

Travel Links



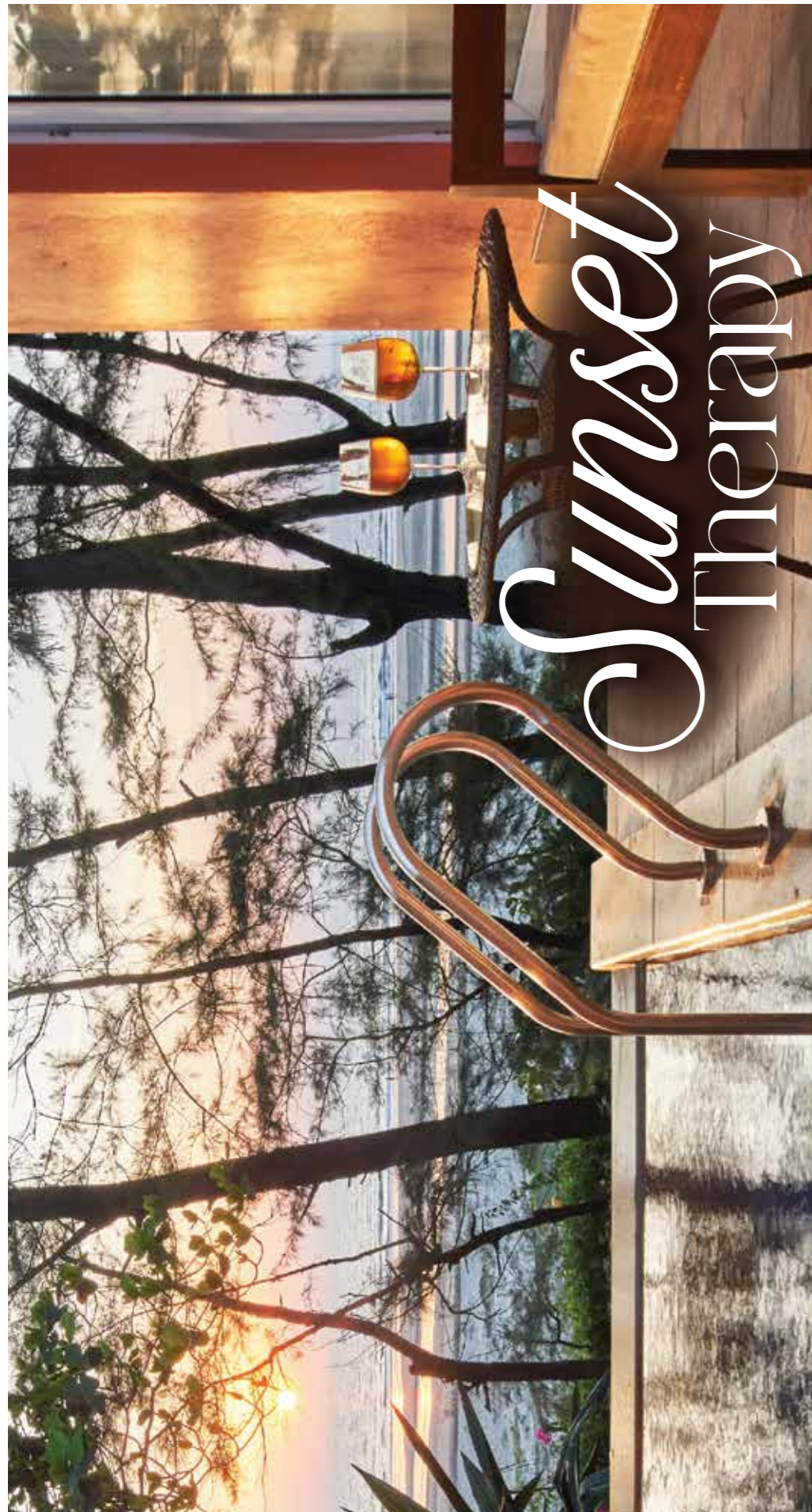
PRICE ₹ 200

VOLUME 06 | ISSUE 03

APRIL - MAY - JUNE 2024



**INTERVIEWS SPECIAL
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ASPIRING BUCKET LIST**



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Travel Links

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Welcome, to yet another issue of Travel Links Magazine, where the spirit of adventure meets the comfort of luxury. This month, we have curated a diverse collection of articles that will transport you across continents, offering insights from key figures in the international tourism sector, showcasing the best hotels around the world, and presenting a special focus on the vibrant top Asian countries to travel and aspiring bucket list 2024.

As the global travel industry continues to recover and adapt to changing dynamics, we're witnessing a remarkable transformation in how we explore the world. Our exclusive interviews with industry leaders provide a window into this evolving landscape. They share their perspectives on sustainable tourism, the impact of technology, and the importance of cultural sensitivity in promoting global connections. Through these conversations, we gain a deeper understanding of the trends shaping the future of travel.

In our "Best Hotels" feature, we take you on a journey through some of the most luxurious and unique accommodations. From opulent urban retreats to serene island resorts, our curated list caters to a range of tastes and preferences. These hotels offer more than just a place to stay; they provide experiences that enrich your journey and create lasting memories. Whether you're seeking a romantic getaway, a family-friendly resort, or a business trip with a touch of elegance, we've got you covered.

Asia has always been a continent of intrigue and beauty, with its diverse cultures and breathtaking landscapes. Our "Top Asian Countries" article explores the must-visit destinations in this dynamic region. We highlight the experiences that make each country unique. Whether you're an adventure seeker or a foodie, Asia offers something for everyone. Through our in-depth exploration, you'll discover hidden gems and get tips for making the most of your visit.

In our feature article on Taiwan, we dive into the heart of this captivating island. Known for its vibrant night markets, stunning landscapes, and rich history, Taiwan is a treasure trove of experiences waiting to be uncovered. We take a closer look at the city of Kaohsiung, where modernity meets tradition. Our article explores the must-see attractions, the local cuisine, and the warm hospitality that makes Taiwan a destination to remember.

Finally, our hospitality review focuses on a new hotel that is setting a benchmark for sustainable luxury. This innovative property combines eco-friendly practices with high-end amenities, proving that responsible tourism doesn't mean sacrificing comfort. The hotel's commitment to reducing its carbon footprint while providing top-notch service is a testament to the direction the industry is heading.

As you flip through the pages of this issue, we hope you're inspired to embark on your adventures. The world is full of wonders, and there's no better time to explore than now. Whether you're planning your next vacation or simply dreaming of distant shores, Travel Links is here to guide you every step of the way.

Thank you for joining us on this journey. We look forward to hearing about your travel experiences and invite you to share your stories with us. Here's to new horizons and unforgettable memories.

Payal Sahni

Payal Sahni

Editor

Payal Sahni

travellinkslive.com



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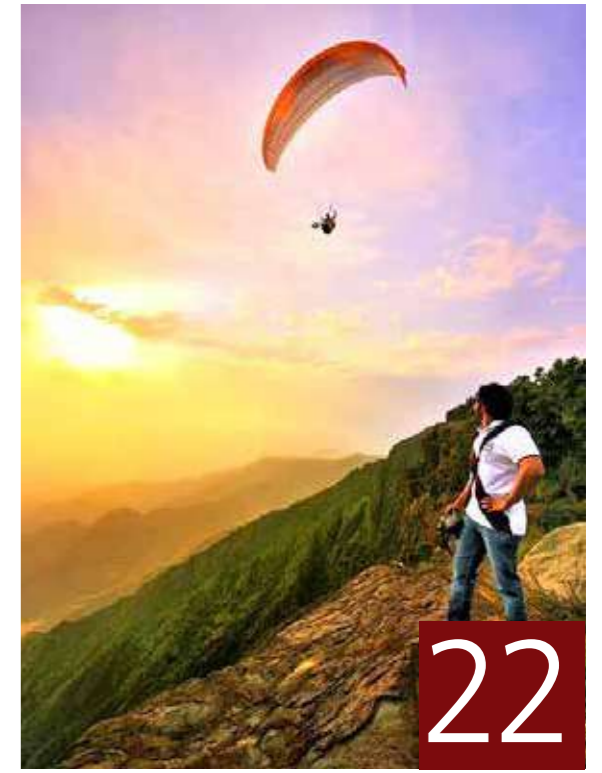


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Mr. Donovan White is the Director of Tourism of Jamaica

Mr. White, a Jamaican national, brings with him many years of marketing and business development experience. Mr. White continues to build upon the past successes of the Jamaica Tourist Board, help the JTB expand its global reach and continue to forge a strong partnership with the private sector. We at Travel Links talk to him about his marketing strategies, importance of Indian tourism sector for Jamaica, Unique campaigns, ease of Visa for travellers, must do things in Jamaica and unforgettable experiences.

By Payal Sahni



Q How does Jamaica plan to tailor its tourism marketing strategies to specifically appeal to the Indian market, considering cultural nuances and preferences?

Jamaica is one of the most aspirational travel destinations for the Indian travellers. The island destination has always been a top priority in the minds of the Indian travellers as they get their visas on arrival. Jamaica is a unique destination, suitable for all age groups, be it families, honeymooners, families, leisure travellers and adventure seekers.

The Government of Jamaica has been focusing on India market, to attract visitors in order to diversify Jamaica's tourist

markets. There is a strong presence of Indian culture in Jamaica. What really makes Jamaica unique is the gorgeous, rich culture of those who live here. The island destination has many tourism products to offer to Indians, with multiple similarities to the Indian culture like traditional music, cuisine and other cultural components. Jamaica's tropical climate makes it an ideal destination for the Indian travellers and Indian cuisines has been adapted into Jamaica's culture.

Q Can you elaborate on any unique initiatives or campaigns Jamaica intends to launch to attract Indian tourists to the island?

The ongoing campaign by Visit Jamaica – “Come Back to the Vibe that comes Alive in Jamaica” showcases Jamaica's natural attractions and its welcoming people working together to help visitors live their best lives. The culture of Jamaica is truly unique, from the music to the food to the people and the vibe.

The campaign focuses at three distinct personas: Adventure Seekers, who represent a younger demographic discovering Jamaica for the first time; Family Planners, represents the young family demographic experiencing a long-anticipated family vacation; and Seasoned Travellers, represents an older demographic that has likely visited Jamaica previously and



intend to visit again to rediscover the island destination. The campaign highlights an array of adventurous, romantic, luxurious, relaxing, fun and mouth-watering moments to inspire travellers to visit Jamaica.

Given the diverse range of experiences

Q Jamaica offers, how does the tourism board plan to showcase these to Indian travellers effectively?

With visa on arrival for the Indian travellers, Jamaica ranks amongst one of the most aspirational travel destinations for the Indian travellers. There is a huge and

developing interest for Indians tourist to come to the island destination.

The Jamaica Tourist Board has recently concluded its first-ever participation in SATTE 2024, the Jamaica Booth received an amazing footfall. To strengthen the culture ties between Jamaica and India, the High Commission of Jamaica in New Delhi in association with PVR INOX hosted an exclusive premiere of the highly anticipated Paramount Pictures Bob Marley Biopic, “One Love”. Destination Jamaica has also been awarded as the “Most Preferred Caribbean Island Holiday Destination 2024” at VETA Awards 2024. JTB India office had also participated in JAPEX 2023 (Jamaica Product Exchange); Jamaica hosted six travel agents from the Indian travel trade fraternity and an Indian media house in Jamaica. JTB had also participated at The Iconic Experiences Show 2023 to ensure Jamaica's presence among the Indian travel trade fraternity. JTB has more marketing and trade promotions lined up in the coming part of the year.

How does Jamaica plan to address any



Q potential barriers such as visa procedures or connectivity issues that may hinder Indian tourists from visiting the destination?

Destination Jamaica offers visa on arrival for the Indian travellers for up to 30 days. Travellers coming to Jamaica are mandated to fill out the immigration form online. The Immigration/Customs (C5) Form is an entry requirement for persons travelling to the island, whether they are residents in Jamaica or visiting.

Jamaica is a long-haul destination for Indians, there is no direct connectivity. However, Destination Jamaica is well connected from various parts of the world and has an easy access from the US, Canada, London, Frankfurt, Paris, Amsterdam and we are also in discussions with some gulf carriers.

Q Please let us know about top 5 things to do/destinations in Jamaica.

Indian Travellers are always on the lookout for a new, exotic and experiential holiday vacation and Jamaica fits the bill

perfectly in this regard. Jamaica has its unique character, a charm of its own, a thrill like no other, and an absolute holistic experience of a dream destination! With so much to do in Jamaica, we recommend some of our best attractions/activities which appeal the most to Indian tourists.

Try rafting on the Martha Brae River, island's #1 rafting attraction, is a relaxing raft ride. Bob Marley fans can visit the famous Bob Marley Museum, the former home of the reggae legend, filled with rich memories and treasured mementos of the outstanding musician. Ever tried climbing a waterfall? Dunn's River Falls is a MUST VISIT on any Jamaican vacation; climb to the top of the falls and witness the incredible views of the rainforest. Adventure enthusiasts can opt for Chukka Adventures and Mystic Mountain; both offers a unique array of adventure tours for all ages. Experience how rum has been made at the Joy Spence Appleton Estate Rum Experience!

Q Music, beats, fun is synonym with Jamaica. Tell us about your

favourite songs/ singer.

From the legendary sounds of reggae greats like Bob Marley and Jimmy Cliff, to the driving rhythms of dancehall, music has always been an integral part of Jamaica's culture. After all, Jamaica has given the world six distinct genres of music - mento, ska, rocksteady, reggae, dub, and dancehall! Jamaica is a haven for live music and pulsating festivals. From the fusion of reggae and hip-hop to the incorporation of electronic elements into dancehall, Jamaican music continues to push boundaries and captivate audiences worldwide.

Q Your 5 favourite cuisines? Any fun memories to share?

Food in Jamaica is a celebration! From our famous street foods to fine dining at some of our top restaurants, the Jamaican flavours and spices always stay authentic! Jamaica is synonymous with all things jerk. The Jerk Chicken is a must try when in Jamaica. Indian cuisine is also part of the Jamaican palette. [\[1\]](#)



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Spokesperson: Ms. Neliswa Nkani, Hub Head – MEISEA, South African Tourism

Ms. Neliswa Nkani, Hub Head - MEISEA, South African Tourism is currently spearheading initiatives of the national tourism board in the Middle East, India, and South East Asia. Neliswa Nkani, a South African national, comes with a holistic tourism experience that includes marketing, and strategic government relations. She shares with Travel Links, the importance of taking the Indian market forward by leaps and bounds for South Africa. **By Payal Sahni**

Q Could you share some of the key strategies or initiatives you've implemented to specifically target and attract Indian travellers to visit South Africa?

India remains a core market for South African Tourism globally and holds much promise. With our media and marketing efforts, we have managed to stay top-of-mind and excite the Indian traveller, while also incentivizing them to travel with some great deals. Our multi-pronged, experiential approach helps us directly dial-up consumers, while also enabling our trade partners to sell the destination more effectively & innovatively. Given that India is one of our largest international source markets, we undertook several initiatives in the past year. We rolled out the second phase of our 'More & More' campaign, showcasing the gems in South Africa through the eyes of Indian influencers. We understand that deriving the most value from international travel spending is key, as is building aspiration to travel with localized content that resonates and speaks the language of our audiences. Towards this end, we recently hosted Indian influencers in South Africa to create 'desi' content that is expected to have a greater impact and recall with consumers across the country. We are also enhancing our reach in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities of India considering them as a key growth trigger for the country over the next decade owing to improved internet access and connectivity. Further, we have recently concluded a very successful Annual India Roadshow 2024 and Corporate Think Tank programs addressing

the needs of Indian travellers and corporates alike. During both of our multi-city events, South African Tourism received a warm reception and departed with overwhelming leads generated as a result of the events.

Q What unique selling points or experiences does South Africa offer to Indian travellers, and how do you effectively communicate these attractions to capture their interest?

South Africa is one of the largest adventure playgrounds for travellers from not only India but around the world. The country boasts more than 3,000 adventure activities in addition to the country's breathtaking scenery. Further, it presents thriving wildlife and a lively food and culture scene, unique to the Rainbow Nation. South Africa holds another ace up its sleeve as one of the most budget-friendly international destinations globally. The affordability has made it a top choice for Indian families, allowing them to explore leisurely and emerge as one of their preferred destinations. While cost is a significant consideration, maximizing the value of international travel is equally important. With our shared history and diverse culture, South African cuisine caters to various dietary preferences, particularly for those prioritizing vegetarian options. Boasting over 3,000 vegetarian restaurants, South Africa respects and accommodates every dietary choice, further enhancing the appeal for travelers. Given our longstanding presence in India, we have an extremely strong network of trade partners in the country. We regularly host them at our Learn

SA workshops held across multiple cities every year and continue to educate them about our revitalized strategy and offerings. Further, we are also working towards maintaining a strong digital presence through which we can keep our consumers up to date.

Q Building strong partnerships and collaborations is often crucial in tourism promotion. Can you highlight any successful partnerships or collaborations you've facilitated to enhance South Africa's appeal to the Indian market?

At South African Tourism, we continually explore fostering mutually beneficial partnerships with a range of companies and trade partners. Our collaboration with Ethiopian Airlines exemplifies this commitment and has yielded remarkable success. Together, we have worked to introduce deal drive campaigns tailored for Indian travelers during peak seasons. This year too, we are excited to have launched a special campaign in partnership with Ethiopian Airlines, aimed at rewarding Indian travelers planning their summer holidays in South Africa. Our focus is on providing exceptional value, with return fares starting at just 39,990/- INR, allowing travelers to allocate more of their budget towards unforgettable experiences. In the past, we have forged similar successful partnerships with airlines such as Air Seychelles and undertaken initiatives to make air travel more affordable with South African Airways. We recognize that airfare expenses often constitute a significant portion of travel

budgets for international trips, and we aim to alleviate this burden while enhancing the overall travel experience.

Q With the ongoing challenges, how have your marketing strategies adapted to continue promoting South Africa as a safe and appealing destination for Indian travellers?

At South African Tourism, we are dedicated to staying on top of the evolving needs of our markets and actively soliciting feedback from our stakeholders. The travel and tourism industry is inherently dynamic, requiring us, as a tourism board, to operate within an agile framework. We must maintain open channels of communication with both, the travelers and trade partners, allowing us to collaboratively enhance our promotional strategies within the region. This commitment ensures that we remain responsive to the changing landscape of travel and are poised to deliver exceptional experiences.

Q Please let us know your top 5 favourite destinations in South Africa and why? You favourite cuisine.

The Rainbow Nation offers an abundance of captivating destinations, and singling out just five from its wealth of natural beauty doesn't do justice to the place. Each province boasts its distinct allure. For travelers venturing into South Africa, a visit to Sutherland in the Northern Cape is highly recommended. Renowned as a world-class astronomical center, Sutherland is home to The Southern African Large Telescope (SALT), perched atop a mountain peak 14km from the town. It offers unparalleled stargazing experiences, making it one of the premier celestial observation sites in the southern hemisphere. Nestled amidst breathtaking scenery, the Blyde River Canyon in Mpumalanga is another sight to behold. Stretching 16 km long and plunging 800m deep, its majestic grandeur and exquisite symmetry make it one of the world's most captivating locations, leaving an indelible impression on all who visit. For a different kind of adventure, saddle up for a horseback ride in Stilbaai, located in the Western Cape. Explore the enchanting coastline and delve into the area's rich cultural heritage, immersing yourself in its coastal charm and scenic vistas. McGregor, also situated in the Western Cape, holds a unique allure with its artistic



ambiance. Retaining much of its 19th-century architectural charm, McGregor is adorned with quaint, white-washed cottages and sprawling gardens, exuding an irresistible old-world charm and artistic flair. No trip to South Africa would be complete without indulging in a round of wine tasting, and the Stellenbosch region stands out as the ultimate destination for oenophiles. Home to some of the most renowned wineries, Stellenbosch promises an unforgettable sensory journey through its exquisite wines and picturesque vineyards. To anyone visiting South Africa, I would recommend them to sample some of my personal favourite, Chakalaka with Dombolo; A hearty flavourful dish with a side of light and fresh steamed bread.

Q Going forward, please share your vision for the coming 5 years.

As the travel and tourism industry increasingly embraces digital platforms, we are strategically directing our efforts toward

engaging consumers where they spend the bulk of their time: online. Over more than two decades of presence in India, we have cultivated a strong digital footprint and strengthened our partnerships with Indian trade, particularly in Tier 1 cities. This is evidenced by the steady inbound traffic from India. In recent years, our strategic focus has shifted towards broadening our reach into Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities across India. We firmly believe that this expansion will fuel the next phase of growth for South African Tourism within the country. To make the Rainbow Nation more accessible and affordable to Indian travelers, we are actively pursuing partnerships with airlines to introduce value-driven deals and offers tailored to benefit travelers from India. This proactive approach underscores our commitment to continue facilitating memorable and cost-effective travel experiences to South Africa for all Indian visitors in the coming years. <#>

Elisa Robles Fraga is the Director of the Tourism Office of Spain (Embassy of Spain) in India

She spearheads the promotion of Spain as a tourist destination in the Indian outbound market as well as in nearby markets such as Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh, among others. Travel Links talks to her about the uniqueness that Spain has to offer in terms of destination, experiences, sustainability, growth, and opportunities.

By **Payal Sahni**

Q Spain is known for its diverse regions, each offering its own distinct experiences. How do you approach highlighting the rich cultural tapestry and varied landscapes of Spain in your tourism initiatives?

To highlight Spain's diverse regions, we employ a comprehensive approach that showcases the distinct cultural heritage and varied landscapes of each area. Through curated content, immersive experiences, and strategic partnerships with local communities, we emphasize the rich tapestry of Spain's heritage, from the vibrant flamenco of Andalusia, the historic charm of Catalonia, and the stunning natural beauty of the Canary and Balearic Islands, to the majestic mountains of Galicia, and the renowned cuisine of the Basque Country and Valencia.

Q With the rise of digital media and social platforms, how do you utilize these tools to engage with potential visitors and convey the allure of Spain as a must-visit destination?

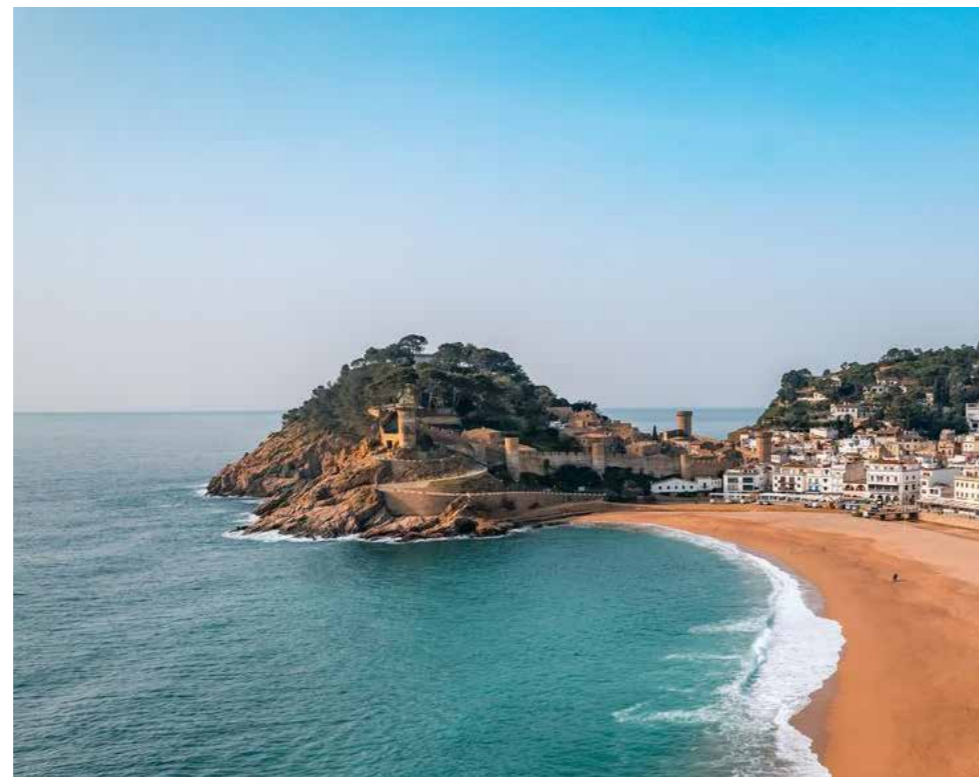
Leveraging digital media and social platforms is integral to our outreach efforts. We deploy targeted advertising campaigns, share captivating visual content, and actively engage with audiences through interactive posts and user-generated content. By leveraging user-generated content, we aim to spark curiosity and inspire travel aspirations among potential visitors, positioning Spain as an irresistible destination. Additionally, we collaborate with travel bloggers and content creators who share our passion for Spain, fostering authentic connections and

amplifying our message across diverse online communities.

Q Sustainable tourism is becoming increasingly important. Could you share some initiatives or strategies implemented by Spain's tourism sector to promote responsible travel and minimize its environmental footprint?

Spain's commitment to sustainable tourism has been underscored by its recent accolade as the 'Best Sustainable Destination in 2024' by The Lonely Planet. This recognition

reflects ongoing efforts throughout Spain to adapt to greener policies, not only preserving our natural wonders but also creating more jobs in the industry and fostering a circular economy. From eco-certified accommodations to conservation projects in protected areas, Spain's tourism sector is dedicated to minimizing environmental impact and promoting responsible travel. Additionally, we actively engage with local communities and stakeholders to implement innovative initiatives that prioritize sustainability while enhancing the



visitor experience. Through these collective endeavours, Spain is paving the way for a more sustainable future in tourism.

Q Spain has faced challenges in recent years, such as over-tourism in certain areas. How do you address these challenges while still promoting tourism and ensuring a positive experience for both visitors and locals?

Addressing the challenges of over-tourism requires a multi-faceted approach, including efforts towards tourism de-seasonalisation in Spain. We focus on promoting lesser-known destinations, diversifying tourism offerings, and implementing crowd management measures such as timed entry tickets and visitor caps in popular attractions. Community engagement and stakeholder collaboration are paramount, ensuring that tourism development is sustainable and benefits local economies while preserving cultural heritage and the environment. By spreading tourism demand across different seasons, we aim to alleviate pressure on popular destinations and create a more balanced and enjoyable experience for both visitors and locals alike.

Q As a leader in Spain's tourism industry, what do you see as the key factors driving the recovery and



growth of tourism post-pandemic, and how is Spain positioning itself to capitalize on these opportunities?

Post-pandemic recovery and growth in tourism hinge on adaptability, innovation, and collaboration. Spain is strategically positioned to capitalize on emerging trends such as digital nomadism, sustainable travel, and wellness tourism. The Indian outbound market has indeed shown its positive intent in the past year towards Spain, surpassing pre-pandemic numbers in 2023, with figures reaching almost 250,000. We are investing in infrastructure, enhancing health and safety protocols, and reimagining visitor experiences to meet evolving traveller preferences. Additionally, proactive marketing campaigns, targeted promotions, and partnerships with airlines and travel agencies are key drivers in repositioning Spain as a premier destination for international travellers seeking unforgettable experiences and warm hospitality. [\[1\]](#)



Travel Bucket List-2024

There are several other nations, like India, that are acclaimed for their delectable cuisine, homegrown wines, adventure sports, wildlife sanctuaries, fashion, and more. We have chosen some of our favorite places, nations, Cities, trips, and initiatives. There are road trips, romantic getaways, conservation projects, hikes, and explorations of local seafood markets. We hope your flights take off on time, your waiting lines are short and you get to see the most beautiful views across the globe. Plus, who knows? Maybe we'll run into you there.

CATEGORIES

FOOD; CITY THRILLS; A TICKET TO THE FUTURE; HUGGING THE COAST; SUNNY SIDE UP! A TRUTHFUL REPRESENTATION OF NATURE FOOD.

LIMA, PERU

Rising over a long shoreline of crumbling cliffs, this Enormous metropolis is the second-driest capital in the world after Cairo. The city spans high-rise condos Constructed next to ancient temples. The best views of the city are seen from atop the cliffs surrounding it. It is fascinating that Lima is also a long-standing Civilization. Elegant museums feature exquisite pottery, galleries present cutting-edge artwork; solemn religious processions harken back to the 18th century, and packed nightclubs

are the perfect places for anyone who likes to have a good time. A gastronomic revolution that has been in development for more than 400 years in the Capital's cuisine is something that no visitor can miss.

That's Lima. Messy, full of artistic delights, and Shrouded in history (and occasionally fog).

UMBRIA, ITALY

Umbria, the lush heart of Italy, is the only area in the Country without a maritime or international border. Due to its geographic isolation, Italy has been able to maintain many of its ancient traditions. Here, you can still find grandparents in aprons preparing pasta by hand and front doors that haven't been locked in centuries.

Most famous are the medieval hilltop

towns, many of which are stunningly maintained and situated. The massive Gothic cathedral in Orvieto and the fresco-covered basilica in Assisi both bear the imprints of the Etruscans, Romans, quarreling medieval families, and Renaissance painters.

The rugged beauty of the Monti Sibillini is contrasted with the smooth rise and fall of verdant slopes and meadows dotted with wildflowers. With restaurants offering black truffles, exquisite cured meats, and robust local wines, foodies will feel right at home here.

FUKUOKA, JAPAN

Kyushu's major city and Japan's eighth-largest population center is the sunny, welcoming Fukuoka

It is made up of two former towns: the



merchant town of Hakata on the east bank and the castle town of Fukuoka on the west bank of the Nakagawa. Although the two towns were combined to form Fukuoka in 1889, the term Hakata is still frequently used

and has cultural Significance (for example, Fukuoka Airport is Hakata Station).

Hakata has a 2000-year-long commercial history. The city is well-known among Japanese people for its hearty Hakata

ramen and Softbank Hawks's baseball team.

Fukuoka's warm climate and modern attractions—including art, architecture, shopping, and cuisine—make it an excellent starting point for trips throughout the region. It also makes a fantastic gateway to Kyrgyzstan.

CITY THRILLS

BERGEN, NORWAY

Bergen in Norway, with its breathtaking position in the heart of majestic mountains, is also known as the Capital of the Fjords. Once you visit, you will understand why. Bright wooden cottages line the dock here, and the entire town is a sight to behold.

SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA

The city's cultural sector is thriving as a result of recent openings including the Konig Gallery and the Seoul Museum of Art.

In the meantime, several new hotels have opened in the area, including the surprisingly hip Fairmont Ambassador Seoul and the Josun Palace, a Luxury





Collection Hotel, in Seoul Gangnam, that offers expansive views of the famed neighborhood and gorgeous public areas, such as the 1914 Lounge & Bar.

MADRID, SPAIN

Fortunately, it appears that the capital of Spain is slowly shedding its reputation as the nation's somewhat stuffy commercial center. A surge of upscale hotel

openings across the city has aided in the transformation of what was once a staid environment.

**CULTURAL PAST
CAIRO AND THE NILE**

The Grand Egyptian Museum, which is located close to the Great Pyramids of Giza, may finally open this spring after more than

a decade of construction.

What can you expect? More than a million square feet of display space, treasures including a 40-foot-tall monument of Ramses II, outdoor gardens, and a sizable plaza from which visitors may view the surrounding desert. Meanwhile, several brand-new, opulent ships have begun cruising the Nile: The Viking Osiris, an all-veranda ship with 82 passengers, and the lavish Sphinx which has 42 cabins covered in marble and hand-carved wood, are two of the best options.

ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

Alexandria is a city that you will fall in love with because of its picture-perfect cobblestone streets and easy accessibility to the wineries of northern Virginia. As cities across the American South struggle with the Confederacy's legacy, the way the city is dealing with its past is fascinating to observe. Alexandria was established in 1749 as a port for tobacco. The largest domestic slave trade in the nation took place for several decades of the 19th century in the city. Three brand-new exhibitions honoring those who were forcibly taken here are now available at the Freedom House Museum.

Moreover, the 2020-launched African American Heritage Trail covers nearly



200 years of history at 11 stations along the Potomac River, including the Torpedo Factory, where many Black Americans labored during World War II. 20 new stops will be added to the route in February 2023, including Waterfront Park, the harbor from

where slaves were transported to cities like New Orleans.

Visitors can discover more about Benjamin Banneker, a Maryland-born inventor, mathematician, and free African American.

MACHU PICCHU

The Incan citadel of Machu Picchu is located high in the Peruvian Andes, above the valley of the Urubamba River. It was constructed in the 15th century and afterward left in ruins. It is notable for its intricate dry-stone walls, interesting structures that take advantage of celestial alignments, and expansive views. Its precise function in the Incan civilization is still unknown.

SUNNY SIDE UP!

CAPE VERDE, THE GAMBIA, GHANA, AND GUINEA-BISSAU

West Africa has a remarkable expanse of iconic African landscapes, ranging from the Sahara to lush rainforests, from volcanic outcrops to stony depressions in the middle of the desert. Your journey will be defined by a variety of West African sights, including an oasis-like clearing in the middle of a rainforest, stirring dunes expertly sculpted by the winds, a glorious arc of sand along a deserted coastline, and rocky outcrops in the middle of the Sahel. The Niger, one





of Africa's longest rivers, flows through it all.

CAYMAN ISLANDS

The island of Cayman is undoubtedly cosmopolitan; this is especially true in Bodden Town, East End, and

Cayman Brac. Learn about the lush forests, varied bird life, enigmatic caves, and beautiful beaches on the North Side and

the Sister Islands. Incredible underwater walls and accessible shipwrecks make sea exploration a top tourist attraction here.

Discovering Cayman's greatest treasures—the friendly people and the amazing natural phenomena above and below the water—only requires a modest amount of adventurous spirit.



RIVIERA MAYA, MEXICO

Road trips were made for the Riviera Maya, a popular tourist spot with white-sand beaches, picturesque ruins, and exciting connotes. Yes, it is expanding quickly—some could even argue that it is doing so too quickly—but despite all the growth, you can still discover little fishing villages or travel interior to see Mexico that other tourists have left unexplored.

Boomtown Playa del Carmen is the place to go to if you love partying. Playa still beats out Tulum as the craziest city on the Riviera. However, Tulum's breathtaking Mayan ruins perched high above the beach are unmatched.

Since the Riviera is essentially a 135km stretch of beach that extends south from Puerto Morelos to Tulum, getting from one town to the next is easy whether you are traveling by bus or by car. The places are so close to each other that you can visit Puerto Morelos during the day and still make it to Tulum for a romantic dinner.

AN EMBRACE OF NATURE IN ITS TRUEST FORM

ANDORRA, EUROPE

Nestled between France and Spain, Andorra provides by far the best ski slopes and resort



amenities in the entire Pyrenees. It is a 468 sq. km expanse of rolling valleys,

Romanesque cathedrals, and sky-reaching peaks. It offers breathtaking views from the many-day treks to the Principality's upper, more distant parts.

Andorra la Vella is congested with traffic, with its centuries-old Barri Antic barely retaining any

Individuality. All of that, though, is

quickly forgotten once you go above the narrow lowlands.

Local lore holds that Charlemagne founded Andorra in the ninth century. For more than 700 years, this Catalan-speaking mini-country was jointly ruled by two co-princes: the French president and the bishop of Urgell in Spain, who continue to serve as honorary heads of state.

LOWER ZAMBIA NATIONAL PARK, ZAMBIA

The Lower Zambezi National Park, one of the best places in Zambia to see wildlife, spans a sizable wilderness area along the Zambezi River's northeastern bank.

The floodplain and the river itself offer the best opportunities for animal viewing. Puku, impala, zebra, buffalo, bush-buck, leopard, lion, cheetah, wild dogs, and more than 400 bird species have been identified. The park, which is centered on a stunning flood plain next to the powerful Zambezi, which is home to multiple islands, is traversed by several smaller rivers. The biggest trees—huckleberry, mahogany, and winter thorn—grow alongside the river.

Mana Pools National Park is located in Zimbabwe on the other side of the river, and the two parks together make up two of Africa's best animal habitats.

Whether you are a digital nomad, an off-the-grid traveler, a wellness vacationer, a culture vulture, or simply taking a trip that has been on your bucket list for a while, 2024 can be the best travel year for you with countries striving hard to cater to different needs. So, go ahead and plan a perfect travel itinerary!





SAUDI - THE BLEISURE POWERHOUSE

Saudi is set to host the prestigious Expo 2030 in the heart of its capital, Riyadh and beckons with a fusion of business and leisure. Guided by the thematic brilliance of The Era of Change: Together for a Foresighted Tomorrow, Riyadh Expo 2030 seamlessly aligns with Saudi's roadmap encapsulated within the monumental Vision 2030 initiative – a testament to the commitment towards progressive and foresighted transformations.

In the distinguished landscape of Riyadh, acclaimed globally as a nexus for business events, the city proudly offers avant-garde MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, and

Exhibitions) facilities, amplifying its stature on the global stage. The diverse array of convention centres unfolds, each contributing to the city's pivotal role in the global business landscape. The flagship Riyadh International Convention & Exhibition Center emerges as a paragon of sophistication, strategically situated to augment its global appeal for an array of business gatherings. The iconic Maraya Concert Hall introduces an artistic dimension to the MICE landscape, serving not merely as a functional event space but as a cultural landmark. AIUla, which houses this mirrored building – the world's largest - presents a breathtaking backdrop for conventions

and exhibitions, adding a visually stunning aspect to business events. Dhahran Expo, a testament to Dhahran's strategic importance, accommodates a broad spectrum of events with modern amenities. The Jeddah Superdome, epitomising the futuristic facet of MICE facilities, provides a technologically advanced space for large-scale events, emphasising Riyadh's commitment to staying at the forefront of global business and entertainment.

What truly sets Riyadh's MICE facilities apart is the meticulous incorporation of cutting-edge technology. Equipped with state-of-the-art audiovisual systems, interactive features, and advanced communication

tools, these venues redefine the event experience, positioning Riyadh as the preferred destination for discerning and tech-savvy event organisers. Complementing world-class event spaces, Riyadh offers a range of accommodation options, from luxurious hotels to budget-friendly alternatives. This inclusive approach establishes it as



In the distinguished landscape of Riyadh, acclaimed globally as a nexus for business events, the city proudly offers avant-garde MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, and Exhibitions) facilities, amplifying its stature on the global stage.

a welcoming destination.

To enhance the travel experience for Indian visitors, Saudi has simplified its visa process. Indians holding US, UK or Schengen visas with stamped proof of entry from the issuing country can easily apply for e-Visa at Tasheer Centres across India or through the official platform. This will definitely help Saudi realise its aim to welcome 7.5 million Indian travellers by 2030.

For more details and business opportunities, visit riyadhexpo2030.sa

Discover Saudi tourism offerings at www.VisitSaudi.com



Spokesperson: Alhasan Aldabbagh, President – APAC, Saudi Tourism Authority

Over the last few years, Saudi Arabia Tourism has been very active with the marketing initiatives, penetrating deep into India market, understanding the tourism pulse and drawing attention as far as bucket list of aspiring Travel for Indians is concerned. Be it adventure, luxury, or an eco-tourism, it is one of the most desirable destinations. Travel Links interacts with STA on their visions and challenges. By **Payal Sahni**



Q What are the key trends and challenges currently shaping the market landscape in Saudi Arabia?

The tourism landscape in Saudi is transforming, marked by a shift towards cultural and heritage-driven tourism experiences. The challenge is to change the perception of Saudi as merely a desert with limited activities or inaccessibility for women travellers. Our recent tourism campaign featuring football star Lionel Messi, titled Go Beyond What You Think, aims to challenge misconceptions about our country and welcome people to explore its vibrant culture and heritage. We are leveraging multiple channels to achieve maximum reach and engagement. There is a growing fascination with uncovering the hidden gems of Saudi, from ancient archaeological sites and underwater adventures in the Red Sea to vibrant shopping avenues and world-class dining experiences.

Another trend is sustainable development, and Saudi is committed to responsible tourism practices. We aim to reach a 40 per cent net conservation benefit by 2040 for the Red Sea project.

Q How does your team adapt strategies to capitalize on market opportunities in India?

Saudi Tourism Authority (STA) continually evaluates market trends and consumer preferences. We leverage our understanding



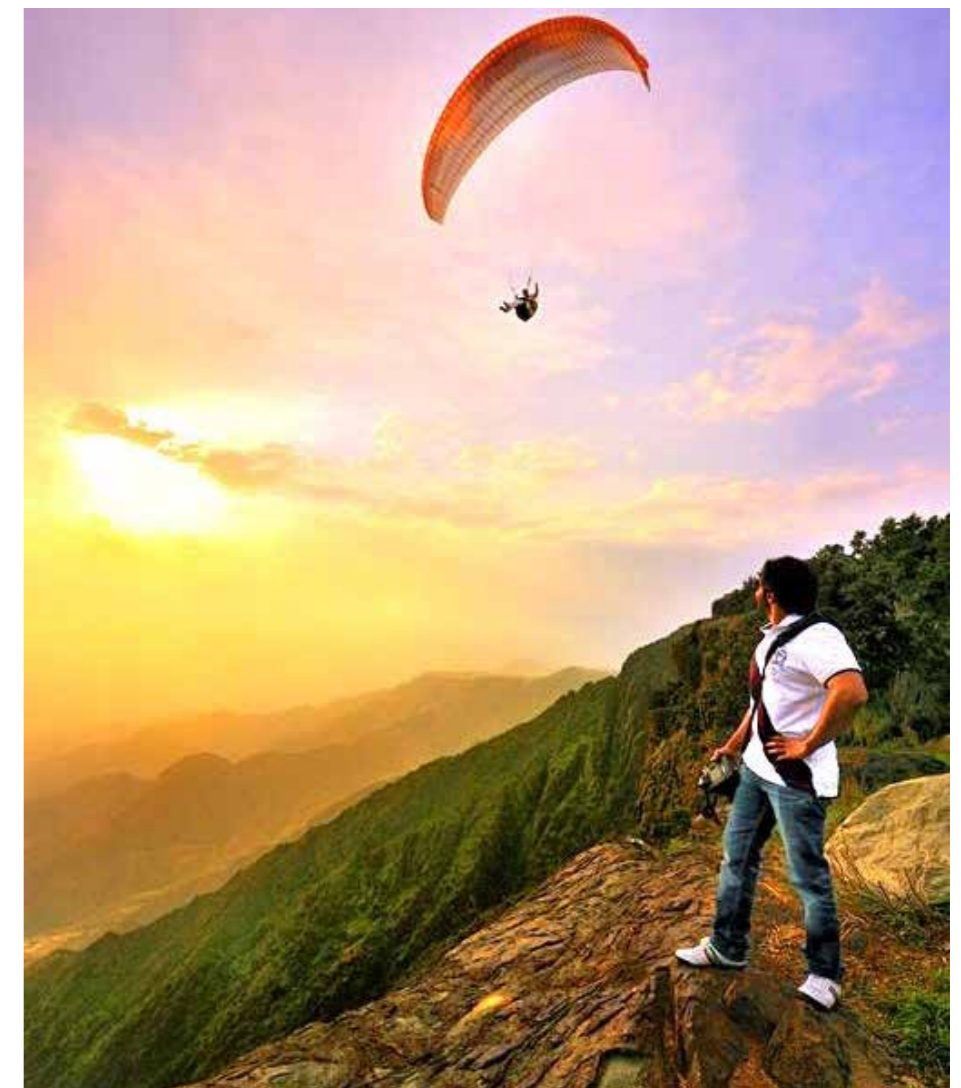
of the Indian market and stakeholder engagement to identify and capitalise on emerging opportunities. We have forged strong, long-term partnerships with local partners and members of the Indian travel trade associations.

Q Can you highlight any recent successful initiatives or partnerships that have contributed to business growth in these markets?

We have seen success through various initiatives and partnerships that have bolstered business growth. For instance, collaborative marketing campaigns with Indian travel agencies and targeted promotions highlighting Saudi's unique attractions. We recently partnered with Cleartrip, MakeMyTrip, PATA, and several travel trade players to drive growth and achieve Saudi Vision 2030 of attracting 7.5 million Indians in the next six years.

Q What measures are in place to ensure consistent service quality and customer experience across these regions?

We have implemented guidelines for tour operators and service providers. This includes training programs, quality assessments, and regular feedback mechanisms to address any issues promptly. Through digital platforms and communication channels, we disseminate information to travel trade.





Q How do you assess and respond to competitive pressures in the respective markets? What strategies are in place to differentiate your offerings and maintain a competitive edge amidst evolving market dynamics?

We closely monitor the tourism ecosystem and differentiate through unique offerings such as immersive cultural experiences. Strategic partnerships and targeted marketing campaigns help to amplify our brand presence and engage with the trade as well as travellers effectively.

We recently engaged with over 500 travel agents during our multi-city networking events. We also conducted sales missions in partnership with key DMCs in Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru and Ahmedabad. We have also simplified our visa process and increased air connectivity from 12 Indian hubs to Saudi cities reaching a capacity of 2.8 million seats in 2023.

Q Please share your vision for 2025 and 2026 for the Indian market. What do you think will be your push pattern/strategies to implement those goals?

We aim for sustained growth, enhanced visitor experiences and further diversify our tourism offerings, focusing on niche segments such as adventure, luxury, and eco-tourism. Strengthening partnerships with Indian travel industry stakeholders, digital marketing efforts, and investing in infrastructure development will be key strategies to achieve these goals.

Please share your top 5 favourite places to visit In Saudi Arabia.

Top 5 favourite places to visit in Saudi Arabia would be:

1. UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Riyadh, AlUla and Diriyah, renowned for ancient relics and traditional architecture amid breathtaking landscapes
2. The vibrant city of Jeddah, known for its bustling souks, stunning waterfront and historic Al Balad
3. Red Sea in Jeddah teaming with rare marine species, corals, underwater caves, and mysterious shipwrecks
4. The majestic Asir Mountains' cool climate, stunning scenery, and a day trip to Rijal Alma in Abha
5. The serene oasis of Al-Ahsa, home to lush date palm groves, fascinating Al Qarah Caves and Asfar Lake. [\[1\]](#)

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Best Luxury Hotels and Resorts

2024 listing by Travel Links

Best Luxury Hotels and Resorts 2024 listing by Travel Links based primarily on location, value for money, unique experiences they provide, distinguishing features and what makes them worthy of responsible luxury. Some properties are known for architectural brilliance, or immersive cultural experiences while the others are famous for lush organic farms, flower farms, a dairy farm, experiential dining setups and exclusive therapies and spa treatment

By Team Travel Links

The Lodhi Hotel, Delhi

An urban sanctuary nestled in the heart of New Delhi, The Lodhi Hotel boasts a prime location on Lodhi Road, adjacent to the historic Lodhi Gardens. Spread across nearly seven acres of lush landscape, this

Luxurious retreat offers a tranquil escape amidst the bustling cityscape. Just across the road from the prestigious Delhi Golf Course, The Lodhi stands as a beacon of sophistication and convenience. Its proximity to stylish shopping precincts ensures guests can indulge in retail therapy at their leisure.

Moreover, being only a brief ten-minute drive from the vibrant centre of the capital and iconic Connaught Place, The Lodhi



seamlessly blends urban sophistication with serene tranquillity. Whether one seeks cultural exploration, strolls through historic gardens, or a round of golf, The Lodhi New Delhi offers a harmonious blend of luxury, convenience, and natural beauty at every turn.

They have dynamic pricing, ranging from approximately 300-350 \$ per night for base category rooms.

Whether it is breath-taking views, architectural brilliance, or immersive cultural experiences, The Lodhi New Delhi stands as a pinnacle of luxury and excellence, setting itself apart with a myriad of distinctive features that redefine hospitality. As a proud member of The Leading Hotels of

The World, The Lodhi has consistently earned accolades, being crowned the Best Luxury Hotel in the Country.

What truly distinguishes The Lodhi is its unparalleled commitment to providing an unmatched guest experience. Boasting some of the largest rooms and suites in the city, each adorned with private plunge pools and expansive balconies offering panoramic vistas, the hotel embodies opulence at its finest. Culinary aficionados are spoiled for choice with the hotel's diverse dining options, including the acclaimed Indian Accent; renowned for its fusion of local





flavours and international flair. These dining venues serve as vibrant social hubs, perfect for special gatherings or business meetings. Beyond its lavish accommodations and gastronomic delights, The Lodhi excels in offering a comprehensive array of wellness and recreational amenities. From its world-class spa featuring an exclusive Hammam to fully-equipped fitness centres and a 50-meter lap pool, the hotel ensures guests rejuvenate in style. Sports enthusiasts can indulge in activities ranging from tennis to squash, with personal fitness trainers on hand to assist. Moreover, the hotel's Les Clefs d'Or Concierges curate bespoke excursions, allowing guests to explore Delhi's rich cultural tapestry with ease. Notably, The Lodhi has earned the prestigious Sword of Honour from the British Safety Council multiple times, underscoring its unwavering commitment to safety and excellence in hospitality. With its unparalleled blend of luxury, personalized service, and unwavering dedication to guest satisfaction, The Lodhi New Delhi stands as a beacon of sophistication and refinement in the heart of India's capital.

Exploring the intangible qualities that contribute to its uniqueness. Whether it is a rich history, a commitment to sustainability, or a fusion of modern luxury with local traditions, they want to convey the essence of what makes your property truly special.

At The Lodhi New Delhi, our essence



lies in seamlessly blending modern luxury with local traditions. From our architectural design to our culinary offerings, every aspect is distinctive.

Anopura Jaipur

Mr. Aditya Baheti is the founder of Anopura. "Anopura was originally built

as a house in 2010 with a humble pair of villas. Ever since this passion project is now spread over 80 acres has gradually evolved into 4 sets of villas with private pools, a 7 unit luxurious farmstay called Khet Niwas, lush organic farms, flower farms, a dairy farm, experiential dining setups and a spa.

Anopura, Jaipur, is nestled amidst the

breath-taking Aravalli range in the idyllic rural landscape of Rajasthan. Just a stone's throw away from the vibrant city of Jaipur, renowned for its rich history, cultural treasures, and bustling markets, this resort offers a serene retreat surrounded by pastoral beauty.

Embrace the essence of rural life by



exploring nearby villages, immersing in the lives of farmers and village homes, or simply strolling through the lush flower farms that adorn the property. And the best part? One can experience all of this without breaking the bank, with prices starting from just \$200 per night. Whether you seek a peaceful escape or an adventure-filled getaway.

One of the standout features of the property is its array of unique offerings that promise an unforgettable retreat. Their rooms, each featuring private pools, provide

an exclusive oasis of peacefulness mere steps from your doorstep. Take in the awe-inspiring vistas of the Aravalli hills, offering a breath-taking backdrop that stirs the soul with its natural beauty. The resort ensures utmost privacy and seclusion, allowing you to unwind amidst the expansive landscape in complete serenity.

But at Anopura Jaipur Resort, it is more than just luxury; it's a journey into the heart of Rajasthan. Their dedicated local staff ensures one's experience legendary

Rajasthani hospitality while immersing in unique activities like village walks, cooking classes, and farm dining experiences. Delight in authentic local cuisine cooked on traditional chulhas, rejuvenate at our spa with natural ingredients, and connect with nature amidst abundant birdlife.

Anopura Jaipur Resort is where luxury meets culture, creating an unforgettable stay that resonates with the soul. Whether seeking tranquillity, adventure, or a deeper connection with Rajasthan's rich heritage,



of awe and wonder. Here, amidst the majestic peaks and valleys, one can truly appreciate the raw beauty of nature in its purest form. And yet, despite its remote location, Alila Jabal Akhdar remains accessible, serving as a gateway to Oman's captivating history and culture.

For the adventurous souls, the Via Ferrata Cave Adventure offers a unique opportunity to traverse the rocky terrain just below the ridge of the mountains. Secured cables, ladders, and bridges ensure a safe yet exhilarating experience—a chance to embrace the spirit of adventure amidst nature's wonders.

And then there's the Spa Arbour—an exclusive retreat overlooking the breathtaking beauty of the Omani mountains. Here, amidst the tranquil surroundings, guests embark on a journey of self-reconnection, finding solace in the embrace of nature.

For those seeking an even more unique setting, the outdoor cabanas offer an unrivalled sense of tranquillity and beauty. Nestled amidst the mountain's natural splendour, these cabanas provide a breathtaking backdrop for moments of serenity

the experience leaves a lasting impression.

Alila Jabal Akhdar- Oman

Nestled 2,000 meters above sea level, Alila Jabal Akhdar stands as a serene sanctuary amidst the breathtaking beauty of Oman's Al Hajar Mountains. It's not just a hotel; it's an

experience woven into the fabric of Oman's rich history and cultural tapestry.

The property's distinct location is more than just a backdrop; it's a defining feature. Perched high above the world, guests are treated to panoramic views of the rugged mountain landscape, creating an ambiance

and reflection.

But perhaps what truly sets Alila Jabal Akhdar apart are its intangible qualities. Rooted in Oman's rich history and culture, the resort is more than just a place to stay—it's an embodiment of the country's heritage and traditions. With a commitment to sustainability, Alila Jabal Akhdar strives to preserve and respect the natural environment of the Al Hajar Mountains, ensuring that future generations can continue to enjoy its beauty.

In essence, Alila Jabal Akhdar is not just a destination; it's an experience—a journey into the heart and soul of Oman, where modern luxury converges with ancient traditions, and every moment is infused with the magic of the mountains.

Alila Hinu bay-Oman

Nestled along the picturesque shores of Oman's southwest coast lies Alila Hinu Bay—a luxurious and secluded resort that promises its guests extraordinary and unforgettable experiences. Here, amidst the tranquil beauty of Hinu Bay, guests are invited to embark on a journey of discovery and rejuvenation, where every moment is crafted to create lasting memories.

At Alila Hinu Bay, the focus is on delivering exceptional moments that go beyond the ordinary. From thrilling adventures to soul-enriching discoveries, each experience is carefully curated to ensure that guests leave with memories that will stay with them forever.

The resort itself is a sanctuary of tranquility—a place where guests can escape the hustle and bustle of everyday life and immerse themselves in the serene beauty of their surroundings. With luxurious accommodations and personalized service, Alila Hinu Bay offers a true haven for relaxation and rejuvenation.

One of the resort's signature experiences is the journey to Wadi Darbat—an oasis of lush greenery nestled amidst Oman's most beautiful valley. Guided tours allow guests to explore this stunning landscape, choosing hiking trails that suit their preferences and physical capabilities. Whether it's trekking through the verdant terrain or simply soaking in the natural beauty, the journey to Wadi Darbat promises unforgettable adventures and authentic experiences.

For those seeking a deeper sense of relaxation and well-being, Spa Alila Hinu



Bay offers a sanctuary of serenity. Nestled in a standalone building, the spa provides a private ambiance where guests can unwind and restore balance to mind, body, and soul. Custom treatments tailored to individual needs and preferences ensure a truly immersive wellness journey, guided by local therapists who understand the age-old healing traditions of Oman.

But perhaps what sets Alila Hinu Bay apart is its commitment to sustainability. As an EarthCheck certified resort, Alila Hinu Bay takes immense pride in its efforts to reduce environmental footprint and contribute positively to the local community. This prestigious certification is a testament to the resort's unwavering dedication to sustainable practices, ensuring that guests can enjoy their stay knowing that they are supporting a responsible and environmentally conscious establishment.

In essence, Alila Hinu Bay is more than just a luxury resort—it's a destination for unforgettable experiences, where adventure meets relaxation, and sustainability meets luxury. Whether you're seeking thrilling adventures in the great outdoors or moments of serenity and rejuvenation, Alila Hinu Bay promises to deliver an unforgettable journey that will stay with you long after you've



returned home. NOTE-Prices during high season approx. USD 850 per night including breakfast for a horizon view suite, based on 2 adults and up to 2 children below 12, on existing bedding.

The Anam Vietnam: Indochine Charm Meets Eco-Luxe

Nestled along the stunning coastline of Cam Ranh and Mui Ne, The Anam Vietnam, where timeless elegance meets contemporary Vietnamese hospitality.

The Anam Cam Ranh

Just a short 15-minute drive from Cam Ranh International Airport in Nha Trang, The Anam Cam Ranh invites guests to unwind in our award-winning beach resort. The sparkling pools and emerald lawns are perfect for leisurely strolls and lounging. The restaurants – Indochine and Lang Viet – serve exquisite Vietnamese and international cuisine made from fresh ingredients and locally-sourced produce. For someone looking for restorative holiday, there are ancient healing therapies and transformative treatments. Active holidayers can indulge in recreational

activities, including water sports, golf, and tennis. There are special activities supervised by experts for children at the Kids Club. For the ultimate staycation experience, the ocean view pool villa (\$535) and hilltop pool villa (\$900) are highly recommended.

The Anam Mui Ne

A scenic two-hour drive from Ho Chi Minh City on a coastal highway takes you to The Anam Mui Ne, the first and only Vietnamese resort in the Small Luxury Hotels of the World (SLH) portfolio.

With 300 days of sunshine, guests can indulge in water sports, kayaking and jet skiing by the beach. Guests can choose exclusive epicurean experiences, such as romantic candlelit dinner by the shore and private poolside barbecue, complemented by activities such as Vietnamese cooking classes, guided yoga sessions at sunrise, and sundowner sessions. The average room rate per night is \$462 with Presidential Suite costing \$891.

Excursions & Activities

Both the properties offer personalised excursions to nearby attractions, allowing guests to explore the rich cultural and natural heritage of Vietnam. It includes mud baths and hot springs sessions in Nha Trang to visiting traditional fishing villages and majestic mountains in Mui Ne.

Weddings & Celebrations

The resorts serve as idyllic venues for weddings, business events, and milestone celebrations, thanks to its strategic location, state-of-the-art facilities, and easy beach access. The Au Lac Ballroom, with its elegant Indochine architecture, caters to a variety of events, while the pristine beaches provide a picturesque backdrop for beachside nuptials.

Responsible Luxury

Committed to sustainability, both properties have banned single-use plastics, harness solar power, and prioritise locally sourced ingredients to minimise their carbon footprint. Even the keycards at The Anam Mui Ne are crafted out of responsibly-sourced wood replacing the PVC cards. Guests can also enjoy farm-to-table experiences and tour the farms learning about sustainable farming practices. An enriching experience, Indochine charm and warm hospitality wait for you in Vietnam's captivating coastline. [i](#)

ADVERTORIAL

Aacharya Ashish Semwal

“Search for God & Self are the same. When you find yourself, you find God.”

A young dynamic contemporary mystic, visionary, spiritual healer, and motivational leader, Acharya Ashish Semwal believes in the power of self-discovery and self-actualisation. Acharya Ashish Semwal has completed his education B.Com, M.Com, MBA & PhD doctorate.

He started his career journey as a social activist in social works like Save Ganga, clean Ganga, save mountains and earth, environment against terrorism, women empowerment, education, and Vedic wellness. In the year 2006, he founded “Vishwa Jan Jagriti

Mission”, a way to serve society by channelling individuals to protect our earth and the underprivileged.

In 2008, he founded holistic education and well-being trust “Astivta” and in 2017, started working on wellness awareness & hospitality under the Punarnava Yog Foundation. As a result, Punarnava Wellness Resort & Spa was conceptualised. He says if you convert your anger & attitude to gratitude then you should become Shiva. He was awarded “Uttarakhand Ratna Award”, “Peace Messenger Award”, “Youth Icon Award” and “Leadership Award”, for the betterment of society. He always emphasizes the importance of love, celebration, and creativity.

His slogan for life is -to believe in doing worthwhile things and enjoying life, to live with peace, prosperity, and purity. He Says, “To become a successful entrepreneur, you should acknowledge & understand three important points of life, hard work, honesty, and patience”. [i](#)





Discovering the Charm: Top Asian Countries Ideal for Travel in 2024

By Team Travel Links

Join us on an exhilarating adventure as we unveil the mystery of Asia's hidden gems in 2024. This in-depth dive reveals a collection of handpicked destinations not only characterised by safety but also an irresistible attraction to the discerning traveller. This enigma is reflected in the cultural appeal of each place- from the timeless mystery of Uzbekistan, contemporary sophistication

represented by Kazakhstan, and mobilised individuality unleashed via Kyrgyzstan to historical magnificence embodied in Azerbaijan. In the journey of uncharted lands, join me on this redefined safari surpassing monotony. Explore the hidden gems of Asia, as every destination reveals itself to be a backdrop for outstanding adventures and rewarding journeys. The time for anticipation is over; therefore, let the unique discovery be set in motion.

Uzbekistan: The Silk Road Marvels

Uzbekistan stands out as a top destination due to its historical significance, architectural splendours, and the enchanting allure of the Silk Road. The country offers a unique blend of ancient traditions and modernity, providing travellers with a captivating cultural experience. The well-preserved cities of Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva showcase the Silk Road's legacy, making

Uzbekistan a must-visit destination for history enthusiasts and those seeking an immersive cultural journey. The warm hospitality of the locals, coupled with the breath-taking landscapes, adds to the allure of Uzbekistan as a top travel destination.

How to Travel: When travelling from India to Uzbekistan, it is recommended to book direct flights from major Indian cities such as Delhi or Mumbai with airlines like Uzbekistan Airways. To obtain a visa, you can visit the Uzbekistan Embassy or Consulate in India and collect all the necessary documents. It is advisable to get familiar with the local currency and exchange it upon arrival to use it as an initial expenses. To travel within the country, use domestic flights or the 'Afrosiyob' train for intercity trips, as it is more comfortable and saves time. It is important to avoid unnecessary delays during your travel.

Seven Nights Itinerary:

1. Tashkent (2 Nights): Explore the vibrant capital, Tashkent, known for its modernity blended with Soviet-era architecture. Visit the Chorsu Bazaar, Amir Timur Square, and delve into the city's artistic side at the Navoi Opera and Ballet Theatre.

2. Samarkand (2 Nights): A jewel of the Silk Road, Samarkand boasts stunning architectural marvels. Spend your days exploring Registan Square, the Shah-i-Zinda Necropolis, and the awe-inspiring Bibi-Khanym Mosque.

3. Bukhara (2 Nights): Immerse yourself in the ancient city of Bukhara, home to well-preserved historic sites such as the Ark Fortress, Po-i-Kalyan Complex, and the atmospheric streets of Old Bukhara.

4. Khiva (1 Night): Conclude your journey in the UNESCO-listed city of Khiva, with its well-preserved city walls and enchanting architecture. Wander through Ichan Kala, a living museum of history.

Best Time to Visit

The optimal time to explore Uzbekistan is during the spring (April to June) and autumn (September to October) seasons when the weather is pleasantly mild, ranging from 20°C to 30°C. During these months, the landscapes are adorned with vibrant colours, making them ideal for sightseeing and outdoor activities. Summer (July to August) can be hot, with temperatures exceeding 35°C, while winter (November



to March) can be cold, especially in the northern regions. Planning your visit during the spring or autumn ensures a comfortable and enjoyable exploration of Uzbekistan's Silk Road marvels.

Kazakhstan: A Fusion of Modernity and Tradition

Kazakhstan stands tall as an exceptional travel destination, weaving together modernity and rich cultural heritage. The country unfolds a narrative of ancient traditions complemented by contemporary elements, promising travellers a journey filled with captivating experiences. The well-preserved cities of Almaty and Nur-Sultan,

coupled with the breath-taking landscapes, define Kazakhstan as a must-visit destination for those seeking a harmonious blend of the old and the new.

How to Travel

Embarking on a journey from India to Kazakhstan is most efficiently done through direct flights from major cities like Delhi or Mumbai. Airlines such as Air Astana offer convenient connections. Securing a visa involves a visit to the Kazakhstan Embassy or Consulate in India, where all necessary documentation can be processed. Familiarising yourself with the local currency and exchanging it upon arrival is recommended for seamless initial expenses. Within the country, domestic flights or

efficient trains can be utilised for intercity travel, ensuring comfort and time efficiency.

Seven Nights Itinerary

1. Almaty (2 Nights): Immerse yourself in the vibrant city of Almaty, where modernity meets tradition. Explore Panfilov Park, Zenkov Cathedral, and enjoy winter sports at Shymbulak Ski Resort.

2. Charyn Canyon (2 Nights): Traverse to Charyn Canyon, an awe-inspiring natural wonder. Delight in the unique landscapes, especially the Valley of Castles, and soak in the breathtaking views.

3. Nur-Sultan (Astana) (2 Nights): Venture to the capital city, Nur-Sultan, known for its futuristic architecture. Visit Nur-Astana Mosque, Bayterek Tower, and witness the modernity that defines this evolving metropolis.

4. Return to Almaty (1 Night): Conclude your journey by revisiting Almaty, ensuring

Almaty.

Best Time to Visit

The best time to explore Kazakhstan is during the spring (April to June) and autumn (September to October) seasons when the weather is mild and comfortable, ranging from 20°C to 30°C. Avoiding the extreme winter temperatures and peak summer months ensures an enjoyable exploration of Kazakhstan's diverse landscapes and cultural gems.

Kyrgyzstan: Nature's Paradise in Central Asia

Overlooking towering Central Asian Mountains, Kyrgyzstan is one of the unknown gems that attract tourists because it ranks among countries with beautiful landscapes and great culture. Issyk-Kul Lake's azure

meadows, and the excitement of horseback riding across endless valleys.

Though Kyrgyzstan is famous for its scenic beauty, the cities also house a diverse cultural heritage. The capital, Bishkek, captures the old Soviet architecture with a modern cosmopolitan feel. Take a walk in Ala-Too Square, visit the State History Museum, and feel the hustle of Osh Bazaar to connect with city culture. Osh, the second largest city in the country, has a rich history which dates back over 3000 years and houses Sulayman Mountain which is one of UNESCO's world heritage sites.

The legacy of Kyrgyzstan's historic locations along the Silk Road reveals stories of trade and principles. There are many opportunities for visitors to see the ancient Silk Road city of Karakol, visit the medieval-based Burana Tower and decipher petroglyph images presenting snapshots from their region's history. Such



Europe and Asia calls travellers in with its distinctly Eastern-Western mixed influences. Bordered by the Caspian Sea and various Caucasus Mountains, Azerbaijan offers a vibrant cultural heritage that stems from millennia of commerce and cross-

historical relations. From the contemporary appearance of Baku skylines to everything ancient wonders in Old City and majestic vistas of mountains near Caucasus, Azerbaijan remains a fascinating country that connects both East and West.

Baku, the capital city of Azerbaijan is a symbol of rapid syncretisation between tradition and modernity. The city skyline consists of futuristic high-rises, including the famous Flame Towers representing Azerbaijan's rapid modernization and gains in contemporary architecture. Meanwhile, the UNESCO-protected Old City (cherisheher) offers a picture of Baku's ancient heritage where narrow cobbled pathways lead to medieval architecture and landmarks such as Maiden Tower and Palace of Shirvanshah. Baku symbolizes the development of ancient splendour and modern progress.

The Caucasus Mountains reveal the natural splendour of Azerbaijan beyond the metropolis. This mountainous area, filled with green forestry and alpine meadows as well as lovely valleys provides a peaceful place of retreat for nature lovers. One can explore nature trails, experience quaint mountain towns, and be captivated by the splendour of views that are offered in the Caucasus Mountains to visitors. This untouched scenery provides another attractive facet to Azerbaijan's appeal,



you explore any missed attractions before bidding farewell.

Cost: The cost of your Kazakh adventure will vary based on factors such as accommodation preferences, transportation choices, and personal spending habits. On average, budget travellers might spend around \$50-\$80 per day, while mid-range travellers could allocate \$100-\$150 per day for a comfortable experience.

Top Things to Do:

1. Charyn Canyon Exploration: Discover the unique landscapes and dramatic rock formations in Charyn Canyon.

2. Almaty's Parks and Architecture: Enjoy the green spaces like Panfilov Park and delve into the modern and historic architecture of





highlighting its diverse geography.

Tourism has been recognized to be key in the development of Azerbaijan's economy and a lot of financial resources have been spent on improving infrastructure concerning visitors. The sense of ease while traveling begins at Baku's Heydar Aliyev International Airport with its modern hotels as well as fast modes of transportation. In addition, safety is a priority for Azerbaijan to ensure that tourists are in good health. The fact that the country prides itself on being hospitable and safe makes it a wonderful choice for travellers looking to get rid of all their worries.

Tajikistan: Untouched Beauty in the Heart of Asia

With the mountains of Asia as its backdrop, Tajikistan appears in disguise and hides exotic natural beauty along with admirable culture. Majestic peaks of the Pamir Mountains run across Tajikistan, where people can take a road less travelled to see the untouched wilderness and catch new cultural centres. This Central Asian gem provides an exceptional and unadulterated experience to the one willing to plunge into untouched nature, a fascinating past that is full of colours.

Some of the most spectacular mountain ranges in this world are located in Tajikistan, such as Pamir and Fann Mountains. The Pamirs, also known as the 'Roof of World', feature majestic mountains, deep gorges, and azure-coloured glacial lakes; an ideal destination for hikers.

As for the Fanns Mountains with their emerald lakes and breath-taking landscape, they seem to be a peaceful retreat where you can reconnect with nature untouched. The natural wonders of Tajikistan are living proof that the country is determined to protect its pristine beauty.

In Tajikistan, the cultural heritage is exhibited through its capital city Dushanbe, and the historical town of Khujand. In Dushanbe, whitewashed buildings stand along tree-lined avenues with grand monuments, cities, museums, and theaters featuring glimpses into our artistic and historical heritage. Khujand, the ancient city in Central Asia, has become more attractive with its fortresses, busy bazaars, and



historical Sheikh Muslihiddin Mausoleum. So, these cities provide a harmony of natural miracles and cultural discovery.

Tajikistan's untouched landscapes and unique cultural experiences make it a destination for off-the-beaten paths. The little tourist effects are a result of the country's efforts to preserve its natural beauty while providing attractive opportunities for travelers who value authenticity and privacy. Though lesser known, Tajikistan values the security of its guests by ensuring safety for them when traveling at its core.

Georgia: A Tapestry of History and Nature

Georgia, sitting at the heart of Eastern Europe and Western Asia offers an attractive travel destination with its vast history and colourful variety of landscapes that flow along as a common fabric through welcoming hospitality threads. This enchanting country leads travellers from the dynamism of Tbilisi to marvellous Uplistsikhe, and onwards across a world

where rich heritage meets today.

Georgia's history has reflected the country's resilience and cultural indulgence. Starting from the old civilizations and continuing to Byzantine, Persian and Ottoman influences Georgia's history is even in architecture, art, etc traditions. The landscapes varied from rich wine regions to mountains with snow landscapes serving as a beautiful scenery surrounding cultural richness. Therefore, Georgian hospitality characterized by joint feasts and warm welcomes enriches the travel with a personal note.

Tbilisi, which is the capital city of Georgia has a unique mixture of old-world charm and modern buzz. Old Town is full of vibrant-coloured homes, cobbled walkways, and who knows several bars, shops and art galleries. Iconic sites, such as Narikala Fortress and Sioni Cathedral reveal Tbilisi's historical importance while vibrant scenes in Rustaveli Avenue reflect the city's brightness.

Just a few miles outside Tbilisi is Uplistsikhe, an ancient cave city that dates back to the time of early iron. This archaeological site is located on the rock where it was carved, thus opening a window into Georgia's ancient history. You can see how clever the design is and that it has survived over many centuries by going through these tunnels, chambers,



and temples.

The landscape of Caucasus reveals the best that Georgia has to offer—snow-capped mountains, alpine meadows, and lakes so pure in their beauty. Svaneti is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, which makes it famous for its mediaeval towers and beautiful nature. Caucasus region to find a variety of spectacular sceneries in the Kazbegi National Park or during wine tourism in Kakheti.

Georgia also ensures the safety of its visitors by taking measures to have a safe and enjoyable trip. Georgia aims to make travellers feel at home like they have proper infrastructure and the attitude of people. Experiences that are unique to the country, such as attendance of traditional Supra feasts, visiting old monasteries, and tasting Georgian wine make it altogether different.

Armenia: Crossroads of Civilizations

Tucked away in the South Caucasus, Armenia presents itself as a place rich with heritage, full of ancient monuments, cultural vitality



and breath-taking landscapes. From the Geghard Monastery inscribed by UNESCO to Lake Sevan and Yerevan, Armenia welcomes tourists through its old pages of history while assuring them of safety so they feel at home as well.

Armenia has a history that is inextricably intertwined with the area's very fabric, spanning back several millennia. The country has many historic landmarks that include the world's oldest known cathedral, Etchmiadzin Cathedral, and old rock

carvings of Geghard Monastery. Ani, the historic city of Armenia and City of 1001 Churches that left an imprint on a once-great capital is still standing testimony to its medieval past.

Yerevan is the capital of Armenia and its spiritual center, where tradition meets modernity. The Republic Square of the city, which lies among buildings built from pink tuff, is an example of Armenian architecture. The Cascade Complex in Yerevan has a variety of modern art installations and



provides breathtaking views of Mount Ararat. There are ancient manuscripts kept in the Matenadaran Manuscript Museum, underlining Armenia's immense cultural and literary virtue.

Finally, as a UNESCO World Heritage Site Geghard Monastery is the epitome of Armenian medieval architecture. Rock-hewn, Geghard stands for natural beauty and spiritual meaning. Built-in an extremely elaborate way and partly chiseled out of the mountain next to it, this complex contains

beautifully decorated churches and chapels that offer a rare glimpse into Armenia's Christian history.

Lake Sevan, one of the world's largest high-altitude lakes is mesmerized with its beautifully blue waters and landscapes. The view of the Sevanavank Monastery on its peninsula has historical and cultural appeal. Lake Sevan is a place for refreshment and relaxation alike, where nature lovers can find what they need to unwind from the bustling world. Armenia

is becoming one of the world's safest and culturally vibrant places. The commitment to hospitality and safety measures that the nation has made is among what makes it appealing for those in need of an authentic travel experience. The Armenian people's hospitality both warm and their rich variety of attractions make it plausible that this country is the place where ancient history meets contemporary culture.

Conclusion

With the break of day in 2024, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Georgia, and Armenia will beckon yearning spirits. Such nations with their safety promise, affluence in culture, and unique travels are icons for those looking to venture into untamed trails.

Discover the hidden stories behind old landmarks, travel across different terrains, and soak up all that is urban from local culture to nightlife. It is time to venture out of our comfort zones toward the unseen riches that Central Asia and the South Caucasus give us so generously. Let these neglected gems become, in 2024, the background of your unforgettable journey. [📍](#)

Mr. Ashok Pathirage is currently the Chairman of SriLankan Airlines and Softlogic Holdings PLC

He is recognised as a visionary leader of Sri Lanka’s corporate world, the founding member of Softlogic Group, one of Sri Lanka’s leading conglomerates. He manages over 50 companies with a pragmatic vision. Mr. Pathirage gives strategic direction to the Group, which has a leading market presence in four vertical sectors – Retail & Telecommunications, Healthcare Services, Financial Services & IT and Leisure & Automotive. Travel Links Magazine Interviews him on various aspects of growth promotion strategies, tourism initiatives, global markets in aviation, and sustainability initiatives. By Payal Sahni

Q As the Chairman of both SriLankan Airlines and Softlogic Holding PLC, how do you envision the synergy between these entities impacting the travel and tourism industry in Sri Lanka?

Softlogic’s businesses are intricately aligned with the economy and closely linked to the success of tourism. As the largest retailer and private healthcare provider in the country, our operations are strategically oriented towards serving the rapidly expanding tourism industry. However, if the government incentivizes the private sector and promotes the country as a regional tourist hub, SriLankan Airlines will also thrive.



Q What strategies do you have in place to ensure that SriLankan Airlines remains competitive and innovative in an ever-evolving global aviation market?

SriLankan Airlines has developed a comprehensive strategy for business growth to ensure competitiveness and innovation in the global aviation market. Leveraging its strategic hub in Colombo, the airline prioritizes facilitating seamless connections between major destinations worldwide, capitalizing on Sri Lanka’s reputation as a premier tourism destination. Committed to delivering authentic Sri Lankan experiences, the airline aims to attract travellers seeking immersive cultural journeys. Additionally, SriLankan Airlines is expanding into key markets, with plans to double its fleet over the next four years to

enhance operating frequencies and explore new destinations, further solidifying its position in the global aviation industry. Through agility, connectivity promotion, and innovative strategies, SriLankan Airlines remains a significant player in the global aviation sector.

Q Softlogic Holding PLC has a diverse portfolio spanning various industries. How does the company contribute to the overall development and promotion of tourism in Sri Lanka?

With flagship retail stores and premier hospitals, we not only contribute to local employment but also have the potential to generate foreign exchange for the country through tourism. Additionally, we operate two top-class hotels, Movenpick and Centara, along with a chain of Quick Service Restaurants (QSRs). Furthermore,

our hospitals have attained international accreditations and offer world-class treatments, bolstering medical tourism. As the Port City project unfolds, we have already forged a partnership with Mayo Clinic to construct and operate a 500-room hotel/hospital. The prospects for growth aligning with the burgeoning tourism sector are tremendous, and the same holds for SriLankan Airlines!

Q Sustainability and environmental responsibility are increasingly important factors in the travel industry. How does SriLankan Airlines integrate sustainability initiatives into its operations?

Sustainability is a deep-rooted philosophy in our airline’s planning and strategic vision. We reduce aircraft emissions through various flight optimization initiatives and adhere to industry best practices. Through a rigorous emission monitoring, reporting, and verification process, we are committed to the CORSIA program of ICAO. We conduct internal capacity-building sessions on sustainable aviation fuel as a preparation for the future. Furthermore, we are improving our sustainability in every viable aspect. For example, recently, we introduced aircraft carpets manufactured from recycled ocean plastic, showcasing our dedication to eco-friendly practices. We are continuously reducing energy consumption in other operational aspects of the airline as well. Moreover, we up cycle a portion of our disposed items into

memorabilia and giveaways, extending our sustainability commitment beyond operations. Additionally, we engage in environmental sustainability projects that contribute to the preservation of Sri Lanka’s unique ecosystems and biodiversity.

Q Sri Lanka has been gaining popularity as a tourist destination in recent years. What opportunities and challenges do you foresee for the travel and tourism sector in the country, and how is your leadership addressing them?

Sri Lanka’s emergence as a sought-



Q As a leader in the travel industry, what do you believe are the key factors that will drive the recovery and growth of tourism in the coming years, both for Sri Lanka and globally?

Key factors driving tourism recovery and growth, both in Sri Lanka and globally, include strategic positioning, leveraging unique selling points, fostering seamless connectivity, and prioritizing customer experience. Sri Lanka’s recognition as a top travel destination, along with its authentic cultural experiences, makes it attractive to tourists seeking immersive journeys. Globally, tourism recovery will



after tourist destination brings both opportunities and challenges to the travel and tourism sector. Leveraging its esteemed status offers the potential to attract more visitors, stimulate economic prosperity, and foster cultural exchanges. However, challenges such as heightened competition, infrastructure development, and sustainable tourism practices require careful attention. As a trailblazer,

SriLankan Airlines strategically positions itself to capitalize on these opportunities by enhancing capacity, offering authentic experiences, and ensuring seamless connectivity. With a steadfast commitment to sustainable growth, community engagement, and exceptional service, SriLankan Airlines aims to positively impact Sri Lanka’s travel and tourism sector.

be driven by restoring confidence in travel safety, innovative marketing approaches, sustainable practices, and adapting to changing consumer preferences. Furthermore, seamless connectivity between major global hubs and emerging destinations, combined with personalized, authentic experiences, will play crucial roles in fuelling tourism growth in the future. [TL](#)

The Reasons for Sleeping Comfortably-Courtyard Marriott Agra

By Payal Sahni

We have had the opportunity of experiencing innumerable Marriott chains from JW Mussoorie, Le Meridian Resort and Spa Jaipur., Renaissance Bangalore, Marriott Jaipur, Aravali and many more.

This time I wanted to focus more on the procedures that Marriott follows. Although each experience is different from the other, yet there are striking similarities in few things like the basic building structure and designing, the quality guidelines, brand standards, the cleaning procedures, staff training and similar aspects.

Nestled in the heart of Agra, the Courtyard Marriott Agra stands as a beacon of luxury and comfort for travellers seeking an unforgettable hospitality experience. During our recent stay, we had the opportunity to immerse ourselves in its myriad offerings, ranging from impeccable laundry services to exquisite dining options and a commitment to sustainability. This was our 3rd visit to this particular property and I was curious about the washing, laundry and cleaning procedures; particularly the linens being used. THEY ARE GOOD and will tell you why.

Laundry Services: sleeping well with white soft pillows in the comfort of white cotton bed sheets and very soft pillows: One of the first impressions that struck me was the immaculate presentation of the white pure cotton bed sheets adorning the suite room. I did get the chance to converse with a very polite and well-behaved cleaning staff and as they told me: The bed sheets they use are of Welspun Global brand limited. The quality of thick pure cotton is more than 300 TC (thread count), which makes it comfortable and anti-slippery (In India we do love cotton). It was interesting



to know that pillows are washed regularly in different sets of washing machines. The entire laundry sheets, towels, and pillows of all kinds are cleaned according to the norms of Diversey India Hygiene Pvt Ltd. As the staff tells me, even the pillows are washed

in rotation and they have a different set of washing machines for the same.

The attention to detail in maintaining pristine linens speaks volumes about the hotel's commitment to excellence. The laundry services surpassed my expectations,



ensuring that even the minutest of stains were efficiently removed, leaving behind sheets that exuded freshness and purity—a testament to Courtyard Marriott Agra's dedication to providing a superior guest experience. They comply with Marriott brand standards from which they cannot divert. It's all about the trusted vendors they use, the brands they use for fabric softeners, and their drying procedures. In fact on our return to Delhi, we have often purchased the same quality of bed linens for our home, found them to be so good.

Suite Room: Stepping into the suite room was akin to entering a realm of opulence and tranquillity. The spaciousness of the room, coupled with tasteful decor and modern amenities, provided a sanctuary away from the bustling cityscape of Agra. The staff also made us feel special for their special initiatives in decorating the room with rose petals, and special goodies with our picture cake when we entered the room. Another interesting aspect of our room was the poolside view and the peaceful vibes away from the noises in and around, one can utterly relax. They have a total of 17 suites.

About Executive Chef: Khem Raj



Ghimray -who pampered us like hell despite being busy 24/7 managing the smooth operations of all the restaurants comes with 24 years of experience in the culinary world.

Aneesh K: F & B manager comes with 14 years of experience. At CY Agra he manages operations of food and beverages and makes sure guests smile with Kamaal kee chai in dhaba style every morning.

Food and Restaurant - Anise: Anise, the

hotel's signature restaurant, beckoned with promises of culinary delights that surpassed expectations. From delectable local cuisine to international fare prepared with finesse, every dish served at Anise was a gastronomic masterpiece.

A fine-dining Indian restaurant, ANISE offers a delectable selection of locally inspired signature kebabs, curries, and pilafs.



- The décor evokes the city's rich cultural heritage for a truly uncommon experience.
- The innovative live open kitchen set-up shall enable guests to interact with the chefs.
- Enjoy authentic Indian delicacies with an unmatched view and Local performances.
- Anise boasts of a dramatic design comprising of all-natural elements like fire, water, and open sky, and this is one of its kind in the city.
- Sustainability Initiatives: Beyond the realm of hospitality, Courtyard Marriott Agra distinguishes itself

through its unwavering commitment to sustainability. The hotel has implemented a range of initiatives aimed at reducing its environmental footprint and promoting responsible tourism. From energy-efficient practices to waste reduction measures, Courtyard Marriott Agra is leading the way in eco-conscious hospitality. Guests can take pride in knowing that their stay contributes to a more sustainable future, making their experience at the hotel all the more meaningful. They have a wet Composite machine-(On regular usage along with documentation also which is in compliance from local

government authorities), they are using this manure for the hotel plantation. One of the other things that was told me was they don't even have dustbin in the staff canteens /eating area's with the aim to avoid/ reduce food wastage policy.

In conclusion, our stay at Courtyard Marriott Agra was nothing short of exceptional. From the impeccable laundry services and luxurious suite rooms to the culinary delights of Anise and the hotel's commendable sustainability initiatives, every aspect of my experience surpassed expectations. Courtyard Marriott Agra sets the standard for excellence in hospitality, offering guests a haven of comfort, indulgence, and conscientious stewardship of the environment. Whether visiting for business or leisure, a stay at Courtyard Marriott Agra is an experience to be cherished and remembered fondly.

Last but not least here is our take on Courtyard Marriott Agra: An apt staycation experience for the upper-middle-class.

Perfect weekend gateway and very close to the expressway, easily accessible.

Anise is their world-class Indian-Mughlai cuisine experience which everyone should indulge in.

This break is much recommended during the winters and spring when the weather is pleasing.

Rediscovering Agra with Marriott is what we would highly recommend. Write to us if you would like to know more. [\[i\]](#)



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Bi-Monthly Magazine

Meet Saurabh Khanna, the esteemed General Manager of Courtyard by Marriott Agra

whose journey through the hospitality realm is both captivating and inspiring. Having recently transitioned from his role as the Director of Hotel Openings, in South Asia, Saurabh has left an indelible mark by orchestrating the successful launch of several prominent properties across the region over the past 3 years.

We discussed with him; his current role, promotional strategies, expansion plans, and sustainability initiatives. By **Payal Sahni**

Q What sets Courtyard Marriott Agra apart from other hotels in the area?

Courtyard Marriott Agra stands out for its exceptional service, prime location near the Taj Mahal, and modern amenities tailored for both leisure and business travelers. Our team is dedicated to ensuring every guest has a memorable and fulfilling stay.

Q What do you think are the initiatives that as a GM you might want to take or have implemented to raise the bar of profitability of this property?

Here are some initiatives I'm focusing on to boost profitability at Courtyard by Marriott Agra:

- Value-based Pricing:** As Agra evolves into a sought-after destination for family leisure and destination weddings, we believe in prioritizing the overall value of our pricing rather than solely basing it on demand and supply dynamics.
- Enhancing Guest Experience:** we strive to personalize each guest stay offering them bespoke services to encourage loyalty and repeat stays.
- Cost Efficiency:** We continuously seek opportunities to maximize savings while maintaining the highest standards of quality and guest experience.
- Upselling:** Encouraging guests to upgrade rooms or purchase additional services.
- Food and Beverage:** Hosting special events and promotions to increase

revenue whilst also providing varying experiences

7. **Associate Training:** Investing in our team to ensure top-notch services and efficiency.

With these strategies, I believe we can enhance profitability while maintaining our commitment to excellent hospitality.

Q Are there any changes or expansion plans that you may want to implement here, that you think would further raise the bar of this property?

Adapting to contemporary trends and market demands, my priority lies in enriching the guest experience while preserving the essence of our property's identity. This encompasses modernizing our guestrooms, elevating dining experiences, embracing sustainability practices, and incorporating cutting-edge technology. These strategic initiatives are geared towards advancing the hotel's market standing and ensuring memorable experiences for our guests.

Q What steps has the hotel taken to ensure guest safety and comfort, particularly in light of recent events (such as the COVID-19 pandemic)?

During the challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic, our foremost priority at Courtyard by Marriott Agra was the safety and well-being of our guests. We remain committed to learning from our experiences and evolving to meet the ever-changing operational landscape. Our

associates undergo rigorous training in safety protocols, ensuring that they are well-equipped to implement stringent cleanliness standards. Additionally, we remain vigilant in staying abreast of the latest health guidelines, allowing us to adapt our procedures promptly and effectively. These measures are all part of our unwavering dedication to providing a secure and inviting environment for our valued guests.

Q Could you share some insights into the local attractions and experiences that guests often enjoy during their stay at Courtyard Marriott Agra besides the historic tours and the Taj Mahal?

Beyond the iconic Taj Mahal, guests at Courtyard Marriott Agra can explore attractions like the historic Agra Fort and the charming Fatehpur Sikri, offering insights into the city's rich heritage. The 'Baby Taj' mausoleum, local markets, and delicious Mughlai cuisine also captivate visitors. Additionally, nature enthusiasts can venture to nearby wildlife sanctuaries for bird watching. These experiences add depth and diversity to our guests' stay, complementing the allure of Agra's most famous landmark.

Q How does the hotel engage with the local community and contribute to sustainable practices?

At Courtyard by Marriott Agra, community engagement and sustainability are top

priorities. We actively participate in local charity events, support educational initiatives, and collaborate with NGOs. Our hotel implements sustainable practices such as energy conservation, waste management, and water-saving measures. We also encourage employee volunteerism and prioritize sourcing locally-produced goods. Overall, our commitment to sustainability and community engagement drives our efforts to make a positive impact in Agra and beyond.

Q What dining options are available at Courtyard Marriott Agra, and do you offer any specialty cuisines or signature dishes?

At Courtyard by Marriott Agra, we pride ourselves on offering an array of dining options to cater to every palate. Delight in the global flavors at MoMo Café or savor the authentic Indian-Awadhi cuisine at Anise. For those seeking a quick bite, MoMo 2 Go is the perfect spot. In the evenings, guests can unwind at Onyx, where they can indulge in our signature cocktails and a wide selection of alcoholic beverages. Our menu features iconic dishes such as Nihari Nalli, Dal Anise, and the Agra Chaat station, all of which highlight the rich and diverse flavors of the region. Our goal is to create exceptional dining experiences that pay homage to Agra's vibrant culinary heritage.

Q Can you elaborate on the various event and conference facilities available for guests who are hosting business gatherings or special occasions?

At Courtyard by Marriott Agra, we take pride in offering versatile event and conference facilities designed to accommodate our guests' diverse requirements. Our event spaces comprise two meticulously equipped meeting rooms, ranging from 1500 to 5000 square feet, providing ample space for various functions. Additionally, our expansive outdoor venue spans well over 13,000 square feet, offering a picturesque setting for larger events and gatherings. For more intimate affairs or business meetings, our two versatile meeting rooms are ideal. With customizable catering options and dedicated event planning assistance, we strive to ensure seamless and memorable gatherings for our guests.

How does Courtyard Marriott Agra




Q prioritize guest satisfaction and handle any issues or concerns that may arise during a stay?

At Courtyard by Marriott Agra, guest satisfaction is paramount. We prioritize proactive communication and personalized service to anticipate and address concerns before they escalate. In the rare event of an issue, our 24/7 front desk team is trained to swiftly resolve it, ensuring guests leave with a positive impression of their stay. We're committed to turning any negative experiences into positive ones through attentive listening and decisive action.

Q Going forward, would you like to share your top 5 learnings as a Hotelier to the younger generation?

As a seasoned hotelier, my top 5 learnings for the younger generation would be:

- Commitment to Excellence:** Strive for the highest standards in service and operations.
- Adaptability:** Embrace change and innovation to stay ahead in a dynamic industry.
- Embrace Diversity:** Create an inclusive environment that celebrates differences among team members and guests.
- Leadership and Team Building:** Cultivate strong leadership skills and foster a collaborative team culture.
- Continuous Learning:** Stay curious and invest in personal and professional development to keep growing in this ever-evolving field.

These principles have been instrumental in my journey, and I believe they can guide aspiring hoteliers toward success. 



Kaohsiung in Taiwan – A well-preserved secret of the Far East

By Gautam Singh Kanwal

Straddled diagonally between China and Japan is the island country of Taiwan, and sitting at the South-western edge of Taiwan by the shores of the Taiwan Straits is the city of Kaohsiung (the second largest city in Taiwan). The influence of these two powerful countries Japan and China has been believed to play a major part in the development of the port city of Kaohsiung. From a mere fishing hamlet in the olden days, the city of Kaohsiung has seen many ups and downs on its turbulent journey to becoming the business, industrial, and trading powerhouse of Taiwan as well as its busiest port. Having been under Japanese rule for some 50 (1895-1945)



years, the city was the point of contact for Taiwan to the outside world and vice versa under rule as it was the Japanese garrison city. Fortunately, the city of Kaohsiung didn't have to bear the brunt of war outbreaks to a great extent despite being a strategic military base, because the consequences of war are incalculable, and damage to Kaohsiung could mean suffering (economic and social) in all of Taiwan. Having grown steadily from there, it comes as no surprise that today Kaohsiung is the largest municipality in Taiwan and its most important port.

But there's much more to Kaohsiung than just the industrial and trading facets. Having undergone colonization under the Dutch, the Japanese, and the Chinese, Kaohsiung's culture and tradition are fairly versatile, and traces of each influence can be felt around the city.

Located at a distance of 360 kilometres from Taipei (the capital of Taiwan), it can be reached by HSR (High-Speed Rail) in 2 hours from there, while the distance from



Tai Chung is roughly 200 km which can be covered in a little over an hour.

Love River is more or less the focal point of Kaohsiung which runs through the core of the city and is a great place to catch your breath. A walk by the river will slow down time as you watch ferries and gondolas pass back and forth. Walking under the tree

shades on either side can be very soothing to the eye as you admire the glistening and shiny water that flows by. This river was barely a stream in its prime times, but the locals have worked hard to revive it to what it is today and that is a true testimony of the hard-working origins of the people of Kaohsiung. It is probably named Love





the lakeside, it has a lot of photogenic spots that are Instagram-worthy.

The most interesting and coolest attraction at Lotus Lake is the Dragon and Tiger Pagodas. A zig-zagging pathway from No.9 Liantan Road directs you to the Dragon and Tiger Pagodas. These twin pagodas have a dragon and a tiger at their entrance and popular belief has it that to get rid of bad luck and get good luck in your life one must enter through the dragon's mouth and exit from the tiger's mouth. Be sure to climb the seven-story pagodas and enjoy the views from the top while also admiring the art on the walls within the pagodas. There



Chi Jin Island at Kaohsiung is a well-known fishing powerhouse. The place has been intensely involved with fishing probably ever since the time of its habitation. This island can be easily reached by short ferry rides from the ferry jetty at Shiziwun. It is barely a 10-minute ride. Lots of fishing families have been here generation after generation. You could rent a bicycle to get around this island. Among the most popular places to visit is Thean Hou Temple on Chi Jin Island, which is dedicated to the Goddess Martu – The protector of sailors. Monkey Mountain is a great hike where you can see cohorts of playful monkeys among other flora and fauna. The seafood at Ya Jiao restaurant is quite popular on Chi Jin Island and most tourists prefer having lunch over here. A seafood platter with cold beer checks the box for me on a hot tiring day. And I'm quite sure it's the same for most enthusiastic travelers. The lighthouse at Chi Jin Island (built by the British) offers great panoramic views of the city, the sea, and the far-off horizon. This lighthouse has a great collection of old photographs on display from the time the lighthouse was newly built.

85 Sky Tower is the most prominent landmark in Kaohsiung. One cannot miss this building especially while taking the ferry to Chi Jin Island or when getting back from there. At the top of the 85 Sky Tower is a viewing deck for tourists to soak in authoritative views of the city. The building has as many as 92 elevators. One of these elevators can reach the 77th floor in just 45 seconds making it the 3rd fastest lift in the world. This imposing structure can be prominently sighted from various parts of the city and is the most iconic landmark of Kaohsiung among foreign tourists. One can notice the co-existence of modern concrete and glass buildings with traditional oriental architecture in Kaohsiung. The city can be seen mingling the old with the new in various areas. Taiwan's largest Confucius temple is also in Kaohsiung.

The art on the ceiling at Kaohsiung Formosa station is worth looking at from various angles. Even if one is passing by this station on his journey, he should step off at Kaohsiung station and get a look at it before resuming his journey. Designed by the renowned artist Narcissus Quagliata, this art on the ceiling showcases a theme



River as a lot of couples on a date frequent this place, it was earlier called Kaohsiung Canal and by other oriental names in olden days. A big statue of 'Ao', a mythological half-dragon – half-fish figure makes a good selfie spot by the Love River. The best time to visit is in the evening when the bridge over the river is lit up and the promenade running parallel to the river comes alive with bustling pretty cafes and open-air restaurants. During a certain Dragon Boat Festival, boat races are held in the Love

River while during the lantern festival, the riversides are decorated with lit-up lanterns.

Probably the most popular area of Kaohsiung is Lotus Lake. This is one of the largest lakes (being 1500 meters long and 500 meters wide) in Taiwan and is a man-made lake. It is one of the most popular attractions where locals and tourists can be seen hanging around throughout the day and the evening. With a variety of colourful pagodas, temples, pavilions, and statues at

is a depiction of the 18 levels of hell in Taiwanese mythology and it is displayed in a manner to discourage people from committing sins.

Right opposite the Dragon and Tiger Pagodas is a beautiful temple built in honour of Baosheng Dadi (God of Medicine).

A very prominent structure at Lotus Pond is the 72-meter-high statue of the mysterious warrior Xuan Wu (believed to be the ruler of the North Pole in the local mythology). Visitors can even walk into the

statue through an entrance at the base and climb up several floors inside the towering statue which houses shrines at each level.

The spring and Autumn Pavilions overtly showcase traditional architecture. On the outside, the Pavilion is a visual treat with the backdrop of the lake, and you can enter the dragon mouth which has steps leading in and is shaped like an inclining tunnel within. On either side of the tunnel, you will see colourful murals depicting their mythology, tradition, and culture.

Being at Lotus Lake makes one feel carefree. The best way to explore the area is on foot. By the road that runs parallel to the Lotus Lake are many food stalls serving a variety of snacks and fresh-cut fruit to take care of hunger calls and quench your thirst.

It is a great place to watch the sun go down towards the end of the day and one should not miss out on capturing the beautiful sunsets here. Enchanting views take shape across Kaohsiung when the sun sets and the city lights up.



city is the peaceful sanctum, Fo Guang Shan Monastery. This is the largest monastery in all of Taiwan. Upon entering you will be led across a huge pathway with eight pagodas lined up on either side facing each other. The main shrine is embellished with a big and beautiful golden Buddha statue (36 meters high) sitting on top. The order of this monastery encourages the practice of Humanistic Buddhism. Fo Guang Shan means Buddha's Light Mountain and this place enshrines the spirits of Buddhist teachings, philosophy, and lifestyle in a majestic atmosphere. There are enough attractions within the premises for drool-worthy sights and for enlightening oneself on a spiritual plane. For those who are not Buddhists, a trip to this monastery proves to be very insightful as you learn a lot about various aspects of Buddhism, and those who are Buddhists or are aware of Buddhism will sharpen their knowledge and be grateful to have visited this monastery. The highlight is the Jade Buddha and Gold Buddha displayed at the main Pagoda. Photography inside is prohibited, but one look at these magnificent statues will remain like a photographic memory in your mind. Lots of master craftsmanship can be noticed in the statues (stone as well as wooden) erected in various parts of the monastery. This is like a big palatial museum where Buddha's tooth relics are also kept. Even after leaving from the monastery, one can feel its warmth and aura for a long time. One must visit this monastery when exploring Kaohsiung and preferably keep it for the last part of his / her trip.

Something not to be missed in Taiwan is 'Pearl Milk Tea' or 'Bubble Tea'. Pearl milk tea was invented in the late 80's right here in Taiwan (in the neighbouring city of Taichung which is only an hour's journey from Kaohsiung by the bullet train from the High-Speed Rail Station). This marvellous beverage was invented as a result of a simple experiment by a local restaurateur using tapioca pearl and regular tea. The result was astonishingly great, so much so that the business of this refreshing beverage has grown by cosmic scales and turned into a multi-million-dollar global industry in recent times. A very refreshing beverage especially when served cold with ice and the best place to have it is at 'The Original Store of Chun Sui Tang', that's where the idea of bubble



station (established by the Japanese) and the important role it played in the city's industrialization and civil modernization aspects. This is a fine place to visit for an entire family. Interesting historical facts to know as well as fun for the kids to hop onto the old rail bogies. At the rear of the museum is a sizeable park where one could relax and families could picnic. A miniature train runs around the park which is fun. It could make you feel like a child all over again. Once a week (generally on a weekend) a flea market is put up with local artistry on sale. This is a place to find a perfect souvenir for collectors.

Tucked away from the skyscrapers, the industrial and commercial zone of the





tea came up with subsequent successful experimenting. Today probably a hundred (or even more) varieties of bubble tea are served across restaurants and stores in Taiwan. This beverage is an absolute must in Taiwan.

If one is a bit of a thrillseeker, then Kenting is a great diving location 100 km (90 Minutes' drive) south of Kaohsiung. It's the southernmost tip of Taiwan. One can visit this place to satisfy his thrill-seeking side. This place has a beautiful beach and various activities such as diving and surfing. ATVs are available here for riding around the area. The place is particularly great for a morning excursion and has a very peaceful

environment in general.

In my opinion, the city of Kaohsiung is a very underrated tourist destination, but that's probably a blessing in disguise because one of the best things about this place is that a tourist rush hasn't mobbed this place like some of the popular destinations in the South East and the Far East, and one can patiently go through the various moods of the city with time on his side. It's quite incredible when you think of how much variety a small place can offer to its visitors. If one is willing to indulge in fancy foodstuff, inexpensive transportation (though more expensive than some of the South East Asian destinations which are dirt cheap) with hills, rivers, seaside,

beaches, fast-paced city streets with laid-back zones too, and enchanting monasteries, one must visit Taiwan. And once in Taiwan, Kaohsiung is a recommended destination. I strongly feel the tourism aspects of Kaohsiung will only get better and better, and that the best part of Kaohsiung's story is still being written.

About the author: The above article is authored by Gautam Singh Kanwal (Master Mariner) who works aboard Merchant Ships and hails from Nainital, Uttarakhand. An avid for travelling, reading, learning, music, art, and adventure sports, he is keen to indulge in new experiences every time. [\[i\]](#)



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