



PRESIDENT'S NOTE

How Gods drive India's consumer economy was robustly demonstrated at Mahakumbh recently.

Festivals, small as well as big, are crucial to India's economy because it is driven by consumers. Consumption accounts for nearly 60% of the GDP. India's economic rise in the past three decades, after the liberalisation, is largely on the back of consumption growth. Now India is expected to become the third-largest consumer market in the world in a few years. Consumer goods companies pin their hopes on numerous festivals all the year round to boost their sales, especially when the consumption is ebbing.

The Maha Kumbh at Prayag Raj was no exception. The mega business of Maha Kumbh had a budget of about Rs 12,670 crore, including both the state and central spending. With crores of people visiting Prayagraj during the Kumbh, they generated huge business.

India's population is about 140 crore. According to some estimates, 40 crore people visited the Maha kumbh. That was more than a fourth of India visiting a temporary district over just 45

days – or close to 90 lakh people on an average every day. The money they spent can total up to Rs 2 lakh crore.

Not just that. India's leading companies captured eyeballs and test new products at the Mela. Brands had spent about Rs 3,600 crore on advertising and marketing around Maha Kumbh, about 25% of which was allocated for outdoor advertising.

Millions of people had taken a holy bath at the Mahakumbh - described as humanity's biggest gathering.

Sudesh Poddar

President, HRAEI

EDITOR'S MESSAGE



“

There are multiple states, union territories and 1300 islands in India which are along the coastline or along the banks of states and interstate rivers or national waterways

Cruise tourism is a nature-driven travel experience that unlocks a country's rivers, seas, and canals for themed journeys across all budgets. It offers safe and comfortable access to even remote destinations, promoting inclusivity and ease of travel.

By tapping into natural waterways, it boosts both national and international connectivity while driving local economies through job creation in hospitality, entertainment, culture, and beyond.

India has significant capabilities in cruise tourism for coastal & river sector. This is due to the presence of: 12 Major and 200 Minor Ports along the 7500 km long coastline across the west and east; Network of more than 20000 kilometres long navigable 110 waterways connecting around 400 rivers.

There are multiple states, union territories and 1300 islands in India which are along the coastline or along the banks of states and interstate rivers or national waterways.

The central government has taken up two grand initiatives: Cruise Bharat Mission and Maritime India Vision 2030 to tap this golden market.

MYSTIC EAST

A BI-MONTHLY MAGAZINE BY HRAEI
Vol 12| Issue 2| March - April 2025

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

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Visitors can enjoy traditional performances, participate in indigenous games, and explore Naga cuisine and crafts

The Hornbill Festival, annually in Nagaland, is a vibrant celebration of the state's rich cultural heritage and tribal traditions.

Nagaland is home to several tribes, each with its distinct culture. Each of the tribes in Nagaland has its own elaborate festivals. These festivals are associated with agriculture as people here survived on agriculture and the majority of them still do. Each tribe considers their festival to be sacred and hence participating in their festivals is of utmost importance.

The festival brings together all the major tribes of Nagaland, showcasing their unique customs, music, dance, and art. These are individual festivals of the tribes. The government has taken an initiative to celebrate an inter-tribe festival making the Hornbill Festival the biggest in the state.

Visitors can enjoy traditional performances, participate in indigenous games, and explore Naga cuisine and crafts. It is known as the “Festival of festivals” and represents the cultural diversity of Nagaland's tribes to encourage intercultural relations among them. The festival, held in Kisama Heritage Village near Kohima, has become a major attraction for tourists, offering a colorful glimpse into the dynamic tribal culture of Northeast India.

Pranav Singh

Honorary Secretary, HRAEI

Cover Story

March - April 2025

28

GODS AND ENDS

How Gods drive India's Consumer Economy was demonstrated at Mahakumbh Mela recently



23



■ BIGGER AND BETTER

The Hornbill festival began in 2000 to celebrate tribal life. Now in its 25th year, Nagaland is gearing up to celebrate the Hornbill Festival



■ KOLKATA'S HERITAGE LANDMARK

34

Mr Kamal Raza has been working as Unit Head (Resident Manager) from December 2022 with The Lalit Great Eastern Kolkata, the 180 years old heritage luxury hotel.

38

▪ CRUISE TOURISM



India has significant capabilities in cruise tourism on its coastal and river sector

44

▪ SUCH A LONG JOURNEY



In Swahili, Hatari means risk. The Director of iconic 60-year old restaurant Samarendra Mukherjee is not averse to taking up challenges.

46

▪ THE SOLITARY REAPER



Maverick woman Rachna Dewan has been slowly building her own empire called The Palm Aryan



48

▪ STATE SURVEY

West Bengal is in fifth position in foreign tourist arrival and it can easily move up the ladder.

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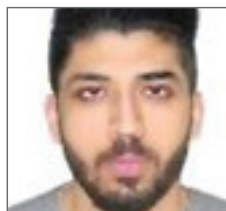
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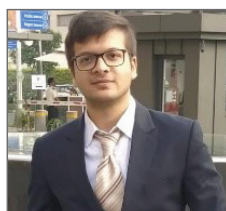
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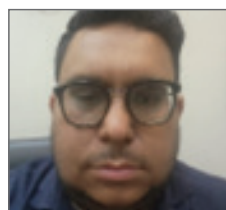
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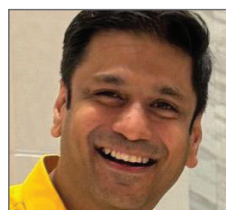
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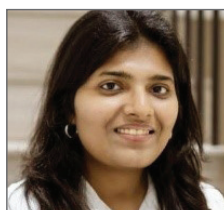
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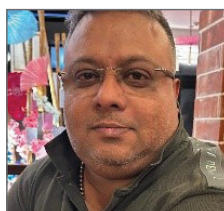
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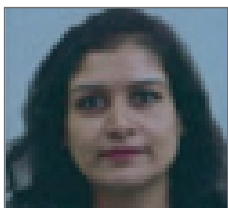
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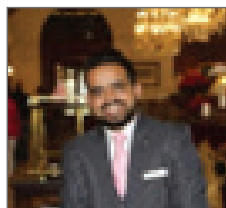
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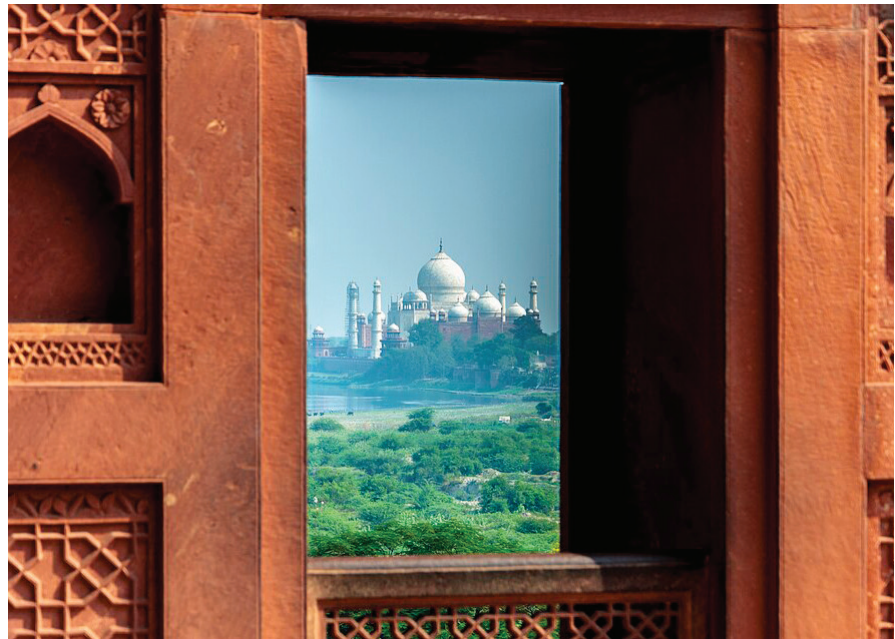
Hospitality Investments Shift to Smaller Cities as Growth Expands Beyond Tier-I Markets: Report

The Indian hospitality sector is witnessing a significant shift as investment momentum moves from traditional metro hubs like Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru to smaller tier-II, III, and IV cities. This diversification is fueled by the increasing urban population, government initiatives, and the growing appeal of niche tourism, according to the HVS Anarock HOPE 2025 report.

The report highlights a record-breaking year for hotel signings in 2024, with over 47,500 rooms across 486 properties signed—an unprecedented milestone. Interestingly, 74% of these new projects were concentrated in smaller cities, up from 65% in 2019. The shift underscores a growing trend in the hospitality industry to tap into untapped and high-potential markets.

With increasing disposable incomes and the rise of domestic travel, these smaller cities are becoming focal points for both leisure and business travel. Hotel operators and investors are keen to capitalize on the demand in emerging urban areas, where room availability and tourism infrastructure have long been limited.

Despite the rapid expansion, overall occupancy rates in 2024 hovered between 63-65%, marking a 1-3% growth compared to 2023 but still slightly below pre-pandemic levels. As these smaller cities integrate into the broader hospitality ecosystem,



occupancy rates are expected to improve further.

The expansion has been bolstered by government initiatives such as the development of regional connectivity through the UDAN scheme and a focus on promoting tourism in tier-II and III cities. Additionally, state governments are providing incentives to encourage hotel development, which has played a vital role in attracting major hospitality players to these regions.

The report signals immense opportunities for hotel operators to diversify their portfolios and target the underpenetrated markets of smaller cities. Brands are leveraging cost-efficient greenfield and brownfield de-

velopments to ensure their offerings align with the needs of these regions, including midscale, budget, and boutique accommodations.

For the hospitality sector, this is not just an expansion but a recalibration of strategy. With smaller cities poised to contribute significantly to the industry's growth, hoteliers must innovate and adapt to cater to the evolving expectations of these new-age travelers while ensuring sustainable practices.

As the hospitality boom moves beyond tier-I markets, the spotlight is firmly on smaller cities to lead the next wave of industry growth in India.

Source:Mint



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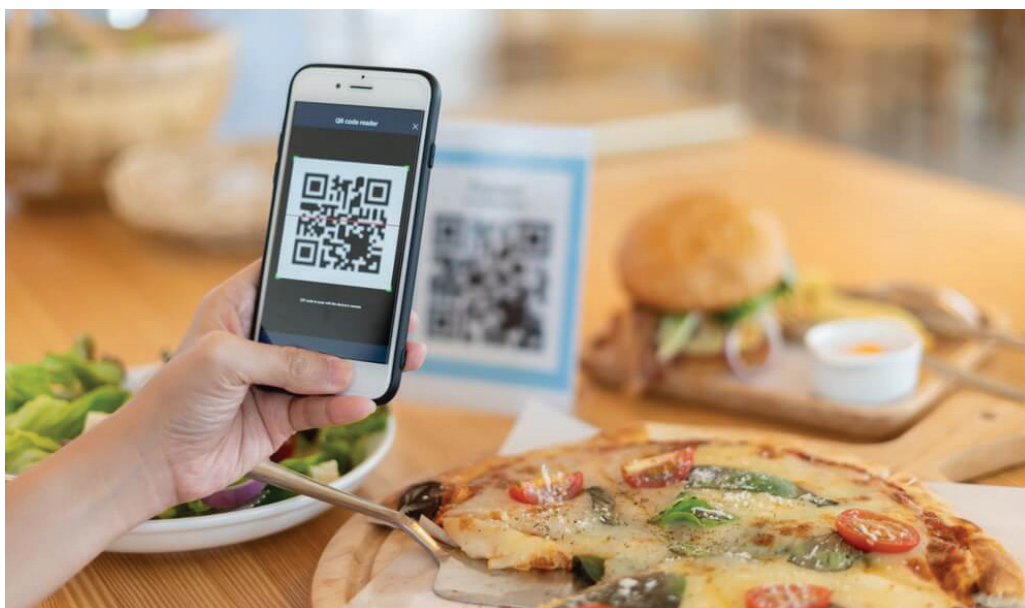
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GST heat on restaurants over packaging charges amid new rate speculation for food apps



There is a persistent tussle between the food apps and eateries - Who will pay the GST?

GST department has reportedly sent summons to several restaurants over levy paid on 'packaging charges,' an Economic Times report said on Monday. The GST officials are investigating whether the eateries listed on food apps such as Swiggy and Zomato have escaped the tax on packaging charges or not.

The ET report said that most of the restaurants in question have been asked to share GST details regarding packaging charges since January 2022. The development comes amid buzz around GST authorities mulling over plans of imposing new five per-

cent tax on food apps.

While there has been no official confirmation or denial, the ET report says that restaurants will be quizzed on whether the packaging charges collected from customers were deposited in the state coffers or not. It should be noted that in usual circumstances, the GST collected from the customer is paid by the service providers who recover it or the final party receiving the said service.

If that's the scenario then provider must pay GST to the state coffers while recovering it from consumers ordering food on such online platform for the all three - food, delivery as well as packaging.

However, there is a persistent tus-

sle between the food apps and eateries - Who will pay the GST? Dinesh Agrawal from law firm Khaitan & Co told ET that food apps are of view that restaurants should be paying the GST as packaging is a distinct supply. But there are differing views on this stance as well.

Previously, there was a strong buzz around the government coming up with five percent additional tax on food apps. However, Pankaj Chaudhary, Minister of State for Finance, recently clarified during the Budget Session of Parliament that 'as of now', the officials are not planning any such move.

Source: Money Control



India is the place to be: Radisson Top Exec



India has the 'best' economic fundamentals in the world for new hotel development, and Radisson Hotel Group will aim to sign 50 hotels a year for the next five years to take the footprint locally to 500 by the end of

this decade, a top executive told ET.

Radisson Hotel Group said this week that it has reached a 'historic milestone' in India and has crossed 200 hotels, following the signing of five new properties.

Radisson's portfolio includes 128 operational hotels (14,209 keys) and 77 properties (8,619 keys) under development. Globally, up until February this year, the chain had 916 hotels in operation spanning 163, 261



rooms. The chain has a pipeline of 607 hotels under development spanning 83,232 rooms.

"There is no reason why we can't get to the 500 hotel mark here. This year we will sign 45 hotels," said Younes. "If in the next five years, we can sign 50 hotels every year, we will get there," he added.

He said the brand's three star, four star hotels and upscale brands will drive the chain's growth in tier two, tier three cities.

"This is what the majority of customers can afford. India is predominantly a domestic market. 60% of the business in India comes from Indians. You need to become Indian to do business here, and I think we do that," he added.

The chain would also like to contribute socially to the country and create more meaningful employment opportunities here, said Younes.

"We employ about 18,000 people, so hopefully we can grow that to

40,000 people in the next five years. We want to give back to society and we want to be the company of choice for owners, guests and employees," he added.

Over the past 14 months, Radisson Hotel Group has signed over 51 hotels across leisure and metro markets in India.

The recent five new signings of the chain include the Radisson Blu Resort & Spa, Pawna Lake; Radisson Blu Hotel, Lucknow CBD; Radisson Hotel Rajkot and two conversions - the St. Marks Hotel, a member of Radisson Individuals in Bangalore CBD and Temple Tree Hotel Shirdi, a member of Radisson Individuals in Shirdi.

Younes said it's too early to assess how recent geopolitical developments will impact the growth of the sector this year. On other global chains talking about the growing potential of tier two, tier

three markets, Younes said the chain welcomes competition.

"In India, we walk the talk. We have been doing that for the last 26 years. Our history is a good testament of our ability to perform in the country," he said. "We will leverage that for the future. We feel we are an Indian company. When you have 200 hotels in a country, you become a part of the country," he added.

Younes said workmanship can be an area of improvement for hotel development, but the key challenge in the industry is finding the right people.

"Talent is scarce. The new generation wants to work in other new age companies and sectors. We have to figure out a way to get quality talent in the industry. We need the right general managers, commercial directors and leaders on the ground," he added.

He said AI will have a consequential impact on the industry. "It will probably help us utilise less people for functions such as HR and financial and back end systems, and free up more people for guest-facing roles," he said. "People will have more leisure time as a result of AI in future, and will hopefully travel more, which is great for the industry," he added.

"India is certainly in the top three countries in the world in terms of our pipeline. Considering the economic fundamentals here, there is no place like India currently for new hotel development," said Elie Younes, executive vice president and global chief development officer, Radisson Hotel Group. "It's certainly not Europe, and the only market that looks promising is Saudi Arabia, but it doesn't have the scale that India has."

Ladakh's Galwan Valley Hot Springs, the New Battlefield

Ladakh's Galwan Valley hot springs are set to welcome tourists starting June 15 under a newly introduced battlefield tourism initiative. In a significant move, the Indian Army and the Ministry of Defence are working on infrastructure enhancements and safety protocols to ensure a seamless visitor experience. This initiative coincides with the five-year milestone of the 2020 Galwan Valley standoff, offering travelers a chance to explore the historic site while paying tribute to its significance.

Ladakh's Galwan Valley hot

springs, situated near the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China, are set to open to tourists from June 15 as part of a battlefield tourism initiative. Spearheaded by the Ministry of Defence in collaboration with the Indian Army, this move seeks to transform the historically significant region into a visitor-friendly destination.

The opening coincides with the fifth anniversary of the 2020 Galwan Valley conflict, which saw casualties on both Indian and Chinese sides. Currently, access to the valley is restricted even for local residents, but

efforts are underway to establish the necessary infrastructure to support tourism.

To enhance the visitor experience, the Ladakh administration, along with the Indian Army, is developing essential amenities while implementing safety measures. The initiative is expected to bolster border and rural tourism, providing economic opportunities for local communities.

Reports indicate that two key infrastructure projects are in progress to accommodate tourists. One site, about 5 km from Durbuk, will feature



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a cafeteria, souvenir shop, and lodging for up to 30 visitors. A second location, roughly 12 km from Durbuk, will serve as an additional stop for tourists exploring the region.

A dedicated museum is currently being developed at Galwan as part of the 2020 war memorial, offering visitors a chance to explore the site's historical significance while admiring its stunning natural surroundings. This initiative aims to provide deeper insights into the events that unfolded in the region while creating an educational and immersive experience.

Visitor Guidelines and Safety Protocols

Given Galwan Valley's sensitive lo-

cation near the border, strict security measures will be in place for all tourists. Visitors will be required to obtain security clearances through a streamlined single-window system in coordination with the Indian Army. Additionally, acclimatization protocols will be enforced to ensure travelers can adapt safely to the high-altitude terrain.

A Major Boost for Ladakh's Tourism

Ladakh continues to be one of India's most sought-after travel destinations, with Pangong Lake currently being its most famous attraction. The introduction of Galwan Valley as a battlefield tourism site is set to

further elevate the region's appeal, drawing history enthusiasts and adventure seekers alike. This initiative is expected to enhance tourism opportunities while contributing to the local economy.

With the completion of infrastructure development and the implementation of stringent safety measures in Galwan Valley, the site is poised to become a key addition to India's growing battlefield tourism circuit. This initiative could open new avenues for travelers seeking historical and strategic insights while exploring the rugged beauty of Ladakh.



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LACHEN ✦ PELLING ✦ SILIGURI ✦ KOLKATA ✦ DIGHA

Tourism, hospitality industry likely to create 50 mn jobs in 5-7 yrs: Puneet Chhatwal



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

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

Chhatwal, who is also the Managing Director and CEO of Indian Hotels Company Ltd, said while

tourism is a pillar of development creating about 10 per cent of the total employment and contributing 8 per cent to GDP with a huge multiplier effect that can help inclusive growth, "there is often a gap between this realisation and the actual policy implementation".

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

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

"We are focussing to create over 50 million jobs in the next 5-7

years," Kachru, who is also the Chairman Emeritus and Principal Advisor South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group, said.

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

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

From the tourism sector, Kant had said that Thailand has created close to 20 million jobs, Malaysia about 15 million and India 7.8 million.

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

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

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



BIGGER and Better

The festival began in
2000 to celebrate the
tribal life. Now in its
25th year, Nagaland is
gearing up to celebrate
the Hornbill Festival

Illustration: Bipul Bhattacharjee

HORNBILL FESTIVAL



The Hornbill Festival, annually in Nagaland, is a vibrant celebration of the state's rich cultural heritage and tribal traditions. Nagaland is home to several tribes, each with its distinct culture. Each of the tribes in Nagaland has its own elaborate festivals. These festivals are associated with agriculture as people here survived on agriculture and the majority of them still do. Each tribe considers their festival to be sacred and hence participating in their festivals is of utmost importance.

The festivals celebrated by different tribes are as follows: In January, Sukhenyie is celebrated by the Chakhesangs, Mimkut is celebrated by the Kukis and Bushu is celebrated by the Kacharis. In February, Sekrenyi is celebrated by the Angamis. In April, Aoling is celebrated by the Konyaks. In May, Moatsu is celebrated by the Aos. In July, Nyaknylum is celebrated by the Changs and Tuluni is celebrated by the Sumis. In October, Yemshe is celebrated by the Pochurys. In November, Tokhu Emong is celebrated by the Lothas etc.

The Hornbill Festival brings together all the major tribes of Nagaland, showcasing their unique customs, music, dance, and art. These are individual festivals of the tribes. The government has taken an initiative to celebrate an inter-tribe festival making the Hornbill Festival the biggest in the state. The festival is aimed at

bringing the people of different cultures and beliefs together and improving the inter-tribe relations. This goes along with the aim to promote the cultural heritage of the state. The festival for the first time was celebrated in December 2000. The first day of the festival is December 1 which is also Nagaland Day and it continues till December 10.

Visitors can enjoy traditional performances, participate in indigenous games, and explore Naga cuisine and crafts. It is known as the "Festival of festivals" and represents the cultural diversity of Nagaland's tribes to encourage inter-cultural relations among them. The festival, held in Kisama Heritage Village near Kohima, has become a major attraction for tourists, offering a colorful glimpse into the dynamic tribal culture of North-east India.

The venue

The Hornbill Festival is held at the Kisama Heritage village in Kohima, Nagaland. To reach Kohima from Guwahati, we embarked on our journey by taking the early morning Jana Satabdi Express to Dimapur. From there, we hired a shared taxi to reach the capital of Nagaland. There are various trains that you can choose from to reach Dimapur from Guwahati, depending on your convenience. Shared taxis are also available throughout the day from the Di-





mapur railway station to Kohima. The shared taxi cost stat from Rs 400 per person and took around 3 hrs.

The festivities began with all the dances, folk songs and dance drama performed in groups. The various tribes of Nagaland made their presence felt with the performance of their own form of dance and songs. The other neighboring states of North East India also represented themselves through various cultural performances. We enjoyed to our heart's content as we swayed and smiled, listening to the soulful, energetic rhythms.

Food

Various delicacies are prepared in the different Morungs. People roast pork, chicken, fish, buffalo etc cooked in the coal fire. There is rice beer, traditional stews made out of snail, dog, fish, etc. We were just spoil for choices.

'Kachari' tribe's simple snacks attract tourists and can be enjoyed with Rice beer and a special Prawn chutney. There were stalls especially readied for vegetarians too. Snacks, sweets, hot and cold beverages were also available in different stalls. During lunchtime, the air of Kisama heritage village was thick with the aroma of different delicacies prepared by the tribes.

Tribal morungs and different tribes of Nagaland

Morungs is a special hut where youth practiced different skills like using bow and arrow, wrestling and making of different crafts etc. In Hornbill Festival Morungs took a



very significant role where the people of different tribes stay in their hut during the festival and perform their cultural and traditional practices for the audience in front of the morung.

All the Morungs are decorated with the traditional items belonging to the individual tribes. Representatives of those different tribes were dressed in their traditional attires were standing in front of their individual Morungs, welcoming guests with smiles. Some of them are seen performing their traditional songs and dances in front of their Morungs. There were hustle and bustle everywhere and the place was lively with people's laughter.

Mementos

Everyone from kids to octogenarian finds something interesting to buy in the festival venue. There are

different stalls for shopping lovers too on the festival ground. One can shop for different handicraft and handloom items, jewelry, decorative items and souvenirs. It also has a collection of traditional utensils, pottery and different orchids. Buying a suitable gift for your loved ones is a must do here. One can see the display of unique and unusual costumes, traditional events, art and craft. The cultural procession and distinctive events like bike rally, stone pulling competition show the versatility of this festival makes it more exciting.

Camping & Concerts

Camp stay is the best stay ever and we like the ambience and simply delicious food provided by the team. They provide us comfortable sleeping bags and blankets too to bit the cold chilly night. Seating be-

HORNBILL FESTIVAL

side the fire and enjoy the night of Hornbill Festival was a memorable experience for us.

If you are a die-hard fan of rock song then please keep in mind that rock concert took place in other major cities of Nagaland from 2016 onward. It took place in Dimapur, Mokokchung and other cities during the 10 days of Hornbill Festival. During the course of the Hornbill Festival apart from dances, songs and indigenous games, world war 2 car rally, Naga chef competition, Naga chilli eating competition, Hornbill motor rally, Miss Nagaland beauty contest and Hornbill literature festival, Stone

Apart from these a flower show of stunning and vivid colourful flowers, handloom and handicraft exhibition, craft escape, Hornbill photo fest and horticulture show also takes place in the Kisama heritage village. Kohima museum also situated in a corner of Kisama village you will be delighted to take a glance in the museum when you get tired from watching the cultural programs.

When you travel to North East India for the hornbill festival, it makes sense to see a few places nearby which are worthy of visiting.

- Kohima: The capital city of Nagaland is Kohima. The city was founded by the British when they established their rule in the Naga region of India. It was named Kewhira by the British in 1878. The inauguration of the city as the official capital of the Nagaland of Free India was done in 1963. In Kohima, the battle between the British and Japanese took place during the Second



The Hornbill Festival brings together all the major tribes of Nagaland, showcasing their unique customs, music, dance, and art. These are individual festivals of the tribes.

World War and lasted for 64 days.

- Dzukou Valley: Located on the border of Nagaland and Manipur is the Dzukou Valley. The beauty of the valley is breathtaking. It is lush green and during the blooming season variety of flowers fill the valley. Owing to this reason the valley is also called as the valley of flowers of the east. The popular flower here

is the Dzukou lily. People come from far and wide to see the lily bloom. It is a very rare variety of lily. The valley is at an altitude of 2452m and experiences a cool pleasant climate. It is 25kms south of the capital city of Kohima. The valley is behind the Japfu Peak and has a rich flora and fauna.

- Dimapur: Dimapur is though not the capital but the largest city of Nagaland. The scenic beauty of Dimapur is awe-inspiring. The city is drained by the River Dhansiri River. The city of Dimapur is a fast-growing city of the state. The city has several temples and astonishing ruins of the Kachari Dynasty. The city of Dimapur was the capital city of the Kachari community. The place has been ruled by Dynasties like the Kachari, Ahom and others. The place was also an important battlefield between when the Japanese attacked during World War II.



Peter Hu ?

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COVER STORY

Gods AND Ends

**How Gods drive India's
Consumer Economy was
demonstrated at Mahakumbh
Mela recently**

COVER STORY

The Mahakumbh Mela, the Hindu festival, the world's biggest gathering of humans, happened recently at Prayagraj on Paush Purnima with the 'Shahi Snan', a bathing ritual. While the 45-day religious event is considered a rare occasion for spiritual growth, it's also known for its pomp and show, with thousands of religious gurus and saints as well as crores of devotees congregating for a dip in the sacred waters. The world's biggest gathering of humans is also a much-awaited event for India's consumer business.

Festivals, small as well as big, are crucial to India's economy because it is driven by consumers. Consumption accounts for nearly 60% of the GDP. India's economic rise in the past three decades, after the liberalisation, is largely on the back of consumption growth. Now India is expected to become the third-largest consumer market in the world in a few years.

Consumer goods companies pin their hopes on numerous festivals all the year round to boost their sales, especially when the consumption is ebbing. The Maha Kumbh at Prayag Raj is no exception.

The mega business of Maha Kumbh

The Maha Kumbh has a budget of about Rs 12,670 crore, including both the state and central spending. With crores of people visiting Prayagraj during the Kumbh, they will generate huge business. India's



Brands got maximum visibility packaged around the six snans. Almost 70% of overall branding spends at the Kumbh were centred around the 45-day event

population is about 140 crore. The administration estimates 40 crore people are likely to visit the Maha kumbh. That's more than a fourth of India visiting a temporary district over just 45 days – or close to 90 lakh people on an average every day. The money they spend can total up to Rs 2 lakh crore.

Not just that. India's leading companies hope to capture eyeballs and test new products at the Mela. Brands are estimated to spend about Rs 3,600 crore on advertising and marketing around Maha Kumbh, about 25% of which will be allocated for outdoor advertising, business and brand strategy specialist Harish Bijoor has told Times of India. "Brands want maximum visibility to be packaged around the six snans. Almost 70% of overall branding spends at the Kumbh Mela are centred around the snans, through the 45-day event," Kunal Lalani, chairman of Crayons Advertising, which holds advertising rights for the Maha Kumbh, has told the Economic Times.

Millions of people have taken a holy bath at the Hindu festival of Kumbh Mela (also known as Mahakumbh) - described as humanity's biggest gathering - in northern India's Prayagraj city on Monday.

The event - held once every 12 years - starts on Monday and over the next six weeks, the devout will bathe at Sangam - the confluence of India's most sacred Ganges river with the Yamuna river and the mythical Saraswati.

Hindus believe that taking a dip



in the sacred river will cleanse them of sins, purify their soul and liberate them from the cycle of birth and death - as the ultimate goal of Hinduism is salvation.

What is Kumbh Mela?

The festival, which concludes on 26 February, has been recognised as an Intangible Heritage of Humanity by the United Nations agency Unesco. Its origin is rooted in a mythological story about a fight between the gods and demons over a Kumbh (a pitcher) of nectar that emerged during the churning of the ocean. As the two sides fought over the pot of elixir that promised them immortality, a few drops spilled over and fell in four cities - Prayagraj, Haridwar, Ujjain and Nasik. As the fight went on for 12 celestial years - each equal to 12 years on Earth - Kumbh Mela festival is held every 12 years in the four cities. An ardh or a half Kumbh is organised halfway between two festivals. The mela is organised in all the four cities, but the biggest festivals, where previous attendance records are broken, are always held in Prayagraj.

Hindu seer Mahant Ravindra Puri said the festival this time round was "extra special" and described it as "a Maha [great] Kumbh". "That's because the current alignment of planets and stars is identical to what existed at the moment of the spill," he told the BBC. "Such perfection is being observed after 12 Kumbh festivals or 144 years," he said.

For festival-goers, a major attraction is the presence of naked Naga sadhus, or ascetics, and it is

a spectacle to watch as they hurl themselves into the icy waters. But for the devout, it holds special significance - they believe that the waters get imbued with the purity of the saints' thoughts and deeds.

Over the weekend, groups of holy men arrived at the mela grounds in large noisy processions. One group of ash-smeared men, some naked and some dressed in just loin cloth or marigold garland draped around their necks, marched in holding tridents, swords and small two-headed drums. Another group had its leaders on chariots escorted to their campsite in a large procession with a music band, dancers, horses and camels.

What are the big bathing days?

The bathing dates and auspicious times are decided by astrologers, based on the alignment of specific planets and constellations.

There are six particularly auspicious days to bathe this time:

- 13 January: Paush Purnima
- 14 January: Makar Sankranti
- 29 January: Mauni Amavasya
- 3 February: Basant Panchami
- 12 February: Magh Purnima
- 26 February: Maha Shivaratri

Three of these - 14 and 29 January, and 3 February - have been designated as Shahi Snan (or the royal bath) days when the Naga sadhus will bathe. The largest gathering is expected on 29 January when 50 to 60 million worshippers are expected to take to the waters. Tens of thousands of pilgrims, including many from foreign countries, have already reached the city.

Sebastian Diago, visiting as part of a 90-member group from Argentina, said he made the journey to "experience the devotion first hand". "I felt the pull of the Ganges so I came," he said. "I will bathe in the river because I feel the need to connect with the Ganges."

Maha Kumbh in numbers

For 45 days, the Mela grounds, spanning 4,000 acres along the riverbanks, hosted pilgrims in various tent accommodations, from basic to luxury, alongside many food stalls.

Beneath the kaleidoscopic chaos of the Maha Kumbh Mela in Uttar Pradesh lies an economic juggernaut, fueled by the faith of an estimated 40 crore people expected to descend on the banks of the Ganga in Prayagraj from January 13 onwards. The Mela had become a vast, pulsating marketplace where every decision - whether setting up a food stall, leasing a tent city, or launching a floating jetty room - carries the weight of opportunity and risk.

The historical city of Allahabad, now known as Prayagraj, has hosted countless Kumbhs - since "anaadi kaal" or times immemorial. This year, with the government launching a massive blitz in preparation for what is expected to be a record turnout, the city and its economy are looking to gain a significant boost.

Officials say the government is focusing on creating a massive economic impact through the Mela. For the next 45 days, the Mela grounds,

spanning 4,000 acres along the riverbanks, will host pilgrims in various tent accommodations, from basic to luxury, alongside many food stalls.

Infrastructure development worth Rs 6,990

The Yogi Adityanath-led BJP government has initiated 549 projects, spanning infrastructure development to sanitation, with a budget of Rs 6,990 crore for the Maha Kumbh. In comparison, the 2019 Kumbh Mela had 700 projects at a cost of over Rs 3,700 crore. Officials estimate that the Mela will generate Rs 25,000 crore in revenues and have a broader economic impact of Rs 2 lakh crore on the state's economy.

CII predicted Rs 25,000 crore turnover from event

Mahendra Kumar Goyal, president of the UP chapter of the Confederation of All India Traders, predicts a turnover of Rs 25,000 crore from the event, with Rs 5,000 crore from puja items, Rs 4,000 crore from dairy products, and Rs 800 crore from flowers. The hospitality sector, especially luxury hotels, is expected to generate Rs 6,000 crore.

Alok Shukla, President of the UP

chapter of the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), calls the Maha Kumbh a "golden opportunity" for local businesses, with "revenues equivalent to one year's worth of business compressed into two months."

Luxury stays in tents priced at up to Rs 1 lakh a night

In a competitive bidding process for spots at the Mela grounds, the state government invited private entities to bid. The highest bidders were allotted stalls. "We have received Rs 1-2 crore from each bidder to set up stalls in Kumbh. The impact is immense," Additional District Magistrate Vivek Chaturvedi was quoted as saying by The Indian Express.

A staggering scale of investment has gone into accommodation for the Mela. The UP government has set up 1.6 lakh tents, including 2,200 luxury tents and many smaller ones along the riverbanks. There are also 218 hotels, 204 guest houses, and 90 dharamshalas in the city.

The luxury tents, priced between Rs 18,000 and Rs 20,000 per night, come with amenities like private bathrooms, blowers, Wi-Fi, and even butler services. Premium accommodations, like those at Sangam Nivas

Prayagraj, are priced at Rs 1 lakh per night for two guests, offering en-suite bathrooms and high-end services. With demand high on auspicious bathing days, all 44 super-luxury tents at Sangam Nivas are sold out, say UP government officials.

The Uttar Pradesh State Tourism Development Corporation (UPSTDC) has four categories of tents — Villa, Maharaja, Swiss Cottage, and Dormitory — with prices ranging from Rs 1,500 per night for dorms to Rs 35,000 for the high-end ones.

From food courts to major food chains – Food and hospitality boom

Brothers Mitesh and Ashwin Thakkar, directors of RR Hospitality Pvt Ltd., have invested Rs 12-13 crore to set up food courts and outlets across 14 of the Mela's 25 sectors, employing over 500 workers. One of their most expensive outlets was secured after a bid of Rs 1.23 crore near the Sangam area.

"We were competing for a tender for Rs 7 crore but lost to an amusement park vendor who bid Rs 11 crore," says Ashwin. Despite missing out on McDonald's due to "time constraints," they have managed to attract brands like Starbucks, Coca



Confederation of All India Traders, predicted a turnover of Rs 25,000 crore from the gala event

Cola, and Domino's and are targeting a Rs 100-200 crore turnover.

"The key is speed and flexibility," says Mitesh. "We had planned to set up a stall near the Dome City at Arial Ghat, but with construction still ongoing, we decided to relocate our food courts."

100 homestays, 7,000 vendors registered for Kumbh

On the anticipated massive turnout, Chaturvedi added, "We took the help of Allahabad University to figure out how to increase the footfall at the Mela by augmenting the infrastructure. Special corridors have been designed to handle an influx of 10,000 to 20,000 pilgrims at a time. Floating jetties, water sports, and temple tourism have been introduced to enhance the event's

appeal while boosting tourism retention."

Regional Tourism Department officer Aparajita Singh notes, "There was a push to improve hotel infrastructure. We now have 100 homestays registered with us compared to just 15 last year. There are over 7,000 vendors in the city, of whom 2,000 have undergone skill development training for digital payments. We have set up a team of 1,000 guides and expanded the food court systems to ensure we give tourists all modern facilities."

Major drivers of the pop-up economy

For small and large businesses on the Mela grounds and beyond, the Kumbh Mela represents both a gamble and an opportunity where faith, hard work, and market dynamics intersect.

Professor Badri Narayan, Director of Govind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institute, says, "The Maha Kumbh Mela touches everyone — from a rag picker to a luxury hotel owner. The Mela may generate around Rs 200 crore in business this year, providing temporary livelihoods for small vendors and workers."

INTERVIEW



KOLKATA'S HERITAGE LANDMARK

Mr Kamal Raza has been working as Unit Head (Resident Manager) from December 2022 with The Lalit Great Eastern Kolkata, the 180 years old heritage luxury hotel.

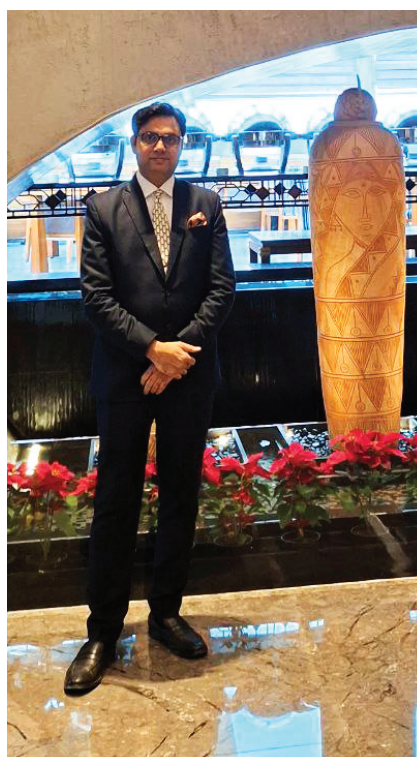


Originally established as the Auckland Hotel by David Wilson in 1840, it was renamed the Great Eastern Hotel in 1865. It began as a bakery and a meeting place for officers of the East India Company in the mid-1830s.

In 1883, it became India's first hotel to be fully lit with electricity. It was frequented by notable figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Queen Elizabeth II, Rudyard Kipling, and Mark Twain, who referred to it as the "Jewel of the East" and the "Best Hotel East of the Suez."

Recognized as Asia's first luxury hotel, it operated continuously for 165 years until 2005. The Lalit Suri Hospitality Group acquired it in 2005 and, after extensive renovations, reopened it as The Lalit Great Eastern on November 19, 2013. This date coincides with the birth anniversary of the founder chairman, Mr. Lalit Suri.

The hotel spans 3 acres and includes new blocks and heritage blocks. It offers various rooms and suites, dining options like the Legacy Grill and The Bakery, and meeting and conference spaces. It also



Dr Jyotsna Suri, the CMD, says, "The restoration of this iconic hotel has been a labour of love, painful and time consuming but extremely rewarding."

features Rejuve-The Spa, a salon, and two levels of parking.

Dr Jyotsna Suri, CMD, The Lalit Suri Hospitality Group, operates 12 luxury hotels, palaces and resorts under The LaLiT brand and two mid market segment hotels under The LaLiT Traveller brand, says, "The name has changed not the tradition of hospitality." Dr Suri has personally undertaken a massive restoration of the heritage property with the help of Architects 61 of Singapore (who restored the iconic Raffles Hotel) and Dulal Mukherjee & Associates. She adds, "The restoration of this iconic hotel has been a labour of love, painful and time consuming but extremely rewarding."

Kamal Raza, Resident Manager, spoke about the restoration plans and the bright future of the unique property with Mystic East in an exclusive interview. Excerpts here.

You took over charge as a General manager at a crucial time.

Yes. That was in December 2022, just after Covid-19. Industry was recovering from the worst crisis

INTERVIEW



We already have a rich history attached to our property. I want guests to feel the value of our heritage while enjoying seamless services

to treat patients as part of our social responsibility at a time when people were dying or were incapacitated.

You had faced an acute challenge...

Certainly. The challenge was to bounce back to normalcy after continuous financial loss for more than a year. Moreover, the reconstruction came to a standstill. We had to restart afresh with permissions from relevant departments, such as the Kolkata Municipal Corporation, Heritage Commission, Fire Department and so on. There were some legal hindrances too.

What were the key restoration work undertaken?

There are three blocks in the ho-

in recent times and everyone was trying to keep going. We had tied up with the then AMRI Hospitals to accommodate the rooms as quarantine centres for doctors who had been serving people risking their own lives. Also, some rooms were offered



tel: New Block, Heritage Block 1 and Heritage block 2. The hotel as it stands today is an amalgamation of the styles of three different eras of history -- Victorian (1837-1901), Edwardian (1901-1910) and contemporary (2006 onwards). These blocks have been painstakingly and seamlessly connected despite their distinct character and decor.

Can you mention some of the heritage artefacts?

The classic century old piano here has been restored to its original glory. manufactured by MF Rachal & Company, Germany, it was the pride of Maxim's, the legendary bar. The 8-feet concrete cup standing tall in the balcony is a replica of the trophy that Mr A.L. Bilimoria, the then Chairman of the Great Eastern Hotel received it from Queen Elizabeth II, after his horse won the race in 1961. The Bakery, another gem, is housed in the Heritage Block II. The more than a century old oven manufactured in England by Baker Perkins Limited is the focal point of the restaurant. Though not functional any more, parts of the oven have been preserved and adorn the interiors of The Bakery. The seven containers used for kneading dough, now serve as planters in different parts of the hotel.

Also on display are huge decorative jugs, which had stains of tea on its inside, and it's a wonder how the hot tea was served from these huge containers. The greatest attraction the Legacy Lounge or the

entire hotel is the innovative reuse of daily usage things recovered from the Great Eastern Hotel, or may be the Auckland Hotel. Decorative glass wine goblets are still in use, as are the various crockeries.

What are your future plans regarding the hotel?

We already have a rich history attached to our property. I want guests to feel the value of our heritage while enjoying seamless services. Many more new wings are going to be added to the heritage blocks soon. A large banquet hall will be one of the new offerings. We are proud of the suite meant for Queen Victoria. She was supposed to visit in 1877, but could never make it to the country. Now the luxury suit is open for customers.

I am primarily a guest-focused person, my plan is to create an experience for our guests that is uncomplicated and personalised.

Such as...

We introduced a personalised service called 'Refresh & Revive' for our Edwardian and Victorian Suite guests. This service facilitates our guests to get their personal belongings refreshed and revived. For instance, leather footwear, cleaning of frames/eyeglasses, cleaning of travelling bags, ladies bags' restoration by experts etc... Usually travellers do not get time for these little things but it's always on their mind.

What are the other customer-focused changes?

Soon after taking over, I carefully studied the market and business dynamics of my hotel and city to introduce a few facilities that will help our discerning travellers have a quality time while staying with us. We introduced a Kid's Corner for our little explorers since family travel is incomplete without an experience for little ones. We have already started seeing a good response from people who travel with their families. We introduced flexible spa hours, this is essentially meant for business travellers who return late from work and wish to use the spa slightly late in the evening. We launched midnight hours to 7am bar service soon to attract late-night partygoers.

You have a Kolkata connection from childhood days...

I was born and partially brought up in Bengal. Kolkata is not so new to me but working here for the first time is definitely exciting. Precisely, Serampore is my birthplace. My father was a doctor in the erstwhile Danish colonial outpost and we used to visit Calcutta occasionally.

I am loving the city although it has changed in some ways but still remains the same in its soul. The city's strong relationship to its colonial past, an inclusive culture, a rich literary tradition and a centre of great educational institutions make it vibrant. I am overwhelmed with the warmth of people here and that is what makes Calcutta different from other cities.



CRUISE





CRUISE TOURISM IN INDIA:

A Voyage of New Possibilities

CRUISE

Cruise tourism is a nature-driven travel experience that unlocks a country's rivers, seas, and canals for themed journeys across all budgets. It offers safe and comfortable access to even remote destinations, promoting inclusivity and ease of travel. By tapping into natural waterways, it boosts both national and international connectivity while driving local economies through job creation in hospitality, entertainment, culture, and beyond.

India has significant capabilities in cruise tourism for coastal & river sector. This is due to the presence of:

- 12 Major and 200 Minor Ports along the 7500 km long coastline across the west and east
- Network of more than 20000 kilometres long navigable 110 waterways connecting around 400 rivers.
- There are multiple states, union territories and 1300 islands in India which are along the coastline or along the banks of states and interstate rivers or national waterways.

Steps Taken By The Indian Government to Boost Cruise Tourism

Cruise Bharat Mission

The 'Cruise Bharat Mission' was launched on September 30, 2024, from the Mumbai port. Aimed at the boosting the tremendous potential of cruise tourism in the country, the programme aims to propel country's cruise tourism industry by



doubling cruise passenger traffic within five years; i.e. by 2029.

In FY 2023- 24, the number of cruise passengers was 4.71 lakhs.

CBM provides for a framework for inter-ministerial approach for crafting interventions along policy, regulatory, and other aspects governing cruise sector and enable responsible involvement of all regulatory agencies, such as Customs, Immigration, CISF, State Tourism Departments, State Maritime Agencies, District Administrations, and local police.

Cruise Bharat Mission will also result in over 1.5 million river cruise

passengers over more than 5,000 Kms of Operational Waterways in India.

The initiative aims to excel India's vision to become a global hub for cruise tourism and promote the country as the leading global cruise destination. The Cruise India Mission will be implemented in three phases, beginning from 1 October 2024 up to 31 March 2029.

Maritime India Vision 2030

The Government of India's vision is to make India a significant player in the global cruise market, both for ocean and river cruises. Indian



cruise market has the potential to grow by 8X over the next decade, driven by rising demand and disposable incomes.

In order to promote India as the global destination for cruise tourism under MIV 2030, interventions have been identified across three key areas:

- Oceanic and Coastal Cruise
- Island and Infrastructure Development
- River and Inland Cruise

Additional steps taken to boost cruise tourism

- Cruise vessels receive berthing priority over cargo ships.
- A rationalized tariff structure with standard port charges and nominal passenger tax has been introduced, offering 10–30% volume-based discounts.
- Ousting charges have been removed to attract more cruise traffic.
- Cabotage (the right to operate sea, air, or other transport services within a particular territory) laws waived for foreign cruise ships, allowing them to carry Indian nationals between domestic ports.
- E-visa and visa-on-arrival facilities have been extended.
- Conditional IGST exemption granted to foreign vessels converting to coastal routes, with reconversion required within six months.
- A uniform SOP has been implemented for all stakeholders in-

involved in cruise operations.

- A single e-Landing Card is now valid across all ports on a cruise itinerary

River Cruise Tourism:

River Cruise Tourism is an emerging segment in the leisure industry with a scope for high growth. Several National Waterways constituting major rivers flow through various states and districts, rich in flora & fauna and cultural heritage. Suitable locations at various National Waterways have been identified and are being explored for development of river cruise tourism in India.

Initiatives taken by IWAI towards developing river tourism are:

- Developing the navigational channel on waterways along with navigational aids and carrying out dredging (process of removing sediments), if necessary, in some NWs.
- Construction of vessel berthing facilities at multiple points along the waterways for ease of movement of tourists.
- Developing an ecosystem for river cruise tourism along with promotion of heritage sites and tourist attractions along the waterways.

The development of river cruise would augment existing revenue generation, employment generation, etc from tourism industry. There are few suitable terminals along rivers which promote cruise





tourism. These include cruises plying along a broad stretch of the river Ganga, Brahmaputra and houseboats floating in the backwaters of Alappuzha in Kerala.

Besides National Waterways, IWAI has jointly cooperated with the Government of Bangladesh to develop river tourism on the IBP route. This will allow Indian cruise vessels to travel through Bangladesh while exploring heritage sites. It is expected that river cruise tourism industry in India would witness exponential growth once required infrastructure is in place.

In January 2023, Hon'ble Prime Minister launched the MV Ganga Vilas, the world's longest river cruise, highlighting the country's thriving river cruise tourism. This



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luxurious 3,200-kilometer journey from Varanasi to Dibrugarh traversed 27 river systems across five Indian states and Bangladesh. The remarkable expedition garnered global attention and secured a spot in the prestigious 'Limca Book of Records.'

Recent Developments

- IWAI, Delhi Govt MoU to boost Cruise Tourism on River Yamuna: In March 2025, the Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) and the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways (MoPSW) signed an MoU with various Delhi government agencies to develop a four-kilometre stretch of the Yamuna (NW-110) between Sonia Vihar and Jagatpur into a hub for



eco-friendly cruise tourism. The project will deploy electric-solar hybrid boats equipped with bio-toilets and safety features, and install two HDPE jetties to support smooth operations—promoting sustainable, short-distance navigation and recreational tourism in Delhi.

- IWAI's MoU with J&K to boost river cruise tourism: In March 2025, The Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Government of Jammu and Kashmir to promote river cruise tourism across three designated National Waterways in the region. Among India's 111 national waterways, Jammu and Kashmir is home to three- River Chenab (NW-26), River Jhelum (NW-49), and River Ravi (NW-84). Marking a major push for inland tourism, IWAI has committed approximately ₹100 crore to develop cruise tourism infrastructure and experiences across these routes.
- IWAI with Govt. of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh : IWAI entered into a tripartite agreement with the Governments of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh to start cruise operations from Kukshi to Sardar Sarovar Dam on 19th April 2024.
- Conferences: Stakeholder conference was organized in Kolkata and Kochi in March-April 2024 and in Delhi on 3rd May 2024 for promoting river cruise tourism
- Significant investment in River Cruise Tourism: The First Inland

Waterways Development Council meeting held on the vessel "Ganges Queen" in Kolkata. The meet, with an objective to enable inland waterways as channels of economic growth and commerce in the country committed an investment Rs. 45,000 crore for development of river cruise tourism. Of this, an estimated Rs. 35,000 crore have been earmarked for cruise vessels and another Rs. 10,000 crore for development of

cruise terminal infrastructure at the end of Amrit Kaal- by 2047.

- The 'River Cruise Tourism Roadmap, 2047' was launched at the inaugural session of IWDC (Inland Waterways Development Council (IWDC) meeting. This Roadmap focuses on four vital pillars, including Infrastructure, Integration, Accessibility, and Policy for promoting river cruise tourism. As a part of the roadmap, over 30 possible routes and tourist circuits along inland waterways have been identified for further development.



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Conclusion

India's cruise tourism is charting a promising course, tapping into its vast and diverse network of rivers, coastlines and ports to offer unique travel experiences that blend leisure with cultural discovery. With major initiatives like the Cruise Bharat Mission and Maritime India Vision 2030, the government is laying a robust foundation to position India as a global cruise destination. From the tranquil backwaters of Kerala to the majestic Ganga and the pristine stretches of the Yamuna and Brahmaputra, cruise tourism is not only unlocking new economic potential but also enabling inclusive growth by creating jobs and boosting local economies. As infrastructure develops and awareness grows, cruise tourism is set to become a defining pillar of India's travel and tourism landscape, inviting the world to rediscover India.

INTERVIEW

SUCH A LONG JOURNEY

In Swahili, Hatari means risk. The Director of iconic 60-year old restaurant Samarendra Mukherjee is not averse to taking up challenges



Hatari, a popular restaurant chain with multiple outlets across the city, known for its Indo-Chinese cuisine started its journey on July 2, 1966. Today it is one of the iconic fine dining places in the city. Under the leadership of Samarendra Mukherjee and Anrita Mukherjee, directors and partners of Hatari, the restaurant has spread across the city and its suburbs in the past few years.

Apart from its base at Triangular Park in South Kolkata, it now has branches at Behala, Naktala, Santoshpur, Salt Lake (Sector 1), Baguiati, Sodepur and Madhyamgram. At Golf Green there's an exclusive takeaway counter. These places offer Chinese, Indian and Tandoori food. The new additions to its conventional restaurants are Hatari Grills (continental) and Hello Bengal (Bengali cuisine).

Hatari Grillz, a new brand aiming to offer something new to its patrons, is located beside Vivekananda Park in south Kolkata. Sprawling across an area of 1,100sq ft, the first outlet of Hatari Grillz is 40-seater, with chic cafe-esque

decor. The place also has a diverse collection of books on display, making it the perfect place to hang out with friends as well as chill alone.

Samarendra Mukherjee recently spoke to Mystic East in an exclusive interview:

Who started the restaurant?

Why do you have this strange name?

My father Kamal Narayan Mukherjee used to sit for adda with his friends near Triangular park, like most true blue Bengali youth. That was in the mid-1960s, a turbulent time in the history of the city. My grandfather, a renowned doctor, was not happy that his son had been wasting his time chatting and not doing anything worthwhile. So, my father decided to open a tea and coffee shop that would sell some typical Bengali snacks. While naming the place my father thought of the nomenclature based on *Hatari*, a 1962 American adventure romantic comedy film starring John Wayne as the leader of a group of professional game catchers in Africa. The movie was a big hit in Calcutta and he thought it would attract youngsters to the cafe. The date of opening was July 2, 1966.

So, the restaurant has come a long way. From a typical cafe to a multi cuisine fine dining restaurant.

Initially I didn't have any plans to join my father's business. I had been studying Economics at Visva Bharati University. But when my father grew old he asked me to take

over the responsibility along with my brother in 1996. Till 2002 we two -- twin brothers -- carried on together. But my brother got separated. Then we decided to expand our cuisine and branch out to different parts of the city and its suburbs. Now my wife Anrita plays a key role in the operations and planning.

What was the expansion like?

Apart from our base at Triangular Park in South Kolkata, we have a growing number of branches. We have added continental and Bengali to our expanding menu. Now we are expanding to Siliguri, Durgapur, Bhubaneswar, Puri, Chennai, Bangalore and so on --



Hatari, a popular restaurant chain with multiple outlets across the city, known for its Indo-Chinese cuisine started its journey on July 2, 1966

wherever there's a Bengali hub.

Did you tap the MICE segment?

Yes. We have been offering a variety of Thali and catering during various ceremonies, such as wedding, funeral ceremony, pre-nuptial feast (aiburo bhaat), marriage anniversary etc. We also serve various bhoger thali during Durga Puja. We cater to corporates also.

What challenges did you face during operation and growth?

There are plenty of them. The biggest setback happened during the Covid-19 pandemic. At one point of time we had zero business. Our 11 landlords co-operated with us and we paid 50 per cent rent at that time, the rest was paid later. But despite such financial strain we never sacked our 400 plus fleet of employees. It took a couple of years to get back on our feet after the Covid-19.

What are the current bottlenecks?

We have been facing tremendous competition in the market. There are too many restaurants in the market and most of them are fly-by-night operators. Since we can't compromise on the quality, sometimes we bleed. Moreover, after Covid-19 we have been forced to tie with food aggregators for home delivery. But they grab about 25 per cent of the profit. We have been trying to develop our own delivery team, but that's been adding up to our expenditure.



THE SOLITARY REAPER

Maverick woman Rachna Dewan has been slowly building her own empire called The Palm Aryan

RACHNA DEWAN began her professional journey as a Sales Executive of ABN AMRO Bank at Dubai in United Arab Emirates in 2003. Soon she rose to the rank of a Team Leader. In 2006, she was anointed the Business Development Manager of Royal Bank of Scotland Business, UAE, handling a large sales team of retail banking.

After some personal setbacks the seasoned investment banker decided to come back to her home town in Kolkata. She reinvented her career in the hospitality domain as a Sales Manager at the iconic The Park Hotel and then as an Associate Director of Sales at Carlson Rezidor Hotel Group.

Then she started The Palm Aryan at Kolkata's satellite town Salt Lake City. Now the hotel is spreading its wing across the country. The day Mystic East caught up for an exclusive interview she's been flying down from Gangtok after laying down the foundation stone of her fourth property in Gangtok. She was tired but spoke with flourish oozing confidence.

So, now you have the fourth feather in your cap.

Yes. I hope the property will be ready before the summer holidays when people will flock to this beautiful hill station. We are already operating at

Kolkata (our flagship property). Then we fanned out to the iconic hill stations of Mussoorie and then Mandi, in Himachal Pradesh.

What's the USP of your hotels?

These are boutique hotels with an average of 15-20 rooms; we have 25 rooms in Kolkata. These are three star properties in Rs 4000-5000 category. Each of the rooms and the property is carefully crafted with the nuances of eco-friendliness. There is minimal use of paper and maximum use of repurposed and recycled items. Sustainability and promotion of responsible tourism is the ultimate goal. Target customers are upper middle



class people who can appreciate our sustainability philosophy.

It seems your hotels are full of greenery...

The Kolkata hotel is situated in the Salt Lake area (Bidhannagar). Guests can enjoy the serenity of the property's garden, especially from the private balconies or terraces. There's a park in front of it and those looking for more greenery can walk to the urban forest of Central Park to rejuvenate themselves. Located in a residential area offers an experience of a homely surrounding. Many guests have mentioned the peaceful location and calm environment outside the hotel, making it a relaxing stay. The hotel is known for its stunning "Quiet Street View," which adds to the peaceful atmosphere. The other properties also follow the same

basic philosophy.

Do you have further plans of expansion?

Certainly. After Gangtok our next stops will be Amritsar and Puri. Both pilgrimages. We wish to cater to customers in the burgeoning religious or spiritual tourism section.

You have been an investment banker for a long time. Do you feel at home in the hospitality sector?

Of course. I made a career switch and got myself acquainted in the hospitality domain in two big groups, The Park and Carlson Rezidor. So my grooming was perfect. That's been an advantage for me as a hotel entrepreneur. Besides, I had been in the service industry I can feel the pulse of customers.

Personally did you have a penchant for hospitality?

Yes. I have a passion for cooking. I curate the menu of each of the hotels carefully and pick and choose the best chefs. Some local people just drop in for a wide array of buffet breakfast after their morning workout sessions in the surrounding green environment.

What are the challenges? How do you tackle them?

The biggest challenge is understanding the temperament of people in each of the city. The temperament of a Calcuttan would be totally different from a hill station like Mussoorie. Besides, manpower is a big problem. Also you need time to groom them. I try to keep my cool and tackle the challenges peacefully based on the experience gathered in course of earlier jobs.

THE Central government will organize the country's first Global Tourism Summit in New Delhi as part of India's ascension to G-20 presidency, where all G-20 member countries will participate on April 10-12. The summit will showcase 'major tourist destinations' of the country with various state governments as stakeholders.

In a roadshow, ahead of the summit, the Tourism Ministry officials emphasized on how the Centre is focussed on bringing global investments in Cruise, Medical, Religious, Adventure and Eco-tourism segments, the day Prime Minister Narendra Modi virtually launched world's longest cruise Ganga Vilas on January 12 in Varanasi.

Ahead of the Global Tourism Investors' Summit, a road show was held in Kolkata urging various eastern states, including Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Andaman & Nicobar Islands, to take a proactive role in promoting their states in front of the global investors with niche destinations.

West Bengal Tourism Secretary Saumitra Mohan spoke about the existing tourism related policies already in place, including WB Tourism Policy 2019, Tea Tourism Policy (where Garden owners can use 15% land for tourism purpose), Homestay Tourism Policy.

"West Bengal is in fifth position in foreign tourist arrival and we want to move up the ladder. We want to

leverage the potential that already exists in the state...Bengal is a state which has Sunderbans, wetlands, sea beaches, mountains, wildlife and rivers," Mohan said.

"In Bengal, we are awaiting investments in the Cruise Tourism segment," Mohan added. During the recent Global summit on "Financial Inclusion" in Kolkata from January 9-11, the G-20 delegates were offered Ganga cruise, cultural festival on board and dinner.

WEST BENGAL IS IN FIFTH POSITION IN FOREIGN TOURIST ARRIVAL

Mohan also emphasized on how Durga Puja, which received intangible cultural heritage status from UNESCO, can be promoted as an intangible cultural & heritage tourism. Jharkhand government representative, on the other hand, said it would like to project Eco-tourism and Religious tourism as their investable segments.

Here goes the text of his speech delivered on this momentous occasion.

Good afternoon, it is indeed a matter of great privilege for West Bengal Tourism to be a part of the Global Tourism Investors' Summit 2023 as

West Bengal is in fifth position in foreign tourist arrival and it can easily move up the ladder. It can leverage the potential that already exists in the state...Bengal is a state which has Sunderbans, wetlands, sea beaches, mountains, wildlife and rivers



a part of G-20 dialogues. On behalf of the Department of Tourism, I would like to thank CII for extending the invitation to be a part of this Road Show in Kolkata this afternoon.

The State of West Bengal is one of the culturally most diverse states of India. West Bengal boasts of different ethnicities, cultures, religions, people and languages which add to its variety.

Geographically, the State encompasses two broad natural regions; The Gangetic Plains in the South and the sub-Himalayan and Himalayan area to its North. It can be termed Mini India as it has almost all the geographical features. Some of these features are unique (e.g. UNESCO World Heritage site of Sunderbans delta, tea plantations, wetlands, sea and beaches, Dooars, mountains, wildlife, river, forests and what not. It all gives the State a huge competitive advantage.

The architectural heritage of West Bengal is significant; Terracotta Temples with its intricate architectural designs and European Buildings are a sublime attraction. The state is also best known for its cuisine, sweets and street food.

Tourism Industry plays a vital role in the state's economy. The Travel and Hospitality sector's contribution to West Bengal GDP including spillovers to other sectors is estimated at around 12% as against the national average of 9.6%. The State Government is keen to strengthen the sector which is likely to have a spillover effect by way

of creating livelihood opportunities and boosting the local economy. Each district has its own unique tourism resource and there is immense potential to utilize it with the help of the private sector.

As per the India Tourism statistics released by the Ministry of Tourism, Govt of India last year, West Bengal is the 5th state in terms of the highest Foreign Tourist Arrival (FTA) and this is bound to grow phenomenally with direct flight connections with Europe and the USA, for which we would like to jointly work with you.

The State Tourism Department has framed some important policies for a focused approach to various sub-sectors of Tourism and facilitate the ease of doing business.

- West Bengal Tourism Policy 2019
- Tea Tourism Policy 2019
- West Bengal Homestay Tourism Policy 2017 amended in 2019
- Recognition of Tourism Services Providers, 2021
- West Bengal Tourist Guides Certification Scheme 2021
- Revised Incentive Policy for the Tourism Industry, 2021
- Some Additional Policies that are currently in pipeline:
 - Draft – WB Eco Tourism Policy
 - Draft – Adventure Tourism Policy
 - Draft – Heritage Tourism Policy
 - Draft – Rural Tourism Policy
 - Draft – PPP Policy
 - Draft – Caravan Tourism Policy
 - Draft – River Cruise Tourism Policy
 - Draft – Health & Wellness Tourism Policy

Here are the highlights to some of the tourism opportunities in the State that could establish significant linkages with Private Investors and the G-20 nations.

Cruise Outsourcing – Given the number of rivers and innumerable water bodies in the State, there is a huge scope for developing different water-based sports including river cruises and house-boating excursions. Private players do have a big opportunity here.

City Based Tourism – There are a number of historic cities in the State of West Bengal where multiple layers of our rich civilization with footprints of foreign settlers could be experienced. This is palpably evident in its tangible and intangible heritage at these locations.

The Department of Tourism has undertaken initiatives such as Integrated City Pass in order to facilitate online access to several prominent Tourist Hot Spots of Kolkata and propose to introduce the Hop on Hop off Tourist Bus Service covering a fixed route surrounding the historic BBD Bag area wherein the British had first settled in the 17th Century.

The Department is also exploring the possibility of illuminating the Heritage Buildings in Kolkata in collaboration with different stakeholders. There is, in fact, a huge opportunity for private investment in Heritage Walking Tours & Stays, Heritage Cruises, Culinary Tourist



Walks and Tourist Bus Services. The Department will be more than happy to extend the requisite hand-holding support as might be required for the purpose.

Medical and Wellness Tourism –Bengal has beautiful mountains and the Dooars which serve as ideal locations for wellness services. Apart from this, top class hospitals with competitive rates and lower waiting time make it a preferred destination for availing medical services.

Ease of Doing Business- As far as ease of doing business is concerned, the State ranked 9th in Ease of Doing Business index. For operating businesses, the State has introduced a single window system for fast-tracking all kinds of permissions required for setting

up a unit under the travel and hospitality sector.

Incentive Scheme – The West Bengal Incentive Scheme, 2021 has been introduced for Tourism Units to be set up in the State and is applicable to eligible tourism units and projects along with the extension plans for the existing projects. Incentives such as State Capital Investment Subsidy, Interest Subsidy, Waiver of Electricity Duty, Additional Incentive on Generation of Employment, and Additional Incentives for Adventure Tour Operators among others are extended for encouraging different tourism-related activities across West Bengal.

Quantum of Project Investment in West Bengal – The state is working towards improving the basic

infrastructure and implementing newer projects to give thrust to the sector. Tourism is likely to see an investment of more than Rs 5,000 crore over the next three years from the private and public sectors. The target is to increase the “number of inbound traffic from 100 million to 300 million per year. West Bengal is already at number 6 when it comes to domestic tourist arrivals.

Quantum of Private Investment –The State is keen on promoting private partnership in the sector and has formed six Sub-Committees on specific sub-sectors of Tourism such as Adventure Tourism, Eco Tourism, River Tourism, MICE Tourism, Heritage & Cultural Tourism and Rural & Tea Tourism with representatives from the industry with a view to formulate

STATE SURVEY: WEST BENGAL



better policy architecture through wider consultations.

Tourist Guides – A Pool of 3000+ New and Existing Trained Tourist Guides certified by the Department of Tourism under the Tourist Guide Certification Scheme in association with Utkarsh Bangla in Hybrid mode is available for utilization by all the private operators intending to engage in tourism-based activities in the State.

Home Stay – Standardization of

Home Stay amenities and service delivery has been initiated by the Tourism Department. More than 2000 plus home stays have registered with the Department and there is ample scope for new home stays and improvement of infrastructure of the existing home stays with the help of private partnership.

Industry Status to Tourism in West Bengal – The Department is exploring the possibility of provid-

ing Industry Status to the Tourism Sector which will push growth and private investment in the sector so as to encourage and attract private sector investments and create a favourable environment to leverage private sector expertise like resources, skills, innovativeness, flexibility, and capacity.

Intangible Cultural Heritage – This narrative will protect Bengal's rich cultural heritage and boost livelihood generation through entrepreneurship development and local community involvement. There is immense scope for promoting tourism-based activities with a focus on Bengal's Intangible Cultural Heritage. Examples: Patachitra Scroll Painters' Village in Naya, Pingla; Fakirs' Village in Gorbhanga & Jalangi etc.

Tangible Cultural Heritage – The terracotta temples built across Bengal in the late medieval period, the historic Zamindari estates spread across the State including Narajole, Chakdighi etc., the Heritage Buildings built during the colonial rule in Bengal, the Buddhist circuit and many more have immense scope of private engagement in promoting tourism-related activities.

Religious Tourism – The greatest festival Durga Puja wherein all religious and social barriers, folk art forms, music and literary excellence melt with one another is celebrated with pomp and grandeur, making the state a tourist's delight. The Durga Puja in Kolk-



ata has recently been inscribed in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Apart from Durga Puja, West Bengal is known for the Shaktipeeths, Gangasagar Mela, Basanta Utsav and various other festivals throughout the year. Private investment in the hospitality sector surrounding religious tourism across West Bengal has significant opportunities.

Tea Tourism – The Tea Tourism and Allied Business Policy, 2019 has been introduced with the aim of generating enhanced investments and employment opportunities for sustainable and inclusive economic development by way of effective utilization of vacant and surplus land in Tea Gardens without any compromising the area under tea plantation.

Art & Craft Villages – The emerging arena of Tourism where people can visit/stay in these villages and experience the traditional crafts along with the lifestyle of the artisans. Example- Kushmandi for Gambhira Masks, Nutangram for Wooden Dolls, Charida for Chhau masks, Bikna for Dhokra artwork, Panchmura for Terracotta Horses etc.

Eco Tourism – The eco-tourism locations for the promotion of sustainable eco-tourism ventures are spread across North Bengal, Purlia, Jhargram and Sunderbans. Being rich in Biodiversity, the State has immense investment potential in Eco Tourism.

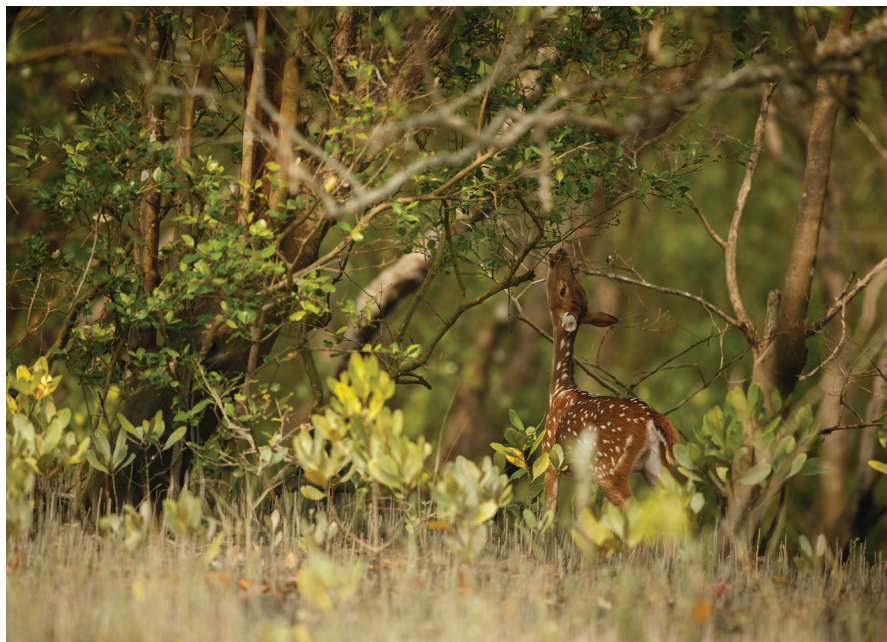


Given the number of rivers and innumerable water bodies in the State, there is a huge scope for developing different water-based sports including river cruises and house-boating excursions. Private players do have a big opportunity here

Souvenir Outlets – To promote local traditional crafts of West Bengal, the State proposes to introduce Souvenir Shops across prominent locations and there is sufficient opportunity for private partnerships in this venture.

Heritage Villas & Home Stays for Accommodation – The Zamindar Baris, Bonedi Baris, Heritage Tea Garden Villas and Heritage Home Stays of West Bengal can be utilized fruitfully with sufficient scope for private partnerships. Heritage stays have proved to be of high demand in the recent past.

Ropeways – Investments in Cable Cars at identified Tourist Destina



tions of Purulia, Darjeeling, Kalimpong etc. are worth exploring.

I am hopeful that with your support, Tourism in West Bengal would reach greater heights in the near future. The Department of Tourism is readily available to assist and support in any such ventures.

Now, the Governor, after careful consideration of the matter, is pleased to announce the Tea Tourism and Allied Business Policy, 2019 in modification of the Tea Tourism Policy notified vide No. 3362-LP/5M-10/2012 dated 17/07/2013 and Notification No. 665-LP/5M-10/12 Dated 4th March 2015. The policy is aimed at generating enhanced investment and employment opportunities for sustainable and inclusive economic development by way of effective utilization of vacant/ surplus land in Tea Gardens without any curtailment/ compromise in areas under tea plantation. The salient provisions of the Policy are as follows:

sions of the Policy are as follows:

1) Tea gardens will be allowed to utilize 15% of the total grant area subject to a maximum of 150 acres for tea tourism and allied business activities.

a. Out of this allowable area a maximum of 40% can be used for construction activities in conformity with extant Rules and Regulations and provided the proposed activity is in harmony with the ecology and the environment.

b. The allowable business activities shall include Tea Tourism, Plantation, Animal Husbandry, Hydro Power, Non-Conventional Energy Resources, Social Infrastructure and Services. An illustrative list of activities under the above broad categories may include tourism resorts, wellness centres, schools, colleges, universities medical/ nursing colleges, hospitals, cultural/ recreational &

exhibition centres, horticulture, floriculture, medicinal plants, food processing units, packaging units etc.

2) Each proposal shall be examined on case to case basis by a Screening Committee constituted as follows:

- i. Chief Secretary to the Govt. of West Bengal- Chairman
- ii. ACS/ Principal Secretary of ICE Department- Member
- iii. Principal Secretary Labour Department- Member
- iv. Principal Secretary L&LR and RRR Department – Member
- v. Principal Secretary, Tourism Department – Member
- vi. Principal Secretary, Agriculture Department – Member
- vii. Principal Secretary, Environment Department – Member
- viii. Representative, Tea Board- Member
- ix. Two Representatives of Tea Associations- Members
- x. Joint Secretary/ Special Secretary, ICE Department – Member-Convenor Representation from Forest department, Public Works Department, Power & NES Department, Animal Resource Development Department or any such relevant department shall be co-opted in the Screening Committee as member on case to case basis as required in terms of the proposal.

The department of Industry, Commerce and Enterprises will act as Nodal Department.