

ASIA'S leading business magazine

M!CEtalk®

A DDP Publication

Meetings • Incentives • Conferences • Events

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**M!CE in
focus at DCT
Abu Dhabi**

**Blending
CAUTION with
CREATIVITY**

**Creating
AVENUES**



A 'PHY-GITAL' WORLD



Japan.
Meetings
& Events
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YOKOHAMA

World's Best Convention Destination



Aerial view, Minato Mirai

Yokohama is the first harbor city introduced to the world as the entrance to Japan. Since the time its port was opened, Yokohama has been vigorously acquiring new cultures and introducing Japan's first-time-ever things from food to a wide range of cultures, which entitles Yokohama as the birthplace of Japan's modern culture. With its wonderful outdoor experience & forward minded approach, Yokohama makes a **perfect place** for corporations to network among other corporations and/or business persons to create **powerful partnerships** or a new company altogether. With this innovative corporate influence, Yokohama is a hotspot for **international conferences**.

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- Clean and Safe
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- Powerfull Partnership and hot spot for International Conferences
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INDUSTRY

Will M!CE regain its lost glory?

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Picture on the cover:

Dubai Tourism

NEWS

DCT Abu Dhabi partners with John Cena

Department of Culture and Tourism Abu Dhabi (DCT Abu Dhabi) has launched a tourism campaign, 'Time is Now'. John Cena's trip through Abu Dhabi's attractions is depicted in the video. The film was aired after Abu Dhabi welcomed all vaccinated travellers and those from Green List countries without the need to quarantine.



First Warner Bros Hotel opens on Yas Island

On November 11, 2021, Warner Bros will open its first hotel. The 257 rooms, designed in partnership with Miral, will be managed by Hilton under the Curio Collection brand.



AD Calendar is Back with 80 Curated Events



With the return of the Abu Dhabi Calendar, the official guide for unmissable experiences taking place in the Emirate, DCT Abu Dhabi unveiled its line-up of thrilling events. The Abu Dhabi Calendar has been redesigned to put the Emirate in your palm of your hand, with all the exciting experiences, events, concerts, and shows going place across the emirate just a click away. It is the ideal place to reconnect with the Emirate.



6th Edition of Gout de/
Good France celebrated
It was celebrated from
October 14 to 22, with a
focus on eco-friendly cuisine,
the Centre-Loire Valley region and
the Garden of France across five continents.



Mark Willis



India is soon to get its
second Raffles property
in Jaipur. It is wonderful
to see India recovering,”
says Mark Willis, CEO-
India, MEA, Accor.



Leela Bhartiya City Bengaluru opens doors for guests

The Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts has opened their second hotel in Bengaluru. Along with 281 rooms, the hotel is spread over 60,000 sq. ft., including a Grand Ballroom, a Royal Ballroom, The Terrace and The Board Room. The hotel offers choice for bespoke events.





India-EU Cultural Exchange 2021

India-EU Cultural Exchange 2021, organised by BLS International, brought together Indian and European stakeholders to promote similarities between the two regions. Language, cuisine, tourism, etc., were covered. **Shikhar Aggarwal**, Jt. MD, BLS International says, "With the borders reopening, we will strengthen bond between India and EU through such platforms."



Chapter 2 Events Launches European Base In Portugal

Chapter 2 Events expands their operations by partnering with Martinhal Family Hotels & Resorts to establish a satellite base in Portugal. When it came to having a base to complement the interests of the large number of overseas Indians based in the UK, the Middle East, Canada, and the US, Europe was the preferred region. Having a physical presence in Portugal has opened up a wide range of opportunities for family clients and strategic connections across the European continent.

Global campaign by Fairmont Hotels & Resorts

Fairmont Hotels & Resorts has introduced a global campaign, 'Experience The Grandest of Feelings', celebrating the brand's origins and locations across the globe. Directed by Nathalie Canguilhem, the campaign stars Hollywood actor Susan Sarandon as a global brand ambassador. "The how, why, and where we travel is unimportant: the transcendent act of travelling opens up the mind to diversity and inclusion that drives the society forward," says **Mansi Vagt**, Vice President, Fairmont Hotels & Resorts.



Phase-I of EIC's Equity Acceleration Plan

The Events Industry Council (EIC) has launched phase-I of its Equity Acceleration Plan. It will focus on setting a benchmark to measure progress of the industry through a survey within the workplace across the events industry. The findings will be used as a series of educational courses, tools and resources to support the industry. **Amy Calvert**, CEO, EIC, says, "The Equity Acceleration Plan will enable us to support event professionals to create more diverse and inclusive environments, develop career pathways, and ensure representation in leadership, and supply chains by providing the learning and resources intended to reach and support our community."

TravelBullz partners with Amazing Thailand



TravelBullz and Tourism Authority of Thailand are all set to welcome Indian guests back to Amazing Thailand with Indian Travel League, as it prepares to reopen borders to the world. ITL is a fun-filled quiz programme aimed at encouraging travel agents in India focussing on Phuket, Krabi, Phang Nga, Khao Lak, Koh Yao Yai and Noi. It will be a weekly campaign with four rounds, beginning October 20. 'The Amazing Thailand Grand Reopening Sale' is aimed at helping Indian travel agents in increasing margins.



Moving beyond myths

Are Indians moving beyond superstitions for their big-day? A WeddingWire Data report finds that 76 per cent of couples opted for non-saaya dates to get hitched.

MT Bureau

WeddingWire India, a subsidiary of The Knot Worldwide – an online marketplace for couples and wedding professionals, has released statistics on how Indians are opting for non-saaya dates. There is a 76 per cent surge in the demand for non-saaya dates in the first half of the year in comparison to the last year.

The data further highlights that Bengaluru has the most demand for non-saaya weddings at 16 per cent followed by Mumbai (12 per cent), Jaipur (11 per cent), and Lucknow (10 per cent). Vendor availability and accessibility on these dates are driving this trend.

In terms of venue, resorts and destination weddings have witnessed the highest enquiries at 139 per cent followed by marriage gardens at 62 per cent, and wedding lawns and farmhouses at 60 per cent.



QUICK BYTE The surge in demand for non-saaya weddings is a refreshing and favourable change

Talking about the mushrooming trend, **Anam Zubair**, Associate Director of Marketing, WeddingWire India, says, "The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a significant transition in the ways weddings are done throughout the world. The big-bang Indian weddings have been replaced by

micro and live-streamed weddings." Zubair further adds, "However, given how deep-rooted Indians are in their culture and customs, the surge in the demand for non-saaya weddings is a refreshing and favourable change for the wedding industry. This radical change,

which was envisioned two-three years down the lane, has been fast-tracked by the pandemic. If the trend continues to strike a chord with the consumers, it will drive new revenue opportunities for professionals in the US\$ 50-billion wedding industry in India."

Since the second wave, there has been a paradigm shift in how Indians are planning their wedding in the new normal. The insights point towards the fact that couples and families are increasingly moving away from traditionally considered auspicious dates for weddings and looking at newer alternatives. From intimate/micro weddings, digital weddings, e-invites and customised wedding websites (62 per cent decrease in demand for traditional wedding cards) to non-saaya dates now, the approach has become more modern and practical.

SINGAPORE:

REIMAGINING SAFE BUSINESS EVENTS

As the world continues to grapple with COVID-19, health and safety remain top priorities for international business events. MICE professionals need to think progressively and reimagine their operations to accommodate different types of engagement.

Singapore, consistently ranked as one of the most innovative countries globally by the likes of Bloomberg and INSEAD, is at the forefront of this evolution. The country's MICE players are unafraid to test new ideas and reinvent event elements, whether physical or digital.



PUTTING HEALTH AND SAFETY AT THE FOREFRONT

Singapore has demonstrated ingenuity in coming up with prototypes and protocols for a new era of events. Such innovations help maintain the highest standards of event safety without compromising the delegate meeting and networking experience.

For instance, at TravelRevive, 'meeting pods' were outfitted with protective plexiglass shields designed to reduce droplet transmissions. Similarly, geospatial technology was used to power the Safe Event platform, which was trialled at the Geo Connect Asia conference to help enforce health and safety measures.

EVOLVING THE DIGITAL EVENT EXPERIENCE

To future proof themselves amidst these extraordinary times, Singapore's MICE venues have also strengthened their digital event offerings. Such technologies help to enhance and extend content delivery and engagement.

Marina Bay Sands' hybrid event broadcast studio has been a game-changer, enabling multi-format sessions to come to life on a physical stage fitted with LED walls and hologram capabilities. Meanwhile, the SingapoReimagine MICE Virtual Show used livestreaming to bring leisure tours and masterclasses to overseas audiences. Plus, a virtual 3D tradeshow gave participants a platform to connect remotely with exhibitors.

The Singapore story is one of reinvention, and the local MICE industry's innovation mindset has enabled it to remain agile. With the country's future-oriented initiatives, event organisers and delegates can have peace of mind when doing business in Singapore.

Plan your next business event at [VisitSingapore.com/MICE](https://www.visit-singapore.com/mice).

With bold ideas, Singapore's MICE industry is reshaping the face of business events.



A 'phy-gital' world

Five stalwarts from different segments of the M!CE industry came together to share their views.

Hazel Jain

The M!CEtalk Digital Conclave, powered by Cvent India, on rebooting the Indian M!CE landscape held on August 25, 2021, brought together five great minds who examined ways in which India can be developed into a M!CE behemoth. According to 2019 data, about 32,000 exhibitions are held annually across the globe, which means that at any given day, there are close to 300 exhibitions opening in some parts of the world. The Indian government has realised the long-term sustainability and benefits of this industry and has recently drafted a M!CE Tourism policy. The Indian M!CE industry holds less than one per cent share of the global M!CE business. According to a 2019 study

by the Ministry of Tourism, GoI, the Indian market is sized at ₹37,576 crore, 60 per cent of which is attributed to meetings and incentives.

SMALL IS NOW BIG

"The world that we operate in has changed. It is a world where you do not want to touch and be in large crowds. So, small has really become big. Hence, we need to dive in much deeper to deliver the experience. How can you do small and still make a big impact, get a larger audience? We are now in a 'phy-gital' world – a hybrid world," says Sabbas



Sandeep Nagpal

“**Virtual events were always there, and they are now merging with the physical**”

Joseph, Founder-Director, Wizcraft International Entertainment. He feels that governments often do not recognise the value addition that M!CE is making to the local economies. Goa recognised this long ago and began investing in M!CE. We need to see more of this in India. Secondly, we need to see collaboration from the governments. They must realise that they need to collaborate with event management companies, hotels, airlines and tour operators. It is the rest of us that can work with them to make M!CE opportunity real," Joseph adds.

COLLABORATION THROUGH TECH

The other aspect, as per Joseph, is that the government has gone heavily

QUICK BYTE Governments often do not recognise value addition that M!CE is making to the local economies

into technology. But it is in bits and pieces. Technology must be made available to the industry, be it with the Aarogya Setu App. Hence, collaborating with the M!CE industry will help make events much safer.

GOVERNMENT ANGLE

Goa being one of the foremost destination for M!CE and weddings in India, it was imperative to get its perspective on this. **Nikhil Desai**, Managing Director, Goa Tourism Development Corporation, agrees that the entire strategy will have to be spearheaded by the government. "It can create an enabling environment for private players. As we speak, there is a state-of-the-art ₹100 crore 1,400-seater convention centre coming up in the heart of the city. It is likely to be complete by May 2022. This will cater to small- and medium-sized events. Also, in the past few days the government of Goa has offered land in Dona Paula, wherein a 5,000-seater convention and expo centre is being built along with a host of other support infrastructure like 5-star hotels," he says.

Secondly, Desai says that M!CE is a highly competitive and globalised business, and destinations compete with each other globally, in terms of facilities and lower tax, and other incentives. "Unfortunately, our country has not been able to reach there because of our high taxation rates and non-availability of differential pricing for such events. This puts a lot of pressure on the pricing, as a result of which, M!CE in India does not make a lot of business sense. So, governments will have to play an important role in this regard," Desai adds.

He believes that to make India a credible M!CE



Sabbas Joseph

There is a need for collaboration using AI, being able to predict consumer behaviour



Nikhil Desai

Every hotel and M!CE venue will have to invest heavily in technology



Rajdev Bhattacharya

Virtual meetings will not replace physical meetings. The hybrid model is here to stay



destination, there needs to be brand awareness and brand equity through sustained brand building and to showcase to the rest of the world the facilities we have to offer. M!CE also often involves leisure travel. The industry needs to be given tax benefits, especially for greenfield project investors. States should compete with each other to win events for building a good M!CE brand.

INVEST IN TECH

On a positive note, he adds that the current scenario is a temporary blip, notwithstanding temporary right-offs that are happening across the industry with pundits saying that M!CE would not be the same. "I respectfully disagree with them, I think this is a temporary situation. We all need to invest in infrastructure because the pandemic will be soon behind us. Businesses have to keep their strategies fluid and have to be aware of the latest developments. In this regard, every hotel and M!CE venue will have to invest heavily in technology and ensure that they create the necessary infrastructure to conduct hybrid events, so that the level of engagements with clients can go up. I

think that is a task best left to a private sector and the governments can create an enabling environment and infrastructure," Desai adds.

VIRTUAL OR PHYSICAL?

Bringing some more ideas on what the corporate clients would want right now, **Rajdev Bhattacharya**, Global Head (Travel & Hospitality) & Business Head, WAY2GO and GM, Global Travel Services, Wipro, says that technology has its own limitations and right now that personal experience is missing. "My view is that whatever happens during the pandemic mindset, and whatever decision and predictions we have made during the pandemic has not happened. Even now, we are making decisions with the pandemic mindset. While virtual meetings have worked, it will only be another medium to meet people. It will not replace physical meetings. The hybrid model is here to stay. M!CE will be in a different form and shape. Let us see the opportunity of what we can be rather than bring back what it was. Whether corporates will start to travel long-haul, it is a function



of business. The need to meet people to do business or events has not gone. We are just waiting for flights to come back," he adds.

HYBRID IS THE NEW NORMAL

To say that virtual events will take over is a myth, feels **Sandeep Nagpal**, V.P. and Head of Marketing, Cvent India. "We are already seeing people starting to have meetings and going back to offices. It is just a matter of time when physical events will be back and the virtual will go hybrid. Physical events will happen, but they will be viewed by thousands virtually. This is an opportunity, both for planners as well as hotels. There are a lot of venues in the world that are transforming themselves into hybrid venues, for two reasons: There are thousands of people who cannot make it to the event; and even at the venue, people will consume a lot virtually. So, creating a studio experience is key, for which venues are transforming themselves into physical as well as hybrid ones. There is also a need for us to make people understand that the consumption of experiences will be different for virtual

and physical. And we need to cater to both. The earlier we realise this and the venues realise this, the better it is. Virtual events were always there, what is happening now is that they are merging with the physical. And that is what the future will hold. Technologies are now available for this. We provide technologies to both hotels and planners for both physical and virtual event experiences," Nagpal says.

A COHESIVE EFFORT

Hybrid will be the new normal, feels **Arif Patel**, Regional VP, Sales & Marketing, Hyatt India. He says, "We are already seeing early signs of recovery. If one demand rises, there is a new segment that will take over. Pre-pandemic, staycations in India were in a nascent stage. But after the second wave, hotels in hill stations recovered their RevPAR because of this segment due to pent-up demand." What the pent-up did is it got business into hotels. "Now we are seeing a



Arif Patel

Large-format events & national conventions will come back by Q4 of 2022

direct correlation between vaccination and people taking flights. In hotels, we are seeing that upscale and luxury have recovered faster than mid-scale and economy. There are two reasons for this: The price for upscale hotels have come down and there is higher brand reassurance for guests. The third part, a large part of the Indian outbound

pre-COVID was incentives and weddings. I do not see that demand going out of India for at least another year. These are people with disposable income and companies spending on experiences. The M!CE pent-up demand is going to be huge. You cannot expect a company not to do business for two years or not to organise meetings. In terms of weddings, it is a US\$ 50 million market growing at 25 per cent CAGR. If there were 100 weddings happening in India on a particular day, there were 1,000 happening out of India. That will change as people are not going to take the risk of travelling with family elders. Even in June-July 2020, there were no hotels in India where there were no weddings. Today, you look at destinations like Goa and Kochi, we are back!" Patel adds.

Patel requests fellow hoteliers to be flexible in terms of cancellation and refund policies. "This will encourage guests to take risks with us. We will bounce back! I see large-format M!CE events and national conventions coming back by Q4 of 2022. We need to come together and put in all resources and ideas," he says.

QUICK BYTE There are a lot of venues in the world that are transforming themselves into hybrid ones



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M!CE in focus at DCT Abu Dhabi

With the webinar 'Rediscover M!CE in Abu Dhabi', DCT Abu Dhabi explores various M!CE-related offerings and other attractions in the Emirates for groups.

Nisha Verma

RULES FIRST

Nikhil Jeet, Country Manager, DCT Abu Dhabi, India & GCC, commenced the discussion with the news of Abu Dhabi opening for fully vaccinated travellers in the world from September 5, 2021. "We do not have any green list or red list requirements. It welcomes travellers from across the world. If one must travel to Abu Dhabi, however, ensure obtaining the latest requirements," he says.

TIME IS NOW

Under its campaign 'Abu Dhabi-Time is Now', the Department of Culture and

Tourism (DCT) encourages the agents to plan their trips and those of their clients now. "One key takeaway is that Abu Dhabi is not a one-day destination. We provide adventure, dining, entertainment, leisure, health, and team-building options for up to 11 days. It is a destination, a city, a region within itself," says Jeet. Secondly, he stated that Abu Dhabi should not

EXPO 2020

Jeet shares, "Some areas of Abu Dhabi are closer to Expo than other parts of Dubai. Buses are going from those areas to Expo. If your Alhosn app status is green & you are fully vaxed, you can travel between Dubai and Abu Dhabi."

be considered an expensive destination. "I am aware that this has been a popular notion. In Abu Dhabi, we offer more than 33,000 hotel rooms ranging from 1-star hotel apartments to 5-star deluxe hotels."

Thirdly, he informs that Abu Dhabi is regarded as the Manhattan of the Middle East. "It is young, trendy, happening, and has world-class restaurants and entertainments. We would like you to take that away," he says.

PERFECT FOR M!CE

Apart from that, he shared

QUICK BYTE Abu Dhabi has opened for fully vaccinated travellers in the world from September 5, 2021

that they have hotels for meeting, M!CE events, weddings, and everything else. “We also have an attractive incentive programme called the ‘Abu Dhabi Advantage Programme’, which can offer up to AED 350 per person as an incentive to bring groups of up to 500 people to Abu Dhabi. So, contact us to design your itineraries, and we can help you with incentives. The first step is to contact DCT Abu Dhabi, so contact india@dctabudhabi.ae for any queries.”

M!CE has a variety of event spaces, as well as dinner venues and Indian food offerings everywhere,

The Hilton Yas Island Abu Dhabi is a part of the Yas Bay Project, specifically the Yas Waterfront part of the project. Etihad Arena, the newest event space in Abu Dhabi, is located to the right of the hotel. Indoors, it can hold up to 18,000 people. Pier71, to the left of the hotel, is expected to include around 35-40 F&B outlets by Q4 of this year,” he says.

Speaking about the property, he shares that it is the biggest property on Yas Island. “We have 545 rooms, and this project and property were built with the goal of making Yas Island a destination within the destination and an ideal M!CE location. The rooms



George Ghantous

In the hotel, there are three primary F&B outlets, with two more to be added later



Roula Jouny

Capital Travel will enhance the experience of the travellers from UAE to abroad



Aysha Omar

We are looking at retaining the M!CE business rather than losing it to another emirate

staying at the property will receive complimentary access to the Yas Island Theme Parks, including Ferrari World, Warner Bros., and Yas Waterworld.

DMC PERSPECTIVE

Roula Jouny, Executive Director, Tourism 365, revealed that they have recently taken a few initiatives to support tourism and the incentive business in Abu Dhabi. “One of the initiatives is Capital Experiences and the other one is Capital Travel. Capital Experience is a DMC, which will have its own fleet of cars. We have personnel on the ground and at the airport, as well as guides at exhibition centres. Hence, when it comes to DMC, we will provide a full-fledged experience. Capital Travel will enhance the experience of the travellers from UAE to abroad, with the goal of expanding the Capital Experience outside of the UAE.”

Aysha Omar, Director Contracting, Capital Experience, asserts that they are focussing on the M!CE business as there is a lot of potential in this area. “This is despite the fact that Abu Dhabi could be overshadowed by other emirates of the UAE, which we hope to change with the support of DCT Abu Dhabi, as well as that of other tour operators and travel agents in India. We are looking at retaining the M!CE business in Abu Dhabi rather than losing it to another emirate. It is not just about matching the prices, but also about the experiences available in Abu Dhabi. Since we are part of the ADNEC Group, we can provide everything the M!CE industry needs, from weddings to leisure, attractions to exhibitions and event management,” Omar concludes.



according to Jeet. For Indians, Abu Dhabi is an ideal M!CE destination. He also informed about team building exercises, local experiences, as well as upcoming attractions in Abu Dhabi like Al Qana Aquarium, Snow Park and Qasr al Watan.

HOSPITALITY OFFERINGS

George Ghantous, Director of Sales, Hilton Abu Dhabi Yas Island, shares that they are the latest addition to Abu Dhabi and the hotel is ideal for both M!CE and FIT. “On February 18, 2020, we opened our doors.

offer stunning views and are equipped with Espresso machines and, if needed, a flexible working desk. We have the largest event centre on the island, with 20 breakout rooms and 4,125 sq. m., of total event space. The Yas Grand Ballroom is 1,421 sq. m., in size and can accommodate up to 1,400 people in a theatre-style setting. Another ballroom, measuring 692 sq. m., is available. In the hotel, there are three primary F&B outlets, with two more to be added later,” he says.

The best part, according to Ghantous, is that all guests

“We are truly honoured to be recognized by this leading certification body for our safety precautions and hygiene practices which is the most important factor especially during these Covid times. We would like to thank QualStar for recognizing us and certifying our practices.”



Mr Kush Kapoor
CEO, Roseate Hotels & Resorts



*Mr Kush Kapoor, CEO, R
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Creating avenues

Easy accessibility and world-class infrastructure have given Abu Dhabi an edge for M!CE events, says **Manpreet Bindra**, President, Leisure Travel, FCM Travel Solutions India.

Lipla Negi

What sets Abu Dhabi apart from the other M!CE destinations?

Abu Dhabi has an advantage due to its easy accessibility from various cities, outstanding infrastructure, world-class hospitality, venues, high-end meeting facilities, convenient transportation, and a safe social environment. As a destination, it is evolving, and in the last couple of years, we have seen a variety of hotels and clubs, from the Emirates Palace to Yas Marina. One of Abu Dhabi's strengths is that it offers sites and facilities to suit each segment's budget. It also offers unique, traditional and cultural experiences for the people visiting the UAE.

What was your impression of the venues?

When it comes to hotels and venues, they are outstanding. For every budget, there is a variety of options. There is also a wide assortment of hotel options, ranging from city hotels to desert resorts, luxury camps, and beach resorts. Abu Dhabi offers a variety of venues for corporate events, from small meetings to medium and large-scale M!CE movements.

What are key characteristics of Abu Dhabi as a M!CE destination?

Abu Dhabi has never posed a challenge when it comes to organising a M!CE event. Vendors and hotel staff that we can contact are a reason for this.



Manpreet Bindra

They are welcoming and always willing to help. For all corporate events, Abu Dhabi offers a one-of-a-kind experience. This always helps us in planning activity-driven events for our corporate clients, which they have appreciated when such events are combined with the M!CE movements.

like IPL. So, consumers will feel more confident in starting to think about and plan for their upcoming M!CE events in the UAE. Their government is also working with industry stakeholders to develop a framework that ensures regular organising of national business events and



QUICK BYTE When clients visit Dubai or elsewhere in the UAE, Abu Dhabi is often a day visit destination

Abu Dhabi offers unique traditional and cultural experiences for the people visiting the UAE

Why do you think Abu Dhabi is a safe choice amidst the pandemic?

For the events, a proof of vaccination is necessary, as well as an RT-PCR negative test report. It will be required for our events to be successful. The UAE has shown its ability to safely host large global events

that the health and safety of participants are prioritised.

What draws you back to Abu Dhabi?

As per client feedback, Abu Dhabi should be regarded as a standalone city for M!CE events. The hotels and venues in the destination are popular among clients. When they visit Dubai or elsewhere in the UAE, Abu Dhabi is often a day visit destination. Client experience has been overwhelmingly positive.



A complete solution

The hotel will add to Gandhinagar's global allure, which already draws thousands of business travellers every year, says **Jaideep Anand**, VP & GM, The Leela Gandhinagar.

Lipla Negi

Built on the airspace of a conventional railway station, 22 metre above ground, The Leela Gandhinagar is touted as an engineering marvel. Offering a blend of architectural antiquity and famed opulence of Indian hospitality, it is the country's first-of-its-kind 5-star hotel with 318 rooms built atop railway tracks.

"The architecture combines modernity with tradition. The lavish interiors are inspired by Gujarat's rich archaeological and architectural antiquity, and the art decor by the state's rich flora and fauna. Each of the 318 rooms offer unrivalled opulence, state-of-the-art facilities and luxurious amenities to guests," says **Jaideep Anand**, VP and GM, The Leela Gandhinagar.

The hotel complements the country's largest convention centre, Mahatma Mandir Convention and Exhibition Centre (MMCEC) Managed by The Leela, seamlessly blending



Jaideep Anand

The lavish interiors are inspired by Gujarat's rich archaeological and architectural antiquity

state-of-the-art facilities with Indian hospitality to offer a complete convention solution. The Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts partnered with the Government of Gujarat, Ministry of Railways and IRSDC to redevelop Gandhinagar capital railway station along with the luxury hotel. "The inspiration behind The Leela Gandhinagar is the PM's vision of transforming the urban landscape with state-of-the-art infrastructure. Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts is honoured to play its role in realising this vision," adds Anand.

From elegant ballrooms to stately meeting rooms, guests can opt from the hotel's indoor and outdoor event spaces spanning across 30,000 sq. ft. The facilities at the hotel are conceptualised keeping the sophisticated global traveller

in mind. The flooring is inspired by the Adalaj Stepwell and elements like the famous Tree of Life at Sidi Saiyyed Mosque, traditional glass beadwork, textile craftsmanship of Bandhej, Ajrakh and Batik, among others. Together with MMEC, it is expected to boost economic activity in the region. MMEC is built over an area of 34 acre, and offers both choice and flexibility with leading-edge facilities to host conventions for up to 15,000 delegates.

"The Leela Gandhinagar and Mahatma Mandir Convention and Exhibition Centre Managed by The Leela, will generate demand for the destination and position it as one of the most sought-after convention destinations in the world," says Anand. He also feels that the hotel will add to the global allure of Gandhinagar as "it attracts thousands of business travellers every year. A luxury hotel like The Leela Gandhinagar that can cater to their needs was very much needed."

QUICK BYTE Together with MMEC, this property is expected to boost economic activity in the region

Exposure to a new culture during a wedding event is always exciting and adds an 'unforgettable' quotient to the memories of the exploration for the guests, says **Hemant Kale**, Director, Swaaha EMC.

Lipla Negi



Mingling of cultures

What sets Abu Dhabi apart as an ideal luxury wedding destination?

Abu Dhabi has a good mix of luxury resorts, hotels, and venues with enough keys to host a big fat Indian wedding, and this is one of the prime factors why Abu Dhabi has become a 'go to' destination in the emirates. Abu Dhabi offers one of the most opulent palace hotels in the world, which can be offered to couples.

How does it fit the grandeur and glamour of big fat Indian weddings?

A big fat Indian wedding has a large guest list to fulfill and other frills of artists, production and technology. Since the teams at all of the major hotels are familiar with Indian weddings, the deliverables are more than satisfactory. In addition, the event venues are ideal for high-decibel Sangeets and soulful beach weddings.

In terms of culture, how does the destination compliment the Indian sensibilities?

For over two decades, the emirates have hosted



Hemant Kale

Abu Dhabi has one of the best palace hotels in the world that can be offered to the couples with all its opulence

Indians as citizens and tourists, and as a result, the blend of local flavours and Indian culture is well received by families planning weddings in the Emirates. In order to ensure a successful wedding, the hotels also extend their support to the families by allowing Indian catering staff to join their teams. It is always exciting to be exposed to a different culture during an event. Hence, it is critical for event planners to consider this aspect and make sure that guests remember the exploration during the wedding ceremonies. We have also actively urged attendees to visit at least one sundowner event in the desert or an Arabi dinner.

From venues to food, what sort of variety and luxury does Abu Dhabi offer?

A great combination of desert, beach, indoor

venues, beautiful ballrooms are in abundance here, hence, designing events uniquely is always possible. When it comes to food and beverage, hotel quality, presentation, and offerings are all world-class, and I can confidently say that this is one of the best in the world.

How has been your experience of planning a wedding in Abu Dhabi?

We have been fortunate to do weddings in a couple of Emirati countries and our experience in Abu Dhabi has been surreal. I was majorly surprised and happy by the way Abu Dhabi Tourism was involved and supported us at every point. They not only proactively advised us but also acted on our queries at lightning speed, this kind of support boosts the confidence of wedding planners to actively work in such cities.

We had a wedding in Emirate Palace and our experience with them was extremely satisfying. Abu Dhabi stands as one of the top destinations for us while suggesting it to families.

QUICK BYTE Abu Dhabi has a good mix of luxury venues with enough keys to host a big fat Indian wedding

Cautiously optimistic

Pinning Raffles Udaipur on Accor's global map, **Kerrie Hannaford**, VP-Commercial, Accor India & South Asia talks about raising the bar with immersive hospitality.

Lipla Negi

What have been your considerations behind coming to India?

India's luxury hotel industry has a bright future. Raffles is the 10th brand that Accor is launching in India. The future is promising for such brands as there are discerning customers, who are looking for memorable, inimitable luxurious experiences, which a brand like Raffles delivers.

Were M!CE & weddings, factors for entering India?

M!CE and weddings remain a focus area for most hotels. In India, weddings will always see traction. The pandemic has brought in a range of new trends in the Indian weddings industry. There has been a shift towards contactless food services, micro wedding ceremonies, besides the present norms of social distancing and highly sanitised venues. As business travellers look for a venue where they can experience exclusivity and peace, we aim to be a workcation destination.



Kerrie Hannaford



We have curated a blend of offerings with local Indian traditions to create memorable experiences



How will Raffles Udaipur carve a niche for itself?

Raffles Udaipur is built like a grand country estate on a private island. With breathtaking views of the Uda Sagar lake from every room, unparalleled culinary experiences, largest ballroom in the city, brand's signature offerings blended with local Indian traditions, as well as the legendary Raffles service, our guests will have a reason to discover the city anew. What sets us apart are the unique experiences, from a celestial cruise under the moon to imaginative destination dining framed in the picturesque hills that surround the lake.

Why did you choose a season-specific market like Rajasthan?

Rajasthan is a place with a vibrant culture and a rich

history. It is the perfect destination to explore for leisure travellers. One of the most preferred domestic as well as international tourist destination, Rajasthan is brimming with cities which boast of beautiful landscapes and delectable cuisines. These elements helped us choose Rajasthan for India's first Raffles.

How do you plan to sustain for the next two years?

The hospitality industry will remain dynamic, but will now be extra cautious and innovative. Currently, more Indians are exploring domestic destinations. This will help us sustain bookings and attract more traffic to the hotel. People will choose luxury as travellers are looking for meaningful experiences. People love to travel and celebrate together, thus they will return to places that offer holistic experiences and have a strong focus on safety. They continue to look for bespoke experiences, and that is what keeps us motivated.

QUICK BYTE We are conducting virtual tours and will soon organise familiarisation tours with airlines"





Blending caution with creativity

From live-streaming the events to offering no cancellation fee, M!CE industry is experimenting like never before to regain its patrons' confidence.

Lipla Negi

While M!CE is one of the hardest hit industries amidst pandemic, a few stakeholders are looking at it as an opportunity to reinvent M!CE. Turning 'thinking out of the box' into a survival strategy, the industry is ready to innovate, kick off new trends and be back with a bang. The biggest challenge is to regain the clients' trust by ensuring utmost safety and hygiene. "The key factor being considered by the clients today is the level of preparedness from hotels to work with the current cleanliness and hygiene

standards. Thankfully, all are better prepared, and have instilled confidence in guests and corporate clients for conducting their events", shares **Atul Upadhyay**, V.P., Pride Group of Hotels.

SMALL YET SIGNIFICANT

Traditionally M!CE has been all about size and sparkle. The new reality demands 'downsizing' at every level. "The reduced capacity and social distancing norms are the major factors holding back the recovery of M!CE business," says Upadhyay. The WFH mode has become the norm, which has

deeply impacted the M!CE business. However, this has not stopped the key players from reinventing and facing the challenges head-on. "Small is the new big for us. We have streamlined our strategies in accordance with COVID protocols and government guidelines. We are now reimagining the same banquet space with two perspectives – conferences and weddings,

vis-à-vis, social distancing. The way we chalked out the floor plan has changed. Groups may have become smaller, but the attention to detail ensuring guests' safety is unprecedented," **Saket Verma**, Director of Sales, Courtyard By Marriott Bengaluru Hebbal.

OPTIMISM & CAUTION

All set to host its 16th edition this year, Hotel

QUICK BYTE Turning 'thinking out of the box' into a survival strategy, the industry is more than ready to innovate



Atul Upadhyay



For the M!CE business, we are investing in tech, such as online registrations, live streaming and VR booths for a better experience



Investment Conference South Asia (HICSA) by Hotelivate, is allowed to take 50 per cent of the overall capacity, but this has not dampened the spirit of the organisers. **Manav Thadani**, Founder Chairman, Hotelivate, says, “This 50 per cent would have easily taken us to 300-400 persons, but we purposely kept our upper limit at 250. We have moved away from keeping the booths next to each other in a pre-function area and instead, are using a separate hall for it.”

Organisers are leaving no stone unturned for creating a bubble of safety at the venue. “The Taj Palace Hotel, New Delhi and Hotelivate will follow all the local protocols required. We can confirm that all the employees of IHCL at the hotel and the entire Hotelivate team meets the criteria,” asserts Thadani.

HYBRID IS THE NORMES DU JOUR

In the post-COVID world of M!CE, virtual and real are seen as two sides of the



Saket Verma



Small is the new big for us. Groups may have become smaller, but the attention to detail to ensure guests' safety and hygiene is unprecedented



same coin. Technology has become one of the most efficient weapon. “It is also important to have an online version available, which is better than a zoom or teams call. Our online networking tool is innovative, allowing active participation of the people attending online. It is a learning for all as it is for us and we hope to see success,” says Thadani. As hybrid becomes the *normes du jour*, hotel venues are not shying away from taking the advantage of the technology. “We made a video tour of the hotel and shared it on our website. The video also talks about safety measures,” says Verma.

For hotels too, it is relatively learning on the go. “For the M!CE business, we are investing in technology, such as online registrations, live streaming, and virtual reality booths,” says Upadhyay. The hybrid mode has evolved the way Indian weddings are planned and executed. Recently, Crowne Plaza Chennai Adyar Park launched a hybrid wedding solutions campaign,



Manav Thadani



In the current environment, it is also important to have an online version available, which allows active networking for the people



unveiling an integrated technology solution for hybrid weddings. The list of wedding services now includes customised streaming from the hotel venue, up to 15 speakers officiating the ceremony, event microsite, secured log in virtual event URL, calendar invite option, camera setup with switcher, etc. The hotel is looking at driving digital engagement through this hybrid platform via WhatsApp chats, live interactions, and live-streaming. **Jit Bose**, Area Director South India, IHG Hotels, says, “It is satisfying to see the adoption of hybrid solution helping our guests.”

CANCELLATION POLICIES GO FLEXIBLE

The third wave in India is a cause of concern. Many M!CE venues are revisiting their cancellation policies for winning clients' trust. “We are offering a credit period of one year as well as refund in case the event gets cancelled or postponed due to rise in COVID cases or lockdown in the area,” explains Verma.



Jit Bose



It is extremely satisfying to see how adoption of hybrid solution is helping our guests to continue with their celebrations



SAFE YET CREATIVE

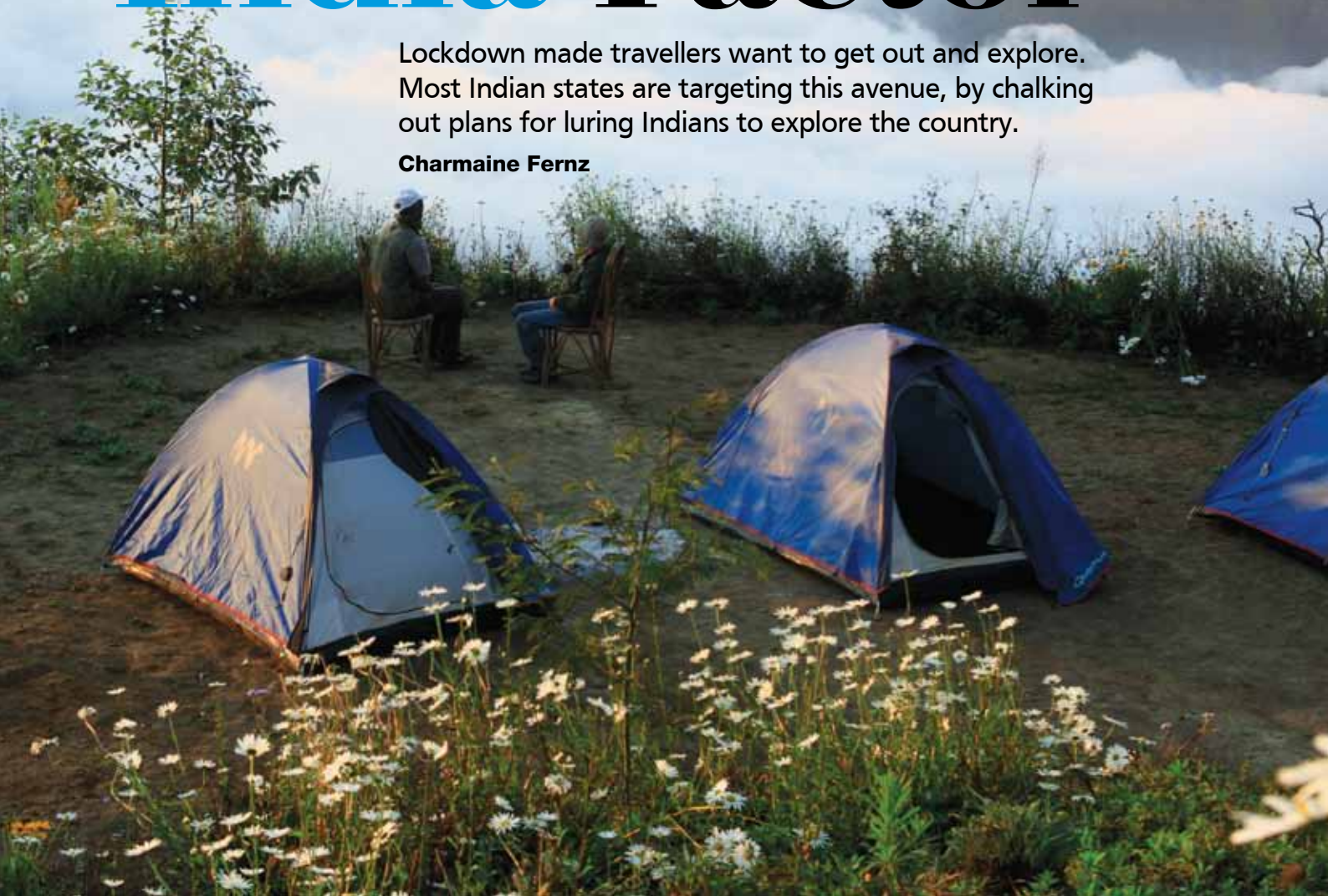
In high demand, sanitised venues are crucial to the revival and hotels are leaving no stone unturned. “All the 19 ibis hotels across 13 cities in India have received the ALLSAFE label. We implemented contactless experiences across all touch-points at our hotels. For immediate assistance, we have tied-up with AXA for any medical assistance,” says **Ajit Jose**, General Manager, ibis Kolkata Rajarhat.

While meetings and conferences have switched to the digital medium, the ‘COVID fatigue’ has the employees as well as employers asking for a real experience of teamwork. “Even the corporates understand that there is a merit in team activity, which cannot be achieved virtually. As they turn to us for new ideas to combat this challenge, we are happy to brainstorm,” says Verma. He believes that these ideas and technology will go a long way in winning the confidence of clients and rebuilding the business.

The India Factor

Lockdown made travellers want to get out and explore. Most Indian states are targeting this avenue, by chalking out plans for luring Indians to explore the country.

Charmaine Fernz



Travel is to a wanderlust like food to a connoisseur. The pandemic was a bitter lesson for the Indian tourism industry, but it was also a boon for domestic tourism. Lockdown made travellers want to get out and explore. This opportunity is what most Indian states are targeting currently. Plans are being chalked out to lure Indians to explore

the country – be it Kerala Tourism or Tamil Nadu Tourism, or even IRCTC collaborating with Cordelia Cruises to offer luxury cruise services within India.

THE FIRST STEP

Several state departments are looking at promoting different aspects of a destination to encourage travellers to explore something new. **Sandeep**

QUICK BYTE Kerala is the first destination in India to go active on social media

Nanduri IAS, Director, Tourism and MD, Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation Limited, says, “A committee was formed by the Tamil Nadu government to draw a ‘revival plan for

the tourism sector in Tamil Nadu post-lockdown.’ This was done with departments officials and non-officials of tourism stakeholders.” He further added that the Tamil Nadu Department of

Tourism has launched many social media campaigns, which showcase hidden tourism potential and promote emerging tourist segments. "A reel contest titled #MyTNMyStory was launched on Instagram to highlight tourist destinations of various districts through creative reels. The contest garnered great appreciation and active participation.

Another campaign was the #AtoZofTNTourism Facebook Photography Contest, aiming to tap into lesser-known tourist places through the alphabet encyclopedia of Tamilnadu Tourism as a part of world tourism celebrations. Social media users have been



V. R. Krishna Teja

Kerala is the first destination in India to go active on social media

actively sharing photos of lesser-known tourist spots of different districts of Tamil Nadu, starting with the Alphabet of the Day."

This is one of the many initiatives by different state departments. Kerala Tourism, too, has reopened its doors to tourists and is looking at welcoming tourists differently.

As **V. R. Krishna Teja IAS**, Director, Department of Tourism, Government of Kerala, explains, "We have rolled out an efficient and meticulous bio-bubble by creating a protective layer of fully inoculated service providers and local communities to host tourists in all destinations across the state. We have also listed out many activities. Domestic marketing campaigns, such as drivecations, wherein tourists visiting Kerala can explore the state by road with the fly and drive packages. Once the COVID situation eases, Kerala Tourism will launch its next set of campaigns to be promoted across OTT, digital, social media and radio campaigns. The focus of these campaigns being planned will be on drive holidays, honeymoons, long stay/workcation packages."

Rajasthan Tourism has joined hands with Incredible India to promote the destination showcasing lesser-known places, cuisine, dance forms, and spiritual journeys. The Department of Tourism of Ladakh with the Tourism Ministry is also planning an event to promote tourism in the region.

THE MEDIUMS

Krishna Teja asserts, "Kerala is the first tourism destination in India to go active on social media and the mainstay of

future campaigns will be social media and online campaigns. Influencer campaigns, innovative product promotion contests, and live broadcasts are some of the digital interventions. The idea is to dominate this space with more video content." Other states are also looking to capture a share of the marketing pie through innovative campaigns. Plans are underway by Maharashtra Tourism to take on a head-on approach.

TECHNOLOGY & TOURISM

The use of technology in many ways has been very restricted within the tourism industry. Nanduri explains, "Tamilnadu Tourism is incorporating emerging technologies like AI and VR through the creation of VR-based booklets and pamphlets. The Department of Tourism envisages integrating VR on the newly launched website for publishing various promotional videos."

Today, travellers, when booking want a realistic view of the destination. This is where VR or AR comes into play. These advanced technologies are also being adopted by several states across India. "We have already showcased VR videos of our famed backwaters at international trade fairs and the Mumbai and Delhi airports. Avenues in AI are being explored and Kerala Tourism will soon unveil its plans on this. Kerala Tourism also launched its Mobile App, which apart from having all tourist and destination-related information, enables users to themselves upload content about local unexplored destinations. The KT Mobile App will also have a Voice Assist facility," says Krishna Teja.





OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

The general Indian mindset is to prefer travelling internationally. Going beyond the regular trails, let us explore some unique facets of the states of India, such as the recent campaign by IRCTC 'Shri Ramayana Yatra' trains under the Dekho Apna Desh initiative, promoting religious tourism. The Northeastern region is looking to promote theme-based tourist circuits and injecting a huge sum of money into projects under the National Mission on PRASHAD schemes. Krishna Teja says that Kerala is now moving beyond the concept of being just a few destinations spread across the state, and focus will be on showcasing Kerala as a single destination, where each locality will be a tourist draw. Homestays, farm stays, and boutique properties may be the next point of traveller interest in a post-COVID scenario.



QUICK BYTE AI is being explored and Kerala Tourism will unveil its plans on this

We are also looking to tap into a new segment, such as honeymooners, drive holidays, wellness seekers, long stays, and active vacations. An exciting set of innovative events are also being planned while existing events in the cultural, sporting arena will be further promoted. Kerala is also looking to explore destination weddings. "Plans are underway by the Indian Railways to leasing or even sell coaches to private parties, in a bid to promote tourism within the country.

There is a strong need to promote railway-based tourism and this initiative will achieve just that."

Nanduri charting out TN's plans says, "Tamil Nadu has plenty of options starting with its five UNESCO World Heritage monuments. The state also offers a vast array of experiences on varied niche tourism themes." The best way to explore a destination is to immerse yourself in the culture and its people. Very rightly stated by **Zurab Pololikashvili**, Secretary-General, UNWTO, "Tourism can be a driver of positive change for rural communities." Interestingly, three Indian villages Ladhpora Khas in Madhya Pradesh, Kongthong village in Meghalaya, and Pochampally village in Telangana have made it to the nominations for 'Best Tourism Villages' by the UNWTO. Each of these villages has a unique story of their own.

Travel for business

Kennet Nordlien, CEO, Riskline, a travel risk intelligence company in operation since 2007, shares his first-hand experience of responding to businesses' needs during the pandemic

Nisha Verma

Duty of care is now at the forefront of many businesses, particularly when planning and managing business travel. COVID-19 has brought into focus the legal obligation to research, plan and implement a strategy to mitigate the risks involved for employees travelling for work. There is now more focus on safety requirements before, during and after travel.

We have seen the changing approach to business travel risk. Over the past year, we have seen a surge in inquiries, including a 30 per cent rise in website inquiries. This has increased our client base by 146 per cent since early 2019, since the start of 2020, and 81 per cent of existing clients have expanded their contracts with us in that time. We have had conversations with businesses across

sectors, including the insurance, aviation, travel tech, life sciences, higher education, assistance and security, as well as the travel management sector – all requiring access to the latest travel risk intelligence. What is clear is that, all employers have an important duty of care responsibility around employee safety when travelling for business.

DEMAND FOR HUMAN-CURATED CONTENT

Human-curated content comes in picture here, which is our term for people-verified information. There is no substitute for human engagement for evaluating and verifying data, and experts on-the-ground are the best people to do it. Their role is crucial in combating the 'infodemic', a virus of disinformation that has overwhelmed people. We have made huge investments in this area,

increasing our global team of on-the-ground analysts by 50 per cent. Our team now spans 15 nations and 11 time zones, all committed to sourcing and verifying real-time data.

DUTY OF CARE POST-PANDEMIC

Duty of care will remain at the forefront as the world gradually reopens, bringing with it the gradual return of business travel. As we adjust to the 'new normal,' we should expect widespread dissatisfaction fuelled by pre-COVID issues, all of which have been amplified in a post-pandemic context. These will have safety concerns for employees travelling for business. My hope is that employers will now have the resources they need to respond appropriately, having fine-tuned their focus on duty of care throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.



Kennet Nordlien



All employers have duty of care responsibility around staff safety when travelling for business





Will M!CE regain its lost glory?

With the advent of lockdowns, the industry realised that individuals, corporates and associations were making changes the way of hosting MICE events.

Ananya Kukreja

M!CE, over the years, has not only evolved but also got bigger in India. It is evident from the fact that it is considered amongst the largest sources of revenue in hospitality and tourism. Hotels now have a separate wing to promote the M!CE segment. The hospitality industry has already understood the importance of M!CE and has scaled up its operations.

With COVID hitting the global hotel industry, organisations focussed on innovative revenue generating ideas to keep themselves afloat. During lockdowns, the industry realised that not only individuals, but also the corporates were changing



Arun Sundararaj



Technology will play a vital role in showing the way forward



Sumit Kaul



We are gearing up for the reality of physical events



the ways of hosting M!CE. "M!CE in India is likely to be the focus in tier-I, II and III cities, and emerging destinations boasting of special attractions" says **Vikram Lalvani**, Chief of Revenue, Sales and Destinations, Sterling Holiday Resorts Ltd.

INNOVATION INSPIRATION

Firms are catering to locals and bringing them together by organising getaway promotional events. Factors like venue, facilities, number, and size of halls are decided after a survey of the city. It is important to have a long-term view while planning, as per **Dheeraj Kukreja**, COO, Piccadily Holiday Resorts Ltd. Sterling receives at least

QUICK BYTE Hotels now have a separate wing to promote the M!CE segment

70 per cent of M!CE and association requirements on weekdays. This segment has grown by over 25 per cent, so far. Sterling's business in 2021 has exceeded by 50 per cent from 2019. The new mantra of revenue production is 'Weekdays,' which is ensured when customers extend their stay and combine business and leisure. Several companies' safety and hygiene measures have allowed them to market themselves to the targeted clientele.

ORGANISATIONAL OPERATIONS

Ever since the pandemic began, the first step for most companies before launching operations was to have a committed hygiene and sanitisation protocol in place. **Manish Dayya**, GM, Novotel Hyderabad Convention Centre and Hyderabad International Convention Centre, states that Accor introduced the 'All Safe' label in 2020 to bring an enhanced safety and hygiene measures. 'All Safe' was developed and vetted by Bureau Veritas and NHCC. Accor has also announced a global rollout of its digital key solution 'Accor Key,' in line with the group's strategy of providing contactless guest journey in its facilities. During the initial days of lockdown, the brand introduced 'All Connect,' a hybrid meetings concept supported by Microsoft Teams.

Sterling Holiday Resorts Ltd., came up with 'Cares,' a 360-degree sanitisation programme with Apollo Clinics, and was one of the first few resorts to have reopened for M!CE. Limited size of meetings helps the company manage events with ease. Sterling also provides complimentary travel insurance to those who opt for it.

SAFE PRACTICES ACCORDED PRIORITY

The Indian Hotels Company Limited (IHCL) has always accorded top priority to the safety of guests and other stakeholders. As a part of Tajness- A Commitment Restrengthened, **Arun Sundararaj**, Director of Culinary Operations, Taj Mahal, New Delhi, says that the hotel has undertaken initiatives, ensuring a safe experience. Menus have been digitised and can be accessed by scanning QR codes. The redesigned menus have a greater emphasis on wellness-oriented food sections. The company has also redefined MICE and wedding experiences by remodelling banqueting processes.

With the launch and phased implementation of I-ZEST, IHCL's Zero-Touch Service Transformation, the company will bring in several digital solutions across hotels under the brands, Taj, Vivanta and SeleQtions. From zero-touch check-ins and check-outs, digital invoicing, online payment options and QR codes to digital menus in restaurants, I-ZEST's digital features will ensure social distancing while maintaining secure and seamless services.

The Piccadily Holiday Resorts Ltd., following the government mandated protocols as well as enhanced responsibility towards hygiene, has launched Piccadily Assured Safety & Security (PASS) programme, allowing guests a sense of refuge at their properties. Apart from COVID norms, the company has also improved its internet connectivity, lease lined with larger capacity, added back-up internet connections, and included world-class



Manish Dayya

Promotions have come about to woo solo travellers & families



Vikram Lalvani

Convenience will be a new factor of expectations for M!CE



Dheeraj Kukreja

There would be stiff competition among many regions

hardware for distribution of online connectivity.

OUTLOOK

The M!CE industry is vast and important, and one cannot begin to think of hotels functioning without this segment. Since the entire world would be looking forward to having M!CE, the competition between countries, region, states, cities, and hotels would be high. It is best if the private sector collaborates with the central and state governments to get their share of the pie.

It is time to work together and promote a destination, so that everyone benefits. WFH and virtual meeting would have a lasting impact on M!CE. However, the sector saw a turnaround after the first COVID wave, which paused during the second wave, and now green shoots of M!CE in September and October can be seen. The subsequent months should, hopefully, be favourable.

With the government allowing larger gatherings of people and the vaccination efforts in India, sentiment towards MICE has changed dramatically. Reduction of COVID cases, reopening of international borders and resumption of international flights contributed to the growth of M!CE. The state government is engaged with the IT and corporates in encouraging employees to come back to offices and revive economic activity cross-sectors.

COVID, coupled with changing consumer needs, has allowed many innovative approaches that would otherwise have not returned into practice, bringing M!CE and ancillary industries back to their glory.



Virtual queuing – a game changer

In its effort to minimise crowding, Imagicaa will introduce the concept of virtual queuing in India when it reopens, says **Dhimant Bakshi**, Joint CEO, Imagicaa World Entertainment.



Dhimant Bakshi



Entertainment parks will revolutionise safety and guest standards in tandem with the evolving world



In early 2020, COVID-19 put the world on a roller coaster ride loop, while in reality roller coaster and other rides came to a grinding halt due to imposed lockdowns. As the first wave of the pandemic momentum slowed, entertainment venues, including Imagicaa exerted best efforts for a cautious reopening with limited capacity to implement safe distancing measures. Functional streamlining of WHO and ICMR recommendations became normative elsewhere and at Imagicaa. But as COVID spiralled into much of 2021, embracing the new normal demanded more than manual temperature checks and safe distancing norms. Thus, fuelling conversation around entertainment was cushioned with utmost safety. The hard truth

is that safety standards have outranked the need for quick getaways as the principal factor currently.

Theme parks can undergo a sustainable transformation to build a safe and pleasant visitor experience. Innovative approaches are now being used by globally to create a safe haven. But as contactless access is critical in public areas or heavy-touch surfaces with high footfall, transitioning guests out of physical queues to virtual queues is a natural solution for most theme parks. In an effort to minimise crowding while ensuring distancing, Imagicaa will introduce the concept of 'virtual queuing' in India when it reopens. Operating on first in, first out (FIFO) policy, guests can enter a virtual equivalent of the physical queue and be

informed when it is time to ride via their smartphones. With a facility like this, guests are free to roam parks like Imagicaa and maximise their visit. What everyone needs to understand is that within our industry, we compete not only against 'share of wallet' but 'share of time' too. Such technologies with measurable results will inevitably raise footfall and guest experience standards.

Virtual queuing is set to be a game changer in the Indian-themed attraction landscape from customer flow management angle. Not only will it help theme parks stay relevant in the future, but also be pivotal to the industry's viability. Serving as an additional stimulus to set themed-entertainment industry back to pre-COVID times must be coupled with government support. On a concluding note, entertainment parks will revolutionise safety and guest standards in tandem with the world as it continues to learn and evolve from this experience.

QUICK BYTE Shifting guests out of physical queues to virtual queues is a natural solution for most theme parks

Airlift and new tourism development

Gavin Eccles, Managing Partner, GE Consulting & Advisory, provides valuable insights on how destinations and airports need to be aligned with the new realities post-COVID.

The aviation sector is undergoing significant change, with a shift away from supply management and toward how to support demand development. Since the turn of the millennium, the growth of air services has been the backbone of tourism generation. Low-cost airlines from the US, Europe, and Asia have all collaborated with airports and tourism boards to support critical routes. Funds and incentives have been set up to help airlines decide on new routes, create demand, and ensure they have institutions and airports working with them to mitigate risk. Such incentives allow for the creation of partnerships and the belief that the airline and the destination/airport are working together to increase future demand. These kind of incentives can span three years or three seasons, and billions of dollars have been

spent around the world to attract tourists. Will this be the case if the aviation industry is re-ignited? Is it still possible for airports and tourism boards to find the incentives needed to help airlines with their business cases and planning decisions?

Two sides of the same coin: The importance of connectivity is critical for any destination's vision. As a result, even the addition of even new route creates enormous trickle-down benefits. Destinations invest funds through incentives and their Tourist Boards and Chambers of Commerce to support the development of airlift, which in turn contribute to the government through tourism spend contributions. Hence, a strong route development scheme attracts tourists, and such spend is often greater than any incentive given to support the route.

So, for the past 20 years, we have seen many new routes that have brought a lot of tourism development to multiple countries and regions, and while we have seen significant growth in aviation, we have also seen a lot of new routes and tourism development. Prior to the COVID-19, both aviation and tourism sectors were witnessing tremendous success. It has never been clearer that aviation and tourism are working on the same side of the coin.

Road to recovery: It goes without saying that the aviation and global tourism industries have been on a sharp decline since February/March 2020. The challenge is to stimulate travel demand. All airports and destinations will be considering how they will recover. Traffic for many airports will not get back to the levels of 2019 until the end of 2022 or early 2023.



Gavin Eccles

It has never been clearer that aviation & tourism are working on the same side of the coin

QUICK BYTE Funds have been set up to help airlines decide on new routes



Movements



Carolyn Turnbull
Managing Director
Tourism Western Australia

Carolyn Turnbull's appointment as Managing Director of Tourism Western Australia has been welcomed by Business Events Perth (BE Perth). Turnbull joined Tourism WA in October 2020 as Executive Director of Industry, Aviation, and Markets, where she oversaw a network of 11 offices, and managed airline connections and distribution channels. Prior to COVID-19, business travellers pumped US\$ 2.5 billion into the Western Australia economy.



Jeremy Heyes
RIBA Sr. VP & MD
WATG London

Heyes has been a member of the WATG Board of Directors since 1992 and is presently completing his 3rd term. He has worked on several projects like the Emirates Palace in Abu Dhabi, the Claridge's Hotel in London's refurbishment, the award-winning St. Regis Astana Hotel + Residences: Porto Montenegro, the soon-to-open Ritz-Carlton Amman Hotel + Residences in Jordan, and two branded properties in Qatar for World Cup 2022. He comes with over 35 years of experience in design and project management.



Lawrence M. Cuculic
President & CEO
BWH Hotel Group

Lawrence (Larry) M. Cuculic has been named President and CEO of BWH Hotel Group. He is expected to take over in December 2021, after departing President and CEO David Kong. For the past 12 years, Larry has served as the company's Senior Vice President and General Counsel. He offers excellent knowledge from his former jobs, military history, and longstanding position to the organisation. He is enthusiastic about leading BWH Hotel Group into its next chapter.



Dr. Debbie Kristiansen
General Manager
BIECC

Dr. Debbie Kristiansen has been named GM of the new Bahrain International Exhibition & Convention Centre (BIECC), set to open in 2022. It will be the largest of its kind in the ME, with 95,000 sq. m., exhibition space, 10 halls, 4,000-seat auditorium, 95 meeting rooms, and Royal and VIP Majlis. Her grasp of the region's culture and character would be an asset in her new post. She was named one of the Top 30 Most Inspirational Women in the Arab World in 2019 and the Middle East Female CEO of the Year in 2018.



Gopinath John Surendranath
Operations Manager
Novotel Chennai SIPCOT

Gopinath John Surendranath has been named Operations Manager at Novotel Chennai SIPCOT. He will lead operations at Novotel Chennai SIPCOT and aim at expanding the hotel's position as a leader in Chennai's bi-leisure sector. He is a seasoned professional with more than 18 years of experience in India and overseas. Surendranath was most recently in charge of the Novotel Hyderabad Convention Centre's Rooms Division Operations.



Sharin Joseph
Director-S&M, Courtyard & Fairfield by Marriott Bengaluru

Marriott Bengaluru has appointed Sharin Joseph as Director of Sales and Marketing, Courtyard & Fairfield. He brings over 13 years of expertise working with international hotel brands such as Marriott International, Hyatt, and Wyndham to Courtyard & Fairfield. His most recent post was Director of Sales at Fairfield by Marriott Bengaluru Rajajinagar. In his new role, Joseph will be in charge of heading a team and contributing in the strategic development of a marketing plan for both properties.



Narendra Babu
General Manager
Grand Victoria The Fern Resort & Spa, Panchgani

Narendra Babu has joined as GM at Grand Victoria The Fern Resort & Spa, Panchgani. He has close to two decades of experience across brands, such as The Oberoi, Four Seasons and Marriott International. He has also worked for six pre-openings and gained experience across India, covering Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Telangana, Tamil Nadu and international exposure at Maldives for a period of more than two years. He is skilled in catering, Food & Beverage and banquet operations.



Gopinath Gopalan
General Manager
Radisson Blu Hotel & Spa, Nashik

Gopinath Gopalan has spent more than two decades in the hotel industry, achieving milestones for a host of prestigious brands. He has worked at Park Hyatt Goa, Grand Hyatt Mumbai, The Leela Palace Bengaluru, and Oberoi Hotels & Resorts in Mumbai, Udaipur, and New Delhi, among others. He positioned the Hyatt Regency Ahmedabad as the 'Favourite New Business Hotel in India' by Condé Nast Traveller Reader's Choice Award in 2016 and as one of the top eight hotels in India on the 'Condé Nast Traveller's Hot List' in 2016.

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