

MYSTIC EAST

...an unexplored horizon

A Bi-monthly Magazine by HRAEI | Vol 10 | Issue 1 | January - February 2024



Destination LAKSHADWEEP

After the controversy between India and Maldives, Indians are moving to their own vacation spot, Lakshadweep

Andaman: India's tropical paradise



VISION

- ✌️ Make the Eastern Region comprising 12 States and a Union Territory a flourishing destination for domestic and foreign tourists by projecting their captivating tourism assets.
- ✌️ Promoting best industry practices and setting benchmarks for industry constituents.

MISSION

- ✌️ A common voice for hotels, restaurants and associates for unhindered progress of the hospitality industry in the country's Eastern Region.
- ✌️ Create value for members by ensuring government policies remain supportive of tourism and the industry.



PRESIDENT'S NOTE



The hospitality sector has been appealing for Infrastructure Status by the Government of India (GoI) for a long time. This will allow the hospitality sector to avail long-term funds under the RBI Infrastructure lending norm criteria to offer quality accommodation supply and in turn, stimulate higher global and domestic travel demand.

Although industry status has been accorded to tourism and hospitality by many State Governments, the incentives and privileges associated with an industry have not been conferred to the sector. The industry really needs for the Centre to step in and grant industry status to hospitality across the country and set up a corpus fund to incentivize all States to align their policies and set off any losses that may occur due to its implementation.

Infrastructure status for any sector provides incentives and relaxations, including cheaper loans, tax concessions, and increased flow of capital. It also helps the sector attract investments. A deduction of up to 40% can be availed on the income derived by financial investments

due to their investments in equity shares.

Infrastructure status helps companies raise viability-gap funding and allows external borrowing. Currently, hospitality projects are classified as "infrastructure" projects only in cities with a population of up to 1 million. According to industry analysts, the hospitality sector currently pays interest of around 11%, which would be way lower if the infrastructure status is provided. The draft National Tourism Policy released by the tourism ministry in November 2022 stressed the need for infrastructure status for hotels.

Most of the hospitality infrastructure such as hotels, resorts, and convention centres are being developed by the private sector in the country. There is a very little public investment in hospitality infrastructure. Investment in these hospitality projects requires significant time to recover.

Sudesh Poddar
President, HRAEI

EDITOR'S MESSAGE



“

the temple town is gearing up with a chain of hotels and resorts

After the consecration of the Ram Temple, the city of Ayodhya is set for a vibrant industrial activity as the hospitality sector has been thronging the temple town with a number of star hotels and resorts lined up for the near future.

As per the figures of the district administration, around two-three lakh devotees are taking darshan of Ram Lalla daily despite all the restrictions in force for crowd management. The number of devotees is likely to soar to 4-5 lakh daily soon. To cater to such a large number of visitors, the temple town is gearing up with a chain of hotels and resorts. Some projects are already taking shape on the ground while others are in the pipeline. The state tourism department has set a target of bringing around 145 hotels, resorts and guest houses to Ayodhya by the end of this year.

These hospitality projects worth Rs 3500 crore and comprising 7500 rooms, will be equipped with upmarket five-star facilities. The construction of those facilities will create at least 10,000 jobs, says the tourism department sources. This is surely a clarion call for hospitality investors across the country.

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Fresh investment in the hospitality sector can create huge employment opportunities

Last year the West Bengal cabinet approved a proposal to grant industry status to the hospitality sector in the state in a bid to draw investments in tourism and to generate employment. Odisha was one of the first states in India to offer industry status to the tourism sector as part of its industrial policy in 2022. The state government in Assam also took a lot of initiatives and is all set to launch a new tourism policy in the upcoming Assembly session to boost tourism and hospitality in the state.

Such initiatives ensure several facilities for the hospitality sector in respective states.

Industry status by states helps hotels to save a handsome amount on electricity bills as they have to pay power tariff as per the industrial rate, and not the much higher commercial rate. It also helps hotels to save on water supply bills. The hospitality sector would have to pay lesser licence fees and other taxes, including property tax. In addition, this helps the industry entitled to a better FAR (floor-area ratio).

Such steps from state governments encourage investors to invest in the tourism sector in the state. Also, it aids the expansion of the existing infrastructure.

Fresh investment in the hospitality sector can create huge employment opportunities. The decision surely gives a boost to the hospitality sector. It also encourages major hotel chains to come up with more accommodations.

States like Karnataka and Rajasthan also have given industry status to the hospitality industry years ago. But it's been observed that the status often doesn't deliver what it promises. So, it's time the states walk the talk and offer some real support to the industry and don't limit themselves to mere "lip-service".

Pranav Singh

Honorary Secretary, HRAEI

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Long neglected, the states known as Seven Sisters, have slowly come of age

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menu



Scan for the
menu

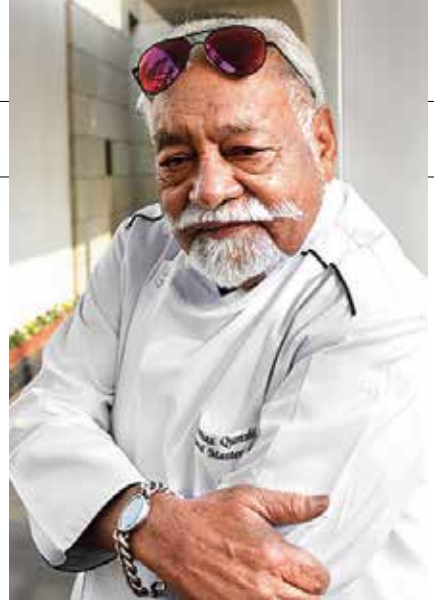
Peter Hu?
FINE ASIAN DINING



Scan for the
menu

Park Street, Kolkata

Legendary chef **IMTIAZ QURESHI**, master of Dum Pukht, passes away at 93



Chef Qureshi, known for his culinary expertise as the master chef at ITC Hotels, gained acclaim for establishing the culinary brand Bukhara.

Renowned chef Imtiaz Qureshi, a recipient of the Padma Shri award, passed away on February 16 at the age of 93. Chef Qureshi, known for his culinary expertise as the master chef at ITC Hotels, gained acclaim for establishing the culinary brand Bukhara.

Born in Kolkata in 1928, Chef Qureshi began his culinary journey at the age of seven by assisting the royal chefs in his family home. He was one of the essential pillars in popularizing the art of Dum Pukht abroad, making it a global gastronomic sensation.

When talking about the legend, his signature dishes like The Grand Trunk Road Tandoori Fruit Chaat, and the Warqi Paratha are bound to be mentioned. Biryani and kebabs under his hands were not just food; they were symphonies of taste that were tantamount to experiencing a celebration in your mouth.

Qureshi's creative genius shone in the simple sophistication of Dum Pukht, a cuisine which requires patience, discipline, and precision. He mastered the art and science of slow cooking, transforming humble ingredients into mouthwatering, aromatic dishes that resonated with the heart and soul.

In a 2015 interview with Financial Express, Chef Imtiaz Qureshi expressed a unique perspective on biryani, stating, "There is no such thing as biryani. Every dish is a pulao. In every so-called biryani, rice is three-fourth cooked when added to either raw or cooked meat. So technically, all of them are pulaos."

Reflecting on his career, Chef Qureshi emphasized, "I have worked honestly, without greed all my life."

Following the news of Chef Imtiaz Qureshi's passing, social media witnessed an outpouring of tributes. Renowned chefs such as Kunal Kapur and Ranveer Brar expressed their condolences through heartfelt messages.

"With great sadness and a heavy heart, I regret to inform you of the heartbreaking news of the passing of Padmashree Chef Mr Imtiaz Qureshi, who departed from this world earlier this morning. His culinary legacy and contributions will forever be remembered and cherished. May his soul find eternal peace and may his memory continue to inspire us all," Kunal Kapur posted.

Celebrity chef Ranveer Brar shared a cherished memory of his early days as a trainee chef in Delhi. Recalling the impact of Chef Imtiaz Qureshi's culinary legacy, Brar mentioned the transformative experience of savor-

ing the Galouti Kebab at Dum Pukht in ITC Maurya. He expressed deep admiration for

Chef Qureshi's contribution to elevating the Dum Pukht technique from Lucknow and shaping it with distinctive refinement. Brar concluded with heartfelt condolences, acknowledging that Chef Qureshi's legacy will endure eternally.

"As a Lucknow boy with dreams of becoming a chef, the folklore of Imtiaz Qureshi is something I grew up with. It was around 1998-1999 when I was working as a trainee chef at the Taj Palace in Delhi. I remember once taking the Rs. 612/- I had earned at ITC Maurya next door and having only the Galouti Kebab at Dum Pukht."

"The fact that I was eating @LegendOfImtiaz Qureshi's food in an ITC hotel was life changing for me. Not only had he pulled the dum pukht technique out of Lucknow, he had given it a personality, an unmistakable refinement. RIP chef, your legacy lives on forever," Brar added.

Singer Adnan Sami also mourned Chef Qureshi's death: "Sad to learn that PadmaShri Master Chef Imtiaz Qureshi has passed away. He was a culinary genius and a man full of zeal for life!! He was also the modern day father of Awadhi Cuisine & his Biryani was legendary amongst everything else he fed the world."

Tourism and hospitality industry may create 50 million jobs in 5-7 years, says HAI

Hotels' Association of India (HAI) recently said that the hospitality and tourism sector expects to create 50 million direct and indirect jobs in the next 5-7 years but government support is required for getting the full industry and infrastructure status in states to tap the employment potential.

The infrastructure status for the hospitality sector can push up investments not only to create accommodation, but also in the process boost income and employment generation, Puneet Chhatwal, President, HAI said while speaking at the 6th HAI Hoteliers' Conclave.

Chhatwal, who is also the Managing Director and CEO of Indian Hotels Company Ltd, said, "While tourism is a pillar of development creating about 10 percent of the total employment and contributing 8 percent to GDP with a huge multiplier effect that can help inclusive growth, "there is often a gap between this realisation and the actual policy implementation".

Addressing a press conference, K B Kachru, VP, HAI, said in the last two years there has been "a rise of 271 per cent in hirings".

"That is how business is moving. Now we need to focus a lot on developing tourism, not only at higher levels but also at entry levels. This focus has to remain and if we don't do that we will not be able to service.



We are focussing on creating over 50 million jobs in the next 5-7 years," said Kachru, who is also the Chairman Emeritus and Principal Advisor South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group.

Earlier in the day, India's G20 Sherpa Amitabh Kant had asked the hospitality and tourism sector players to tell politicians about the creation of 25 million jobs by 2030 while seeking their help for the demand of industry and infrastructure status.

He had stated that somehow the tourism industry failed to tell politicians that it is a big creator of jobs, while agreeing with their demand for industry status.

From the tourism sector, Kant had said that Thailand has created close

to 20 million jobs, Malaysia about 15 million and India 7.8 million.

Chhatwal said while the government's focus on infrastructure — such as construction of roads, rails and doubling of airports — has had a "direct correlation with the success of the sector", granting a full infrastructure status will help it grow further in all aspects.

"We have that status, but there are a lot of limitations that were put into it 12 years ago," he said, adding that the industry status at the state level will also help in making the sector stay competitive.

On the granting of industry status by states, Kachru said while 11 states have done it, there has been a gap in execution.

AYODHYA

THE NEW INVESTMENT HOTSPOT

Investors have signed various agreements for big investments in the hospitality sector here, as the Ram Temple provides immense potential for religious tourism. Famous hotel brands are establishing their branches in Ayodhya, and approximately 50 major hotel construction projects are currently underway in the city, official sources said.

With several small hotels, resorts, and homestays investing in the region, Ayodhya is emerging as a new hotspot in the hotel industry.

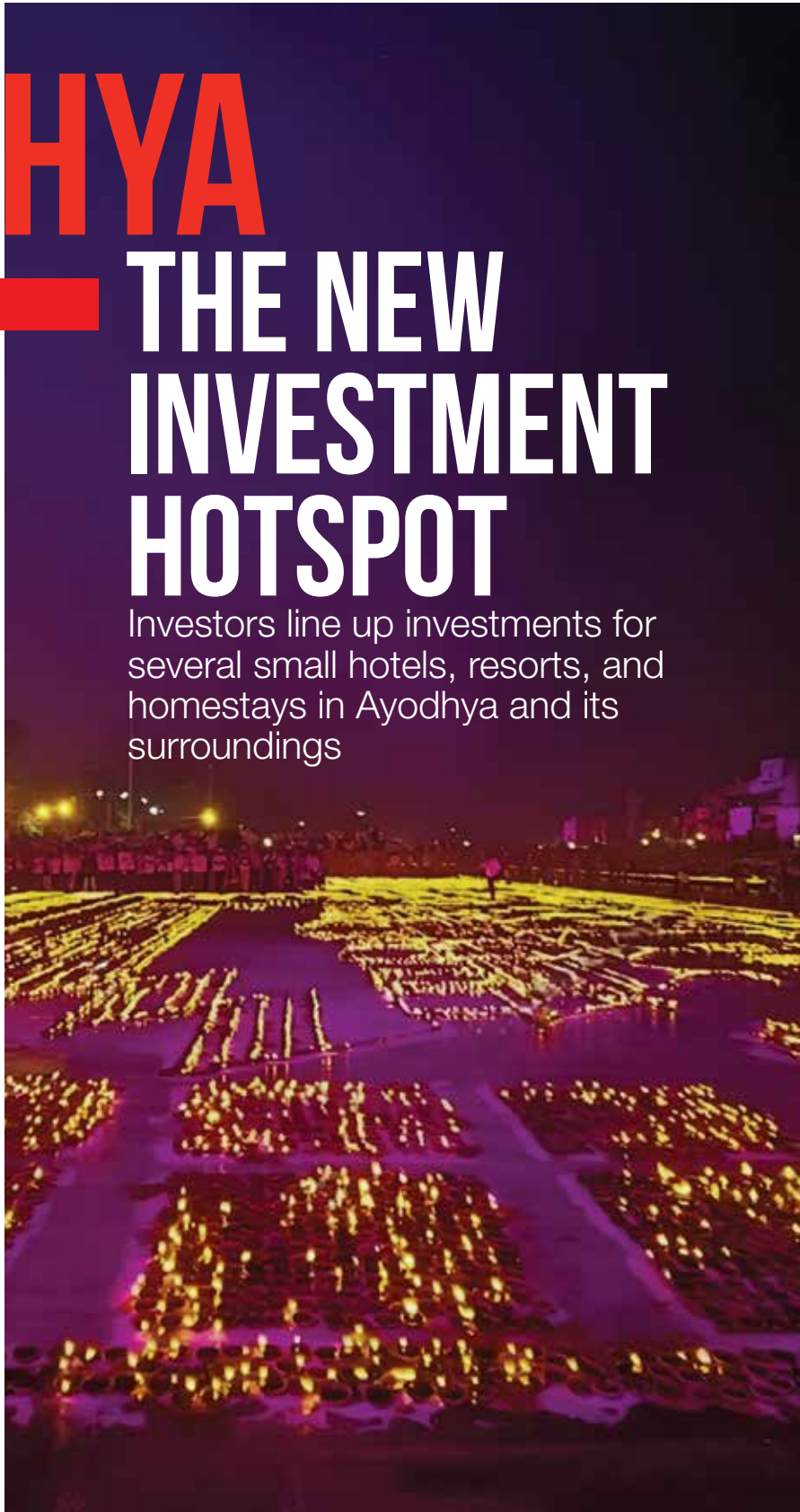
In addition, good highways and roads, wall paintings depicting the life of Lord Ram, facade lighting, and a grand entrance adorned with Victorian lamps add to the attraction of Ayodhya.

According to Divisional Commissioner of Ayodhya Gaurav Dayal, 102 intent agreements worth about Rs 18,000 crore were signed for tourism in Ayodhya during the Global investment summit.

Even after the GIS, many entrepreneurs have submitted their proposals to the government and district administration for the investment in the tourism sector in Ayodhya, he added.

Currently, there are 126 ready-to-be-implemented projects related to tourism in Ayodhya.

Investors line up investments for several small hotels, resorts, and homestays in Ayodhya and its surroundings





There are plans to develop the 'Raja Ki Building' as a heritage hotel, with a major hotel chain expressing interest in investing in this project

Of the 126 projects, 46 have signed MOUs, while 80 are non-MOU related. The total cost of all these 126 projects is around Rs 4,000 crore.

Dayal said that around 50 renowned hotels have invested in Ayodhya for large-scale projects, and the construction of their buildings is underway. These hotels include Taj, Marriott, Ginger, Oberoi, Trident, and Radisson, and they will soon be completed and operational.

There are plans to develop the 'Raja Ki Building' as a heritage hotel, with a major hotel chain expressing interest in investing in this project.

Apart from these, a significant number of small and large hotels are likely to commence operations in and around the Ayodhya region. These hotels will ensure the accommodation for a large number of devotees and tourists visiting Ayodhya.

Ayodhya is set to witness an investment of approximately Rs 420 crore through the four large projects in the hotel industry. The first on the list is Panche Dreamworld LLP, which will establish the 'O Rama Hotels and Resorts' project at a total cost of Rs 140 crore.

Innovators Digital Ads Pvt Ltd will build Solitaire Ayodhya 5 Star hotel for Rs 100 crore, Evergreen Infrastructure will establish Shri Ramya Hotel with an investment of Rs 90 crore and Samruddhi Swastik Trading and Investment will set up the 'Vishranti Grah' at an investment of Rs 86 crore, officials said.

From Hidden Gems to Prominent Stalwarts: While the stalwarts of the hospitality industry

have chosen to keep their rates steady, the lesser-known hotels and dharamshalas have seized the opportunity to adjust their tariffs for the influx of visitors during this celebratory period. Among the lively conversations among hoteliers, a local owner shared that while a renowned hotel currently boasts a room tariff of ₹2500, the less prominent establishments had boldly raised their prices to ₹4000 for bookings during the much-anticipated Ram Mandir ceremony. "This pricing dichotomy unveils a fascinating narrative within Ayodhya's hospitality landscape. The established hotels maintain their constant stream of clientele throughout the year, a fact that prevents them from sudden tariff hikes. Instead, it's the hidden gems of Ayodhya's hospitality sector that find themselves in the spotlight, embracing the opportunity to shine."

Resilient Spirit of Ayodhya's Hospitality Industry: The dynamic doesn't end with hotels alone. Dharamshalas in Ayodhya have taken a similar route. Recognizing the demand on the horizon, online booking has been temporarily put on hold. This strategic move came after online reservations for the period between January 20 to 24, a time frame aligned with the potential inauguration of the Ram Mandir, started pouring in, even as the official opening date was yet to be announced.

Intriguingly, Ayodhya boasts a diverse array of accommodation options. This spiritual hub houses around 150 hotels, including 10 luxurious havens, 25 budget-friendly lodgings, and 115





Major hotel chains and renowned food brands are exploring opportunities in Ayodhya, adding their names to the city's rising legacy

economical choices. The city also features 35 hidden-away guest houses, 50 tranquil dharamshalas, and 50 warm homestays and guest houses, collectively adding up to a staggering 10,000 rooms waiting to welcome pilgrims and visitors alike.

A Glimpse into Ayodhya's Transformative Future: Beyond the grandeur of the impending Ram Mandir ceremony, Ayodhya's future holds equally compelling narratives. Enter the Taj Group, with a vision to infuse this sacred city with luxury and opulence. The group's announcement of three upcoming hotels, with two slated to be ready by 2027, showcas-

es the confidence that established names in the hospitality industry have in Ayodhya's burgeoning potential.

The relentless pace of development and innovation is palpable. Ayodhya, once known for its humble hotels and dharamshalas, is now witnessing the emergence of luxury five-star accommodations that rival the best in the world. Not to be outdone, major hotel chains and renowned food brands are exploring opportunities in Ayodhya, adding their names to the city's rising legacy.

Ayodhya's Journey to Global Prominence: Meanwhile, the city's transformation into a global tourist destination is

a journey underway. Tourism officials project that Ayodhya will shine as one of the world's most sought-after spots by 2030. The government's estimations suggest that a staggering five crore tourists will grace Ayodhya within the next decade.

The groundwork for this monumental shift has already begun, with both government initiatives and the contributions of industry giants. As the upcoming airport takes shape, a sprawling complex, sprawling over five acres, is set to house the Vivanta and Ginger hotels by IHCL, offering a luxurious and convenient haven for travellers.

MARKETING TREND

Hotel Marketing Trends to Watch in 2024



When thinking about marketing holistically, we are often posed with this question: do we develop initiatives, which are backed by consumer data, that we know will align with our guests' interest and create a marketing strategy, or do we take the interest of our guests and build out strategies which appeal to what they have already told us their interest in?? Similar to the chicken or the egg question.

The answer, however, is we do both. There are four hospitality marketing trends I expect to see in 2024, some of which are driven by the hospitality community and some by guests' interests.

Sustainability and Green Initiatives

One prominent trend that is set to define the realm of hospitality marketing in 2024 is the seamless integration of sustainability and green initiatives into marketing endeavors. Acknowledging the irrefutable reality of global climate change, as underscored by reputable sources such as NASA and many others, hotels are increasingly recognizing the imperative to cater to the eco-conscious inclinations of contemporary travelers.

The commitment to sustainability is not a newfound focus for the hospitality sector; however, the innovation lies in how hotels communicate and market their eco-friendly initiatives. As leisure travelers conscientiously strive to reduce their carbon footprint, they seek information about a hotel's environmental practices with the same enthusiasm as they explore amenities. The transformative shift in 2024 lies in the accessibility of this information. I anticipate that hotels will make



Another prominent and transformative trend that is poised to shape the landscape of hospitality marketing in 2024 is the shift towards influencer brand trips

concerted efforts in 2024 to share their green initiatives prominently on their websites and across social media channels, providing guests with easily accessible insights into their eco-friendly practices.

A facet of this trend involves hotels showcasing the tangible impact guests make by participating in these green initiatives. For instance, a program like Clean the World, where hotels can work to recycle soap, becomes not just an internal effort but a story told in marketing narratives. Guests contributing to these sustainability endeavors will be celebrated and integrated into the overarching hotel marketing strategy.

Beyond the realm of leisure travel, the influence of sustainability will extend its reach into the B2B space. With an increasing number of companies mandating hotels to demonstrate their commitment to sustain-

ability before entering into contracts, marketing efforts will pivot to highlight these initiatives in the corporate sphere. Expect to witness a surge in sustainability-focused marketing on B2B RFP platforms and professional networking platforms like LinkedIn. The narrative will shift to how groups, conferences, and events hosted at these hotels contribute to reducing their collective carbon footprint, creating a captivating marketing trickledown effect that resonates with event attendees and corporate decision-makers alike.

Influencer Brand Trips

Another prominent and transformative trend that is poised to shape the landscape of hospitality marketing in 2024 is the shift towards influencer brand trips. While the concept of influencer trips has been prevalent in the consumer product goods space, particularly within the beauty and



makeup industry, there is a distinct anticipation I expect to see in 2024.

Preceding the global pandemic, the hospitality industry traditionally organized press trips that were tailored for journalists and editors. However, as the pandemic occurred, media professionals and influencers expressed a growing preference for flexible travel schedules, desiring the ability to visit hotels during their personally chosen dates. This marked a pivotal shift in the industry's approach to accommodating the evolving needs of media and influencers.

However, now drawing parallels with the beauty industry, especially cosmetic brands, where influencer collaboration has become an integral facet of marketing, influencers are increasingly gravitating towards spending time together on immersive and experiential trips. This al-

lows for influencers to showcase not only the immediate features of a hotel, but destination experiences that allow them to capture a diverse array of content. The anticipated surge in influencer brand trips in the hospitality sector is indicative of a broader shift towards experiential marketing, emphasizing the importance of creating compelling and immersive narratives.

Unlike conventional press trips that might focus solely on the hotel's amenities and features, these influencer-driven experiences aim to craft a holistic story, incorporating various elements of the destination, hotel, and the influencers' interactions. The trend towards influencer brand trips aligns seamlessly with the evolving nature of digital storytelling, where authenticity, relatability, and a sense of shared experiences take precedence.

Leveraging Social Media Platforms

The third significant hospitality marketing trend that is poised to shape the landscape of 2024 is the sustained emphasis on leveraging social media platforms to share live video content, Instagram Stories, and reels. The evolving nature of social media algorithms, which increasingly prioritize authenticity and a "real feeling" aesthetic, is steering the trajectory of content creation towards a more genuine and relatable style of shooting.

Within the sphere of live video content, an anticipatory shift is expected in the way hotels engage with their audiences. There is a projected increase in the frequency of hotels sharing real-time experiences through platforms such as Instagram Stories, reels, and the ever-popular TikTok. The emphasis here is on

MARKETING TREND

fostering a sense of immediacy and connection by showcasing "this is happening here and now" content. This real-time approach not only aligns with the algorithmic preferences of social media platforms but also taps into the audience's desire for authentic, unfiltered glimpses into the happenings within a hotel's environment.

Instagram Stories, with their short-lived nature, offer an ideal canvas for hotels to provide quick, unscripted snapshots of the current happenings. Stories feature a sense of urgency and exclusivity, prompting viewers to engage promptly to catch the unfolding moments.

Moreover, the rising prominence of Instagram reels, known for their short and engaging format, presents an opportunity for hotels to showcase their personality and creativity. Hotels can leverage this feature to craft visually appealing, bite-sized content that resonates with the audience's preference for concise and entertaining experiences. By embracing the creative potential of reels, hotels can not only enhance their online presence but also cater to the evolving taste of social media users who appreciate content that is both informative and visually captivating.

Collaboration with Local Businesses and Attractions

The last marketing trend I anticipate in 2024 will be collaboration with local businesses and attractions, especially in the luxury space; guests want to explore the destination like a local. The contemporary traveler's desire to explore a destination like a local has continued to reshape the way hotels approach their market-

ing strategies. As alluded to earlier, experiential marketing has been steadily on the rise, with guests increasingly seeking immersive, authentic experiences that go beyond the confines of the hotel walls.

In the upcoming year, the marketing landscape is poised to witness a concentrated effort to satisfy this evolving appetite for exploration. The objective here is to curate and offer guests unique, specialized experiences that not only align with the luxury brand but also immerse them in the vibrant tapestry of the destination.

The allure of exploring a destination like a local has become a hallmark of the modern traveler's preferences. In response, hotels are set to embark on a journey of discovery, identifying and partnering with local gems that embody the essence of the community. This collaborative approach not only enriches the guest experience but also serves as a distinctive selling point in the competitive luxury hospitality market.

In practical terms, these collaborations may involve working with local artisans, boutique shops, culinary establishments, or even guided tours led by knowledgeable locals. Such partnerships contribute to a richer, more authentic guest experience by introducing them to the hidden gems and unique facets of the destination that might elude the typical tourist experience.

From a marketing perspective, hotels are expected to weave these collaborations into their narrative, showcasing the symbiotic relationship between the establishment and the local businesses. This storytelling approach not only enhances the hotel's authenticity but also resonates with guests seeking a deeper connection with the communities they visit.

Furthermore, the emphasis on collaboration with local businesses in 2024 reflects a broader commitment to sustainable and responsible tourism. By supporting local enterprises, hotels contribute to the economic vitality of the community, fostering a sense of shared prosperity and environmental stewardship.

The upcoming year is poised to witness a notable surge in marketing strategies centered around collaboration with local businesses and attractions, especially in the luxury hospitality sector. As hotels align themselves with the desire of guests to explore destinations like locals, these strategic partnerships are set to redefine the guest experience by offering unique, culturally enriching adventures. This trend not only mirrors the continued rise of experiential marketing but also underscores the industry's commitment to authenticity, community engagement, and responsible tourism practices.

In conclusion, the landscape of hospitality marketing in 2024 is characterized by a dynamic interplay between steering guest preferences and adapting to evolving consumer demands. The delicate dance between these elements is essential for success in the competitive industry. As we venture into 2024, the hospitality industry is at the cusp of a transformative era, where innovative marketing strategies align with evolving consumer values, fostering a deeper connection between hotels and their guests. These trends underscore the industry's commitment to authenticity, community engagement, and responsible tourism practices, promising a year of unique, culturally immersive adventures for the discerning traveler.



HOSPITALITY TREND

Top 10 Trends in the Hospitality Industry in 2024

What are the latest trends in the hospitality industry? As a testament to its resilience, agility and innovative spirit, this article reflects today's increasingly dynamic hospitality industry in terms of its long, medium and short-term evolution. Discover the industry's adaptability and forward-thinking approach, shaping its trajectory in the face of challenges and opportunities, while staying attuned to the latest hospitality trends.

Best-selling author, Will Guidara, claims "We are entering into a hospitality economy" – suggesting that what underpins the essence of hospitality, (service excellence, human interaction, personalization and the co-creation of memorable experiences), is actually what many sectors of industry are desperately in need of today.

As we charge at break neck speed towards an ever-more digitalized society, the hospitality industry stands out as the successful hybrid that balances the implementation of tech innovation for improved operations whilst preserving the human need for connection, authenticity and real-life discovery.

With statistics predicting a healthy expansion of the sector (e.g., the bleisure and wellness markets on the up, room demand set to reach an all-time high, booking.com as the most valuable tourism brand in the world, and new positions opening up in the sector), we can confirm that the hospitality industry is poised for a significant transformation in 2024.

So what new trends are emerging? Driven by interlinked factors, including technological progress, evolving consumer preferences and a deeper focus



on sustainability, hospitality businesses can capitalise on emerging opportunities to enhance guest experiences and position themselves for long-term success.

**Workforce empowerment:
Transforming challenges into
opportunities**

Over the past two years, the industry's biggest challenge has not been attracting customers but rather finding and retaining staff. To address this issue, many hotel groups have begun to make improvements, and there has never been a better time for newcomers to the industry to negotiate better working conditions and salaries.

Today, many hotels offer their staff free or low-cost accommodation, increased wages and reduced peak-time working hours. They also invest in training programs to motivate staff and allow mobility up the corporate ladder. Empowered employees not only have a positive impact on how guests feel and their decision to become repeat guests, but also help attract other employees to build a cohesive, high-quality workforce.

**Artificial intelligence and
technology: Choosing the best
tech to revolutionize hospitality**

As Chat GPT celebrates its first birthday, we can only surrender to the fact that, like it or not, we have entered into an AI-accelerated world, and consequently, the pace at which the industry adapts has become a pressing issue. But which forms of AI best harness hospitality stakeholder outcomes?



Embracing contactless technologies is about redefining the hospitality experience to cater to modern travelers, not just adapting to the pandemic-driven shift toward touchless interactions. Contactless services simplify the guest journey by reducing wait times and physical contact points. Mobile check-in, digital keys and voice or tablet-controlled room automation allow guests to move seamlessly through the hospitality experience. The citizenM hotel brand has pioneered this minimum-fuss check-in and room experience with a hugely successful UX-friendly app.

Other popular tools such as WhatsApp allow hotel staff to remain in constant contact with customers during their stay, respond immediately to requests and thus

provide bespoke services. It also streamlines operations by reducing the need for face-to-face interactions and human error, improving service delivery and lowering the burden on a scarce workforce. In line with contactless services, hospitality companies need to prioritise data privacy and security, putting solid safeguards in place to protect guest information against cyber threats.

At the heart of technology innovation is the ability for managers and employees to centralize information at all times. Migrating to a fully cloud-based solution is a first but essential step. This enables real-time sharing, better service orientation and personalisation of the guest experience, improving all hotel departments.

Robotic systems (as used in the Henn-na Hotels in Japan) optimise processes and increase efficiency in back-of-house operations such as housekeeping or F&B outlets, reducing staffing requirements and allowing managers to respond to problems in real-time and with accountability.

The use of augmented reality helps with staff onboarding, allowing new employees to be put in real-life situations and trained before even entering a room. Pedagogically speaking, as practiced at EHL in the Virtual Housekeeping class, AR provides a more interactive and complete learning environment. Augmented reality also allows hotels and airlines to market themselves in an ad hoc style - an innovative and sustainable ap-

HOSPITALITY TREND

proach. Potential customers can better immerse themselves in the facilities and make more informed decisions.

In a world of commoditised practices, guests are increasingly looking for personalized experiences that cater to individual preferences and aspirations. In the hospitality industry, hyper-personalisation means relying on technology-based micro-segmentation to tailor each guest interaction to real-time needs and behaviours. For example, eliminating 'deadlines' such as check-in/check-out/F&B closing times, knowing whether a customer wants to be accompanied through check-in or do it contactless, personalizing room temperature, lighting and amenities or tailoring F&B options promptly and accurately. At Fauchon l'Hotel in Paris clients suggest the menu and define their portion sizes. From a hotel perspective, this enables better dynamic pricing strategies, higher guest-spent for experiences, or tailored loyalty programmes with commercial partners.

Culinary experiences: Putting experiences, authenticity and the senses first

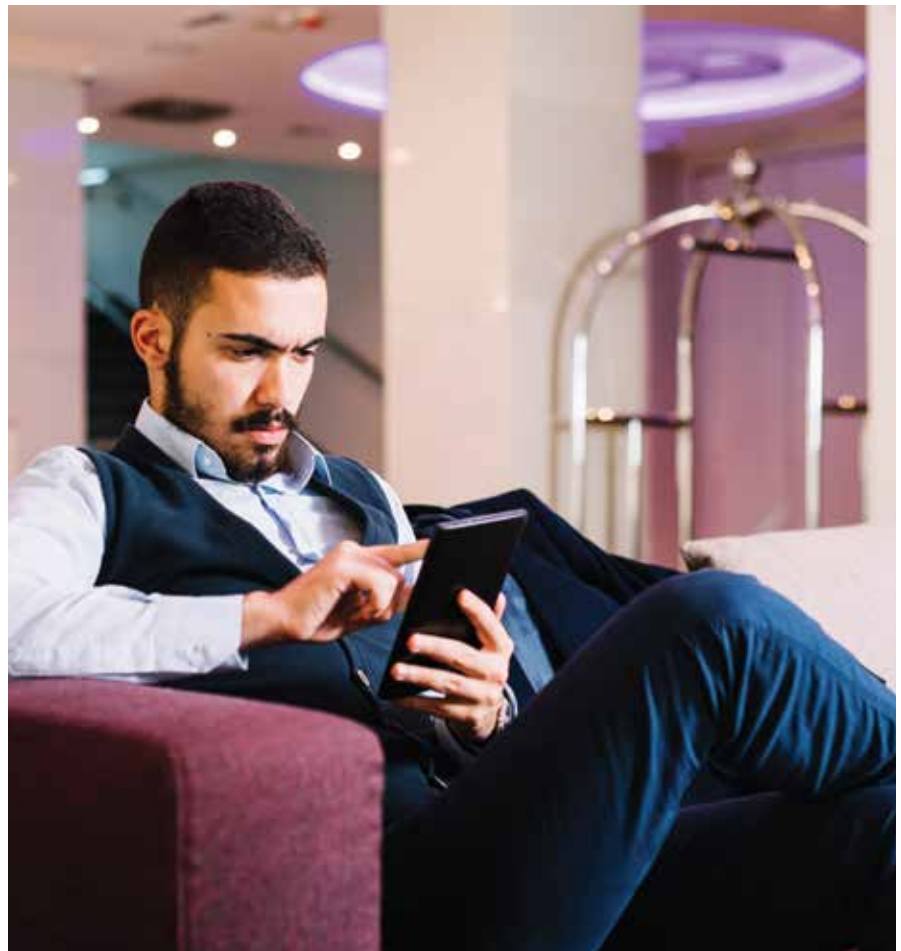
The desire to experience rather than simply consume means that experiential dining has today evolved in new ways. Hotels are now required to offer a range of dining options to cater to different customer tastes and, when correctly done, can become a culinary destination where the restaurant is at the heart of the experience and not just an extension of the hotel. A good example is the Grand Resort

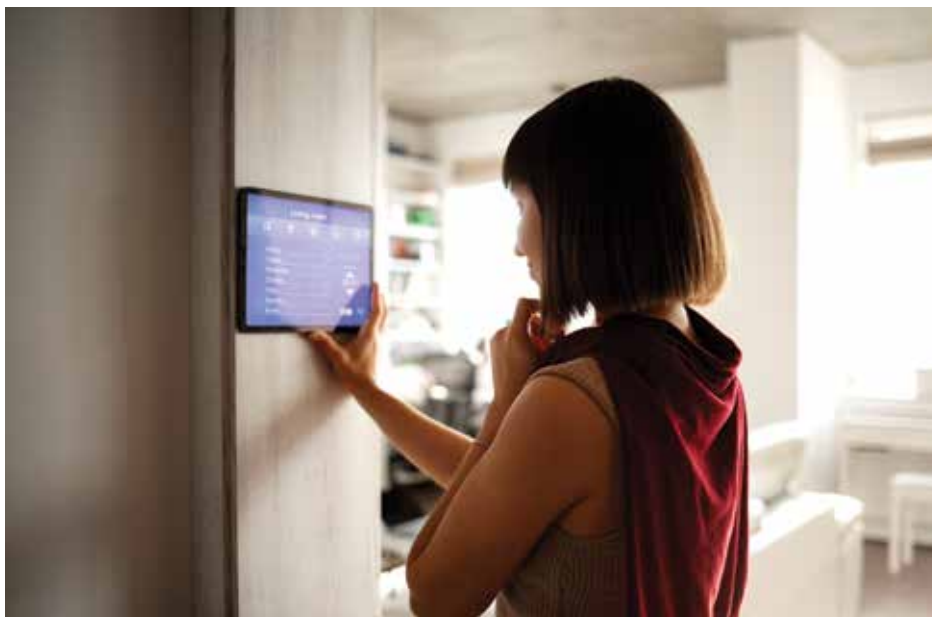
Bad Ragaz in Switzerland which boasts seven restaurants, three bars, a bistro, a café and a sushi takeaway, (plus an array of Michelin stars and GaultMillau points), unsurprisingly making it a mecca for traveling gourmets.

Experiential design can also allow customers to taste food in a multi-sensory environment that stimulates all the senses, not just the taste buds (e.g., Ultraviolet by Paul Pairet in Shanghai). Some hotels have started to provide experiences even on a smaller and more dynamic scale. E.g., They offer four-hand dinners (an invited chef

cooks with the in-house chef), organise kitchen parties (clients eat in the kitchen), or have a front-cooking area. Specialist cooking classes can complement this. The key here is to offer a unique experience like how to make your own gin, cook local food, or bake bread with the experts.

Another trend relates to children. A menu of unimaginative, standard food à la burger and chips is no longer enough; parents want their children to eat healthier, globally-inspired food with high-quality ingredients. Adding world food or plant-based products and pack-





aging them in innovative ways will make for happy families likely to return.

A final significant trend in the food sector is off-premise dining and digitalisation. Although customers have returned to eating in restaurants since the pandemic, a large proportion mix on- and off-premise dining. Restaurants need to cater to this clientele to increase revenues, as takeaways are no longer limited to fast food but also exist for traditional and even fine dining. This means that restaurants need to reorganise their workflows and operations to cater to in-house diners and delivery, alongside designing appropriate, creative, high-quality packaging and optimising delivery or collection methods to be easy and inexpensive without competing with traditional delivery platforms.

This can also include ghost kitchens focusing only on food

production for delivery and take-away. Post-Covid, ghost kitchens have become an increasingly popular trend in the restaurant industry with statistics showing that they are projected to be a \$157 billion market by 2030. As of 2021, there

are over 100,000 ghost kitchens operating worldwide.

Bars and drinks redefined: Adding creativity and design to the drinks' menu

Today's bars need to stand out by offering unique drinks paired with a special, Instagrammable atmosphere to create an immersive experience for their customers. E.g., Ashley Sutton Design Bars are known across Asia for their ability to transport guests to enchanting, immersive worlds, offering not just a place to drink but an entire experience that stimulates the senses and sparks curiosity.

Gone are the days of a simple wine list and international beer and spirit brands. Bars and restaurants need to specialise and cater to an international clientele with evolving tastes. A dedicated beer menu with local craft beers, wines from specific vintages and terroirs with



Today's bars need to stand out by offering unique drinks paired with a special, Instagrammable atmosphere to create an immersive experience for their customers



a narrative, eclectic spirits collections (after whisky and gin, look out for rum in the coming years), and fresh hyper-locally sourced juices are what customers want.

Mixology has been around for some time, but offering mocktails and non-alcoholic food pairings is also becoming essential due to stricter alcohol laws and healthier lifestyles driven by Gen Z and millennials. Faux booze has gone mainstream and now it's not just a case of 'dry January', but mocktails all year long! Cocktail and mocktail innovations should go beyond traditional recipes to include unique ingredients, techniques and presentation styles (e.g., Bar Benfiddich in Tokyo) and be taught to customers in mixology classes.

The effect of economic uncer-

tainty on hotels, restaurants and fine wines

Fine dining: In need of reinvention but full of potential

The pandemic has unexpectedly affected consumer behaviors: they now organize themselves on short notice, have become increasingly spoiled for choice and no-shows are today the norm. More and more restaurants are responding by asking for a credit card at the time of reservation. But this only treats one of the symptoms without solving the problem. "A full house one day, but only four tables occupied the next", is an observation that led Antoine Lecefel to shut his restaurant – sadly one of many fine dining establishments to do so.

Inflation and declining purchas-

ing power play a part, but more generally, the fundamental problem lies in the inability of fine-dining restaurants to reinvent themselves. Unlike hotels and other players in the hospitality industry that increasingly compete with them through ambitious and innovative culinary projects, they have to contend with limited financial and human resources. They have neither the capacity to implement and manage a proactive strategy nor the means to invest in cutting-edge, highly experiential concepts. Initiatives such as Eatrenalin, which create a unique experience by combining gastronomy, décor and entertainment, offer a glimpse of this changing industry and the new competition facing traditional players.

Solutions? A strong, contemporary concept plus a business-oriented management that understands consumers, connects with them and is thought through from the outset to generate margins and create synergies and/or economies of scale. The Igniv chain is a shining example of this, driven by an extraordinary chef and based on the principle of “we love to share”, Andreas Caminada has created a unique and fully coherent concept, the success of which is now being rolled out in various locations, all of which have been rewarded with rave reviews from customers and expert guides.

Fine wine prices: Navigating the fluctuating vineyard market

Another challenge facing restaurants is cellar and wine list management. Restaurants with limited financial resources may even wonder whether fine wines still have their place on their menu. Indeed, fine wine prices have risen almost exponentially since the Global Financial Crisis of 2008. But here, too, the situation appears to have changed.

A year ago, fine wine prices were at record highs. Demand for rare, artisanal wines from regions with long-standing terroir reputations was at its peak. One could go on about Burgundy, but many other examples are as revealing. For example, the Châteauneuf-du-Pape Réserve cuvée from Rayas, worth between 150 and 200 euros (for young vintages) less than a decade ago, has soared to reach and exceed the 2'000 euro mark. At this point, voices suggested that this was normal; inflation should also positively impact the



Another challenge facing restaurants is cellar and wine list management. Restaurants with limited financial resources may even wonder whether fine wines still have their place on their menu

prices of fine wines. But there is no reason this should be the case: demand drives prices, not production costs. Fine wines attract wealthy people, collectors and investors. For them, the resources that can be invested in wine depend on economic conditions and financial markets. The latter have fallen sharply since the beginning of 2022. Not surprisingly, wine prices have followed the same trend.

The most spectacular move was in Burgundy wines. Prices had become so high that these wines had detached from the rest of the market. Just a year ago, many wines from the 2019 vintage were selling for several thousand euros a bottle. One wondered whether these wines had permanently changed their status and would never be traded at lower prices again. Today, the trend has abruptly re-

versed, and it appears more like a speculative bubble that has begun to implode. Time will tell. The fine wine market offers an almost perfect setting for this kind of phenomenon: herding behaviour is common, and, in the end, price levels depend not on financial arguments but simply on what people are willing to pay for a bottle.

Rising interest rates: The impact on hotel property values and transactions

As we have seen with wine, economic conditions considerably impact on the value of tangible assets. The same applies to real estate. The market proved relatively resilient last year, thanks to the ability of hotels to pass on (sometimes more than proportionally) higher costs to their customers, while maintaining high occupancy rates. The increase in RevPar thus more than offsets the rise in discount rates.

Today, consumers having finished dipping into their COVID-19 savings and interest rates remaining high, the very long upward cycle in hotel property values has ended. What remains as a stabilising factor is the fact that the pipeline of hotel projects is thin. In other words, supply is likely to stagnate over the coming years and should thus not contribute to aggravating the supply-demand imbalance. Nonetheless, we can expect pressure on prices. Refinancing transactions will further exacerbate this, which will take place on far less favourable terms over the next 12-24 months. As is always the case in this type of environment, we can expect forced sales, sometimes at substantial discounts to current valuations.



MASTER CHEF

JAYANTA BANERJEE is Executive Chef at Carlson Rezidor Hotels (Park Plaza Hotel) in Kolkata. He started his career at The Park, Kolkata in 1994. He was an Executive Sous Chef in The Lalit Great Eastern, Kolkata, before he took the current responsibility. He has helped launch unique cafes and restaurants in many top restaurants in the city. He shares some exclusive recipes with Mystic East.

Koraishutir Dhokar Dalna



In Hindu tradition, widows were not allowed to eat foods that would not be classified as "bitter", necessitating experiment and innovation. While most Bengali castes ate meat and fish, this was barred for widows. Widows also could not use "heating" foods such as shallot and garlic, but ginger was allowed. This style found a core place in Bengali curries in general, both vegetarian and non-vegetarian.

Expensive spices such as saffron, cinnamon or cloves were used very sparingly—if at all. Nuts, dry fruits, milk and milk products (such as cream, ghee or curd) were similarly scarce. These economic and social restrictions influenced Bengali widows to create a brand new set of meals that utilized only vegetables and cheap spices.

Koraishutir dhokar dalna:

Ingredients:

- Green peas 250gm
- Chana dal 200gm
- Asafoetida (Hing) 5gm
- Bay leaf 2pc
- Whole cumin 10gm
- Whole garam masala 10gm
- Garam masala powder 5gm
- Ginger paste 30gm
- Cumin powder 10gm
- Coriander powder 10gm
- Fresh tomato puree 50ml
- Salt to taste
- Green chilly paste 10gm
- Turmeric powder 10gm

- Kashmiri chilly powder 10gm
- Sugar 10gm
- Mustard oil 30ml
- Ghee 25gm

Method: Soak chana dal overnight. Make a coarse paste with green peas and chana dal with salt and adequate water. Heat oil in a pan. Add hing, little bit of green chilly and ginger paste, add peas chana dal paste and cook it nicely adding a bit of sugar till a thick texture comes. Spread the mixture on a plate and keep it in a cool place. Now cut into equal diamond shapes and deep fry till golden brown colour.

Heat oil in a kadai. Add bay leaf, whole garam masala, whole cumin. Add ginger, green chilly paste and cook it nicely. Now add cumin, coriander, turmeric, Kashmiri chilly powder and cook it thoroughly so that the oil comes out. Now add tomato puree, salt, sugar and adequate water, let it boil. Now add the golden fried dhoka and simmer for few minutes. Fish with ghee and garam masala powder.

Aar Machher Aam Kasundi



The Bengali cuisine has been shaped by the region's diverse history and climate. It is known for its varied use of flavours including mustard oil, as well as the spread of its confectioneries and desserts

The culinary style of Bengal, that comprises Bangladesh and the Indian states of West Bengal and Tripura. The cuisine has been shaped by the region's diverse history and climate. It is known for its varied use of flavours including mustard oil, as well as the spread of its confectioneries and desserts. There is a strong emphasis on rice as a staple, with fish traditionally the most common protein. Fresh wa-

ter fish are preferred to seafish, although Aar, Boal, Bhetki, Pabda are also common. If we talk about the preparation, Paturi or thick gravy with mustard paste, "kalo-jeere-kanchalonkar jhol" or a semi thick gravy with cumin-ginger-tomato paste is popular. The sweet water fish Rohu or Katla goes well in Kaliya where the fresh river prawn is best paired in malaicurry (ginger-onion-coconut milk) gravy.

Aar machher aam kasundi

Ingredients:

- Aar fish 500gm
- Black Mustard paste 50gm
- White mustard 50 gm
- Raw mango 1 medium size
- Salt to taste
- Sugar a pinch
- Mustard oil 75ml
- Green chilly 5pc
- Turmeric powder 20gm
- Panchforon 10gm
- Dry red chilly 2pc

Method: Marinate the fish with salt and turmeric and deep fry till golden brown colour. Make a fine paste of yellow and black mustard with salt, half the mango and adequate water. Heat the same oil, add dry red chilly and panchforon, add mango mustard paste, salt, sugar, turmeric, slit green chilly and cook it nicely. Add adequate water and let it boil. Add fried fishes and slowly reduce the gravy. Drizzle mustard oil on top.

COVER STORY: TOURISM

DESTINATION LAKSHA



LAKSHADWEEP

After the controversy between India and Maldives, Indians are moving to their own vacation spot, Lakshadweep



After a derogatory remark from Maldivian ministers against India and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, X, formerly known as Twitter, is filled with “boycott Maldives” tweets. Celebrities are encouraging people to visit the nation’s own island, Lakshadweep, for vacations rather than visiting other countries.

So, if you are also preparing to visit Lakshadweep, here's your guide before starting your unforgettable journey.

Lakshadweep is India's one of the eight Union Territories, which became part of India in 1956. It has a total of 36 islands, 12 atolls, and 3 reefs. Out of 36 islands, only 10 are inhabited. The most popular islands among them are Minicoy Island, Kadmat Islands, Bangaram Island, Kalpeni Islands, and Thinnakara Island.

How to reach Lakshadweep?

The first question that comes to the mind of first-time visitors is how to reach Lakshadweep. You can reach Lakshadweep from Kochi. There are two modes to travel to Lakshadweep, i.e., flights or ships. Air India operates flights six days a week.

Indian Airlines operates flights from Kochi to Agatti Island Airport. The airstrip is available on Agatti Island only. The flight from Kochi to Agatti takes around 1 hour and 30 minutes. As per makemytrip, the fair price from Kochi (Cochin) to Lakshadweep is around Rs 5500.

Helicopter services are also available from Agatti to Kavaratti during the monsoon season as per availability of helicopters.

How to get access to Lakshadweep?

Lakshadweep is restricted and not open to all. To visit Lakshadweep you need a permit issued by the Lakshadweep administration, which is based in Kochi. After getting the permit, first, you need to download the clearance certificate and then get it cleared by a local police station. You need to attach your identification documents and then three passport-size photos.

After getting the clearance certificate, you need to download the entry permit, or you can get it done in person from the Lakshadweep administration office, based in Willingdon Island, Kochi.

Once you reach Lakshadweep, you are required to submit an entry permit to the station house officer.

If you are planning to fly to Lakshadweep, pack light, as they have limited capacity.

Sail to Lakshadweep

In case you want to travel to Lakshadweep, there are seven ships to Lakshadweep from Kochi, namely, MV Kavaratti, MV Lagoon, MV Amindivi, MV Corals, MV Minicoy, MV Lakshadweep Sea, and MV Arabian Sea.

The passage from ships takes around 14 to 18 hours depending on the island chosen for the journey. There are different classes available for accommodation inside the ships like A/C First Class with two berth cabins, A/C Second Class with four berth cabins and push back/Bunk Class with A/C seating. A doctor is always available on call on board.



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The fare to travel to Lakshadweep from Kochi can vary from Rs 2200 to Rs 7000, depending on your berth.

History of Lakshadweep

The UT of Lakshadweep, India's smallest, is spread over an area of 32 sq km and consists of 36 islands and coral reefs in the Laccadive Sea. Of these, only a few are open to the public (with due permits), with Kavaratti being a key highlight.

Formed in 1956, the UT was named as Lakshadweep only in 1973. However, as per the traditional legends, the earliest settlement on these islands dates back to the period of Cheraman Perumal, the last king of

Kerala. As per the legend, the king fled his regime in present-day Kochi following his conversion to Islam at the behest of some Arab merchants, the official website states. The earliest settlements on the islands of Amini, Kavaratti, Andrott and Kalpeni are linked to this Kerala king.

While this remains an unsubstantiated claim, it is known that the arrival of the Portuguese in India made Laccadives an important place for seafarers, the website further states the UT's history. Notably, the Portuguese invasion crumbled sometime around the early 16th century. "...It is said that the people killed all the invaders by poisoning, ending the

TOURISM

Portuguese invasion," the official website further explained.

By 1854, the islands were under British rule.

Today, the UT has a population of nearly 64,000, as per the 2011 census. Influenced by Islam, the UT is dominated by a Muslim population of 96.58 per cent, while Hindus make up 2.77 per cent of the population.

Why do Indians need permission to visit Lakshadweep

To visit Lakshadweep, even Indians need a permit issued by the Lakshadweep administration, which is based in Kochi. According to the prescribed rules, those who are not a native of these islands need the due permission. This provision has been taken to protect the Scheduled Tribes residing there.

Bottlenecks for tourism

The Tata Group has announced plans to open two "world-class" resorts on two Lakshadweep islands by 2026 (the archipelago has 36 islands - only 10 are inhabited - spread over 32 sq km (12.3 sq miles)). The only airline that currently flies to Lakshadweep has started additional flights and another plans to launch a service soon.

But experts say Lakshadweep - famed for its picturesque silver beaches, crystal-blue waters and coral islands - cannot be developed into a massive tourist destination like the Maldives because of its small size and fragile ecology. Many locals also say that what they





Top 8 places to visit in Lakshadweep

- Minicoy Island
- Kadmat Island
- Kavaratti Island
- Marine Museum
- Pitti Bird Sanctuary
- Bangaram Atoll
- Amini Beach
- Kiltan Island

need is responsible tourism in which they are stakeholders, not large-scale development plans that will overturn their way of life.

"The main occupation of the people is fishing, coconut cultivation and coir twisting," according to a government website, which calls tourism "an emerging industry" here.

Until the launch of additional flights, there were only two ways to reach the archipelago - a 72-seater plane operated by Alliance Air that flew daily from Kochi in Kerala state to Lakshadweep's only airport on Agatti island, and ships from the mainland that arrived every four days.

Entry to Lakshadweep is also

limited by permits issued by the administration.

Transport, accommodation and land-based infrastructure are a huge bottleneck to developing the islands, says PP Mohammed Faizal from the Nationalist Congress Party, who is the only MP representing around 70,000 people in Lakshadweep.

Bangaram, the island on which PM Modi stayed, has only 36 rooms [for tourists]," he says.

So, much of the territory's current tourism operates through cruises - visitors from ships docked off the archipelago tour the islands during the day and return to the vessel to spend the night.



Maldives Vs Andaman

Which one will make the cut for
your island vacation?





Both Andaman and Maldives feature a tropical climate, with average temperatures ranging from 23°C to 30°C in Andaman, and an annual mean temperature of around 28°C in Maldives

In the Maldives vs Lakshadweep imbroglio, most travel and tour specialists seem to have glossed over the East's tropical paradise: the Andaman Islands.

Now let's explore the two locations to assist tourists in making an informed choice for your ultimate tropical island escapade.

Location and Culture

Andaman Islands:

The Andaman Islands are a union territory of India, nestled in the Bay of Bengal. This region boasts approximately 800 islets adorned with dense rain-fed, damp, and evergreen forests, as well as a diverse range of exotic flora and fauna. Among these islets, around 550 belong to the Andaman Group, with 28 of them being inhabited. On the inhabited islands, the population is diverse, consisting of mainland Indians and the native tribal communities of Andaman. The predominant languages are Hindi and Bengali, with a minority also speaking Tamil, Telugu, and even Malayalam.

Maldives:

The Republic of the Maldives, an island nation positioned in the Indian Ocean to the southwest of India and Sri Lanka, is characterised by its archipelagic structure. Comprising 1192 islands that span a distance of 871 kilometres, only 200 of these islands are ac-

tually inhabited. The primary language spoken in the Maldives is Dhivehi, which also holds the status of the national language. However, due to the massive influx of global tourists, English has become widely spoken, and the US dollar is accepted alongside the national currency, the Maldivian Rufiyaa.

Best Time to Visit

Both Andaman and Maldives feature a tropical climate, with average temperatures ranging from 23°C to 30°C in Andaman, and an annual mean temperature of around 28°C in Maldives.

In Andaman, there are no severe climate conditions apart from tropical storms and late summer rains during the monsoon season. Summers (March to May) offer warmth accompanied by pleasant sea breezes and around 80% humidity. However, the best time for visiting Andaman, catering to all types of tourists, falls between October and May. It's advisable to steer clear of the monsoon season (July to September) due to heavy tidal waves and the suspension of water activities.

In Maldives, March stands as the hottest month, yet it doesn't deter one from enjoying the beach. The prime period to explore the Maldives extends from November to April, conveniently avoiding the monsoon season.



Natural Landscape and Beauty

Andaman Islands:

The Andaman Islands are bestowed with the most beautiful bounties of nature. These encompass crystal-clear waters, verdant hills, lush forest canopies, an exquisite array of flora and fauna, breathtaking beaches, intriguing volcanic sites, and an abundant coral population that promises you satisfying snorkelling and scuba diving experiences.

Maldives:

The natural allure of the Maldives is defined by its ivory-white sandy beaches and the mesmerising clarity of its turquoise waters. The Maldives boasts a thriving and vibrant coral population, making its beaches some of the most captivating in the world. The Maldivian experience often leans towards luxury and seclusion, as epitomised by private islands that offer exclusivity. In certain areas, the beaches come alive at night, when they sparkle with the luminescence of bioluminescent plankton.

Major Tourist Attractions

Both of these archipelagos boast a plethora of captivating sites and tourist attractions that are sure to leave you enthralled.

Andaman

Cellular Jail, Port Blair: Serving as a solemn reminder of India's freedom struggle and independence movement, Cellular Jail has been transformed into a museum and memorial. Visitors can attend a sound and light show that narrates the harsh realities faced by freedom fighters at the hands of colonialists.

Radhanagar Beach, Havelock Island: Recognised for its unparalleled beauty and cleanliness, Radhanagar Beach has earned the distinction of being ranked as the number one beach in Asia and the seventh in the world. Witnessing a sunrise or sunset on this beach offers an immaculate experience.

The Mahatma Gandhi Marine National Park: This enchanting destination is a favourite spot for snorkelling and scuba diving. It houses a treasure trove of healthy coral



The Maldivian experience often leans towards luxury and seclusion, as epitomised by private islands that offer exclusivity. In certain areas, the beaches come alive at night, when they sparkle with bioluminescent plankton



populations and an array of fascinating marine life, including jellyfish, sea horses, octopuses, pearl oysters, and vibrant marine flora.

Maldives:

The Capital City, Male: The picturesque capital city of Maldives is home to ancient mosques, vibrant architecture, Malé's National Museum, and prominent sites for engaging in diving, snorkelling, and other sports activities.

Maafushi Island: Renowned as the most famous island in Maldives, Maafushi is celebrated for its pristine white beaches, turquoise waters, and enchanting coral reefs. Notably, it offers more budget-friendly options compared to other islands while providing superior accommodation choices.

Banana Reef: One of the oldest reefs in Maldives, Banana Reef is a vibrant ecosystem teeming with kaleidoscopic coral reefs, majestic cliffs, and beautiful caves. Inhabited by groupers, barracudas, and sharks, this location attracts divers from around the world. Its calm currents and excellent visibility make it suitable for both beginners and seasoned divers.

Cuisines

Andamanese:

The Andamanese cuisine is a delightful fusion of flavours, bringing together enticing dishes from various parts of India, Indo-Chinese influences, and even some continental fare. However, what truly makes Andaman a haven for food enthusiasts is its emphasis

on seafood. Seafood preparations take centre stage, while fruits also play a significant role in the menu. Among the crowd-pleasing dishes, curried prawns stand out, showcasing the freshest catch from the Bay of Bengal.

Maldivian:

The Maldivian cuisine draws inspiration from South Indian and Sri Lankan culinary traditions, characterised by generous use of spices, curry, and coconut. While resorts largely cater to a global audience, reflecting diverse palates, the traditional essence remains intact. Maldivian dishes often present a harmonious blend of local ingredients and global influences. From Mediterranean to Pan Asian cuisines, along with a plethora of



Andaman Island caters to both high budget and mid-budget range, featuring an array of accommodations

grilled delights, you'll find a rich variety in most resorts.

Visa Requirements:

Andaman Islands: For Indian citizens, a special permit or visa isn't required to visit the Andaman Islands. Valid forms of identification such as an Aadhaar card, driver's licence, or Voter ID card are suf-

ficient. However, foreign visitors must obtain an Indian visa along with all requisite documentation before travelling to the Andaman Islands.

Maldives: When considering a trip to the Maldives, ensure that you have the necessary documents in place. These include return plane tickets, accommodation details, and a passport with a minimum of 3 blank pages, valid for at least 6 months. No visa is required for entry; instead, a 30-day visa is granted upon arrival, making Maldives a remarkably welcoming international destination.

Accommodation Expenses:

Let's delve into the accommodation expenses for these two tropical destinations.

Maldives:

Renowned for its premier luxury offerings, the Maldives boasts all-inclusive resorts and private beaches. Consequently, nightly stay costs can range from 800 USD to 1500 USD, depending on factors such as room type, amenities, and service levels. However, alternative affordable options, including budget hotels, are available to align with diverse budgets, with prices ranging from 60 USD to 100 USD per night.

Andaman Islands:

Andaman Island caters to both high budget and mid-budget range, featuring an array of accommodations, from luxury resorts to budget-friendly hotels and eco huts. This diversity attracts a wide



spectrum of tourists, from backpackers to luxury seekers. Leading resorts like Taj Exotica, Barefoot, and TSG Aura Resort are concentrated in Havelock, Port Blair, and Neil Island. Nightly prices span from INR 7000/- to INR 20,000/-. Furthermore, Andaman offers a variety of premium and budget hotels tailored to your preferences and needs. Hotel prices in Andaman can range from 2500/- to 6500/- per night.

Please note that the costs of accommodations in both Andaman and Maldives are subject to fluctuation based on the time of year, demand, and tourist influx.

Nightlife and Shopping

Maldives:

The Maldives offers a selection of beaches, bars, and nightclubs

scattered across its various atolls. However, it's important to note that enjoying these amenities often requires island hopping, which might not be the most convenient option for many tourists. To experience the "nightlife" in Maldives, the best approach is to stay within your resort, where you can access the resort's own bar or club.

When it comes to shopping, Maldives isn't particularly famed as a shopper's haven. Most visitors come to Maldives for secluded luxury getaways. Nonetheless, you can still discover local souvenirs and arts and crafts crafted by the Maldivian people.

Andaman Islands:

Similarly, the Andaman Islands aren't known for their vibrant nightlife. Nevertheless, there are clubs and



Both Andaman and Maldives offer unique experiences for honeymooners. The Maldives is often associated with luxury and romance, while Andaman provides a mix of natural beauty and cultural exploration





The Maldivian cuisine draws inspiration from South Indian and Sri Lankan culinary traditions, characterised by generous use of spices, curry, and coconut. While resorts largely cater to a global audience, reflecting diverse palates, the traditional essence remains intact.



bars where you can indulge in nocturnal escapades by sipping cocktails and dancing the night away. For those interested in shopping, Andaman offers options like Aberdeen Bazaar, Sagarika, Electric Plaza, Shell-Based Products Markets, and MG Road. Here, you can find a wide range of commodities, from household items to fashionable apparel, as well as items such as hats, bags, accessories, and footwear, along with souvenirs.

Exploration Time

Maldives

For those aiming to explore all the major tourist islands in the Maldives, a minimum duration of 7 to 10 days is recommended. This time frame allows ample opportunity to bask in the Maldivian sun, discover its pristine beaches, unwind, and partake in a wide array of water sports, in-

cluding diving and snorkelling.

Andaman Islands:

Conversely, to thoroughly cover key locations like Port Blair, Havelock, and Neil Island, a comfortable span of 5 to 7 days is advised. This period affords sufficient time to visit historical landmarks, enjoy the beaches, and engage in thrilling water sports such as skiing, paragliding, and snorkelling.

Getting Around

Maldives:

Upon arriving in the Maldives, there are two main options for island hopping. Firstly, you can utilise TransMaldivian Airlines, which operates numerous daily flights connecting all the atolls. It's advisable to directly book your tickets with them. Alternatively, ferries are available for inter-island travel. Please

note that the costs for seaplanes and ferries can vary significantly depending on the specific atoll.

Andaman Islands:

For those travelling to the Andaman Islands, you can fly from major Indian cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, and Kolkata to Port Blair's Veer Savarkar Airport. Once arrived in Port Blair, ferries and vessels provide internal transfers between the islands. Booking tickets online is recommended. Within the islands, auto rickshaws and taxis are available for convenient travel between different locations.

On the contrary, Andaman Islands stand as an excellent choice for all types of tourists. It presents a spectrum of options, from luxurious to budget-friendly, embracing a laid-back ambiance that's rustic and harmonious with the natural world.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q1. Which is better, Maldives or Andaman?

Choosing between the Maldives and Andaman depends on your budget, preferences and priorities. The Maldives is known for its luxurious overwater bungalows, pristine beaches, and exceptional underwater experiences. It's ideal for those seeking a high-end, indulgent, and secluded getaway. On the other hand, Andaman offers a mix of lush landscapes, diverse marine life, and rich cultural experiences. It's a great choice for nature lovers and those interested in exploring indigenous cultures and visiting historical sites.

Q2. Is Andaman more expensive than Maldives?

The Maldives tends to be more expensive overall, especially when considering high-end resorts. Andaman can offer more budget-friendly options, but luxury experiences are also available.

Q3. Is the Maldives near Andaman?

The Maldives is not near Andaman geographically; they are separate island groups in the Indian Ocean.

Q4. Can we go to the Maldives without a passport?

A passport is required to travel to the Maldives. It's a common misconception that you can travel to

the Maldives without a passport. All international travellers need a valid passport to enter the country.

Q5. Which is the best month to visit Maldives?

The best time to visit the Maldives is during the dry season, which typically runs from November to April. The weather is pleasant, and the sea is calm, making it ideal for water activities and beach relaxation.

Q6. How much money is required to visit the Andaman from India?

The cost of a trip to the Andaman from India can vary based on factors like travel dates, accommodation choices, and activities. On average, a mid-range budget for a week-long trip could range from INR 35,000/- to INR 1 lakh per person.

Q7. How many days is enough for Andaman and Maldives?

For an all encompassing experience of the Andaman, a stay of around 5 to 7 days is recommended. In the case of the Maldives, a week-long trip is a common choice, allowing plenty of time to enjoy the beaches, water activities, and relaxation.

Q8. Is Maldives visa free for Indians?

Yes, Indian citizens are granted a free 30-day tourist visa on arrival in the Maldives.

Q9. Can I go to the Maldives on a budget of INR 1 lakh/- ?

Yes, it's possible to plan a budget-friendly trip to the Maldives with around INR 1 lakh. However, achieving this budget would require careful planning, choosing for cheap accommodation options, and managing expenses during your stay.

Q10. Which is a better honeymoon destination between Andaman and Maldives?

Both Andaman and Maldives offer unique experiences for honeymooners. The Maldives is often associated with luxury and romance, while Andaman provides a mix of natural beauty and cultural exploration. The choice depends on whether you prefer a more luxurious, beach-focused experience (Maldives) or a combination of adventure and relaxation (Andaman).

Q11. Is Indian Rupee valid in Maldives?

While the Maldivian Rufiyaa (MVR) is the official currency of the Maldives, many tourist-centric areas and resorts do accept US Dollars. SO, it is best to convert your Indian currency on arrival in Maldives.

Q12. Which are the best months to visit Andaman?

The months from October to April are the best months to plan your visit to Andaman Island.



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, Buddhist 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



► Guru Padmasambhava consecrated the Taktshang monastery

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 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



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

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, 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-Vaishavinism 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



► Each Xatra represents the uniqueness of Assamese culture and tradition

monasteries and heritages for many, which will be of interest to travelers. 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- Satriya dance.

Places to visit: Satras (pronounced

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

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 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 Sattras 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 Sattra 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 Khagemba 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



► Manipur is surrounded by nine ranges of bluish green hills



► Nagaland is home to a large number of unique tribes

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.

Mon, Nagaland

If you want to uncover the real north-east then this is the place to

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

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



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

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 missionaries. 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 jewelry, 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 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 marvelous 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



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

Chenpo in the 17th century originally. The monastery has a unique depth in its name. The term Pemayangtse 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 Pemayangtse Monastery and hence it controls all the monasteries following the same order in Sikkim.

An old dated photograph of Sangdok palri at Pemayangtse 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 stat-

ues of saints and Rinpoches, deified on various 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 Ma-

hakala 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, Yuksom-Dzongri-GoechhaLa” which is a trek of 46 km to the Kanchendzonga range of hills and Kanchendzonga National Park (KNP), started prior to 1960.



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