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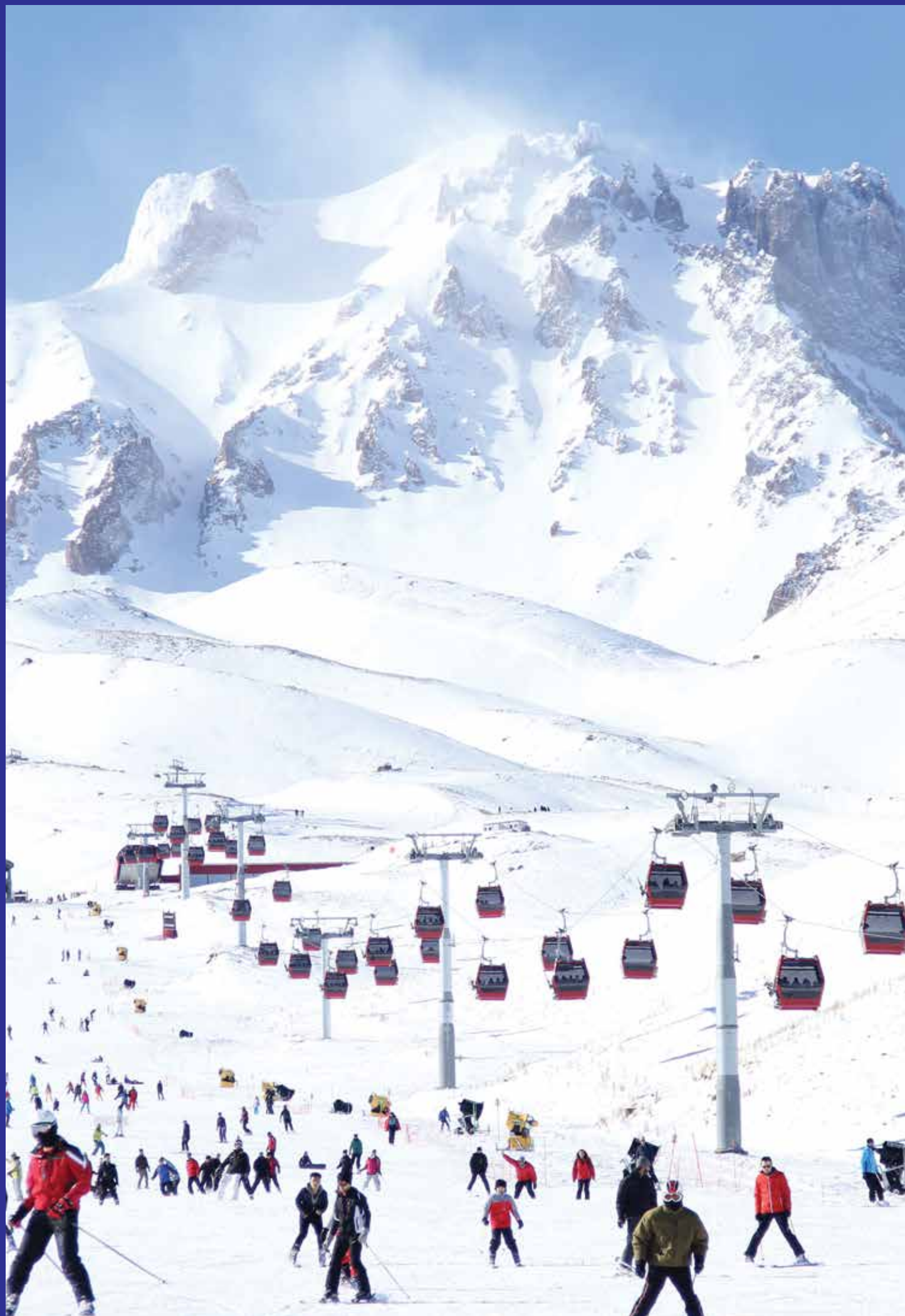
Switzerland's
Premium
panoramic trains

**Travel
Insurance**
A New Year
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**Top 5 Winter
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**5 U.S.
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EDITOR'S LETTER

Brand USA to establish the United States as a top-tier global travel destination for Indians



Synopsis:

- Brand USA organized the India Sales and Media Mission in Goa from January 22 to January 25 with 39 U.S. companies with 46 U.S. delegates, 11 media delegates from the US, and senior Indian buyers and media members.
- India ranks number 5 in the top arrival figures having 1.76 million Indian travelers visiting the United States in

India ranks number 5 in the top arrival figures to the US, an increase of 20% on Pre pandemic numbers

2023 and this represents almost a 20% jump on pre-pandemic numbers in 2019 that stood to 1.4 million.

- The United States plans to open a Hyderabad facility, expected to be Asia's biggest visa-processing Consulate processing around 3500 visa applications daily. The United States also has plans to open Consulates in Ahmedabad and Bangalore.

After experiencing a notable 20% growth in 2023 compared to pre-pandemic numbers of 2019, Brand USA is now poised to intensify its presence in the Indian market through various initiatives. The NTO expects the positive momentum to continue this year and years ahead.

Brand USA continues to establish the United States as a top-tier global travel destination and adopts an innovative

and robust strategy to forge a stronger penetration into the potential segments of the Indian population this year.

In an exclusive to Travel Span Jackie Ennis, Vice President of Global Trade Development, at Brand USA shares the trends.

India: The Source Market - "2023 has been an incredible year as we have maintained a steady flow of Indian visitors struggling through the pandemic, and 2023 marked a real recovery. As of December 2023, there were 1.76 million Indian visitors to the United States representing a 20% jump on pre-pandemic numbers in 2019 that stood at 1.4 million.

India is now positioned at number 5 from 10th position in terms of arrivals, which is a great achievement considering Canada and Mexico border the neighboring markets, followed by the UK and Germany. Earlier, India was in the top 10 for spending".

In 2019 India entered the top 10 list with regards to visitation and was

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number 6 for spending. There is a magnificent pent-up demand for Indian travelers coming to the US, as India is the only market other than Canada which has preceded the pre-pandemic numbers, whereas Germany is on number 4, but it is still 11% down compared to pre-pandemic, reveals Ennis. India is also the number one source for international students to the US, overtaking China, and also VFR.

On Visa issuance, Ennis informed, “that despite facing two-fold challenges post-pandemic, in 2023, 1.25 million visas were issued in India for the US which is more than any of the year before. This also speaks for the demand to explore the US as a holiday destination.”

Furthermore, the visa processes also have been relaxed, people going for renewals no longer have to go to the Consulate or Embassy in person, instead, it can be done through post. The United States is in the process of opening the Hyderabad facility which is expected to be fully staffed and process around 3500 visa applications daily and is supposed to be Asia’s biggest visa-processing Consulate. The United States

also has plans to open Consulates in Ahmedabad and Bangalore.

On connectivity - “We have great connectivity via both non-stop and direct flights and also one-stop, almost 80% of the Indian visitation comes via one-stop, either by Europe, Middle East or Pacific. And we hope this gets only better and we are very anticipatory in 2024”, mentions Ennis. Currently, the United States has 49 direct non-stop flights from India and is looking at some positive announcements in 2024. the new configuration of India’s aviation order, Air India, and the partnerships between IndiGo, Turkish Airlines, and British Airways, all together bring significant connectivity and push up the demand.

This year, Brand USA is looking in terms of more person-to-person contact. In 2023, Brand USA organized several events and visited India targeting cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, and Bangalore. The objective was to be present in India and create awareness in not only major cities but also in Tier II cities like Chandigarh, Lucknow, Hyderabad, and Ahmedabad.

In terms of fostering closer ties with India’s travel trade in 2024, Brand USA

organized the 10th Sales and Maiden Media Mission in Goa from January 22 to January 25 with 39 U.S. companies with 46 U.S. delegates, and senior Indian buyers and media members added Ennis.

“Indian travelers are now looking at unique experiences. Accordingly, we have conducted webinars to give more information to agents, on destinations that they are not familiar with or have no presence in the Indian audience.”

“Additionally, We also have the USA Discover Program, which is an online platform that has been hugely successful in India and enables agents who want to be experts in the United States. We have incredible participation from the agents using it.”

“During this year we are looking forward to revamping and relaunching this platform making it a more enhanced version with mobile applicability.”

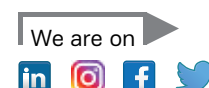
“We are looking at continuing product FAMs like last year,” says Ennis.

Brand USA has partnered with a niche platform, Tata Cliq, to access a segment of the Indian population who have the resources and the propensity to travel to the US. Also, Brand USA ran a campaign with Thrillophilia in the last quarter of 2023, which inspired travelers to book over 800 tickets across 45+ attractions, which Ennis claims to be a great number for a first-time effort.

The objective is to engage the Indian audience throughout the year on product knowledge about Brand USA. We are trying very hard to keep the information fresh and new and offer innovative ideas of traveling in the US and enhancing more numbers to the United States.



DEVENDER GROVER



Travel Insurance

A New Year Resolution

FOSTERING SAFER TRIPS
FOR EVERY TRAVELLER...

Asego is a progressive business model with more than 22 years of innovative product leadership. They provide comprehensive travel protection services to corporate, leisure, and student travelers with the aid of our dedicated service providers present in pan-India. ASEGO has been servicing clients in the Corporate, E-commerce, and Retail verticals and protecting nearly 5 million Indian travelers every year with a proven forte in expert travel assistance capabilities.

Dev Karvat, Founder and CEO, Asego shares his inputs for Asego's outlook for travellers in 2024.

Q As the new year begins, what is Asego's outlook going to be in 2024?

We believe that every business, be it small or big, has the potential to undergo a digital transformation and take the next step towards unparalleled success and limitless possibilities.

As pioneers of the Indian Travel Assistance and Insurance sector, Asego is poised to lead this charge, ushering in the next wave of digital transformation through our upcoming proprietary software. This innovative tool will empower our partners with improved business intelligence and enhanced operational efficiency which in turn will amplify their growth, elevate customer experiences, and redefine industry standards.

We are confident that this strategic leap will also provide our partners with



a deeper understanding of ancillary service businesses, unlocking new avenues for growth through additional ancillary service revenue.

Q Coming back to your core business- Travel Assistance. Can you elaborate a bit on the assistance services offered by Asego?

Asego has been a stalwart in the travel protection space for over 24 years, placing Travel Assistance services at the forefront of our legacy. Asego's services extend beyond mere claims processing. We offer comprehensive real-time assistance services, including 24X7 global medical support, roadside assistance, and family protection, along with insurance. Furthermore, we provide medical service-related referrals to travellers seeking hospitals, clinics, chemists, diagnostic centres, etc. not only for themselves but also for their families back home. This holistic approach underscores our dedication to ensuring the well-being and security of every Indian traveller.

Q What are the various kinds of risks travelers are facing these days?

Travel, by nature, is an adventure into the unknown, and while the thrill is undeniable, uncertainties can cast a shadow on the overall experience. One of the most common uncertainties being reported by travelers these days is the unpredictability of the weather. Winter travels, in particular, come with the risk of flight delays or cancellations due to adverse weather conditions. Another significant uncertainty revolves around the unexpected disruptions caused by natural calamities. Whether it is a sudden snowstorm, heavy rains, or other unforeseen events, travelers may find their plans derailed. Furthermore, during the festive season, the influx of travelers can lead to crowded airports and transportation hubs, increasing the likelihood of lost baggage or theft of gadgets and valuables. Last but not least, travelers have also been fazed lately by a

As pioneers of the Indian Travel Assistance and Insurance sector, Asego is poised to lead this charge, ushering in the next wave of digital transformation through our upcoming proprietary software.

looming concern about political unrest in various countries.

Q How does Asego tackle such situations faced by travelers and ensure they have a peaceful journey?

Asego has been working tirelessly to identify and mitigate these risks with comprehensive travel assistance and insurance solutions. Our bouquet of offerings not only takes care of medical emergencies and other travel-related inconveniences but also ensures that travelers are protected against risks such as emergency medical evacuation, loss and damage of gadgets, cyber security issues, identity theft, credit/debit card fraud, etc. Further, our carefully curated standalone products offer travelers an opportunity to customize their protection plans as per their needs and preferences, rather than opting for a plain vanilla travel insurance product.

Q With drastic changes in travel preference, offbeat and unexplored travel experiences are amongst the customer favourites lately. How does Asego ensure the safety of such travelers?

Yes, we too have seen a drastic jump in travelers seeking new experiences such as cruise trips, adventure sports, self-drive trips, etc. to end or begin the new year with a bang. However, we should be mindful of such activities as they also come with inherent risks that require proper preparation and protection. We have therefore curated some exclusive coverages for Gen Z travelers such as adventure sports

covers, sports equipment covers, self-drive protection, etc. These covers not only safeguard high-risk activities and other adventurous pursuits by travelers but also take care of emergency medical expenses in case of personal accident, emergency evacuations, and more.

Q As you rightly said, cruises are another hot favourite during these festive times. Is a cruise-specific travel insurance cover is important while cruising and why?

Certainly! We all agree that sailing through the open seas' midst of serene landscapes and luxurious provisions is an amazing experience. But what if an unforeseen emergency or mishap arises? That's when a relevant cruise protection cover comes into the picture. There is a general misconception amongst cruise enthusiasts that regular travel insurance should be sufficient to keep them secure while enjoying the high seas. However, travel insurance does not cover passengers while on a cruise. For instance, if a mishap strikes before you even begin the journey, you may have to cancel your trip. The cruise line won't reimburse you, but dedicated cruise trip protection can. Further, if a passenger is affected by illness or any other medical emergencies on board, they will be confined to their cabins and eventually miss their excursion. Cruise protection plans such as Asego's exclusive cruise cover not only safeguard travelers from such losses but also cover emergency evacuation and subsequent medical care expenses in case of serious injuries.



India becomes 5th tourism-generating market for Singapore, free-visa travel takes Indonesia at the top

With visa-on-arrival being offered to Indonesian and Chinese passport holders, more travellers are expected to visit Singapore from these countries.

In 2023, Singapore welcomed 1.1 million Indian tourists, marking a substantial 115% increase in overall visitor numbers, reaching 13.6 million from the pandemic-affected 6.3 million in 2022, Singapore Tourism (STB) said

The upswing in visitor arrivals was due to robust demand from key markets, However, India was not the

primary tourism-generating market for Singapore. It fell to the fifth spot, with markets such as Indonesia (2.3 million), China (1.4 million), and Malaysia (1.1 million), becoming the top three markets. India was ranked fifth, after Australia, from where 1.1 million tourists visited the Asian country in 2023.

Earlier in November 2023, India was the third tourism-generating market for Singapore. However, after the city-state announced visa-free arrival for Indonesian passport holders, the

country witnessed the highest arrivals from there.

Singapore anticipates tourism receipts for 2023 to range between SG \$24.5 billion and SG \$26 billion, surpassing STB's earlier forecast of S \$18 billion to SG \$21 billion. This represents approximately 88% to 94% of 2019 levels. The final figures for tourism receipts will be disclosed in the second quarter of 2024.

STB reported an increase in the average length of stay to approximately 3.8 days in 2023, compared to 3.4 days in the same period in 2019. Singapore's tourism sector demonstrated resilience and robust recovery throughout 2023.

Singapore and China's agreement for a mutual 30-day visa-free entry is expected to commence on February 9, coinciding with the Chinese New Year. The STB projects that international flight capacity will approach or match pre-pandemic levels in 2024, leading to an expected 15 to 16 million international visitor arrivals, generating SG \$26 billion to SG \$27.5 billion in tourism receipts.

Turkish Airlines, the airline flying to more countries than any other, adds Melbourne, Australia, to its flight network



The airline will operate three weekly flights between Istanbul and Melbourne.

To date, the flag carrier, which has reached 129 countries and 345 destinations across five continents, is preparing to connect its passengers to a sixth continent with the start of flights to Australia.

Turkish Airlines is continuing its route expansion strategy by adding Australia, a destination of considerable interest and long on its agenda, to its flight network.

The flag carrier, which will schedule

three flights a week to Melbourne from 15 March 2024 via Singapore, will contribute to the tourism and trade volumes of Türkiye and Australia by carrying thousands of visitors on the Istanbul-Melbourne route every year.

The Australian gateway of Melbourne will be Turkish Airlines' 346th global destination and 130th country served.

Turkish Airlines will also have the benefit of being the only European airline to currently operate flights to

Melbourne Airport.

Prof. Dr. Ahmet Bolat, Turkish Airlines Chairman of the Board and the Executive Committee, said: "Today is an important day for us. We have realised our goal of reaching the continent of Australia, which we have been successfully working on for a while, with the confirmed flight date."

"We have a significant global value that distinguishes us from our competitors as we are the airline that

flies to more countries than any other in the world. Maintaining this valuable mission is a very strong motivation that drives us to work harder, more devotedly, and with more enthusiasm.

“With this motivation, we are excited to add Melbourne as our 346th destination to our flight network. Australia, with its natural beauty and hospitable people, becomes the 130th country and sixth continent under our wings.

“We are delighted to meet Australians with Turkish Airlines’ award-winning service quality and unique flight network. In the coming years, we plan to strengthen our presence in this beautiful country by increasing both the frequency of our flights and the number of our destinations. Also, as we bring the Turkish and Australian people closer and strengthen the bonds between our countries, we aim to increase

bilateral tourism, trade, and business opportunities.”

Supported by the Victorian Government and Melbourne Airport, the new route will connect Türkiye with Victoria, one of Australia’s largest trading centres and fastest-growing states, home to Australia’s largest Turkish community.

Turkish Airlines’ new flights will also increase Melbourne’s access to the European, Middle Eastern, Balkan, and African markets via İstanbul, contributing to tourism, international education, business, and trade potential.

In the next few years, Turkish Airlines aims to operate direct flights to Melbourne and other potential cities in the country with the acquisition of new aircraft capable of operating non-stop flights between İstanbul and Melbourne.

Winter schedule details for Melbourne/Australia flights;

Flight No	Start Date	End Date	Flight Days	Departure	Departure Time	Arrival Time	Arrival
TK168	15 March 2024	29 March 2024	Monday, Wednesday, Friday	IST	17:30	08:50 +1	SIN
TK168	16 March 2024	30 March 2024	Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday	SIN	10:20	20:40	MEL
TK169	16 March 2024	30 March 2024	Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday	MEL	22:30	03:00+1	SIN
TK169	17 March 2024	31 April 2024	Wednesday, Friday, Sunday	SIN	04:30	11:15	IST

Summer schedule details for Melbourne/Australia flights;

Flight No	Start Date	End Date	Flight Days	Departure	Departure Time	Arrival Time	Arrival
TK168	31 March 2024	25 October 2024	Tuesday, Friday, Sunday	IST	17:00	08:45 +1	SIN
TK168	1 April 2024	6 April 2024	Monday, Wednesday, Saturday	SIN	10:15	20:40	MEL
TK168	8 April 2024	5 October 2024	Monday, Wednesday, Saturday	SIN	10:15	19:40	MEL
TK168	7 October 2024	26 October 2024	Monday, Wednesday, Saturday	SIN	10:15	20:40	MEL
TK169	1 April 2024	6 April 2024	Monday, Wednesday, Saturday	MEL	22:20	02:50+1	SIN
TK169	8 April 2024	5 October 2024	Monday, Wednesday, Saturday	MEL	21:20	02:50+1	SIN
TK169	7 October 2024	26 October 2024	Monday, Wednesday, Saturday	MEL	22:20	02:50+1	SIN
TK169	2 April 2024	27 October 2024	Tuesday, Thursday, Sunday	SIN	04:30	10:40	IST

*Due to the daylight-saving in Australia, there is a time variance.

Akasa Air Orders 150 More Boeing 737 MAX Jets For Domestic and International Expansion



India's fastest-growing airline nearly triples 737 order book to meet rising demand

All-737 operator adds 737-10 to its single-aisle fleet and additional 737-8-200s and Boeing and Akasa Air have announced that the Indian carrier has placed a follow-on 737 MAX order, confirming 150 more fuel-efficient jets in its order book. The purchase of 737-10 airplanes and an additional 737-8-200 jets by India's all-737 operator was revealed at the Wings India 2024 airshow.

Akasa Air will leverage the 737 MAX family to

expand its domestic and international network in the coming years. Since launching operations in 2022, the airline has captured approximately 4% of India's domestic market, serving 18 destinations with a fleet of 22 737 MAX jets.

"We are excited to announce this historic order for 150 new Boeing airplanes, increasing our total orders from Boeing to 226 jets. In addition to supporting our rapid domestic expansion, the efficiency and economics of these new airplanes position Akasa to launch international routes in

the coming months," said **Vinay Dube, Akasa Air founder and CEO.** "The lower carbon emissions of the 737 MAX family allow us to remain focused on sustainable operations, while also providing our environmentally conscious passengers with a more comfortable way to fly. Sustainability is at the core of our business, and we strive for more opportunities to reduce our impact to the environment."

Both 737 MAX variants will provide Akasa Air with added capacity and range on new and existing routes, while reducing fuel use

and carbon emissions by 20% compared to older-generation airplanes.

"This milestone demonstrates the strength of our partnership with Akasa Air and is a testament to the capabilities of the 737 MAX family to further the airline's operational priorities," said Stephanie Pope, Boeing Chief Operating Officer. "The efficiency and versatility of the 737-10 and 737-8-200 will support Akasa Air's expansion to meet soaring demand for air travel in the region for many years to come."

As Akasa Air looks to expand its network in India and South Asia, Boeing's 2023 Commercial Market outlook forecasts delivery of 2,705 new commercial airplanes over the next 20 years for the region, of which nearly 90% will be single-aisle jets.

This order was finalized in December 2023 and was unidentified on the Boeing Orders & Deliveries website.

As a leading global aerospace company, Boeing develops, manufactures and services commercial airplanes, defense products and space systems for customers in more than 150 countries. As a top U.S. exporter, the company leverages the talents of a global supplier base to advance economic opportunity, sustainability and community impact. Boeing's diverse team is committed to innovating for the future, leading with sustainability, and cultivating a culture based on the company's core values of safety, quality and integrity.

Air India welcomes first Airbus A350, revolutionizing Indian aviation



India's aviation leaps forward with Air India's first Airbus A350, inaugurated at Wings India 2024, signifying a new era in air travel.

In a landmark moment for Indian aviation, Hon'ble Minister of **Civil Aviation Shri Jyotiraditya Scindia** officially inaugurated **India's** and **Air India's** first **Airbus A350** aircraft on the first day of Wings India 2024.

This not only marks the arrival of a state-of-the-art aircraft to Air India's fleet, but also signifies India's growing stature as a major player in the global aviation industry.

"The A350 is a game-changer for Air India," said **Campbell Wilson**, Chief Executive Officer & Managing Director, Air India. "It will not only elevate our passenger experience but also open up new routes and opportunities for expansion. Together with the full interior refit of our legacy widebody aircraft commencing mid-2024, this upgradation of fleet and product is a key pillar of returning Air India to the upper echelons of world aviation."

The arrival of the A350 coincides with a period of rapid growth and transformation for Air India. Under the leadership of the **Tata Group**, the airline is undergoing a comprehensive transformation, aimed at renewing its fleet, expanding its global route network, enhancing its service offerings, and regaining its position as a global aviation leader.

Airbus A350

Equipped with powerful and fuel-

efficient **Rolls-Royce** Trent XWB engines, the Airbus A350 delivers optimal performance, environmental benefits, and superior passenger comfort. Its impressive range of up to 9,700nm (18,000 km) enables non-stop flights from India to destinations in the United States, Canada, and Australia.

Unparalleled passenger experience

The A350 offers wider cabins, larger windows, mood lighting, and advanced entertainment systems, and comes with world-class cabin products, setting a new benchmark for passenger experience on Indian airlines. Air India's A350-900 comes with 316 seats in a three-class cabin configuration.

Luxe Business: Business class aboard Air India's A350-900 features 28 private suites in a 1-2-1 configuration, each boasting direct aisle access and sliding privacy doors. At the touch of a button, the suite chairs convert into full-sized beds, becoming guests' own private cocoons in the sky. Each suite has a personal wardrobe and ample stowage space for electronic devices, amenities, and shoes, as well as a conveniently located mirror, catering to every traveller's needs. 21-inch HD touchscreen and video handset provide an immersive entertainment experience, while universal A/C and USB-A power outlets

ensure mobile and electronic devices stay charged.

Upscale Premium Economy: The exclusive Premium Economy cabin on Air India's A350-900 has 24 wide seats arranged in a 2-4-2 configuration, offering ample legroom with 38 inches of seat pitch, 18.5 inches of seat width, and 8-inch recline. Each seat has a 4-way adjustable headrest and leg rest with a foot paddle for customised comfort, and a 13.3-inch HD touchscreen, and universal AC and USB-A power outlets.

Comfortable Economy: Economy has 264 seats in a 3-4-3 configuration, each with 31 inches of seat pitch, 17.5 inches of seat width, and 6 inches of recline, 4-way adjustable headrest, and a 12-inch HD touchscreen for a comfortable, yet stylish flying experience that delivers value for money.

Entering commercial service

Air India's A350 enters commercial service on 22 January 2024, initially operating domestically for crew familiarisation on flights to/from Bengaluru, Chennai, Delhi, Hyderabad, and Mumbai. The aircraft will be subsequently deployed on international routes.

The first A350 of the many arriving. Air India's first A350, registered VT-JRA, is the first of Air India's 20 Airbus A350-900 on order, with five more scheduled for deliveries through March 2024. Air India's firm orders for 250 new aircraft with Airbus include 20 A350-1000 as well.

AirAsia launches new Kuala Lumpur-Ahmedabad route, expanding India network



AirAsia introduces a new direct flight from Kuala Lumpur to Ahmedabad, India, enhancing its robust connectivity and expanding its South Asian network.

AirAsia announced a brand new connectivity to its expanding network to **India**, launching a new route from **Kuala Lumpur** to India's first **UNESCO World Heritage City Ahmedabad**.

This new route, set to take flight on 1 May 2024, will add to the airline's rapidly growing connectivity to India, marking AirAsia's eleventh route to the country, and third new route in 2024 alone. This will also serve as AirAsia's first step into the state of Gujarat from Malaysia, further cementing its foothold in South Asia.

Also known as Amdavad, the city of Ahmedabad is a sprawling town that is home to one of India's largest cotton textile hubs, serene lakes, quaint temples, centuries-old mosques and so much more. History buffs often flock to the city to get up close to its ancient architecture dating back to the 15th century under the rule of Sultan Ahmad Shah. Ahmedabad is not shy of tourist hotspots boasting some of the best street food in the world, in addition to being at the forefront of some of the

country's most sought-after jewellery markets.

Group CEO of AirAsia Aviation Group, **Bo Lingam** said: "We couldn't be more thrilled to announce yet another venture of AirAsia into Incredible India to the beautiful Ahmedabad with many more to follow suit as we continue to celebrate the commendable initiative by the Malaysian government for the visa-free entry into Malaysia for Indian nationals. A city that is steeped in deeply-rooted traditions and heritage, Ahmedabad has something for everyone and I'm certain this route will be well received by travellers who are looking to sightsee its magnificent architecture or simply immerse themselves in the rich, local culture.

"When we launched our very first flight into India in 2008, our vision and mission had always been to enhance affordable connectivity between our two nations. Both Malaysia and India have plenty of untapped tourism potential and it has been amazing to see how travel has boomed in both countries in the last decade. AirAsia will continue to broaden

our horizons of connectivity, which undoubtedly will encourage and allow for more people to travel to various unexplored gems of India affordably."

AirAsia operates a robust network of routes directly from Kuala Lumpur to India in both northern and southern cities Chennai, Tiruchirappalli, Kochi, Hyderabad, Bengaluru and Kolkata via its short-haul airline **AirAsia Malaysia** (flight code AK) and to New Delhi and Amritsar via medium haul affiliate airline AirAsia X (flight code D7). Come February 2024, AirAsia will be commencing flights to another exciting destination the city of Thiruvananthapuram in the southern state of Kerala, making it the second direct route to the state after Kochi followed by Jaipur in April and Ahmedabad in May. That's not all the airline also offers affordable and accessible Fly-Thru options, where guests travelling from India to Malaysia can utilise Kuala Lumpur as a connecting hub to AirAsia's more than 130 destinations in 22 countries.



In terms of product and service attributes, Vistara offers the choice of flying in state-of-the-art aircraft equipped with luxurious cabins. Vistara's Business Class cabin products are unmatched within the domestic market and on par with some of the biggest airlines around the world. Vistara is also the first Indian airline to offer Premium Economy - a product gaining prominence as customers want more convenience, exclusivity and space during travel. The

Vistara named best airline of the year at Wings India 2024

Also recognized with the Innovation Champion Award

Vistara, India's finest full-service carrier takes home stellar laurels including the **'Best Airline of the Year'** and **'Innovation Champion'** award at the prestigious **Wings India 2024**. The distinguished awards were presented by the Hon'ble Minister of Civil Aviation, Government of India, Mr. Jyotiraditya Scindia in the presence of other senior officials from the Ministry, FICCI, and a gathering of industry representatives from across the globe at the award ceremony held in Hyderabad

On this occasion, **Mr. Vinod Kannan, Chief Executive Officer, Vistara** said: *"We are pleased to be named 'Best Airline of the Year' at Wings India 2024. This prestigious award, along with the recognition as Innovation Champions, is a true testament to the continuous efforts of all our staff, frontline and at the backend, who work tirelessly towards ensuring service excellence. As we soar to new heights, these awards further reaffirm our commitment to pushing boundaries and setting new benchmarks in Indian aviation. We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to the jury of Wings India 2024 for recognising our efforts. We also thank our customers for their steadfast trust in us and look forward to their continued patronage."*

Vistara's world-class travel experience and safety standards have been widely appreciated by customers, significantly contributing to winning these awards. The airline's constant quest for innovation is evident in various initiatives such as implementing newer technologies like RFID AeroCheck, introducing Live TV on select international flights, operating the country's first long-haul flight on a wide-body aircraft using sustainable aviation fuel and many others.

experience is further enhanced by cutting-edge inflight entertainment, delectable onboard cuisine, thoughtfully curated amenity kits and the benefits of our frequent flyer program, Club Vistara. Additionally, Vistara's onboard service is delivered by the award-winning cabin crew trained in service excellence, which the Tata Group and Singapore Airlines are renowned for.

Vistara is India's highest-rated airline on Skytrax and TripAdvisor, and it has been the winner of several 'Best Airline' awards, besides being lauded for world-class cabin cleanliness and upholding high safety standards. The only Indian carrier to feature amongst World's Top 20 Airlines, Vistara has been named '16th Best Airline' globally while also being recognised as the 'Best Airline in India and South Asia' for the third time in a row, 'Best Airline Staff in India and South Asia' for the fifth consecutive year, 'Best Cabin Crew in India and South Asia' for the third time in a row and 'Best Business Class Airline in India and South Asia' for the second time in a row at the coveted World Airline Awards 2023 by Skytrax. Vistara also received the ch-aviation Asia's Third Youngest Airline Fleet award for the second consecutive year.



Over 300 delegates marked their presence at ATOAI's 15th Annual Convention

The 15th Annual Adventure Tourism Convention of the Adventure Tour Operators Association of India (ATOAI) took place December 16–18, 2023, at the Statue of Unity in Ekta Nagar. The over 300 delegates in attendance at the event, which was sponsored by the Gujarat Tourism Corporation, served as a prelude to the upcoming Vibrant

Gujarat Global Summit in January 2024.

Distinguished dignitaries attended the inauguration ceremony, including Lt. Gen. Rakesh Kapoor, VSM Deputy Chief of Army Staff, Padmashree Ajeet Bajaj, President of ATOAI, Vaibhav Kala, Convention Chairman and Vice President of ATOAI, and Tejbir Singh Anand, Senior Vice President, ATOAI. Sourabh Pardhi, Managing Director and Commissioner of Gujarat Tourism, Hareet Shukla, Secretary of Tourism, Government of Gujarat, Khayati Nayak, Manager, Niche Tourism Gujarat, Anil Oraw, Regional Director, North East, Ministry of Tourism, Lt. Gen. Rakesh Kapoor, VSM Deputy Chief of Army Staff, Pema Khandu, Hon. Other government representatives and officials from the federal, state, and local levels also attended the gathering. Ajeet Bajaj greeted the guests and emphasized that ATOAI works with travel agencies to improve regulations related to adventure travel across the country.

The convention included panel discussions, experience-sharing sessions, and keynote talks on adventure tourism and industry growth throughout the day. Pema Khandu emphasized the Northeastern region's and the state's abundant potential for adventure tourism. He emphasized the intention of creating thriving communities for sustainable tourism and applauded the efforts of

Hon. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is promoting tourism through programs like "Dekho Apna Desh."

Mulubhai Bera talked about how PM Modi is turning Gujarat into one of the top adventure travel destinations. He lauded efforts made under Prime Minister Modi's leadership that led to recognition such as the UNWTO's "Best Tourism Village" Award for Dhordo and UNESCO's designation of Garba as a "Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity." He emphasized the variety of the state's attractions as well as the important contribution adventure tourism makes to the economy. Hareet Shukla discussed Gujarat's attempts to boost the tourism industry and its top spot as a travel destination.

Actor and fitness enthusiast Milind Soman gave a special speech on the value of adventure travel in the nation. A panel discussion led by Lt. Rakesh Kapoor on "The Adventure Trilogy: Mega Trails, Border Tourism, and Vibrant Villages" was another event of the convention. During the event, several presentations on adventure tourism in Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab, and Gujarat were given.

A number of Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) were signed as part of the state's effort to increase tourism in advance of the Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit in January 2024. The knowledge-sharing agreements, were together valued at Rupees 770 crores, were centred on adventure tourism, film production, and infrastructure development. It is expected that these efforts would bear fruit at the next Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit, which will take the state's tourism economy to new heights.

Beyond simply exploring exciting excursions against the breathtaking backdrop of the Statue of Unity, this convention set a standard for sustainability by pledging to be a carbon-negative and single-use plastic-free event. The Honourable Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, Pema Khandu, has extended an invitation to ATOAI to host its 16th Annual Convention amidst the stunning scenery of the state.

With over 560 open hotels and residential projects in Asia Pacific Excluding China

Marriott International saw record year of Net rooms growth and signings in the region

2023 marked a terrific year for Marriott International in the Asia Pacific Excluding China region with over 80 deals signed, adding approximately 18,000 rooms in the pipeline for this region

Following the recent announcement by Marriott International, Inc. of its strong global net rooms growth and record year of organic signings in 2023, the company highlighted the remarkable surge in hotel and residences openings and signings in the Asia Pacific excluding China (APEC) region, particularly in key travel markets such as Japan, India, and Vietnam. At the close of 2023, Marriott set a milestone in APEC with over 60 properties added to its portfolio during the year, bringing the company's presence in the APEC region to more than 560 operating hotels and residences, and exceeding 10 percent net rooms growth compared to 2022. The company also sealed a record of over 80 deals signed across 13 markets, representing approximately 18,000 rooms.

As tourism recovers in APEC and the travel landscape evolves, Marriott has continued to focus on strategically providing the best-in-class offerings to owners, franchisees, and guests. At the end of 2023, Marriott's APEC development pipeline stood at over 320 hotels with over 69,000 rooms, showcasing the company's dedication to providing world renowned brands and diverse experiences, aligning with the evolving preferences of travelers across the region.

Luxury continues to play a pivotal



role in the growth of Marriott, and 25 percent of Marriott's global luxury rooms pipeline is represented in APEC. In 2023, 15 percent of the deals signed in APEC were in the luxury segment. A record nine luxury hotels were opened in the region in 2023 — including The Ritz-Carlton, Melbourne— Marriott's 1,000th hotel in the Asia Pacific region. The JW Marriott Goa debuted the brand in Goa and was the company's 150th hotel to open in South Asia, and added The Singapore EDITION, the first EDITION in Southeast Asia.

*"With our record year of growth at Marriott International in APEC, we remain committed to meeting the demands of modern travelers underscored by our diverse portfolio of brands and strategic presence in new destinations," said **Rajeev Menon, President, Marriott International, APEC.** "2023 has positioned us as a thriving and desirable region in the global landscape. I am excited about our momentum as we*

focus on being where our customers want us to be and connecting people through the power of travel."

Marriott Bonvoy – Marriott's award-winning travel program— has helped fuel interest in the company's regional portfolio. In APEC, the Marriott Bonvoy membership base has surged by 50 percent since 2019. This momentum is attributed to the unique and unforgettable experiences the program offers, including exclusive access to prestigious events like the Australian Open and Formula 1. Beyond hotel stays, Marriott Bonvoy continues to re-define the regional travel landscape with strategic partnerships with Singapore Airlines, Rakuten and co-branded credit cards in Japan, Korea, and India. The company's commitment to delivering exceptional experiences, coupled with the strength of Marriott Bonvoy, positions Marriott as a leader in shaping the future of travel and hospitality across the APEC region.

FHRAI

advocates hospitality sector reforms - 2024



focusing on pragmatic reforms for the hospitality sector in India.

FHRAI proposes granting infrastructure status universally to hotels with a project cost of Rs. 10 crores and above, regardless of city population, aiming to eliminate geographical biases and enhance growth and accessibility in the hotel industry. This move is anticipated to facilitate long-term loans at affordable interest rates, fostering growth in the sector.

The hospitality sector seeks additional stimulus packages and incentives from the government to achieve the target of welcoming 100 million international tourists by 2047. This includes a call for a favourable GST regime and ease of doing business measures in the hospitality industry.

Addressing the bureaucratic complexities in the sector, FHRAI emphasises the need for a uniform system for approvals and compliance. The association suggests measures such as a single window clearance system, deemed approvals, self-regulation, merging of multiple approvals and licences, and fixing a validity period of a minimum of 5 years for licenses.

Pradeep Shetty, President of FHRAI, highlighted the industry's significance in India's economic growth and urged the government to consider these reforms seriously, recognising the crucial role of tourism and hospitality. He said, "The hospitality industry is a vital contributor to India's

economic growth. We believe that the proposed pre-budget reforms are pivotal in catering to the untapped potential of our diverse nation, propelling the hospitality sector towards unprecedented growth. FHRAI urges the government to consider these reforms seriously, recognizing the crucial role of tourism and hospitality in shaping India's economic landscape."

FHRAI strongly advocates classifying tourism, travel, and hospitality in the concurrent list to establish a national shared common framework between the Centre and States. The association contends that tourism, which contributes around 10 per cent of the GDP, should be declared a priority sector in the country with special incentives and benefits.

The call for a comprehensive review and reduction of GST rates in the hospitality sector is another key proposal. Specifically, FHRAI recommends abolishing the 18 per cent GST category for hotels above 7500 and merging it with the more moderate 12 per cent GST category, aiming to make India a more competitive and attractive destination.

These proposed reforms are viewed as essential steps towards positioning India as a global hospitality hub. FHRAI anticipates a budget that recognises the pivotal role of tourism and hospitality in the economic landscape and implements measures to propel India to the forefront of global travel destinations.

The Federation of Hotel & Restaurant Associations of India

(FHRAI) has put forth a set of pre-budget expectations for the upcoming budget,



Hospitality, travel sector players want infrastructure status for hotel industry

Hospitality and travel sector players on Tuesday demanded infrastructure status for the hotel industry besides measures such as tax exemption on LTA annually to boost domestic tourism ahead of the Union Budget. They also recommended removal of the current TDS levied on automated bookings for internal or closed user groups such as business travel platforms and reducing the total number of licenses required to establish a hotel.

“A full-blown infrastructure status for the hotel sector and further rationalisation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) and a Central single window clearance for hotel projects are some of the major expectations from the Budget 2024,” an industry expert said in a statement.

The industry has been clamouring for infrastructure status for decades.

The status will enable hotel projects to have easy access to cheaper debt that is at par with projects in other industries. A reduced capital cost will have a bearing on both timely completion of projects and their overall financial health, he added.

Another expert said albeit interim, the Union Budget offers a significant opportunity as a growth accelerator for the travel and tourism sector, which is “a valuable contributor to the country’s GDP and a powerful employment engine”.

Calling for a multi-pronged approach, he asked the government to “remove the deterrent to technology in the form of the current TDS that is levied on automated bookings (self-booking tools) for internal/closed user groups such as our business travel platforms”.

“This would align with the government’s commitment to ease of doing business and digital adoption, and the larger objective of building a

Digital India,” he added.

Another industry expert said in order to give a boost to travel and tourism spending, a reduction in income tax levels is needed to provide increased disposable income in the hands of the people.

Also, he recommended tax exemption on LTA annually, against twice in four years to catalyse domestic tourism, while also proposing standardisation of TCS at 5 per cent on foreign travel packages against the current 5 per cent and 20 per cent slabs.

Another expert also asked the government to consider lowering of GST rates on hotel room tariffs of Rs 7,500 and above to 12 per cent from the current 18 per cent saying it is “still high in this competitive scenario”.

He acknowledged that the GST Council in 2019 green-lighted a reduction in the GST rate on the hotel room tariffs of Rs 7,500 and above to 18 per cent from 28 per cent earlier.

Ras Al Khaimah Art 2024



12th
Edition
Kicks
Off in
February

Ras Al Khaimah Art, the year-long cultural initiative nurturing existing and emerging talent, has announced details of the Ras Al Khaimah Art 2024 Festival, which will officially open to the public on Friday, February 2nd, 2023, at 9pm, at the Al Jazeera Al Hamra Heritage Village.

Curated by the award-winning, Alfio Tommasini, and embracing the theme of 'In Motion', the Ras Al Khaimah Art 2024 Festival, presented by Aldar, is set to be an immersive and sensory cultural experience for visitors, bridging heritage and modernity with a curated display of over 100 different artists, as well as inspiring masterclasses, public talks and live performances.

Commenting on the theme of this year's festival, Tommasini said: "In Motion challenges the concept of a new 'normal' and beckons you to embrace the constant evolution of our diverse world. From generative AI and NFTs to space journeys and environmental movements, our Festival celebrates and critiques the power of motion and change, bringing together a variety of artforms whilst stimulating dialogue between artists, authors, creatives and the community."

New for 2024 is the addition of **The Souq**, a contemporary art exhibition and market featuring artists and craftspeople from around the world. Another key addition this year is **Ephemeral Whispers**, a mesmerizing kinetic art installation on the Fort tower, symbolizing unity, and the dynamic nature of human interactions in response to the exhibition theme In Motion and the Al Jazeera Al Hamra Heritage Village history. The fabric installation blends contemporary and traditional materials from diverse cultures, suspended like tapestries, serving as visual metaphors for the rich heritage and experiences facilitated by marketplaces throughout history.

In addition to the curated exhibitions, the 12th edition of the festival will also host a series of interactive experiences and live performances. Visitors can unleash their creativity with a program of **artistic workshops**, from wire knitting and resin ocean art to photography and ceramics, or enjoy dynamic musical experiences, stand-up comedy, and other artistic performances with **Live Performance Saturdays**. Visitors will also have the opportunity to engage in discussions on

culture, innovation, and sustainability with a six-part speaker series and enjoy a diverse array of screenings with **Friday Film Nights**, featuring thought-provoking documentaries and captivating narratives from award-winning directors.

Foodies will also be well catered for with the return of award-winning cultural heritage dining experience **Antica Australis**. Featuring specially curated four-course set menus starring local organic produce from Ras Al Khaimah, Australian native ingredients & Emirati flavors, Antica Australis will present a limited series of lunch and dinner events over three weekends during the Festival from Saturday 3 to Sunday 18 February 2024. Seatings are limited to 20 covers and advance booking is essential.

Meanwhile, pet owners and animal lovers are invited to explore the festival with a dedicated **Pet-Friendly Weekend** from 9 – 11 February. Not only will furry friends be welcomed to explore the festival, but owners can also participate in special events and workshops including pet collar/harness art, pottery nametag painting, pet photography and pet fashion shows taking place throughout the weekend.

South African tourism kickstarts its annual multi-city roadshow 2024

Aligning with the strategic roadmap for the Indian market, South African Tourism is delighted to announce the 2024 edition of its annual India roadshow. Serving as an essential tool in promoting travel and tourism for the Rainbow Nation, the roadshow for the first time ever will enter the pink city of Jaipur. Scheduled from **12th – 16th February 2024**, the event will further move to other significant Indian cities, namely – Delhi, Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, and Mumbai in the respective order.

The 20th annual roadshow schedule marks a vital milestone in South African Tourism's efforts in the Indian market. It will witness the unveiling of the tourism board's year-long plan to engage with Indian consumers. The novel insights leading to redefined approach will enable the trade partners to tap into India's growing outbound travel market. Commencing in Jaipur the inaugural roadshow will be complemented by a panel discussion on 11th February 2024 and a gala for more than 150 key delegates and trade partners bringing on ground the sights, sounds, culture, and cuisine of South Africa.

India is currently one of the top three focus markets for South African Tourism across the globe and holds a position of strategic importance. Led by **Ms. Neliswa Nkani** –



Hub Head – Middle East, India and Southeast Asia, South African Tourism

the roadshow remains an integral tool in attracting 'more & more' consumers to the Rainbow Nation. For years, India has been one of the largest source markets to many destinations across the globe. Owing to the recent uptick in its appetite for outbound tourism, the country is impossible to overlook for any tourism board.

Commenting on the occasion Neliswa Nkani, Hub Head – Middle East, India and South East Asia, South African Tourism said "In 2023, we experienced another year marked by substantial growth in arrivals from the Indian market. Indicative of our successful strategy, the

increase in inbound tourism to South Africa is a testament to our initiatives undertaken in the preceding year.

*Through meticulously curated campaigns, we showcased the hidden beauty of South Africa leading us to achieving an impressive recovery of **82%** of the pre-pandemic level arrivals from India to South Africa.*

She continues "The overwhelming response not only underscores our commitment to the Indian market but also inches us closer towards our targets of surpassing pre-pandemic arrival figures. Eager to continue building on the robust traveller momentum witnessed so far, our 2024 roadshow promises to provide trade partners with novel and valuable insights. We are confident that our efforts will

assist our Indian counterparts in redefining their approach and equip themselves with all necessary tools."

Paving way for mutually beneficial partnerships with Indian trade buyers, the convention will host more than 40 prominent exhibitors from the Rainbow Nation out of which 14 are SMMEs. It is also key to note that this year over 40% are new products. Each year, Indian and South African trade partners come together during the annual trade schedule and chart the way forward for the next phase of growth. Reputed companies such as Ethiopian Airlines, The Westin Hotels – Cape Town, SA Forest Adventures, and government authorities such as JoBurg Tourism, WesGro and more will showcase their latest offerings, promoting comforting stays, thrilling adventures, and unforgettable experiences.

In 2023, South African Tourism made a giant leap forward and inched closer to its target of surpassing pre-pandemic arrivals from India. It is worth noting that Indian travellers are the largest consumer of adventure in the Rainbow Nation. Besides, the country is also home to the largest population of the Indian diaspora outside India. As the ongoing conversations for improved accessibility through e-visa pilot program and direct air-connectivity make headway, the bond between the two nations will only flourish further. At present, several stop-over flights fly from India to South Africa, including Emirates, Qatar Airways, Ethiopian Airlines, Kenya Airways and Air Seychelles.

Bahrain highlighted as a unique destination for weddings



“**B**TEA is promoting Bahrain as a unique destination for weddings and other occasions from Asia, Africa, Australia, and the Americas, attracting their citizens and expatriates alike. These additional efforts are in line with its plans to develop wedding tourism in Bahrain through the “Island Wedding” initiative, which includes a variety of offers that appeal to families and tourists from all over the world.

Bahrain’s role in providing plenty of surreal landscapes and exceptional venues with an internationally highly ranked tourism institute, islands, beaches, the Bahrain International Circuit (BIC), and heritage-based locations to host such exotic weddings, makes Bahrain a favourable place for organising with prominent, well-known hotel chains that suit all wedding parties and pre-wedding occasions, in addition to the availability of Bahraini

wedding specialists.

BTEA Advisor Dr Ali Hasan Follad pointed out that the authority managed in such a short time to turn the idea of promoting Bahrain as a leading tourist destination for weddings and social occasions into a tremendous trademark in this regard on the regional map by targeting international and GCC markets.

“These efforts are part of BTEA endeavours to provide the necessary support to easily organize weddings in the Kingdom, as well as playing a pivotal role in planning and collaborating with the interested parties, working collectively to organize the logistics services, selected locations, and connecting suppliers and specialists,” he said.

Dr. Ali Hassan Follad, Advisor – Bahrain Tourism & Exhibitions mentions, “We have come up with a roadmap and started connecting with the stakeholders. We have also started to work on our website and several such developments.” The Kingdom has witnessed two weddings in 2017, 10 weddings in 2018, 13 weddings in 2019, two weddings in 2020, six weddings in 2021, and 21 weddings in 2022.

Follad sees positive growth for this segment, where arriving numbers recorded from 300, 500, 1000, to 1500, in the past years, and in addition, hosting the Ambanis also contributed significantly. “For any project, we go step by step.

Currently, Bahrain offers 25+ wedding venues, comprising both big and small. Indians mostly love properties that have access to the beaches, and some a dedicated portion also like to have weddings at the city properties. Bahrain aims at catering to all segments, giving them a diverse set of options.

Talking about the ease of doing weddings in Bahrain, Follad mentions “Regarding connectivity, we have 8 cities in India from where we have direct flights. We have Gulf Air, our national carrier, through which we can offer two options, either by scheduling flights or charter flights. “

With regards to closely working with the wedding planners and trade arena, Bahrain is planning to host FAM tours in 2024.

5 Reasons Why You Should Get Married in Bahrain

Linking east and west, Bahrain – which means “Two Seas” in Arabic – is set among several islands in the Gulf. With surreal landscapes and exceptional venues, Bahrain can elevate the wedding to a completely new level. Here are 5 reasons why you should pick Bahrain as your wedding destination:

1) The venues are stunning! Bahrain offers a wide range of stunning wedding venues, from luxurious hotels with exceptional services to historic

landmarks and picturesque beaches. These venues provide a romantic and unforgettable setting for a wedding ceremony and reception.

2) You can reach Bahrain easily with direct 4-5 hour flights from Mumbai & Delhi Bahrain is a small island nation located in the Persian Gulf, making it easily accessible from many parts of the world.

3) Bahrain has a warm climate throughout the year, which makes it an ideal destination for couples who want to have an outdoor wedding. The country has several beautiful gardens, beaches, and outdoor venues that provide a stunning backdrop for a wedding ceremony.

4) The BTEA has launched a dedicated website,

bahrainislandwedding.com, to promote the country as a wedding destination and further provide information to interested families about packages. You can find everything here from venues to decor.

5) The kingdom of Bahrain hosted more than 54 weddings between 2017 and 2022 attracting around 20,000 guests from all around the world with an average of 370 people attending each wedding. There were two weddings in 2017, ten in 2018, thirteen in 2019, two in 2020, six in 2021, and twenty-one weddings just last year. These weddings contributed millions of dinars directly to the national economy despite COVID-19 putting the brakes on 10 planned nuptials during the pandemic period.



EgyptAir has appointed Bird Travels as their GSA for North India

Egyptair, the flag carrier of Egypt has appointed Bird Travels Private Ltd. the airline management services arm of Bird Group as its General Sales Agent (GSA) in North India effective 1st February 2024. We warmly welcome Egyptair to the Bird Group family! said the bird group.

Egyptair, the flag carrier of Egypt has appointed Bird Travels Private Ltd. the airline management services

arm of Bird Group as its General Sales Agent (GSA) in North India effective 1st February 2024. Strengthening the airline's commitment and growing presence in the market is a significant step towards building its sales distribution network in India.

One of the world's pioneer airlines, Egyptair is a member airline of the Star Alliance Network, the largest airline alliance in the world. Egyptair is currently operating four weekly flights

between Delhi and Cairo connecting Egypt and onward destinations in Europe, Africa, North America and Canada. The airline also operates five flights out of Mumbai.

With over 50 years of excellence, Bird Travels is India's largest representation company with expertise in airline management, distribution, sales and marketing, representing some of the best aviation and travel brands as their exclusive GSA/ GSSA.



Türkiye aims to reach 3.5 lakh Indian arrivals by 2025

Türkiye received 2.3 lakh Indian tourists in 2019 and the 2.7 lakh estimates are a 20% jump over 2022 arrival numbers. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Türkiye and Türkiye Tourism and Promotion Agency in association with Travel Agents Association of India (TAAI) has organised a six city India roadshow commencing from New Delhi.



Türkiye would have received a record number of 2.7 lakh Indian tourists last year, eclipsing the Indian arrival figures of 2022 and 2019, **Onur Gözet, deputy director general, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Republic of Türkiye.**

He said the aim is to

reach 3.5 lakh Indian arrivals next year. Türkiye received 2.3 lakh Indian tourists in 2019 and the 2.7 lakh estimates are a 20% jump over 2022 arrival numbers. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Türkiye and Türkiye Tourism and Promotion Agency in

association with Travel Agents Association of India (TAAI) has organised a six city India roadshow commencing from New Delhi.

“Our official figures are not out yet, but we are estimating that we would have received about 2.7 lakh Indian tourists last year. The target is to make India among our top ten source markets in the next two to three years. India, as an emerging source market for tourism is really important for the ministry of culture and tourism and the Turkish Tourism Authorities,” said Gözet.

He also said the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are working to ease the visa application procedure for Indian travellers. “Turkish Airlines has 14 flights per week from Delhi and Mumbai, and Indigo has the same number of flights. The most important element in tourism is transportation. We will work on increasing the number of flights between India and Türkiye,” he added.

He said Türkiye saw a ‘remarkable’ surge in popularity among Indian couples seeking the perfect destination wedding last year, and that Türkiye is betting on the Indian wedding segment, as it is a good way of promoting Indian culture in the country.

The top source markets for Türkiye are Germany, Russia and the UK. “We are looking for new and emerging markets such as India,” he added. Overall,

Türkiye would have received 5.5 crore international visitors last year.

He said the country wants to involve more Indian travel agent associations such as TAAI as well as Outbound Tour Operators Association of India (OTOAI). “We will also try to expand our presence in other markets such as Ahmedabad, Lucknow, Chennai, Bengaluru and Chandigarh, as these markets also have a huge potential,” he added.

Gözet said one of the aims of the ministry and the tourism sector is to diversify the tourism product. “When we look at the Indian tourists in Türkiye, they come for culture, they come for history, they come for events, shopping, weddings and other MICE events. These are the types of tourists we want. This matches with our targets,” he added.

Jyoti Mayal, President, TAAI, commented on the roadshow, saying, “Tourism stands as a dynamic force for connecting individuals from diverse cultures, fostering mutual understanding. We are delighted to collaborate with Türkiye for their mega six-city roadshow after the challenging phase of the COVID pandemic. The interactions today in Delhi marked a successful commencement of the roadshow, graced by the presence of senior government representatives from Türkiye, highlighting the effectiveness of such interactions in building relationships.”



**Over 17 lakh foreign and 18 crore
Indian tourists visited this
state of Rajasthan in 2023**



From January 2020 to December 2023, a total of 32.44 crore domestic tourists explored Rajasthan, which appealed to over 22.20 lakh foreign tourists.

Over the past four years, the influx of domestic tourists to Rajasthan has surged twelvefold, marking a

substantial recovery in foreign tourist visits following the decline amid the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Rajasthan Tourism Department, the state witnessed a remarkable increase in domestic tourism, with over 17.90 crore tourists visiting the desert state in 2023.

Nearly 18 crore domestic and 17 lakh foreign tourists visited Rajasthan in 2023. The figures for 2020 stood at 1.51 crore domestic and 4.46 lakh foreign tourists, followed by 2.19 crore domestic and 34,806 foreign tourists in 2021. In 2022, the state hosted 10.83 crore domestic and 39,684 foreign tourists.

From January 2020 to December 2023, a total of 32.44 crore domestic tourists explored Rajasthan, while the state of royals attracted over 22.20 lakh foreign tourists. "Rajasthan has been a major tourist attraction among the tourists. After the coronavirus pandemic, a large number of domestic tourists have started visiting the state. The number of foreign tourists has also significantly risen," said Deputy Director of the Tourism Department, Daleep Singh.

The hotel association in the state expressed optimism following the visit of the French President to Jaipur, anticipating new tourism opportunities. M Hussain, President of the Jaipur Hotels Association, believes that the visit will unlock fresh possibilities, especially considering the previous high influx of French tourists to the region before the pandemic.

On a broader scale, the tourism and hospitality sector recently lauded the Narendra Modi government's focus on domestic tourism in the Interim Budget 2024-25 announced by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on February 1.

"The government's continued focus on domestic tourism in the interim Budget 2024-25 is encouraging. Empowering iconic destinations and local entrepreneurs through interest-free loans and quality ratings will elevate India's tourism landscape. The projects to enhance connectivity through the development of airports, railways, metros, ports, and the tourism infrastructure will enhance demand and generate employment," Radisson Hotel Group, South Asia, Chairman Emeritus and Principal Advisor K B Kachru said.

Travel Industry applauds Budget's favourable measures



The interim Budget of 2024 highlighted the Government's dedication to revitalising the hospitality sector and nurturing its enduring viability

The interim Budget of 2024 underscored the Government's commitment to reviving the hospitality sector and fostering its long-term sustainability. By addressing financial challenges, providing regulatory support and investing in infrastructure and human capital, the budget aimed to position the Indian hospitality industry for a resilient and prosperous future. The industry has welcomed the measures aimed at revitalising the economy.

A few reactions:

The Government of India's continued focus on domestic tourism in the interim Budget 2024-25 is encouraging. Empowering iconic destinations and local entrepreneurs through interest-free loans and quality ratings will elevate India's tourism landscape. The projects to enhance connectivity in the country through the development of airports, railways metro lines, ports in our unexplored island including Lakshadweep, and tourism infrastructure, will enhance demand and generate employment. This is not just a boost for tourism, it's an investment in

India's potential. We are optimistic about additional futuristic support from the Government in granting infrastructure status to hospitality and tourism, which will help us achieve a long-awaited status. We foresee that this will have a multiplier impact and drive significant investment from the private sector.

KB Kachru, Chairman Emeritus & Principal Advisor, Radisson Hotel Group, South Asia

The recent interim Union budget brings positive news for the hospitality, travel and tourism sectors. The Government's initiative to offer interest-free loans signals a welcomed boost for domestic tourism, especially in iconic tourist spots like Bodh Gaya, Ayodhya, Gujarat, Varanasi, and others. Special attention to Lakshadweep promises enhanced tourist infrastructure, making hospitality services more appealing and accessible. This development particularly benefits the middle class, fostering their aspirations to travel and explore. Overall, these measures aim to fortify the tourism industry, contributing to the nation's economic growth and offering

new opportunities for both businesses and travellers.

Nikhil Sharma, Market Managing Director, Eurasia, Wyndham Hotels & Resorts

The biggest expectation is to introduce input credit on restaurants and F&B businesses. Organized restaurant players are losing out, and as the chain grows, creating formal employment and business for registered vendors, we are still at a loss. Food is served everywhere, from bus stands to airports, up in the air, or trains. This results in a significant loss for both the government and the industry. The Vitskamats Group, with its extensive presence in the hospitality sector, anticipates positive changes in the budget that will address these concerns and foster the growth of the restaurant and F&B industry in India.

Dr Vikram Kamat, Founder and CMD, The Vitskamats Group

The Government's vision and initiatives for the tourism sector is much appreciated. The comprehensive development of tourist centres, especially the iconic ones, will showcase the rich and diverse cultural heritage of India to the world. Added focus on making India a MICE destination particularly after our positive experience in hosting the G20 summit is another welcome move and must be encouraged even through the PPP route. The provision of long-term interest free loans to the states will enable them to upgrade their

infrastructure and services and attract more tourists and investments. The focus on island tourism, especially Lakshadweep, will create new opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship, and enhance the connectivity and accessibility of these destinations. We hope that the budget proposals will further boost the growth of the tourism sector.

Vineet Verma, Director, Brigade Hospitality

It is an India first Budget. A confident Budget of a confident Government that focusses on the objective of ensuring that India becomes a 5 trillion-dollar economy by 2025 and a developed nation by 2047. I commend the FM for her unwavering commitment to sabka saath, sabka vikas, sabka vishwas. I commend especially the increase in infrastructure spending that will have a multiplier effect on our economy. I commend the evident railway corridors, and the one lakh crore fund for research and development and the startup sector. The emphasis on clean energy, technology and digital infrastructure will make India a world leader. This is India's moment, and this budget is part of a continuous process of making policy that will provide massive opportunities for India and Indians.

Ajay Singh, CMD, SpiceJet and President, ASSOCHAM

It is highly encouraging to note that the Hon'ble Finance Minister has highlighted the significance of tourism as an important driver of our economy to spur employment and GDP. The enhanced focus of the Government for promotion of MICE, religious tourism, iconic tourism centres and domestic tourism will lay the foundation of tourism development in the Amrit Kal and equip the sector to achieve the ambitious target of welcoming 100 million tourists by 2047. The tourism and hospitality sector are also very delighted to hear about the Government's vision to grant long term financing to states for developing iconic tourism centres. The Government has also reinforced its commitment to the tourism sector through the announcement that tourism projects will be taken up at islands, including Lakshadweep.

This strategic initiative promises a seamless experience for tourists and unlocks tremendous growth avenues for the hospitality sector. By enhancing infrastructure, it aligns with a mission to exceed evolving traveller expectations, making Lakshadweep a premier destination for discerning travellers. This visionary

approach transforms the islands into a magnet for tourists, creating new opportunities and propelling the hospitality sector into an era of unparalleled growth within India's dynamic tourism and hospitality landscape. This expansion of tourism in Lakshadweep is anticipated to generate a substantial number of employment opportunities. As the influx of tourists increases, there will be a corresponding surge in demand for a range of services, including hospitality, catering, transportation, and various other related sectors.

Pradeep Shetty, President, The Federation of Hotel & Restaurant Associations of India

Hon'ble FM Sitharaman's interim Budget speech underscores a strategic move to reshape India's MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions) landscape by encouraging states to develop iconic tourist centres. The commitment to promoting these centres through long-term interest-free loans signifies a visionary approach, fostering a thriving ecosystem for local entrepreneurs. The recognition of G20 meetings as a showcase of India's diversity is a powerful endorsement.

For the hotel industry, this announcement holds immense promise, turning these tourist centres into magnets for MICE activities. Strategically located and well-equipped, these centres can become hubs for national and international gatherings, boosting demand for accommodation, meeting spaces, and related services. The ripple effect is undeniable, with hotel occupancy rates set to surge as these centres become focal points for corporate events.

The long-term interest-free loans to states provide the financial impetus for seamless development, enhancing the appeal of these centres. This support not only fuels infrastructure growth but also attracts event organisers. Hotels, by aligning with the burgeoning MICE sector and offering top-notch facilities, can position themselves as preferred choices. The budget's emphasis, therefore, not only transforms MICE activities but also presents a significant opportunity for the hotel industry's growth and prosperity."

Kush Kapoor, CEO, Roseate Hotels & Resorts

We welcome the steps taken to promote the tourism industry, inter-alia, development of iconic tourist centers, long-term interest-free loans to states, enhancement

of tourism infrastructure, enhancing port connectivity and amenities in islands, etc. However, these initiatives can flourish with a further reduction in GST rates. Lowering taxes on hotel restaurants and rooms exceeding Rs 7,500 and easing input norms for hotel development would incentivise new and existing players, ultimately expanding the GST base. Additionally, streamlining access to concessional debt for private tourism stakeholders is crucial for unlocking further growth. Let's make tourism truly soar with a combined focus on infrastructure and rationalised taxes.

Sonika Malhotra Kandhari, Joint Managing Director of MBD Group

The interim Budget presented by the Finance Minister has focussed on tourism with a multipronged approach that we believe will create a multiplier effect across aviation, tourism and allied sectors, boosting growth and employment generation.

We welcome the announcements on airport development and expansion: having already doubled to 149 airports in the last decade, the government's plans to boost air connectivity by the addition of 517 new routes across Tier II-III cities, carrying 1.3 crore passengers via the UDAN scheme, will play a critical role with vibrant hub and spoke air corridors to boost accessibility-affordability for Regional India.

Implementation of major rail connectivity corridors via the PM Gati Shakti program together with port and metro/rapid transport expansion will serve to create valuable multi modal connectivity for Tourism.

We welcome the special focus on domestic tourism which represents a vibrant growth driver via the government's plan of long-term interest free loans to states; development of iconic tourism centres by states along with marketing on global standards. What was noteworthy is the reference to spiritual tourism and projects for port connectivity, tourism infrastructure and amenities on islands including Lakshadweep – aimed at development of India's hidden gems and employment opportunities.

Further, the strong capex outlay of Rs 11.11 lakh crore, a significant 4 per cent of our GDP, will serve as a catalyst to the country's growth potential and job creation.

Madhavan Menon, Executive Chairman, Thomas Cook (India) Limited

The recent Budget announcement brings positive news for the tourism and hospitality

sector. The development of iconic tourist spots is expected to contribute significantly to the local economy by drawing in visitors, creating job opportunities, and promoting business expansion. This will have a positive impact on numerous local economies. Additionally, the initiative is anticipated to result in enhancements to infrastructure, transportation, and various amenities, providing benefits to both tourists and local residents. An increase in tourism provides opportunities for cultural exchange. Visitors will engage with local customs, traditions, and arts, fostering a mutual understanding and appreciation of cities like Udaipur's unique cultural identity. An example of this was the G20 summit, which contributed to a rise in Udaipur tourism. Nevertheless, it is imperative to find a balance between development and the preservation of the spiritual and cultural integrity of the region. Prioritising sustainable and responsible tourism practices is essential to ensure long-term benefits without causing adverse effects on the environment or local communities. We eagerly anticipate the implementation of these initiatives for the advancement of the tourism sector in India.

Somesh Agarwal, Chairman and MD, Radisson Blu Palace Resort & Spa, Udaipur

The interim Budget presented by Hon'ble Finance Minister has maintained status-quo on direct and indirect taxes thus keeping its impact neutral. The government has set focus on the overall travel and tourism sector via infrastructure development, green energy, sustainability and looked at diverse initiatives for domestic tourism via a strategic approach for each segment - aviation, ports (waterways) and rail to strengthen regional connectivity to Tier II and III cities.

We welcome the development on the rapid expansion of air connectivity with the addition of 517 new routes across Regional India's Tier II and III cities via the UDAN scheme – this will play a key role in strengthening accessibility.

The special focus on strengthening domestic tourism via implementation of rail connectivity corridors under the PM Gati Shakti initiative and upgrading 40,000 regular train bogies into high-speed Vande Bharat trains will definitely strengthen surface transportation.

The Government's plan on focus on spiritual tourism, development of iconic tourist spots and island destinations of India including Lakshadweep (projects for port connectivity, tourism infrastructure,

and amenities) will generate employment thus boosting India's economy. What is noteworthy, is the Government's mindful move to form a panel to tackle challenges of higher population/over tourism, especially in destinations with sensitive ecosystems.

Vishal Suri, Managing Director, SOTC Travel Limited

The Government's continued thrust on tourism and focus on addressing some of the structural bottlenecks augur well for hotel demand. Special assistance has been announced to state governments for infrastructure development, through 50-year interest free loans. There are plans for development of iconic tourist centres and framework for rating the same as well. There is focus on enhanced connectivity, through airports, heliports and advance landing grounds. The budget also proposes promotion of coastal shipping to improve access to some destinations. Availability of requisite information through sector-specific skilling and informative guides would improve tourist experience and facilitate demand growth as well. Further, continued emphasis on ease of doing business will also be beneficial for the industry, considering the pick-up in new supply announcements in the last 15-18 months. The Draft National Data Governance Policy, which aims at data security, has been prepared and is under finalisation. Overall, the proposals in the Union Budget are expected to support the ongoing demand upcycle in the domestic hotel industry.

Shamsher Dewan, Senior Vice President & Group Head - Corporate Ratings, ICRA Limited

As someone deeply involved in the hospitality sector, I can't help but express my enthusiasm about the Interim Budget for 2024-25, especially its focus on the tourism industry. It's heartening to see the Government recognising the vast potential of India's travel destinations. The initiative to create renowned tourist spots and provide states with long-term, interest-free loans is a commendable step.

What's particularly invigorating is the Budget's emphasis on spiritual tourism, with Ayodhya emerging as a key destination. This increase in investment reflects a growing desire among travellers for destinations that offer not just a journey, but also a deep cultural and spiritual experience.

This Budget announcement signals fresh opportunities and responsibilities for us in the hospitality industry. It's a call to action for us to enhance our services and

amenities, aligning them with international standards. Additionally, the development focus on areas like Lakshadweep opens avenues for tourism growth, employment, and skill development, further bolstering the sector's progression.

In sum, the Interim Budget 2024-25's spotlight on tourism offers a pivotal chance for the hospitality industry to innovate and grow. It's a critical moment for us to elevate the sector's role in shaping India's economic and cultural narrative."

Navneet Nagpal, Principal Consultant and Director, Spectra Hospitality Services

We acknowledge, with satisfaction, the Government's sustained focus on travel and tourism as reaffirmed in the interim budget. The commitment to bolster domestic tourism through initiatives spanning rail and air travel, coupled with the ongoing emphasis on tourism-led destinations, particularly in the realm of island tourism and spiritual tourism, reflects a strategic vision for the long-term growth of the T&T sector.

The allocation of interest-free loans to state governments for the creation of iconic tourist destinations is a noteworthy step. The expansion of airports and the PM Gati Shakti program are pivotal in enhancing connectivity to previously unexplored regional gems. These initiatives will take domestic discovery to farther reaches of the country, thereby empowering local entrepreneurs and creating employment opportunities.

While the specifics are yet to be seen, collaboration between the industry and the Government is key to maximising impact, ensuring quality standards, and fostering sustainable tourism models for an enhanced traveller experience."

Rajesh Magow, Co-founder & Group CEO, MakeMyTrip

The Government's decision to invest significantly in the tourism sector, as stated by the Union Finance Minister in the interim Budget, is a welcome step that bodes well for the Indian economy. Coupled with a strong focus on infrastructure development, it will lead to the emergence of new tourism corridors, resulting in greater interest from domestic and international travellers to visit the less explored parts of the country. Mastercard is closely aligned with the government's vision of tourism contributing USD 1 trillion to India's GDP by 2047. To support this vision, the company launched its 'priceless india' program last year under

the guidance of the Ministry of Tourism. It offers exclusively curated experiences around India's rich history, culture, cuisine, and a lot more to travel enthusiasts from around the globe.

Gautam Aggarwal, Division President, South Asia, Mastercard

The interim Budget marks the culmination of the second term of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government and lays out the vision for Viksit Bharat 2047. Notably, significant announcements were made for the travel and tourism industry, creating opportunities that will, in turn, open doors for the restaurant sector. Finance Minister Sitharaman highlighted the establishment of a framework for rating tourist centres based on the quality of facilities and services, coupled with the provision of long-term interest-free loans to states for financing such development. This is poised to generate numerous prospects for employment and entrepreneurship in the tourism and hospitality domain.

Anticipating the forthcoming comprehensive and transformative Union Budget in July when the newly elected government will present a detailed roadmap for our pursuit of 'Viksit Bharat', there are expectations to address key concerns of the industry. These include the restoration of the GST Input Tax Credit, reinstating the Service Export from India Scheme, establishing a dedicated Food Services Ministry with industry status, reducing GST on eco-friendly materials, addressing GST on commercial rentals, rationalising licences and NOCs, ensuring equitable e-commerce policies, extending operating hours, implementing targeted subsidy schemes for SMEs, and introducing an employee welfare plan.

Pranav Rungta, Co-founder and Director, Nksha Restaurant and Vice President, NRAI

It is heartening to see the intent to push for tourism and regard this sector as a source of local job creation, domestic tourism, and inbound revenue. Clearly, the call is for Infra development and time will tell how this strategy unfolds. Lakshadweep and Spiritual Tourism have grabbed the fancy with the PM and FM driving focus. We expect good things will happen here. We understand this is an interim budget, however a reduction of the GST to a maximum slab of 12 per cent for rates above INR 7,500 per night would have been a great boost for Indian Tourism in 2024. We would have also liked for the budget

to shine a light on heritage tourism and the promotion of Offbeat Destinations which could make use of the lovely roads, telecom/wifi connectivity, and general infra improvement to reach the remote corners of India.

Ramit Sethi, Co-founder, Seclude Hotels Home Style

Interim Budget 2024 paints an optimistic picture for India's aviation and tourism sectors. The significant increase in the number of airports to 149 over the last decade and the targeted expansion of existing airports highlights the government's dedication to fostering growth in aviation. With orders for over 1,000 new aircraft, conducive policies for leasing the sector are ready to address the demand.

Furthermore, the Government's attention to tourism projects in islands, including Lakshadweep, opens up exciting possibilities for both sectors. There's substantial potential in promoting tourism, especially spiritual tourism, and encouraging states to develop iconic tourist spots and launch new airlines on those routes is a welcome start. The escalating aspirations of the middle class to travel and explore align with the broader vision for the industry.

Jaideep Mirchandani, Chairman, Sky One, Sharjah

The G20 conferences held in India have significantly contributed to the growth of the travel and tourism sector within the country. This has not only elevated India's status as a prominent global tourist destination but has also proven to be a boon for the industry. The recent interim budget announcement by Finance Minister Sitharaman underscores a proactive approach, urging states to embark on the comprehensive development of iconic tourist centres. The strategy involves branding and marketing these centres on a global scale. Sitharaman emphasised the establishment of a framework for rating these centres based on the quality of facilities and services. Additionally, she highlighted the provision of long-term interest-free loans to states to facilitate the financing of such developmental initiatives. As anticipation builds for the upcoming Union Budget to be presented by the new government, it is noteworthy to acknowledge the substantial support the Finance Minister has provided to the tourism industry over the past six years.

Saurabh Gahoi, Vice President, India, Ramee Group of Hotels

As the network via road, rail, airport, and highway increases, it opens up opportunities for more travel, which creates a domino effect over the food and beverage industry as well. With developments like these and spiritual tourism coming up, the scope for established as well as new food brands has increased. The Hon'ble Finance Minister's announcement to develop infrastructure across the country is a welcome step for everyone related to the F&B industry. The international and domestic brands will get a chance to penetrate more nationwide, also giving a great employment opportunity."

Simranjeet Singh, Director, CYK Hospitality

The 2024 Union Budget holds promising implications for our industry, with a commendable focus on uplifting marginalised sections and promoting tourism. Prioritising the gareeb (poor), mahilayen (women), yuva (youth), and annadata (farmers) reflect an inclusive growth approach, ensuring equitable distribution of tourism-related benefits.

The commitment to developing iconic tourist centres and global marketing is a positive step that can significantly boost tourist influx, benefitting hotels and hospitality establishments nationwide. The ongoing expansion of airports over the past decade has enhanced infrastructure for the aviation and tourism sectors, improving connectivity for domestic and international tourists. This not only makes travel more accessible but also creates new opportunities for growth and expansion within the hospitality sector. Overall, the 2024 budget aligns well with the industry's needs, paving the way for a more inclusive, connected, and prosperous future.

Sibasish Mishra, Founder and CEO, Bookingjini

Tourism cannot grow without investment. We welcome the government's initiatives on developing iconic tourist centres and investing in tourism and connectivity infrastructure. Measures such as long term loans to states will foster long term development and unlock India's tourism potential. We hope for more measures from the government that continue to build our air infrastructure and hospitality sector. This development will not just invite the world to explore our heritage but also ignite local economies and our pride!

Chirag Agrawal, Co-Founder, TravClan

We applaud the forward-thinking measures outlined in Union Budget 2024, particularly the interest-free loans for states to enhance their tourism hubs, attract business and create entrepreneurship and employment opportunities for locals.

The proposed port connectivity and infrastructure improvements for island and other attractive location accessibility in the country will motivate families and young tourists to opt for domestic travel. This step will further strengthen the hospitality industry and travel and tourism sector will grow rapidly in the country.

Overall, being an interim budget, Union Budget 2024 was balanced and I expect the recommendations made for direct and indirect taxes will empower the middle class to spend the money on leisure and travel more.

Davinder Juj, General Manager, Eros Hotel New Delhi

I'm thrilled by the Government's proactive measures to bolster the tourism sector, particularly the initiative to offer long-term interest-free loans for the promotion of iconic tourist centres. This progressive approach underscores a commitment to showcasing India's rich cultural and natural heritage on a global stage.

Furthermore, the Government's emphasis on integrating green energy initiatives within the tourism industry is a significant stride towards sustainability. At Dharana, we believe in embracing this initiative, aligning with our ethos of environmental stewardship. By harnessing renewable energy sources and implementing eco-friendly practices, we aim to minimise our environmental footprint while offering guests transformative wellness experiences amidst nature.

This concerted effort signifies a progressive shift towards sustainable tourism, where economic growth harmonises with environmental conservation. Together, let's embark on a journey towards a greener, more resilient tourism industry—one that not only enriches the lives of travellers but also safeguards the beauty of our planet for generations to come.

Srikant Peri, General Manager, Dharana at Shillim

We celebrate the visionary steps taken in the interim Union Budget 2024 by FM Sitharaman, maintaining tax stability for a robust economic environment. The

laudable commitment to boost domestic and inbound tourism through island projects and Metro Rail expansion is noteworthy. With the inauguration of the Ram Mandir, emphasis on 'Wed in India,' and 'Vocal for Local,' the government passionately promotes domestic tourism, aligning with PM Modi's vision. The announcement of 149 airport expansions will significantly enhance domestic travel. FM Sitharaman's foresight promises a golden era of unprecedented development in our nation over the next five years. Furthermore, by prioritising the empowerment of youth and enhancing digital, social, and physical infrastructure, the Government is actively encouraging the younger generation to play a pivotal role in the country's growth and contribute significantly to the GDP. FM Sitharaman's holistic approach ensures that our youth becomes an integral force in shaping the prosperous future of our nation.

Naveen Nahar, Partner, Travelz Factory

In order to catalyse the growth of the hospitality sector and bolster tourism, it is imperative for the Government to extend leniency in tax policies and allocate a substantial budget towards the development of infrastructure, enhancing guest experiences, and elevating the standards of hotels. Adopting visa-free or on-arrival policies, as many countries have done, will make us more competitive in the global tourism market.

Furthermore, a significant increase in budget allocation for Leave Travel Allowance (LTA) is crucial. This not only benefits the staff but also serves as a catalyst for domestic tourism. The government should actively promote and invest in initiatives that encourage domestic travel, tapping into the potential of a burgeoning economy and a youthful population.

To facilitate the growth of hotels and resorts, the loan process should be streamlined, ensuring easy access to funds that enhance cash flow and property development. Addressing the high operational costs and providing tax relaxations will alleviate financial burdens on the hospitality industry, ultimately contributing to a more competitive and thriving sector.

Recognising the current economic landscape, where guest spending capacity is hampered by inflation, it becomes imperative to offer tax relief to boost spending on travel. With a growing economy and increasing incomes, Indians are poised

to spend more on travel. Leveraging social media as a powerful tool for marketing and promotion, India is set to become the 4th highest spender by 2030, spending an estimated \$410 billion.

These measures outlined in the post-budget disclosure are essential for positioning India as a premier destination for global and domestic tourists alike, ensuring sustained growth and prosperity in the hospitality sector.

Priyanka Sharma, Revenue Manager, Clarks Exotica Convention Resort & Spa

The interim Budget 2024 will bring growth in the medical tourism sector. The pledge to enhance iconic tourist centres not only beckons global explorers but also holds promise for the burgeoning medical tourism sector. With 40,000 rail bogies transforming to Vande Bharat standards and an expansion of airports to 149, connectivity becomes the heartbeat of accessible healthcare. This leap in infrastructure aligns seamlessly with the needs of overseas patients, facilitating smoother transitions for pre-treatment arrangements and post-treatment rehabilitation. The budget's wings extend beyond tourism, fostering a health-centric global connectivity. In addition to this, the latest Middle East-Europe-India corridor will also help in expanding Indian healthcare tourism and consulting facilities to overseas markets as well.

Rajeev Taneja, Founder, GlobalCare

As expected, this year's budget puts a strong emphasis on domestic tourism, and we truly applaud this move. The commitment to providing interest-free loans to states for enhancing tourism within their borders is a positive step to boost domestic tourism in the country. There are many offbeat destinations within India that are unique and one of a kind, so Government's pledge for the comprehensive development of tourist centres, with a focus on branding and global-scale marketing, is another welcome move. This will undoubtedly pave the way for transformative growth in the travel and tourism sector, enabling us to showcase the incredible diversity and richness of our nation to the world.

Sandeep Arora, Director, Brightsun Travel

The interim Budget has huge opportunities for spiritual tourism in India, this is very much positive news for any tourism sector in India, this will definitely support local entrepreneurship, and

startups getting extended tax benefits for expanding spiritual tourism is surely a great news for us. We, at My Tirth India, feel that this is a euphoria that was long due, this is a payback to our forefathers who have created such beautiful temples and structures in India and now it is the time for us to visit our old heritage temples and structures and start rediscovering India with My Tirth India.

The Government's emphasis on the comprehensive development of iconic tourist centres with global branding aligns seamlessly with Clarks Exotica's commitment to delivering unique and culturally immersive guest experiences. I see promise in the proposed projects for port connectivity, tourism infrastructure, and amenities in the islands, particularly Lakshadweep. He notes the potential for these initiatives to enhance destination allure and act as catalysts for significant employment generation within the hospitality sector. Anticipating heightened demand for accommodation and services, Bhat envisions a positive upswing for the industry. The Finance Minister's targetted approach to elevate tourism in islands, notably Lakshadweep, needs specific commendation. The need to navigate challenges such as sustainable development and infrastructure requirements, emphasising prudent planning and collaboration between the government and private sector entities like Clarks Exotica. I acknowledge the Finance Minister's recognition of opportunities for local entrepreneurship, including in spiritual tourism. I am confident that local businesses and entrepreneurs within the hospitality sector are poised to play a pivotal role in showcasing indigenous experiences, promising not only a substantial economic impact but also fostering community engagement and sustainable tourism practices. In conclusion, as observed by Ramachandra Bhat, the Finance Minister's forward-thinking proposals are poised to usher in positive transformations for the hospitality sector's future, aligning well with Clarks Exotica's commitment to excellence and unique guest experiences.

Indraneel Dasgupta, Managing Director and Founder, My Tirth India

The infrastructural support extended in the current budget (across air, water, railways and roads) will be an essential boon for tourism. In addition to this, I believe that promoting 'Destination India' would require us to look holistically at

ensuring that our country can sustainably manage an uptick in tourism. This includes prioritising the wellbeing of native communities, protecting heritage sites, preserving natural ecosystems and promoting circular economies to secure responsible consumption and production chains. While advocating the promotion of iconic destinations, we can also look at increasing access to remote areas of the country where travellers can seek out unique experiences. I would also urge each of us to work collectively to mitigate the impact of tourism on people and the planet in accordance with global sustainability benchmarks. This can be done through various macro and micro initiatives in collaboration with public, private and non-governmental organisations across the industry.

Shruti Shibulal, CEO and Director, Tamara Leisure Experiences

As the Finance Minister charts the course for India's economic future in the interim budget 2024, JetSetGo stands in harmony, sharing a vision of 'Reform, Perform, and Transform.' Aligned with the government's forward-looking initiatives, we celebrate the doubling of airports to 149, enabling private aviation companies like ours to extend our reach and serve as a vital link for India's economic leaders, entrepreneurs, and decision-makers. The expansion of airport infrastructure complements our commitment to efficient time management and personalized services, ensuring a seamless travel experience. We are enthused by the focus on enhancing tourism infrastructure on islands, recognizing the unique appeal of private jets for reaching offbeat destinations. Emphasizing urban mobility, the Finance Minister's vision paves the way for growth in the aviation sector. The broader emphasis on infrastructure development and increased spending, coupled with the optimistic outlook for India in the global aviation market, solidify our confidence in the growth story. JetSetGo stands aligned with this vision, having already established strategic partnerships with aircraft technology companies to introduce Advanced Air Mobility solutions, enhancing regional connectivity and contributing to India's dynamic aviation landscape.

Kanika Tekriwal, Founder, JetSetGo

The travel and tourism sector serves as a crucial economic driver for India, and this year's budget underscores the commitment

to fostering its growth and development. The emphasis on encouraging states to invest in and enhance iconic tourist spots is a strategic move poised to impact foreign receipts, thereby significantly creating more employment opportunities.

The Government's fast-track development and investments in airport infrastructure and road connectivity projects will play a pivotal role in boosting connectivity. This, in turn, is expected to result in a substantial increase in the number of inbound travelers, further solidifying India as one of the most sought-after destinations among global travelers. Moreover, announcing the port connectivity, including in places like Lakshadweep, will open up additional gateways for travellers, unlocking more avenues to explore the diverse offerings of our incredible nation. Additionally, the focus on spiritual tourism is poised to contribute immensely to the industry's tremendous growth, ultimately bolstering the overall economic progress of India.

Shikhar Aggarwal, Joint Managing Director, BLS International

It is encouraging to see that the Hon'ble Finance Minister's statement aligns with the strategic objective of growing the country's infrastructure and tourism industry. The introduction of a novel system for classifying tourist locations according to amenities and infrastructure charts a revolutionary new direction and gives them a competitive advantage in the global marketplace. India's appeal to foreign tourists is enhanced by its dedication to the comprehensive development of famous tourist destinations, with a focus on captivating locations such as Lakshadweep. The budget places significant focus on advancing green growth by introducing biomanufacturing and foundry initiatives, indicating a proactive stance.

As the Finance Minister pointed out, the country's major train infrastructure projects are expanding due to the boost in economic strength, which also drives conference and business travel. The exponential increase in airports over the last ten years is evidence of India's dedication to accessibility and connectivity. It is heartening that this budget essentially lays out a revolutionary route that combines robust infrastructure development, sustainable tourism, and economic dynamism and will also boost adventure tourism in India

Rama Mahendru, Country General Manager- India, Intrepid Travel

Winter Wonders **in** **Türkiye**

**Top 5
Destinations for
Winter Sports
Enthusiasts**





Turkiye, the destination known for its breathtaking beauty all year round; beckons travelers to discover unique adventures with the changing seasons. As winter blankets the landscape, Turkiye transforms into a winter sports paradise, with an array of world-class ski resorts promising unique and unforgettable experiences. With its breathtaking mountain ranges, Turkiye has earned its place as one of the world's premier destinations for winter sports.

Explore Turkiye's top five winter destinations, each serving as a testament to the country's vibrant winter sports culture and awe-inspiring natural landscapes.

Uludağ

Recognised as a symbol of winter enchantment, Uludağ, is one of Turkiye's favorite and most beloved winter sports centers. As the highest mountain in Western Anatolia, Uludağ invites visitors to immerse themselves in the magical atmosphere of its





snow-covered peaks. Easily accessible from major cities such as Istanbul and Bursa, Uludağ guarantees comfortable suites, shopping halls, restaurants, cafés and bars, and vibrant nightlife for an unforgettable winter holiday experience.

Kartepe

Situated along the shores of Lake Sapanca, Kartepe stands out as Türkiye's nearest ski resort to Istanbul. Kartepe is the winter wonderland you've always imagined, with its hillside fruit orchards, villages, and forests

of hazelnut, oak, and chestnut trees. With its off slopes that suit skiers of all levels and its proximity to renowned attractions like Maşukiye and Lake Sapanca, Kartepe offers the perfect combination of skiing excitement and serene lakeside tranquility.





Kartalkaya

Nestled in the Köroğlu Mountains in Bolu, Kartalkaya is renowned as a favoured ski destination, conveniently situated near major cities like Istanbul and Ankara. Visitors can immerse themselves in alpine bliss, experiencing expert slopes catering to snowboarders and a seamless integration of nature with winter sports.

Mount Erciyes

Situated in Central Anatolia, Erciyes Ski Center on Mount Erciyes (3,916 m), the highest summit of Anatolia, emerges as a premier destination for skiing and snowboarding enthusiasts. This extinct volcano, characterised by dramatic angles, offers excellent slopes and ideal conditions for skiers in search of delightful snowy experiences. While in Erciyes, you can also visit the fairy-tale winter destination of Cappadocia, stay in



cave hotels and explore the region's famous underground cities.

Palandöken

Embark on a journey to Palandöken Mountain in Erzurum, in Eastern Anatolia. As the most famous ski resort in the region and one of the country's largest ski resorts, Palandöken Ski Center, stands out with its snow quality and long tracks. It is possible to experience an uninterrupted ski track of 14 kilometres at the facility. With its challenging steep slopes, expansive long trails, and the allure of light powder snow reaching heights of two or three meters, Palandöken Ski Centre is also attracting professional skiers.





Kavya Resort & Spa, Luxury Resorts in Nagarkot, Kathmandu appoints 'Wanderlust Marketing', a bespoke division of Global Destinations, as their India representative

Kavya Resort & Spa, Luxury Resorts in Nagarkot, Kathmandu appoints 'Wanderlust Marketing', a bespoke division of Global Destinations, as their India representative.

A Luxury Resort in Nagarkot, nestled in the lap of the Himalayas, Kavya Resort & Spa embodies the union of exquisiteness, class, and luxury through its charming ambience and sublime views.

Seamlessly marrying Nepalese Tradition with Modern Sophistication tucked in the sleepy village of Nagarkot, Kavya is an ideal vacation amidst snow-draped peaks with beaming sunrises on freezing mornings – an exceptional experience to leave you spellbound. Amid rugged mountains and idyllic ravines, Kavya Resort & Spa is set on a peaceful site affording magnificent views. Re-think luxury and witness warm hospitality at Kavya, with panoramic trails and breathtaking butterflies clasped by the wildflower-strewn Kathmandu Valley.

Under the 'Wanderlust Marketing' vertical, Global Destinations aims to curate a compendium of unique and exclusive travel providers offering them comprehensive marketing solutions

while delivering to discerning travelers the most exclusive, bespoke, and memorable experiences from around the world.

TJ Grundl-Hong, Managing Principal, Kavya Resort & Spa, India is our priority market, and we are excited to appoint Wanderlust Marketing as our India representative.

Kavya Resort & Spa is a well-suited luxury & wellness property for the Indian discerning traveler and we have seen an exponential increase, from India during 2023, both in terms of the number of guests as well as length of stay, **Pranav Kapadia, Founder Wanderlust Marketing** shared, "It's an immense pleasure to add Kavya Resort & Spa to our portfolio and introduce the luxury resort, to our Indian trade partners.

Experiential Luxury travel from India has grown by leaps and bounds and continues to be on the rise. Today, travelers look for unique and distinguished experiences. The emergence of experiential luxury travel is one of the outcomes of the pandemic, where Indian travelers now look to engage in immersive, meaningful, and sustainable travel.



5 U.S. Destinations to Watch In 2024



The USA is home to many incredible experiences from coast to coast and rural to urban. Travellers are invited to explore ever-changing landscapes and discover diverse communities. Visit The USA spotlights five U.S. destinations that should be on the radar for 2024.



1 **Kansas City, Missouri:** **Swiftmania set to drive record numbers**

Kansas City is now firmly on the map thanks to one of the hottest new relationships to emerge in 2023. Queen of American pop and country music singer, Taylor Swift and Kansas City Chiefs tight end, Travis Kelce, have everyone rushing to the City of Fountains. Featuring over 200 water installations throughout the

metro, it is a true sporting mecca, home to everything from soccer to pickleball. Preparations are underway to host Triple Crown Sports' inaugural 'PickleCon' competition this August, one of America's fastest-growing sports, as well as the hotly anticipated FIFA World Cup in 2026. The city is also set to welcome the National Women's Soccer League, Kansas City Current, for their debut at the new CPKC Stadium in 2024. The 11,500-

seat venue will be the world's first stadium purpose-built for a women's professional sports team and is set to be the new tailgating hotspot. Off the field, visitors can enjoy the city's thriving barbecue scene, with restaurants smoking everything from pork, beef, and chicken to jackfruit, mushrooms, and fish. For those visiting in autumn, The American Royal is the largest BBQ competition across the globe, with more than 600 teams



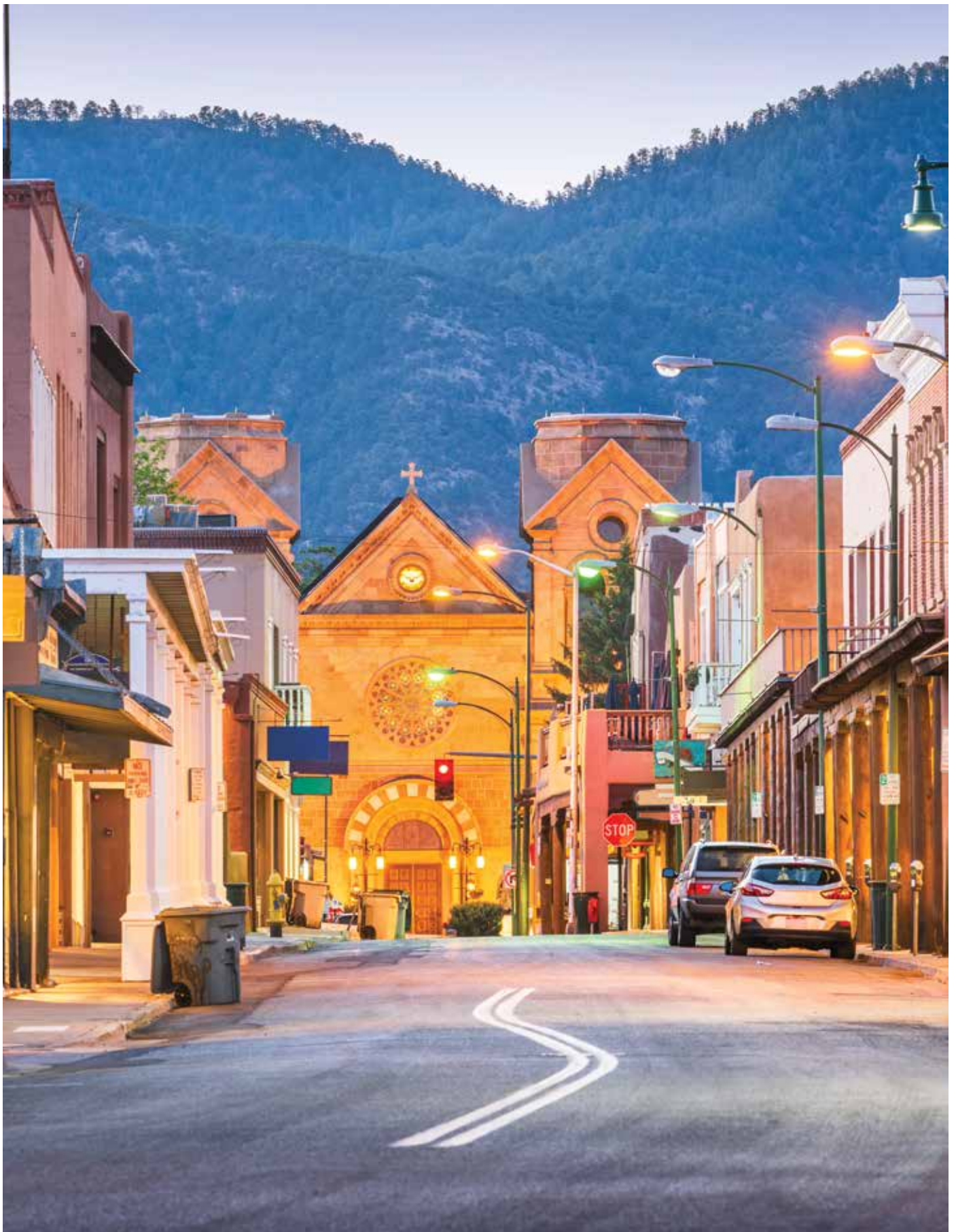
competing and tens of thousands of spectators/tasters!

2 Santa Fe, New Mexico: **America's melting pot of creativity**

With the breathtaking backdrop of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, Santa Fe is both mystical and eclectic. The land has become renowned for its healing qualities and is a spiritual haven while its varied terrain has lured artists from all over the world. Native American, Spanish, and Anglo-American cultures seamlessly blend forming a thriving creative community. Santa Fe is home to the Georgia

O'Keeffe Museum (showcasing the 'Making a Life' exhibition until March 2024) as well as the fantastical Meow Wolf – which is a completely immersive art experience called 'House of Eternal Return' which has over 70 rooms created by local and community artists. The city is also home to eight Native American pueblos and the Santa Fe Indian Market, one of the largest and most prestigious Native American art shows in the world featuring artists from over 200 tribes (taking place on 17 - 18 August 2024). However, to truly appreciate the arts, culture, and culinary landscape, look no further than the Art + Sol winter festival.





3 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: where old meets new

The birthplace of the U.S. and the first World Heritage City, Philadelphia is steeped in history, yet equally exudes a contemporary and vibrant culinary and arts scene. The Michelin Green Guide hails Philly as “an open-air museum” thanks to the 600+ sculptures and statues and over 4,400 outdoor murals. In late 2024, the Calder Gardens Museum is set to open, celebrating the impact that three generations of Calder family

have had on Philadelphia. The city also has a strong culinary stake - dubbed a true epicurean’s heaven - foodies can find everything from street food, markets, and fine dining to BYOB restaurants. Famed for its iconic cheesesteaks, hoagies, soft pretzels, and water ice, the roast pork sandwich is arguably the real deal with DiNic’s Roast Pork drawing a line around its Reading Terminal Market outpost (one of the oldest and largest public markets in America) every day. For those with a sweet tooth, the Philly

Tastykake comes in every flavour, from butterscotch to peanut butter.

4 St. Pete/Clearwater, Florida: From endless beaches to street art

Tucked away on a sun-drenched peninsula between Tampa Bay and the Gulf of Mexico lies St. Pete / Clearwater - a collection of 24 communities that perfectly weaves the great outdoors with an incredible art scene. Visitors are spoilt for choice with an award-winning 35-mile stretch





of coastline on which to kick back and relax including National State Parks: Honeymoon Island (ideal for nature lovers looking to spot eagles, great horned owls and gopher tortoises or hike the three-mile trail through one of the last remaining virgin slash pine forests) and Caladesi Island (one of the few untouched islands along the Gulf Coast and only accessible by boat). St. Pete is also an artistic enclave that is home to eight museums and 532 pieces of stunning street murals with Downtown St. Pete preparing for the 10th anniversary of the SHINE Mural Festival in October 2024. Visitors can also check out The Dali Museum's unparalleled collection of Salvador Dali's works, including the recently launched, Dali Alive 360° Dome, a multi-sensory immersive experience enveloping visitors in 360 degrees of

light and sound. Another must-visit is the Imagine Museum which features contemporary glass art exhibits from around the world or the Chihuly Collection, the first installation of Dale Chihuly's art.

5 Asheville, North Carolina: The majestic mountainous city

Nestled in the majestic Blue Ridge Mountains, surrounded by more than a million acres of protected wilderness and the tallest peaks in the East, Asheville prides itself on its Appalachian history and heritage. Combining music and the great outdoors, each summer, the Folk Heritage Committee invites visitors and locals alike to join in celebrations at 'Shindig on the Green', a free festival to support the preservation of traditional bluegrass

music, dance and storytelling of the Southern Appalachian Mountains. For those looking to connect with nature, the mountain city boasts spectacular hiking, biking, water rafting and horseback riding trails, as well as the chance to get up close with wildlife, from bird watching to foraging bears and herds of elk. This spring, guests will be able to sleep under the stars in AutoCamp's newest luxury airstream campsite, opening just 15 minutes north of town, along the banks of the French Broad River. Spoilt for choice, campers can also check into the new LOGE Asheville, set to open its first location in the Southeast next summer. Taking over the iconic landmark roadside motel, The Mountaineer Inn, the renovated property will include outdoor fire pits and bike racks in each room.

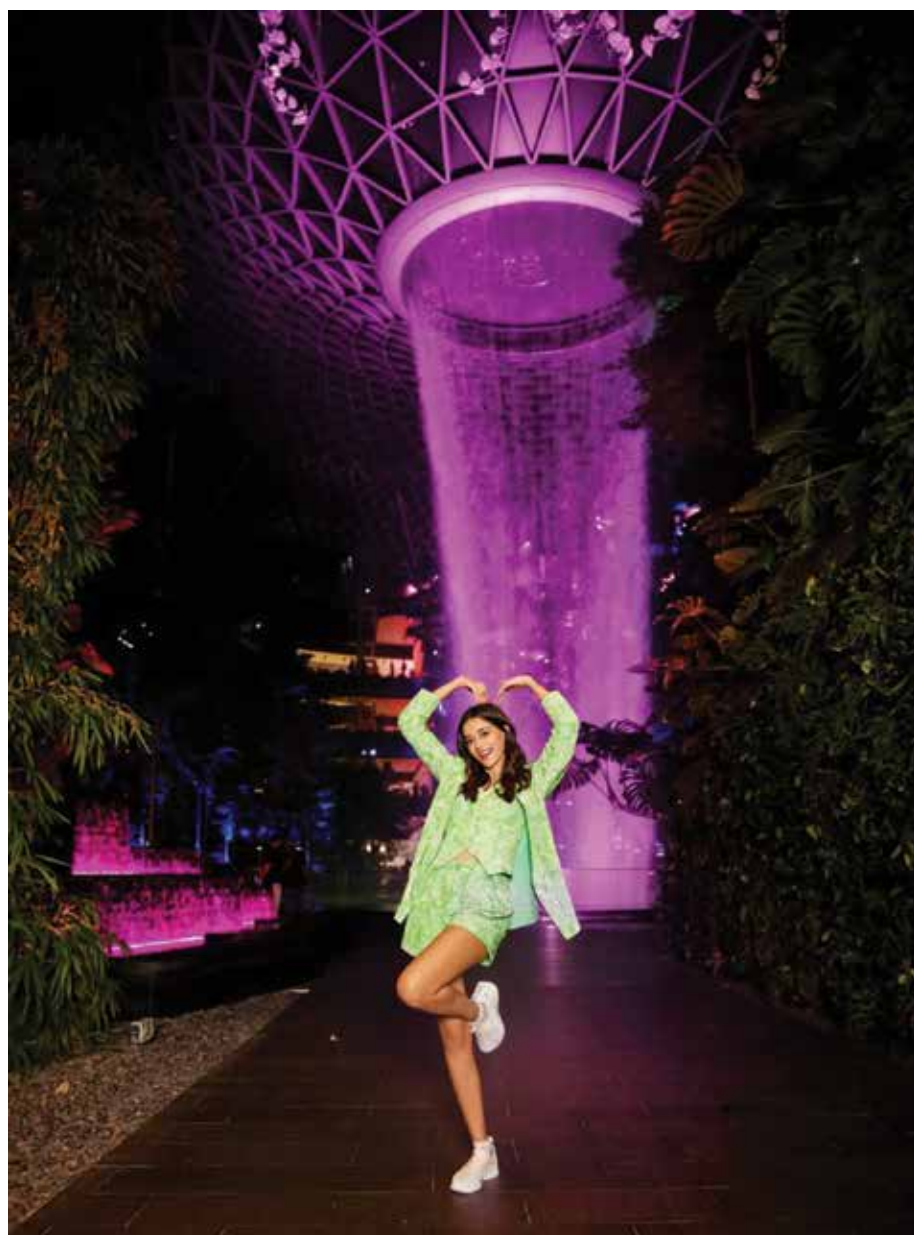
Singapore Tourism Board collaborates with Ananya Panday to throw a spotlight on the city's unique and extraordinary experiences

The Singapore Tourism Board (STB) has partnered with Bollywood actress Ananya Panday to showcase unique and surprising experiences that can only be **'Made in Singapore'**. Audiences will soon be able to watch Ananya in a 4-episode vlog series that promises to unveil a new, exciting, and fun side of Singapore that will entice them to travel to the city. The series will shed fresh light on the city where ordinary experiences are made extraordinary in very unexpected ways.

Talking about the partnership, Ananya Panday said, *"I have a great love for traveling, especially when it involves exploring hidden gems, discovering a different side of the city, and indulging the foodie in me. My recent adventure in Singapore was truly remarkable, providing unique experiences that made it an unforgettable journey that was truly one for the books. Each day allowed me to rediscover the beauty of this versatile destination and also reconnect with myself in the process. And I can't wait to visit again soon."*

Mr. GB Srithar, Regional Director, India, Middle East, South Asia & Africa, Singapore Tourism Board (STB), on collaborating with Ananya, said, *"Singapore continues to be a top-of-mind destination, offering a rich tapestry of unique, exciting, and memorable experiences to diverse travel segments, including the millennials. We are happy to collaborate with youth icon Ananya Panday as she explores Singapore's refreshed and renewed experiences through an engaging travel vlog series. This series is an invitation to rediscover passions, reconnect with yourself, and create lasting memories. On any planned holiday, there are unscripted*

It invites audiences to enjoy Ananya Panday's escapades as she explores off-beat locations and dives into adventures in the City in Nature



moments that make the holiday truly exhilarating. Singapore offers many moments to just immerse oneself and have fun. We hope Ananya's vlog

series inspires travelers to visit us soon and come to experience extraordinary offerings that can only be 'Made in Singapore'."

INTERNATIONAL

Switzerland's Premium panoramic trains





Switzerland's panorama train routes are among the most beautiful rail routes in the world. They are part of the country's heritage and history. They pass through the most majestic mountain scenery, idyllic valleys and villages; along crystal-clear lakes and ice-blue glaciers. Their privileged passengers enjoy stunning scenic splendours and superior travel comfort.

Bernina Express

This panoramic train connects the north of Europe to its south – right through the UNESCO World Heritage site of Rhaetian Railway, passing by glaciers on its way down to palm trees.

Crossing the Alps in the Bernina Express certainly is one of the most spectacular ways to do it. Along

the way, the Bernina Express rolls over the 65-metre-high Landwasser Viaduct, the signature structure of the Rhaetian Railway and the UNESCO World Heritage site. Altogether the train passes through 55 tunnels and over 196 bridges on its way from Chur to Tirano. Travellers are treated to marvellous sights during their journey, like the Montebello curve with a view of the Bernina massif, the Morteratsch glacier, the three lakes Lej Pitschen, Lej Nair and Lago Bianco, the Alp Grüm, and the Brusio Circular Viaduct.

In summer, the journey can be extended from Tirano to Lugano aboard the Bernina Express Bus.

Glacier Express

The journey in what has been dubbed the world's slowest express train takes

travellers across the Alps within roughly eight hours, passing through 91 tunnels and over 291 bridges.

The Glacier Express offers a journey for the senses – from Engadine right to the Matterhorn. On its relaxing drive from dazzling St. Moritz to equally sophisticated Zermatt, the Glacier Express delights travellers with scenic attractions and technical state-of-the-art achievements. With its overheight panoramic windows, the Glacier Express opens up unobstructed views of unique landscapes.

New: Excellence Class

A rail journey through the Swiss Alps has never been so luxurious. With guaranteed window seats, an exclusive bar, onboard entertainment, a concierge service, and personal

INTERNATIONAL

travel guides, the Glacier Express Excellence Class is setting new standards. The journey between St. Moritz and Zermatt is a feast for the senses: while the spectacular landscape passes by outside, guests are served champagne and amuse-bouches – followed by an exquisite five-course meal with accompanying wine.

With this new service, the Glacier Express offers one of the most exclusive rolling touristic highlights in Switzerland. Reservations for the most sought-after seats in Switzerland can be booked at glacierexpress.ch.

GoldenPass Express

The GoldenPass Express redefines

the travel experience between Interlaken and Montreux.

Seamless travel experience

The GoldenPass Express provides a seamless and even more comfortable travel experience on one of Switzerland's most picturesque train routes. The new panoramic train will connect Interlaken with Montreux up to four times a day, offering uninterrupted views of the breathtaking panorama.

Prestige

The new travel class "Prestige" is the centerpiece of the new train. It offers everything you would expect from an unforgettable train journey: plenty of privacy, maximum comfort in a small

compartment, and an exceptional culinary offering.

Make yourself comfortable on the luxurious and heated leather seats, which can be rotated 180 degrees upon request. The new travel class is also elevated by 40 cm compared to the other travel classes, offering you an even better view of the fascinating scenery.

Culinary delights on the GoldenPass Express

Local and international delicacies can be ordered in advance, ensuring a perfect start to an exciting journey. For example, how about a glass of champagne and a portion of the finest caviar from Frutigen in Switzerland?







If you prefer to pamper your palate with regional delicacies, you won't be disappointed with a traditional apéro-plate or a vegetarian alternative. While champagne and caviar are served exclusively in "Prestige" and 1st class, you can enjoy selected dishes from the small but exquisite menu in all travel classes.

World-famous places, three regions

The journey on the GoldenPass Express is like a foray through Switzerland. The trip starts in picturesque Interlaken and continues via Gstaad, Château-d'Oex, and Montbovon to Montreux, the journey's final stop. Of course, you can also start your trip in Montreux.

Interlaken is a great base for numerous activities and boasts incredible views of Eiger, Mönch, and Jungfrau. Luxurious Gstaad is known for its charming chalets and is a favourite holiday spot among stars and winter sports enthusiasts alike. Château-d'Oex is known for its hot



air balloons and, with a little luck, you might spot one aloft. Montreux, of course, is home to the annual Montreux Jazz Festival.

Swissness

The GoldenPass Express is a world-first and a Swiss masterstroke. After all, the idea of connecting Interlaken and Montreux without needing to change trains originated more than 100 years ago. The project never materialised, however, because of the different track gauges of the respective sections of the line. But this seemingly impossible challenge could now be solved by an ingenious invention: adjustable bogies.

Gotthard Panorama Express

A great experience of history comes alive: The journey leads from Ticino along the historic Gotthard panoramic route to Lucerne. Welcome to the original Switzerland!

Starting in Lugano or Bellinzona, the journey takes you from the Mediterranean south right through

the heart of Switzerland – and the Gotthard tunnel built in 1882 – over the Alps towards the north. En route, the church of Wassen can be seen from three different angles; thanks to the bold railway layout with its many loop tunnels it has become world-famous.

On a steamboat, passengers seamlessly continue via Flüelen across Lake Lucerne. Many locations steeped in history such as the Rütliwiese, the Schillerstein, and Tell Chapel greet guests with their original Swiss charms. In the evening, Lucerne harbour – located right next to the famous Chapel Bridge – welcomes the travellers. And by the way: The journey can easily be travelled in the opposite direction, too.

Apart from the many sights, passengers enjoy special presentations about history, myths, and legends around Gotthard during this historic journey through time. Last but not least, the culinary aspect will not be neglected: Guests may indulge in warm meals on the steamboat or enjoy snacks and beverages on the train.

Luzern–Interlaken Express

Lucerne and Interlaken. Two of Switzerland's most popular tourist destinations. But how best to get from one city to the other? Conveniently easy: with the comfortable Luzern–Interlaken Express.

The Luzern–Interlaken Express turns the journey from one city to the other into a great experience. During a train ride of roughly two hours, passengers marvel at five crystal clear mountain lakes that gather the waters from various rivers and waterfalls. At the lakeshore, steep rock faces of surrounding mountains rise protectively and provide unique photo motifs.

Shortly before starting its steep, winding ascent to Brünig Pass, the train changes to cogwheel drivetrain technology to conquer the gradient. With good reason, the Luzern–Interlaken Express is part of the scenic GoldenPass Line leading to Interlaken and on to Montreux.



The Shortest Day of The Year **And The Strange Phenomenon at Mount Karkom**

*Is That a Burning Bush?
Is This Mt. Sinai?
Solstice Bolsters a Claim*



On the year's shortest day, hundreds of Israelis ventured deep into the desert to witness a strange natural phenomenon atop an ancient pilgrimage site that some argue is where God spoke to Moses.

MOUNT KARKOM, Israel — The mountain kept its secrets for centuries, its air of sacred mystery enhanced by a remote location in the Negev Desert in southern Israel.

Far from civilization, close to the

Israel-Egypt border in southwestern Negev and a challenging four-hour jeep drive from Sde Boker, lies the 850-meter-high Mount Karkom. This natural site has become a pilgrimage of sorts for adventurers, intent on witnessing a natural phenomenon that reaches its climax on the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, December 21. This natural phenomenon can now be explained, but at the time it would have been

perceived as mysterious and magical, bestowing a unique, cult-like sanctity on the mountain.

A glowing aura of light, which looks like fire, appears to emanate from an opening in a rock, illuminating the edges of the cave with a yellow "halo". Many recall the story of the "burning bush" described in Exodus 3:1-2 when witnessing this spectacle. "Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian.



And he led the flock to the back of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 And the Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. So, he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not consumed”.

To view the phenomenon, one must stand at just the right angle on the mountain, viewing the entrance to the cave from approximately 200 meters - and at just the right time. The climax of this glowing phenomenon takes place precisely on December 21, the shortest day of the year, at noon – although it can be seen within twenty days on either side of December 21.

We now understand that this

bright light is the result of sunlight illuminating a limestone cave through a hidden aperture in its roof, but in ancient times this was not understood. The significance of this light ‘miracle’ in the depth of winter to ancient peoples was the promise of spring, renewal, and growth. They would ascend the mountain in great numbers to see the light appear on the rock.

There is much physical evidence of the cult-like attraction of the mountain, including dozens of ancient parallel tracks on the desert floor leading to the site. Around the mountain are 1,350 small archaeological sites from the Paleolithic period to the later Arab period, with most of the findings attributed to the Middle Bronze Age.

On the mountain itself, there are some 42,000 ancient rock carvings, a rare concentration in quantity for such a small area. This rock art includes a painting reminiscent of the tablets of stone, a painting reminiscent of the seven-branched candelabra known as the menorah, and a painting of a snake with a wooden club.

While there are those, like Italian Israeli archaeologist Professor Emmanuel Anati, who spent decades exploring the site and developed a theory (which many of his colleagues refute) that this mountain could be the Biblical Mount Sinai, there is no doubt that the mountain has been a cult and pilgrimage site for millennia and has been frequented by members of many civilizations.



Now Open Fireback Goa



Fireback is an exciting new Thai restaurant and bar from EHV International. Hidden behind an old Portuguese bungalow, Fireback serves authentic Thai food at a picturesque riverside setting in Siolim, Goa. The name is inspired by the Thai national bird, the Siamese Fireback, and also speaks to the fire-grilled cooking behind many of the restaurant's dishes.

Multi award-winning chef, David Thompson, is the Culinary Director for Fireback. Chef Thompson's legendary authentic Thai curries and stir fries anchor a vast menu of small plates and grills. The concept is equally led by its unique beverage program with cocktails inspired by Thai ingredients. Chef David Thompson says, "What an exciting prospect. We are looking forward to making Fireback fly."

Rohit Khattar, Founder Chairman EHV, says, "In 1999 in New Delhi, we opened what was perhaps India's first pan Asian restaurant, 'Oriental Octopus'. I always nurtured the desire to open an authentic, approachable Thai restaurant and am delighted to have David Thompson, whose cuisine I have always admired, as Culinary Director for Fireback. Our accomplished team of 7 chefs led by veteran Chef Swatantra

Gautam, were extensively trained in Bangkok and now are cooking with David in Goa. Our mixologist extraordinaire, Varun Sharma too travelled through Asia to bring an ideal cocktail list. We hope Goa enjoys Fireback.”

The Fireback menu showcases authentic Thai cooking in a lush, tropical setting, with flavors that seamlessly blend tradition and modernity. The cuisine is authentic and the service unfussy. The Josper grill that is centerstage, offers a host of grills and skewers – turmeric prawns; southern style pumpkin. There is a range of fluffy omelettes followed by small plates like salad of pomelo with toasted coconuts and shredded ginger

on betel leaves; smoky grilled eggplant gorlae, and more.

Thai curries are showcased with an offering of massaman curry lamb, deep-fried pumpkin; soft shell crab, red curry; sour orange curry of river prawns with shredded green papaya, and much more, while stir-fries include green flat beans stir-fried with yellow beans, baby corn and minced chicken with thai basil, bird eye chillies. Some familiar dishes may be bold, fiery, and uncompromising.

The Thai-inspired cocktail list includes whisky with pickled galangal brine, gin with Thai basil and custard apple, and an innovate blend of rum, rice and mango that recalls the classic

mango-rice dessert.

The restaurant is a modern glass house that steps down onto outdoor decks and a promenade overlooking the river. Dine by a fish pond or by the riverside with an outdoor bar taking centre stage. The stunning St. Anthony’s Church in the distance presides over this unique setting. The capacity of Fireback is 80 between the indoor and outdoor seating.

The interiors and exteriors have been designed by London’s Russell Sage Studio, coordinating closely with EHV’s Director Design, Rashmi Khattar. Architect Pratap Naik has worked on an ideal structure for the glass house, working with EHV’s Director of



Development Vikas Bhasin, who was in charge of end-to-end project development and management.

Fireback is the latest concept from EHV International. Chef David Thompson is the Culinary Director. Chef Swatantra Gautam with over 20 years of experience in Asian cuisines, is the Brand Chef, Prantush Rai is the Head Chef and Kamal Kant Joshi is the Chef de Cuisine at Fireback Goa. Varun Sharma, EHV International's Head of Bars, has created a unique beverage program with innovative Thai cocktails. Head of Wines, Kevin Rodrigues has curated a wine list that compliments the unique Thai flavors. Operations are spearheaded by Nikita Ohri, reporting to COO Nitin Mathur.

EHV thanks the owners of Irada Home, the property that gives Fireback its lovely setting. Irada Home is a venture by +nineone, a hospitality and real estate investment firm led by Yash Malhotra.

Address: Fireback, At Irada Home, House No. 60/1 A1, Near St. Anthony's Church, Vaddy, Siolim-Bardez, North Goa 403517, Tel: +91 9209717970 www.firebackrestaurant.com

Instagram: @firebackrestaurant Facebook: Fireback Restaurant Twitter: firebackthai

About EHV (www.ehvinternational.com)

EHV International, a part of the Old World Hospitality Group, owns and operates several path-breaking restaurants that are market leaders in their respective cuisines.

Indian Accent, New Delhi is renowned as the pioneering modern Indian restaurant worldwide and has garnered international acclaim for its cutting edge take on Indian cuisine. It has been on Asia's 50 Best Restaurants list for 9 years and was again voted the No. 1 Restaurant in India by Condé Nast Traveller 2023. Indian Accent, New York opened in 2016 and opened a hugely popular Mumbai outpost at the Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre in 2023.

Comorin, which features regional Indian comfort food with an innovative bar has been voted 'The Best Restaurant Bar in India' (30 Best Bars) 2 years running, and this year was voted the No. 3 Restaurant in India by the jury at the Food Food Awards with Indian Accent voted as No. 1.

Koloman, a contemporary French restaurant, received the coveted 3 stars from the New York Times. It is the company's second restaurant in New York after Indian Accent, with a third one, a Bar, expected to open in early 2024.

HOSA, Goa has created quite a niche for itself with its unique take on South Indian cuisine. Times Food & Nightlife Awards 2023 awarded HOSA, 'Best Modern Indian' and 'Best Restobar' in Goa. It has also been awarded the 'Debutant Restaurant of the Year' and 'Restobar of the Year', both for the West Region at the ET Hospitality World Restaurants & Nightlife Awards 2023.

Fireback is the newest addition to the EHV portfolio.

EHV International is poised to open several new restaurants in 2024-25 in India, as well as overseas. In addition to growing its existing 5 brands, several other new restaurant concepts are being developed.

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Record 85.1 million international tourists visited Spain in 2023

the majority stayed for 4 to 7 nights

Spain witnessed a groundbreaking surge in tourism in 2023, with a record 85.1 million international visitors travelling to the country.

This is a 19% increase over the previous year, according to the country's National Statistics Institute.

In 2023, Spain surpassed its pre-pandemic levels of

2019, welcoming 83.5 million tourists before COVID-19 restrictions impacted leisure travel across the world. The United Kingdom, France, and Germany emerged as the

top contributors to Spain's tourism influx during the past year.

From an economic perspective, Spain's revenue from foreign tourists soared



to 108.7 billion euros (\$117 billion) in 2023, showcasing a remarkable 25% rise compared to the preceding year. Tourism's significant contribution to the country's gross domestic product is 12%.

Catalonia, particularly Barcelona, the Balearic Islands in the Mediterranean, and the Canary Islands off North Africa emerged as the most sought-after destinations within Spain.

In December last year, Spain welcomed 5.2 million international tourists, marking a substantial increase of 26.2% compared to the same month in 2022 and surpassing the figures from December 2019 by 21.0%.

The United Kingdom emerged as the primary country of origin, contributing 907,752 tourists, representing an 18.7% growth from December 2022. Additionally, France and Germany contributed

significantly, with 819,405 tourists (23.7% increase) and 561,521 tourists (23.7% increase), respectively.

The duration of average stay for the majority of tourists ranged from four to seven nights, totaling over 2.2 million visitors. Nonetheless, there was a 22.3% increase in the number of day-trippers (those not staying overnight) and a 32.7% surge in tourists with extended stays lasting over 15 nights.

Regarding travel arrangements, almost 4.1 million tourists opted for independent travel without a tourist package in November, marking a substantial 24.8% increase. Conversely, over 1.1 million tourists chose a tourist package, reflecting a notable 31.3% rise.

France, Spain, and the US have been the top three global tourist destinations, which are visited by the highest number of international travellers.



Saudia's recent rebranding elevates its commitment towards luxury travel

In the wake of its recent rebranding, Saudia, the national flag carrier of Saudi Arabia, has intensified its commitment to providing an extraordinary travel experience, particularly for those who aspire to the pinnacle of luxury in the skies. The rebranding signifies a strategic shift towards a more refined, digitalized and elevated services, with a heightened emphasis on passenger satisfaction. From new brand identity, livery, revamped in-flight services to enhanced ground experiences, Saudia is placing a premium on every aspect of the traveler's journey.

Here are some of Saudia's premium services, exemplifying its dedication to redefine the standards above the clouds.

ALTANFEETHI Premium Service:

Embark on an unparalleled travel journey with ALTANFEETHI, Saudi Arabia's exclusive service that unfolds a distinctive experience across more than 27 executive private terminals. From arrival to departure, experience luxury at every step. Enjoy exclusive amenities like a private terminal, Meet & Greet, and Fast Track check-in. Benefit from private transportation, efficient baggage handling, and world-class hospitality. A dedicated personal assistant, nearby private parking, and access to a fully-equipped business center ensure a seamless and opulent journey. ALTANFEETHI is committed to delivering an unparalleled travel experience from start to finish.

Saudia's First Suite & Business Class: A Symphony of Comfort and Luxury

Indulge in Saudia's First Class Suite—a private oasis featuring an 82 seat, 23 HD screen, and 5000 hours of entertainment. Stay productive with a 24x24.5 table and Wi-Fi. When it's time



to unwind, your cabin crew transforms your space into a comfortable bed with exclusive Porsche Design pyjamas. Contributing to enhancing operational excellence and elevating the guests' travel experience, Saudia Technic, a Saudia Group subsidiary, is upgrading First Suites on its Boeing 777 fleet to boost operational excellence and enhance guest experiences. The successful completion of the HZ-AK37 aircraft upgrade marks the beginning of this project, tailored for long-haul and direct Saudia flights. Plans are in place to extend these enhancements to the remaining nine aircraft of the same model.

Saudia's Business Class is tailored for discerning travelers, creating an ambiance ideal for both relaxation and productivity. Featuring full-flat beds and a spacious 17-inch HD screen offering 5000 hours of entertainment, the priority is efficiency, friendliness, and unobtrusive service, respecting passengers' personal space. Enjoy a warm welcome with cardamom-flavored Arabic coffee, dates, and fresh fruit juices. The generously reclining seats

provide ample legroom, comparable to other airlines' First Class. Adjustable padded wings and ergonomically-designed seats ensure maximum comfort for long-haul flights.

Saudia Airport Lounges: A Tranquil Haven of Sophistication

As an extension of the premium travel experience, Saudia's airport lounges, including the AlFursan lounges and SkyTeam Lounges provide a seamless transition from the bustling airport environment to a tranquil haven of sophistication. These exclusive spaces are designed to offer premium class passengers a retreat where they can unwind, refresh, and enjoy personalized services before their flight. The lounges reflect Saudia's commitment to creating an oasis of comfort and luxury for its discerning travelers.

For passengers seeking the finest in air travel, Saudia's premium classes, onboard services, and airport lounges promise a journey that transcends expectations and celebrates the true essence of luxury.

Bahrain Tourism and Exhibitions Authority (BTEA) Unveils “Celebrate Bahrain” for the Festive Season

The Bahrain Tourism and Exhibitions Authority (BTEA) announced the final list of events and activities, themed “Celebrate Bahrain” to be held in collaboration with partners, marking the kingdom’s national days. The diverse arrangement implies a fusion of family, musical, cultural, and sporting events set to captivate citizens, residents, and visitors alike throughout December.

The festivities begin with a series of events, such as the enchanting “Festival City,” a carnival showcasing several entertainment games, delectable restaurants, and live performances for families to enjoy. The celebration continues with the second edition of the Heritage Village, showcasing Bahrain’s rich cultural heritage. For those looking for a unique shopping experience, the annual “Autumn Fair” takes place at the Exhibition World Bahrain. This exhibition offers a diverse range of shopping opportunities, adding a vibrant touch to the festive season.

As the year comes to a close, the New Year’s Eve celebrations promise to be spectacular. Various locations such as Marassi Al Bahrain, Bahrain Bay, Water Garden City, Bahrain Financial Harbour, Bahrain Fort, Bahrain National Museum, and Al Najma Club are set to host events featuring dazzling fireworks displays. These gatherings provide a fantastic way for residents and visitors alike to ring in the New Year with joy and excitement. The festivities also include the return of the Muharraq Nights Festival offering an immersive experience in the heart of Muharraq City. For sports enthusiasts, the calendar boasts prestigious events such as the Ironman 70.3 Middle East Championship, Rotax Max Challenge Grand Finals, horse racing competitions, and the Brave championship series.

To enhance the tourist experience, Bahrain Tourism and Exhibitions Authority (BTEA) also introduced special packages focusing on various fields, such as exploring Bahrain’s rich musical and cultural

diversity, golf experiences, New Year’s celebrations, coral events, and sports. Each package was curated to provide unique offers and benefits for a memorable stay. As part of these extraordinary offerings, Gulf Air extended a festive gesture with a generous 16% discount on flight offers, ensuring a seamless journey to Bahrain’s enchanting festivities. Furthermore, shoppers and diners enjoyed treats with discounts and prize opportunities at Moda Mall, City Centre Bahrain, Seef Mall, and The Avenues. For a hassle-free and immersive stay, tourists could avail themselves of

comprehensive packages covering accommodation, entertainment, and transportation.

As the enchanting “Celebrate Bahrain” events unfold,” Bahrain Tourism and Exhibitions Authority stands ready to welcome citizens, residents, and visitors alike to immerse themselves in the vibrant festivities, creating enduring memories in the heart of the kingdom. Simultaneously, BTEA is poised for action, gearing up to launch intensified promotional campaigns that aim to not only showcase the significance of the festivities but also to ensure maximum global participation.



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