotels

across a number of properties in a more cohesive and inclusive way adds dimension to this part of the guest experience. It also helps to meet some very real-world physical requirements to making payments easy and stress-free.

A cloud-enabled hotel PMS platform that allows this functionality to be applied easily and quickly to all locations allows hotel teams to help redefine what great service means in a new era, and that makes staff contributions to the guest experience more enjoyable, constructive, proactive, and generally more meaningful for them. Importantly, this can mean re-thinking and creating dedicated spaces in the property beyond guest rooms for guests to work, dine, read, think, be, without guests having to manage distance from others wherever they are while at a hotel property.

Both guests and front desk staff will also have to forget about paper brochures with travel and tourism information, so another great contactless alternative will be to send along digital and personalized travel guides for every guest.

Travelers will turn to online travel information now more than ever. Online travel guides that keep travelers up to date with area activities like events, top sights, and restaurants will benefit travelers and limit their need to interact with the concierge desk. At Smartvel, for instance, we provide a completely digital and contactless concierge solution for hotels to offer guests updated information on the things that they will be able to visit, whether a certain activity or restaurant is opened or not, etc. via SMS. As part of our "Get Ready to Come Back" campaign, we are now offering a taste of our content technology at no cost until August.

LATERAL THINKING BECAME THE NEW NORM IN THE PANDEMIC

Mr Sourav Ghosal joined Vivanta Kolkata, EM Bypass Hotel (the then The Gateway Hotel EM Bypass, Kolkata) in March, 2018 as the General Manager.

He moved to Kolkata from Vivanta by Taj - President, Mumbai where he was the Resident Manager. He started working with the Taj Group in 2010 as a Food & Beverage Manager at the Taj Club House, Chennai. Prior to joining the Taj Group, Mr Ghosal had worked with other renowned hospitality brands in various capacities. This includes an eight year-stint at Burj Al Arab Jumeirah in Dubai.

He graduated from Institute of Hotel Management, Bhubaneswar in 1995 and his first job was at Hyatt Regency Delhi (1995-1999). Besides being a certified Mountaineer, he is a wine enthusiast and a certified Wine Taster from Wine & Spirit Education Trust (WSET), London.



ensure that our precautionary checks and measures are in line with guidelines from the World Health Organization and Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, Government of India as we adapted to the changing scenarios and business demands with an eye on catering to our guest's request for accommodations & dining experiences safely.

Q: Did you introduce any innovation to buck up ancillary revenue streams during the period? Do you wish to continue with these innovative ideas?

We at Vivanta Kolkata, worked on a holistic plan to re-purpose our current, guest services, and operational

expertise adjusting to the new normal and guest demands and business opportunities that originated as a result of it. We are part of the Qmin App, which is our all new service platform delivering signature dishes to homes, contactless, with sustainable packaging and safety measures. This is not only restricted to food delivery, but is more equipped to Virtual Dining Experience from the comfort of one's home or office.

Q: How has the situation changed after the hospitality industry was gradually unlocked?

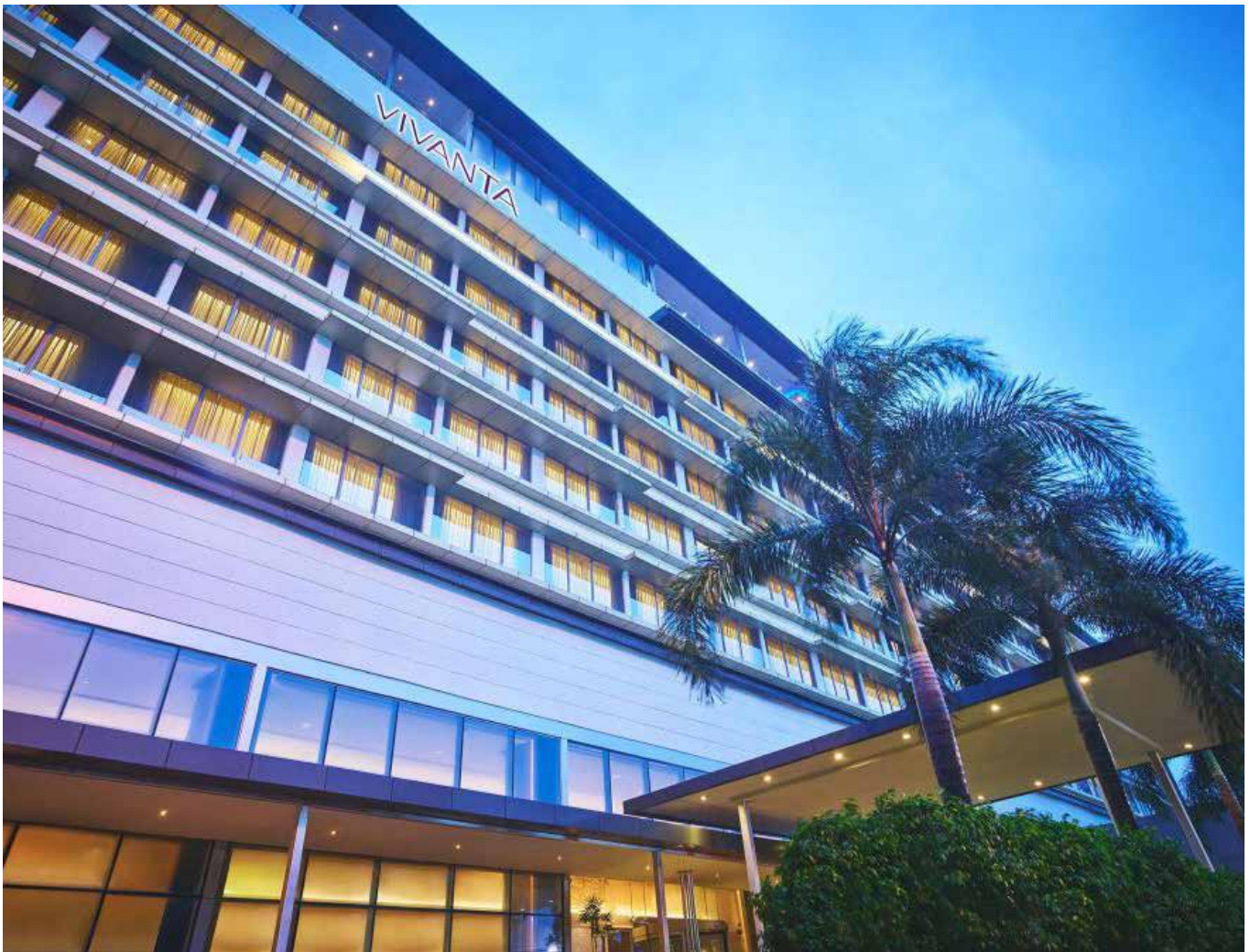
The Pandemic taught us and encouraged us to rethink and re-imagine each and every business function.

Mr Ghosal spoke to Mystic East in an exclusive interview. Excerpts:

Q: How did you cope in the early days of lockdown induced by Covid-19?

We at Vivanta Kolkata, placed great value in ensuring all compliance to all requirements with respect to hygiene, safety and security. The safety of our guests, associates and all stakeholders is of paramount importance to us. Our endeavor was to





Lateral thinking became the “new norm” as we bid to reinvent common industry best practices.

Q: What new norms have you introduced to attract more guests?

As India emerged from the national lockdown, moving in to the unlock phase we implemented enhanced precautionary measures in preparation of hotels opening. Some of these measures included thermal screening of all employees and guests, intensive hospital level sanitization of hotels as well as new contactless processes and social distancing measures while staying true

to the core of our service philosophy.

Q: Can you see green shoots after the festival season? Do you expect a large number of customers in the Christmas and New Year?

As hoteliers we are always optimistic about guests walking through our doors and hope the situation improves to enable us to offer our services to our valued guests.

Q: Are you expecting more MICE customers in the coming days?

This will depend entirely on the situation and rules laid out by the government.

Q: What is your projection for the hospitality business in 2021?

Going by the trend of business pick up and pipeline queries, we are optimistic, provided there are no new situations of unwarranted spikes resulting in renewed restrictions.

Q: Do you think the industry will be back on its feet by 2022?

The truth is this pandemic is like nothing we have experienced before. We have evolved our offerings and processes to adapt and will continue to do so to remain at the disposal of our loyal contingent of guests and hope for a better future.



STATE SURVEY: NORTH EAST INDIA

UNEXPLORED HORIZON

Long neglected by even the most intrepid of travellers the states known as Seven Sisters have slowly come of age, and may soon grow into India's most sought-after travel destination



TRAVELLERS' Bible Lonely Planet describes North East as: This triangular-shaped piece of land is wedged between China, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar, and consists of seven states, known collectively as the Seven Sisters. Long neglected by even the most intrepid of travellers because of their notoriously troubled past, the Sisters have slowly come of age, and may soon grow into India's most sought-after

travel destination.

For domestic travellers in India the region is still largely unexplored. For a traveller the region can offer peace and tranquility. Here are a few highlights of the region for those who have a spiritual bent of mind.

Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh

If Shangri-La conjures up images of an earthly paradise isolated from the outside world, happy people, Bud-

dhist chants floating in the air, and mystical monks engrossed in prayers, then Tawang is what you're most likely thinking about. Located at a height of near about 10,000 ft above sea level, picturesque Tawang is a thinly populated mountainous tract lying on the northwest extremity of Arunachal Pradesh in north east India. It is also the seat of the 400-year-old Tawang Monastery, one of the oldest and the largest monasteries in India



► Guru Padmasambhava consecrated the Taktshang monastery

and the biggest outside of Lhasa.

As the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama, it is a holy site for Tibetan Buddhists and a prominent center for Gelug or Gelugpa, the pre-eminent Buddhist school in Tibet. Tawang shares boundaries with Tibet in the north, Bhutan in the south west and Sela range of West Kameng in the east.

Places to visit: Tawang is both historically and naturally endowed. It is located at a distance of 183 Kms from Bomdila and is situated at an altitude of 3500 metres above sea level. The natural beauty and solitude of Gudpi and Chong-Chugmi ranges, Tawang chu River and Tawang valley are very mesmerizing. The inhabitants of the districts are all of Monpa tribes except Shyo village which is dominated by people of Tibetan origin. There are many beautiful glacial lakes in and around Tawang with crystal blue waters such as Sela lake, P.T.Tso lake, Sangetser lake, Banggachang lake and many more. These remain frozen in winter while in summer they become haven for migratory birds.

Arts & Festivals: There are two major religious festivals of the Monpas, 'Losar' and 'Torgya'. Both festivals are celebrated once annually. The Losar is celebrated to the commencement of New year. Every third year of Torgya, the festival of Dungyur is celebrated. Both "Dungyur and Torgya" festivals are celebrated at the premises of the Tawang Monastery with traditional gaiety and enthusiasm.

The Monpas have a glorious heritage of various kinds of Arts and Crafts. Their craftsmanship is manifested in various trades like weaving, mask making bamboo work, wood works, Thangka paintings, paper-making, incense making, pottery,



► **Majuli is the largest river island in the world**

etc. Unlike the traditional societal organization in the country there is no separate class of Artisans in the society and one is free to take up any Art or Craft of their liking by associating with an expert / Master. W 689

Majuli, Assam

Majuli is a mystic place that is wrapped in history and culture and one of the star attractions of Assam. Majuli is not just the biggest river island in the world, but it is also the seat of neo-Vaishnavism in Assam.

Majuli tourism may be small, but it is filled with life. If the mighty

Brahmaputra enhances the natural beauty of the place, the Satras give it the cultural identity. Majuli holds the prestigious recognition of being the largest river island in the world. Originally the island was spread over an area of 1250 sq km but due to erosion, its size has reduced considerably. Today it covers a total area of 421.65 sq km only. Majuli is located just 20 km from Jorhat which can be reached by ferries.

Life in Majuli is only about celebration. Amidst incessant floods, ecological degradation what lives on is the spirit to live. Culture and

religion has made Majuli what it is today. The Satras or the socio-cultural institutions are the lifelines of the river island. There are as many as 25 Satras in the island which work as monasteries and heritages for many, which will be of interest to travellers. These Satras are regarded as the hub of neo-Vaishnavite culture which was first promoted by revered Assamese saint Srimanta Sankardeva and later by his disciple Madhavdeva. Here, not only is Vaishnavism taught and promoted but it is also home to one of the principal classical Indian dance routines- Sattriya dance.



► Each Xatra represents the uniqueness of Assamese culture and tradition

Places to visit: Satras (pronounced in Assamese as Xatra) are the socio-religious institutions adhering to the neo-Vaishnavism teachings of Srimanta Sankardeva, the pioneering religious leader of Assam. Majuli tourism is incomplete without these Satras. Each Satra has its own distinguishing feature, teaching something different yet something very close to Assamese culture and tradition. If the Kamalabari Satra is one of the most influential and most noted Satras in Majuli, the Auniati Satra is famous

Xatras are the socio-religious institutions disseminating neo-Vaishnavism of Srimanta Sankardeva, a pioneering saint of Assam

for the festival called Paalnaam and Apsara Dance. Benganaati Satra and Shamaguri Satra are two other important Satras in Majuli.

Festivals: The Raas Lila is an annual festival being performed on the full moon day (Purnima) in the months of October-November (Kati- Aghun) during the autumn season. During this festival the Satras draw a large number of people. The Raas Lila is the story of the life of Lord Krishna presented in the performing art form. Performance of the Ras Lila involves various classes

of musical instruments, music and dance, and artifacts mask and painting. First Raas Leela was performed at Dakhinpat Sattrra in 1840 A.D. and it is continued with full ritual ways. These constitute Assamese culture.

Imphal, Manipur

Manipur, located in a lush green corner of North East India, is an oval shaped valley surrounded by nine ranges of bluish green hills intertwined with cascading rapids, carpets of flowers and lazy lakes. A little paradise on Earth with her rich cultural heritage and sublime natural beauty, Manipur promises to be a favourite new Tourism Destination. The people and tribes of Manipur include Meiteis, Nagas, Mizos and many other colourful communities who have coexisted in complete harmony for centuries. These are people whose folklore, myths and legends, dances, indigenous games and martial arts, exotic handlooms, handicrafts and fine arts are invested with the mystique of nature

Manipur is a mosaic of ancient traditions and rich cultural patterns. In the field of arts and culture, the State is best represented by its classical and folk dance forms. Raas Leelas depict the Leelas of Lord Krishna as a child with Gopies of Brindavan and express their yearning for communion with the Lord. The Raas Dance is perfectly lyrical and has extremely graceful movements. The spring festival, the "Lai Haraoba" held in April – May is symbolized by a traditional stylized and ritualistic dance performed for peace and prosperity. The tribal folk dances are an expression of nature, creativity and aestheticism of the tribal way of life.

The city of Imphal is the capital of the Indian state of Manipur. The Kangla Palace, built by King Khagem-

ba and his son Khunjaoba, was destroyed by the British during the Anglo-Manipuri War. During the reign of Maharaja Bhagyachandra, the region experienced several Burmese invasions; however, with the help of Gambhir Singh and the Manipur army, Kangla was liberated from the Burmese forces.

Places to visit:

The following are a few of the numerous places of interest in and around Imphal. Shree Shree Govindajee Temple is a historic Vaishnavite centre, adjoining Manipur's former Maharajas' Royal Palace. Twin domes, a paved courtyard, and a large raised congregation hall form a perfect backdrop for priests who descend the steps, to accept offerings from devotees in the courtyard. The shrines of Lord Krishna and Balaram and Jagannath flank the two sides of the presiding deity.

The centre of Manipur's power till 1891, the historical embodiment of Manipur Rulers and the people of Manipur, Kangla have a significant place in the heart and mind of the people of Manipur. Govindajee temple, outer and inner moat and other relics are perfect reflections of the rich art and culture of Manipur and her civilization.

Commemorating the memories of the British and Indian soldiers who died during the World War II, these are War Cemeteries, managed by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Ima Market is a unique all women's market, having 3,000 or more "Imas" or mothers who run the stalls. Split into two sections on either side of a road these women sell vegetables, fruits, fishes and household groceries are sold on one side and exquisite handlooms and household tools on the other.



► Manipur is surrounded by nine ranges of bluish green hills



► Nagaland is home to a large number of unique tribes

Mon, Nagaland

If you want to uncover the real north-east then this is the place to be as you'll be left awestruck by the scenic beauty of this district. Learn about the Konyaks, the headhunter Naga tribe, who keep on their ancient ethnic lifestyle (except hunting for heads, of course).

Driving from Dimapur airport, towards the hilly and forest-lined district of Mon itself will be a journey that would take you deep into the hub of Konyak Nagas. The fearless warriors with their tattoos signifying the number of heads they had hunted still sport these tattoos as proudly as trophies proving their bravery. The hereditary chief is called Angh and his house in the Chui village is a place of great interest among tourists visiting this serene district of Mon.

Mon offers adventure seekers

plenty of things to do, and the mountain slopes are quite steep, yet the practically pollution-free forest roads are great to hike and trek. Few people speak in English here due to the work done here by the Christian missionar-

The fearless warriors with their tattoos signifying the number of heads they had hunted still sport these tattoos as proudly as trophies proving their bravery

ies. That said the main religion today in Mon is Christianity.

Places to visit: Longwa Village, Tenyimi Church, Museum in Chenloisho Village, Doyang River, Nagaland science center, Hong Kong Market, Shilloi Lake. Explore Villages Around - Longwa, Chui, Naganimora, Shangnyu, Trek to Veda Peak and Explore The Konak Tribe

Arts & Festivals: Beaded jewellery, woodcarvings, and headgears made with bright feathers, are the works of local artisans in the tribe. Aoling Monyu, is their annual festival, when the entire village gets decked up in the brightest tribal clothing and very elaborate headgear and brass jewelry. The villages of Shangnyu, Naganimora, and Chui offer an elaborate view of the pristine preview of life



► **Unakoti's 'Lost Hill of Faces' is an unparalleled Shaivite pilgrimage**

and art, in these parts.

Unakoti, Tripura

Located around 178 km from Agartala, Unakoti's 'Lost Hill of Faces' is a centuries-old Shaivite pilgrimage spot. Unakoti dates back to 7th – 9th centuries if not earlier. The marvellous rock carvings, murals with their primitive beauty, waterfalls are not to be missed. Unakoti means one less than a crore and it is said that these many rock cut carvings are available here. As per Hindu mythology, when Lord Shiva was going to Kashi along with one crore gods and goddesses he made a night halt at this location. He

asked all the gods and goddesses to wake up before sun rise and proceed for Kashi.

It is said that in the morning, except Shiva himself, no one else could get up so Lord Shiva set out for Kashi himself cursing the others to become stone images. As a result we have one less than a crore stone images and carvings at Unakoti. These carvings are located at a beautifully landscaped forest area with green vegetation all around which add to the beauty of the carvings. The images found at Unakoti are of two types, namely rock-carved figures and stone images.

Among the rock cut carvings, the central Shiva head and gigantic Ganesha figures deserve special mention. The central Shiva head known as 'Unakotiswara Kal Bhairava' is about 30 feet high including an embroidered head-dress which itself is 10 feet high. On each side of the head-dress of the central Shiva, there are two full size female figures – one of Durga standing on a lion and another female figure on the other side. In addition three enormous images of Nandi Bull are found half buried in the ground. There are various other stone as well as rock cut images at Unakoti.

Festivals: Every year a big fair popularly known as 'Ashokastami Mela' is held in the month of April which is visited by thousands of pilgrims.

Pemyangtse Monastery, Sikkim

The Pemyangtse Monastery is one of the oldest and premier monasteries of Sikkim. It was built by Lhatsun Chenpo in the 17th century originally. The monastery has a unique depth in its name. The term Pemyangtse means "Perfect Sublime Lotus", and is said to symbolise one of the four plexus of the human body.

Built for ta-tshang or 'pure monks' in the times of the monarchy in Sikkim, the monastery's head lama received the unique privilege of anointing the Chogyals with holy water. The Nyingma Order of Tibetan Buddhism is followed by the Pemyangtse Monastery and hence it controls all the monasteries following the same order in Sikkim.

An old dated photograph of Sangdok palri at Pemyangtse from 1972, depicting the cultural enigma and elegance that has remain synonymous with Buddhism for decades.

The three-storied structure depicts paintings on its walls and statues of saints and Rinpoches, deified on var-



► **Most of the monasteries of Sikkim follow the Nyingma Order of Tibetan Buddhism**

ious floors. Padmasambhava's eight incarnations in the fierce form are also seen here.

Kae Chong, Buddhism and Shamanism practitioner talks about his visit to the monastery and how he got to witness the supernatural phenomenon, "Zangdok Palri, the celestial realm for Guru Padmasambhava. In Guru's teaching, achieving a rainbow body is very significant. When someone passes away and his body transforms into Rainbow means that he is liberated from the samsara."

Festivals: On the 28th and 29th day of the 12th lunar month of the Tibetan calendar, corresponding to February of the Gregorian calendar,

The Cham dance festival is held. It is performed by the lamas of this monastery where they dress up as Mahākāla and Guru Drag-dmar (Sanskrit Vajrakila) in colourful costumes for the dance performances.

The festival marks the conclusion of Losar (new year's festival) and pilgrims come from all parts of Sikkim to visit the monastery to witness this festival. A very large and impressive embroidered scroll is displayed and a firework display is done which symbolizes driving away evil spirits. The 108 monks of monastery are distinguishable as they wear red hats unlike yellow worn by other monasteries.

The monastery is located at the beginning of the most popular trek

in Sikkim, "Dzongri trek route, Yuktom-Dzongri-GoechhaLa" which is a trek of 46 km to the Kanchendzonga range of hills and Kanchendzonga National Park (KNP), started prior to 1960.

March to June is considered to be the most favourable months to visit Pemayangtse because of the pleasing weather. During the cold days, this place turns even more alluring or one might say mythical but the temperature can be as low as -5C.

Pemayangtse is blessed with astonishing beauty being situated among picturesque mountains, exotic greenwoods and glaciers which makes it one of the most well-known Sikkim destinations.

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