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Foreword



JYOTHI VARMA
CONSULTING EDITOR

Changing face of global MICE

The MICE industry was rooted in traditional, face-to-face gatherings, emphasising physical venues, printed materials, and personal networking. Today, it thrives on hybrid formats, digital platforms, and data-driven personalisation, blending in-person experiences with virtual reach. Sustainability, inclusivity, and technology are reshaping how meetings and exhibitions are delivered.

Humanity remains at the heart of the industry, driving authentic connections, creativity, empathy, and memorable experiences, while AI-driven algorithms enhance efficiency through predictive

and future-ready. Crisis disrupts, conflict challenges, and continuity sustains. Together, they shape the evolution of MICE by forcing reinvention while preserving its core purpose — bringing people together meaningfully.

The GBTA APAC Conference achieved strong success with high attendee participation and impactful education sessions. Keynote addresses highlighted the rapid growth of corporate travel across APAC, with India emerging as a major contributor. Industry statistics reflected strong regional momentum, while Venture Connect stood out by giving start-ups a valuable platform to showcase innovative

“Crisis disrupts, conflict challenges, and continuity sustains. Together, they shape the evolution of MICE by forcing reinvention.”

analytics, automation, personalisation, and RoI optimisation. The future of MICE will be defined by immersive experiences, smart venues, sustainability, global connectivity, and balancing emotional human engagement with intelligent, scalable, and data-led insights.

The new focus of incentive travel is shifting toward personalised, sustainable, and experiential journeys that reward employees with authentic experiences rather than just luxury trips. Companies are prioritising well-being, safety, eco-responsibility, and technology-enabled engagement to make travel more impactful

products and solutions, reinforcing the conference’s future-focused vision.

Destinations like the Philippines, Spain, and the Maldives are focusing on how they position themselves beyond attracting large groups. Greater emphasis is being placed on sustainability, wellness, and high-quality event experiences. These destinations are also targeting inbound travel from beyond APAC through event-led initiatives, visa flexibility, and attractive support incentives to strengthen global appeal.

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SanJeet bestowed with PATA Life Membership

Recognising decades of contribution to global tourism, PATA honoured SanJeet, Director, DDP Publications, with a Life Membership.

By MT Bureau

In a ringing endorsement of his long-standing contribution to PATA and the travel and tourism industry, the Pacific Asia Travel Association has conferred its prestigious Life Membership upon **SanJeet**, Director, DDP Publications, recognising his

dedicated service to the Association over the years. The honour was presented during the PATA Executive Board & Board Member and Awards Presentation Dinner held at Lahan Hotel in Pohang, Korea (ROK), as part of the PATA Annual Summit 2026, making SanJeet the fourth Indian *ever* to win this accolade.

PATA Life Membership is awarded to individuals who have demonstrated exceptional leadership, commitment, and continuous support towards strengthening both PATA and the wider tourism community across the Asia-Pacific region. SanJeet has been associated with PATA for 26 years. Over the years, he has served two terms on the Executive Board and has remained an active board member for 18 years. He has also contributed extensively through

various committees and leadership positions, including his involvement with the PATA India Chapter, where he has supported several initiatives focused on strengthening industry engagement and regional collaboration.

He also played an instrumental role in bringing PATA Travel Mart 2023 to New Delhi, further strengthening India's visibility and positioning within the global travel trade landscape.

As the Director of DDP Publications, SanJeet oversees a portfolio of ten travel industry magazines, including two based in Dubai. He is also the founder of platforms such as the India Travel Awards, India Cargo Awards, and Arabian Travel Awards, which recognise and celebrate excellence across the travel, tourism, aviation, and hospitality sectors. **MT**



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As global uncertainty continues to test corporate confidence, the Asia-Pacific business travel sector is proving its resilience. GBTA's latest insights point towards a strong growth story for the region, with business travel spending expected to cross US\$ 700 billion in 2026.



India among APAC's fastest growing markets

By MT Bureau

Business travel across Asia-Pacific continues to gain momentum, with the region expected to retain its position as the world's largest business travel market in 2026 despite geopolitical tensions and ongoing economic challenges. According to findings revealed at the GBTA APAC Conference 2026, business travel spending across APAC is projected to surpass US\$ 700 billion in 2026, accounting for more than 40 per cent of global outbound business travel expenditure. China is set to dominate the region with an estimated US\$ 408 billion



in spending, while markets such as Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, Taiwan, Indonesia, and Singapore are all expected to witness healthy year-on-year growth.

Suzanne Neufang, CEO, GBTA, highlighted the resilience of corporate travel despite mounting global uncertainties. She noted that APAC continues to lead global recovery and growth, underlining the sector's importance in driving economic activity, innovation, and face-to-face business engagement.

The latest GBTA Business Travel Index (BTI) analysis projects Asia Pacific business travel spending to reach US\$ 700.9 billion in 2026, reflecting a 10.9 per cent increase year-on-year. China alone is expected to contribute 58 per cent of the region's total spending. Collectively, the top five APAC markets — China, Japan, South Korea, India, and Australia — are forecast to account for US\$ 623.2 billion, representing over 40 per cent of the global business travel forecast of US\$ 1.69 trillion in 2026.

Among the fastest-growing markets in the region are Taiwan (24.7 per cent), Japan (15.3 per cent), South Korea (13.3 per cent), Indonesia (12.6 per cent), India (12.5 per cent), Australia (9.7 per cent), and Singapore (9 per cent). Growth

“
India is emerging as a major force in APAC's corporate travel recovery, recording 12.5 per cent growth in 2026 projections.
 ”

is being largely supported by sectors including manufacturing, construction, utilities, and administrative services.

However, despite the strong outlook, industry sentiment remains cautious. Insights from GBTA's April 2026 global survey revealed that optimism among APAC travel professionals declined from 56 per cent in January to 46 per cent in April, while pessimism remained steady at around 25 per cent, mirroring broader global trends. **MT**



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Algorithms vs Human Touch: The new MICE frontier

As technology reshapes the MICE industry, success lies in balancing automated efficiency with the irreplaceable human touch, ensuring innovation enhances creativity without ever sacrificing personal connection.



By Deepa Sethi

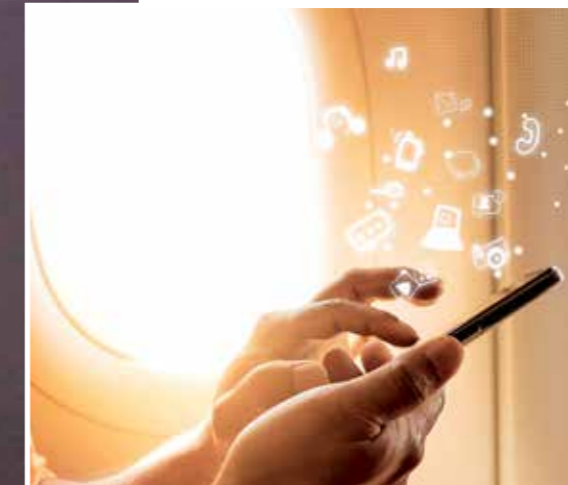
From my perspective, as an editor, some of my most meaningful industry insights come from honest conversations with people I trust and admire in the travel and MICE space. Over the past few months, I've had several such discussions around technology, AI, and the future of our industry, and there's no denying that AI and digital tools are becoming central to how we plan, manage, and experience events. The industry is evolving and becoming smarter in ways we could not have imagined a few years ago. Yet, almost everyone I spoke with shared the same belief: Efficiency may be driven by technology, but connection will always be driven by people. In this Q&A, I share those perspectives, and I would very much welcome your own thoughts on how our industry can embrace the future without losing its soul.

and mobile-first experiences matter far more than fancy interfaces

- Use AI upfront to reduce anxiety and instil confidence — visa clarity, crowd predictions, disruption alerts — because confidence drives conversion
- Stop measuring service only by satisfaction scores and start measuring effort saved, both for the traveller and the planner.

If we had to pinpoint, what digital or AI-led skills are becoming non-negotiable for travel professionals today, and why?

A. Contrary to popular belief, travel professionals do not need to learn coding or understand complex algorithms. What matters today is knowing how to make AI work effectively for them. The real non-negotiable skill is the ability to ask the right questions of technology — framing clear prompts, interpreting patterns instead of raw data, and knowing when human judgement must take over. Professionals also need a practical understanding of automation workflows, digital compliance, and decision-making in an increasingly tech-enabled environment. This balance will shape future success.



How have AI and technology changed the way training is approached in the industry, especially for large groups?

A. The biggest shift is that training has moved from annual classroom sessions to continuous, role-specific learning. AI now enables teams to simulate real-world disruptions such as weather delays, visa issues, and capacity challenges before facing them on the job. For large events, this has transformed training by making it faster, more consistent, and far closer to real-time decision-making and operational realities.

What are five immediate steps the travel and tourism industry should take to shift from hands-on service to technology-enabled, yet personal experiences?

A. Use technology to take work off people, not take people out of work. Reduce errors and improve the connection.

- Automate everything repetitive — ticketing, documentation, and reconciliations — because that's not where value is created anymore
- Design journeys that are digitally assisted, not fully self-serve. In our culture, trust will always matter, especially for first-time or large-value travellers
- Technology has to work in Indian conditions — voice, regional languages,

Everyone talks about AI speeding things up — but how can it actually help planners design and execute better programmes, not just faster ones, and how can it be integrated into training to improve accuracy and decision-making?

A. Speed is overrated! AI is not just about speeding things up — its real value lies in improving accuracy while allowing professionals to focus more on the human side of planning and hospitality. In the travel and events industry, a great deal of time is spent fixing errors caused by



compliance gaps, cost leakages, or poor inventory planning. AI helps identify these blind spots early and supports better decision-making from the outset.

However, technology cannot replace judgement or experience. Professionals must be trained to question AI outputs, apply context, and use human understanding to shape programmes that are not only efficient, but also thoughtful and meaningful for people.

There is always a concern that tech can dilute creativity. Is that a real risk, or can it actually enhance and maintain creativity and high-quality experiences with its vast reserves of information?

A. Creativity has never been lacking in this industry; the real challenge is finding the time to nurture it. Constant work pressure and daily fire-fighting leave little room for fresh thinking or experimentation. AI can help by expanding creative possibilities and giving planners access to broader ideas, destinations, formats, and experiences they may not have time to research manually. However, while AI can generate

options and inspiration, humans still create meaning, emotion, and connection. When used thoughtfully, technology does not diminish creativity; it protects it and gives it more space to grow.

When it comes to AI-led planning, does human judgement still make the biggest difference? How can we build that balance?

A. AI is excellent at recognising patterns. India runs on exceptions while AI runs on predictability. Local sensitivities, cultural differences, last-minute changes, and even egos — all these require human judgement. We need to focus on building that balance: AI for baseline decisions, humans for overrides and exceptions, and structured reflection after every project to learn from both.

With costs rising across the board, how are AI and digital tools helping the industry stay efficient and manage costs better?

A. AI is not a panacea; it cannot magically reduce costs. What it can do is surface inefficiencies early, which can go a long way in increasing efficiency. But for technology to be impactful, planners need to think in terms of cost-to-value. Training must include financial awareness, scenario costing, and post-travel analytics, not just booking skills.

How can AI-driven training help planners efficiently deliver personalised yet scalable experiences for large corporate and MICE groups?

A. Hyper-personalisation does not always scale, but relevance does. AI helps planners create smarter, more adaptable

experiences by segmenting travellers into meaningful personas and offering tiered options instead of excessive customisation. The goal is not to personalise everything manually, but to design flexible frameworks that still feel thoughtful, relevant, and personal at scale.

Inclusivity and cultural sensitivity are becoming more important. Can technology genuinely support this? Or can we train planners to incorporate these aspects?

A. Unless we have humanoid AI technology, I do not think the current AI models can teach empathy. However, they can help prevent mistakes that take place due to language misinterpretation, religious sensitivities, or not knowing local customs.

Inclusivity training is important; however, it must still be human-led, rooted in awareness and judgement. Technology supports sensitivity; it does not replace it.

If we look ahead, how will AI and technology reshape not just planning, but also the way travel, hotel, and event professionals are trained and upskilled?

A. In the field of travel and hospitality, degrees will not matter as much as demonstrated capability. We will move towards simulation-based experiential assessments and performance-linked learning paths. People will not be trained once and left alone; they will be constantly upskilled as tools and traveller expectations evolve.

Can AI and technology help measure, report, and reduce the carbon footprint of events without manual spreadsheets or complex data collection?

A. Yes, and this is one area where India has the potential to gain a real advantage. Technology can help the industry leapfrog outdated systems, much like UPI transformed payments. AI can track travel emissions, accommodation impact, energy consumption, and waste generation without relying on spreadsheets or complicated data collection. More importantly, it can identify where reductions are possible and even suggest how to achieve them.

Sustainability can only scale when measurement becomes simpler, and AI has the ability to make that process faster, smarter, and accessible. **MT**



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Incentive travel: Stability over luxury

The biggest debate in incentive travel today is no longer where to go, but whether the destination feels stable enough to commit to.

By Janice Alyosius

A few years ago, incentive travel conversations usually began with destinations, gala venues, and experience ideas. Today, the initial questions are very different. Can flight costs remain stable for the next three months? Is the airline route reliable? What happens if geopolitical tensions escalate suddenly? Will hotels offer flexibility if plans change midway?

That shift in conversation is now visible across the MICE industry. Corporate incentive travel is still moving ahead, but planners are approaching every programme with far more caution than before. Rising fuel surcharges, fluctuating forex rates, airline disruptions, and operational uncertainty are forcing companies to recalculate budgets almost constantly. In many cases, the destination itself is no longer the first priority — stability, connectivity, and flexibility are.

What makes the current situation more complex is that demand for incentive travel has not slowed. Companies still see value in rewarding employees, strengthening internal culture, and retaining talent through shared experiences. But the way those programmes are being designed has changed significantly. Long-haul itineraries are being shortened, destinations are being reconsidered, and contingency planning is becoming just as important as the experience itself.

BALANCING COST & CARE

Across the industry, corporates are trying to strike a balance between maintaining



“Internal incentive programmes have now shifted to H2 of 2026, and several stakeholder movements were deferred to Q2 for greater operational stability.”
— Shenaz Kanorwalla



SHENAZ KANORWALLA
ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR AND HEAD –
BUSINESS TRAVEL AND EVENTS, CIPLA

employee engagement and keeping travel costs under control. **Shenaz Kanorwalla**, Associate Director and Head – Business Travel and Events, Cipla, said the company has consciously slowed movement timelines instead of cutting back entirely. “While overall incentive travel budgets have not been revised, we have taken a prudent approach by deferring internal team incentive programmes to the second half of the year (H2). This allows us to balance cost pressures without compromising the overall incentive strategy. Due to ongoing operational and connectivity challenges, several stakeholder group movements have also been deferred to Q2 of FY27, allowing for greater stability and improved travel experience,” she said.

The conversation around value is also changing. **John Dennis L**, Travel & Facility Manager, Sea6 Energy, said incentive travel today is less about extravagant spending and more about creating practical yet memorable experiences. “Incentive travel is still around, but it’s being redefined. The focus is now on ‘memorable, cost-conscious experiences’ that inspire workers without going over budget, rather than ‘big-ticket exotic trips’. Incentive travel plans are also becoming more complex, combining local excursions for larger groups with selective high-profile destinations when budgets permit,” he explained.

Ajay Bhatt, Corporate Expert, said rising airfares have forced companies to fundamentally rethink programme design. “Rising airfares are pushing corporates to rethink incentive travel. There’s a clear shift from long-haul, high-spend programmes to shorter, high-impact experiences that deliver

value without diluting intent. Today, corporates are far more cautious and are evaluating programmes through the lens of pricing, geopolitical confidence, and operational certainty,” he said.

A REGION RECONSIDERED

Even as Southeast Asia and other value-driven destinations gain traction, the Middle East continues to remain part of the conversation for many corporates. Industry stakeholders say the region has not been ruled out permanently, but companies are now waiting for greater geopolitical stability, softer pricing, and more predictable operating conditions before committing large groups again.

Kanorwalla said the company remains open to reconsidering the region if conditions improve. “We remain open to reconsidering destinations such as the Middle East should geopolitical situation and pricing stabilise. Currently, we have not re-routed incentive groups, as European destinations have already been committed. Any future re-routing decisions will be evaluated based on cost, connectivity, and overall delegate experience,” she said.

Dennis believes the Middle East will continue to hold value, but perhaps in a different format than before. “Incentive travel plans are growing more complex, combining local excursions for larger groups with sporadic, high-profile locations like the Middle East when funds permit. Fuel price stability would undoubtedly pave the way once more, but the lessons learnt about sustainability, adaptability, and resilience are unlikely to be forgotten. Redefining when and how the Middle East fits into the incentive travel mix is more important than permanently leaving the region,” he said.



JOHN DENNIS L
TRAVEL & FACILITY MANAGER
SEA6 ENERGY

Bhatt added that corporates are now looking at the region through a far more cautious lens than before. If stability returns, destinations like the Middle East will come back into consideration, but the decision will be driven by a combination of pricing and geopolitical confidence. Today, corporates are far more cautious — risk perception, travel advisories, and overall regional stability are playing an equally important role alongside cost. So, the shift is not permanent, but the lens has clearly changed from preferred destination to safe, stable, and value-backed choice,” he explained.

SOUTHEAST ASIA SURGES

As corporates become more cautious, Southeast Asia has emerged as one of the biggest beneficiaries of the shift. Countries like Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka are increasingly being viewed as practical alternatives

“
In today’s incentive travel planning, safety guarantees, insurance coverage, and crisis management have become definite non-negotiables.
— John Dennis L”

because they combine affordability, shorter travel times, and easier access.

Nihaluddin, Sr Vice President & Business Head – MICE & OBT, Trail Blazer Tours India, said the shift has already become visible in company proposals and bookings. “For us as a company, we had exactly 33–35 per cent shift of various proposals from the Middle East to the SE segment, like Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam. Thailand and Vietnam are the big gainers. Even though the night stays are reduced, the cost is still getting higher by nearly 20 per cent due to forex fluctuations and airlines revising fuel surcharge with or without prior notice,” he said.

Long-haul destinations are becoming increasingly difficult to sustain within earlier budget structures. “The fuel surcharge for long-haul destinations such as Australia, New Zealand, Bali, Japan, and Korea has impacted the length of stay for various clients. The budgets remain the same for clients, but what we were planning one year in advance has

totally rattled because airfare revisions are happening constantly. Airlines are also adding riders that fuel surcharge may increase again at the time of final ticketing,” Nihaluddin explained.

Sea6 Energy is also actively rerouting groups towards alternate

“
Indian corps are spending nearly 10–14 days in South Africa, seeking immersive itineraries with stronger value and seamless experiences.
— Mitalee Karmarkar”



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destinations such as Latin America including Colombia and Costa Rica, and Asian destinations, including Sri Lanka, Vietnam, and Bali, emerging as viable alternatives. These areas are perfect substitutes in the present cost-sensitive economy because they combine accessibility, affordability, and genuine experiences,” said Dennis.

Ahmad Maaz, Managing Director, Royal Tour & Travel India, said destination preferences are now being driven by operational ease as much as by experience. “We are seeing strong traction for regions such as Southeast Asia including Thailand and Malaysia, the Middle East, including Oman, and emerging destinations like Azerbaijan

and Georgia. These offer a strong balance of cost efficiency, visa ease, and quality infrastructure. Planning cycles have also become longer, with corporates seeking early confirmations to lock in better pricing and avoid volatility,” he said.

AIRFARE WOES IN EUROPE

While Southeast Asia gains momentum, Europe is beginning to feel the pressure of rising operational costs and airfare unpredictability. Nihaluddin pointed out that European itineraries have become increasingly difficult to plan because airfare structures have changed dramatically over the last year. “Europe is losing away as the Middle Eastern carriers like Emirates and Etihad always

had a fare check as compared to the European carriers. Even today Middle Eastern carriers are offering around ₹60,000 for India to Switzerland return, while European carriers for the same route are nearly ₹90,000. The budgets remain the same for clients and what we were planning one year in advance has totally rattled,” he said.

The situation has become more complicated because of operational challenges linked to flight routes and airspace restrictions. “The biggest impact is because Air India and IndiGo Airlines in the last two years launched approximately 40-plus destinations,

“
Corporates are replacing long-haul, high-spend incentives with shorter, high-impact programmes focused on pricing stability and operational certainty.
 ”

— Ajay Bhatt



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but due to the Pakistan airspace being closed for them they can't fly direct to some important destinations in Europe, especially ex-Delhi. Since there is a shift of businesses from Europe to Australia and other alternatives, fares have doubled because demand is more and supply is less," Nihaluddin added.

Bhatt said corporates are now prioritising destinations that minimise unpredictability. "There is a clear preference for direct routes, buffer-led itineraries and destinations with reliable infrastructure to avoid last-minute disruptions and ensure smooth group movement. Risk perception, travel advisories and overall regional stability are now playing an equally important role alongside cost. The lens has clearly shifted from preferred destination to safe, stable, and value-backed choice," he said.

SAFETY TAKES CENTRE STAGE

One of the biggest changes in corporate incentive travel is the growing importance of safety, insurance, and crisis

management. What was once treated as a backend operational detail has now become central to planning discussions.

Kanorwalla said safety frameworks are now non-negotiable across programme planning. "The safety and well-being of travellers remain a top priority, and it is the corporate's responsibility to ensure adequate safety assurances, insurance coverage, and robust crisis-management protocols at all times. Any future re-routing decisions will also be evaluated based on cost, connectivity, and overall delegate experience," she said.

Dennis echoed a similar sentiment and said organisations today are far less willing to take risks around group movement. "In today's incentive travel planning, safety guarantees, insurance coverage, and crisis management have evolved from 'nice-to-have' items to definite non-negotiables. Organisations are far less inclined to take chances when it comes to group travel due to growing geopolitical unpredictability, climatic catastrophes, and health concerns.

Incentive travel now involves competent risk management in addition to comfort and rewards," he said.

For travel companies, the impact of operational uncertainty is already being felt on the ground. Nihaluddin recalled how sudden airline cancellations disrupted planned movements and forced major itinerary revisions. "Two groups cancelled from Almaty and Tbilisi when IndiGo cancelled the flight just before the war. Now all the trips are combined, and they are travelling to Far East destinations like Phuket or Pattaya. The yearly award functions are happening at one place, the volume has increased, but the cost has again increased due to demand and supply, fuel surcharge, and forex fluctuation," he said.

Maaz said stronger safeguards are now becoming standard practice across programme execution. "We ensure comprehensive travel insurance, work with vetted ground partners, and build



AHMAD MAAZ
MANAGING DIRECTOR
ROYAL TOUR & TRAVEL INDIA

“
Planning cycles are becoming longer as corporates seek early confirmations to avoid pricing volatility and secure better commercial value.
— Ahmad Maaz”

as the Middle East should geopolitical situations and pricing stabilise," she said.

At the same time, suppliers themselves are finding it difficult to absorb unpredictable increases. Nihaluddin said forex movements and fuel surcharges are creating tension around existing commercial agreements. "Some are adjusting to the situation and understanding well, but some are going as per the contract which they have in place. Earlier we used to revise pricing if forex fluctuation crossed 2 per cent, but now some clients are not budging at all. In short, we are losing clients across segments and we cannot add new clients as a whole," he said.

RISE OF VALUE TRAVEL

Tourism boards are also repositioning themselves to stay relevant in a more value-conscious market. South African Tourism believes destinations now need to compete on overall experience and ease rather than only airfare.

Mitalee Karmarkar, Marketing and Communications Manager (MEISEA), South African Tourism, said Indian corporates are increasingly evaluating complete itinerary value. "South Africa works well because it allows groups to experience wildlife, city life, culture, adventure, and scenic landscapes within a single itinerary, which helps optimise both time and on-ground spend. Indian travellers also typically spend around 10 to 14 days in South Africa, which allows them to truly immerse themselves in the destination and get more value out of the overall journey. Alongside this, initiatives

contingency plans into itineraries. Real-time monitoring, on-ground support teams, and clear communication protocols are now standard practice. Connectivity continues to remain a critical factor, especially during peak season capacity constraints and pricing volatility," he explained.

ADAPTABILITY COMES FIRST

Alongside safety, flexibility has become one of the strongest deciding factors in corporate travel planning. Corporates today want contracts that can absorb sudden airfare hikes, schedule changes, and geopolitical uncertainty without creating major financial losses.

Bhatt said commercial flexibility is now heavily influencing supplier and destination selection. "This includes better group rates, value-add inclusions, flexible cancellation terms, and support on logistics. Partners who share risk are getting preference. Corporates are increasingly seeking adaptable contracts, flexible travel dates, and alternative destination options as part of a more cautious and strategic planning approach," he said.

Kanorwalla added that suppliers who can offer transparency and alternatives are better positioned in the current market. "We would welcome early visibility into cost-effective destinations and hotel offerings that can be positioned as viable alternatives. Transparent pricing, value-added inclusions and flexible terms would significantly support our discussions with internal stakeholders. We remain open to reconsidering destinations such

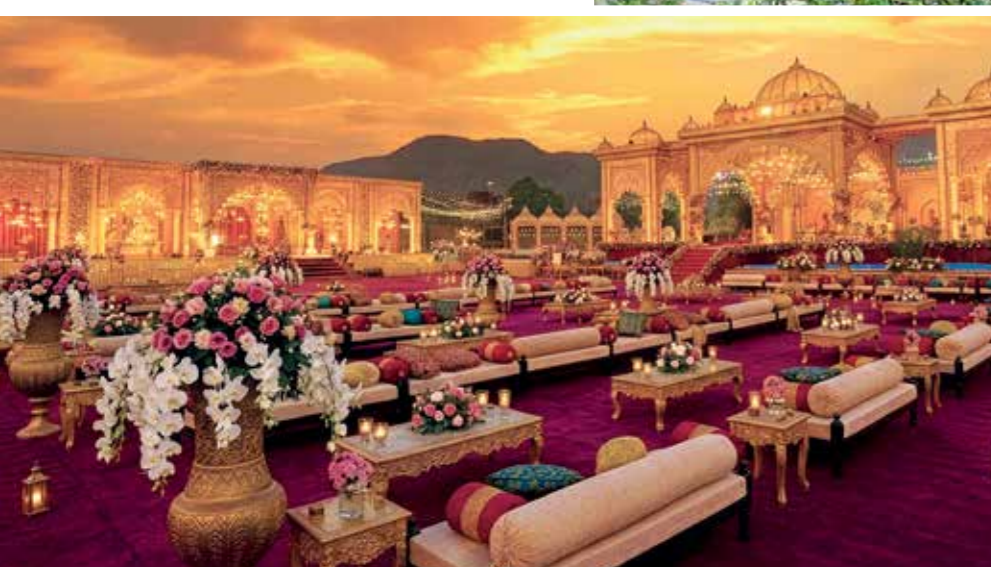
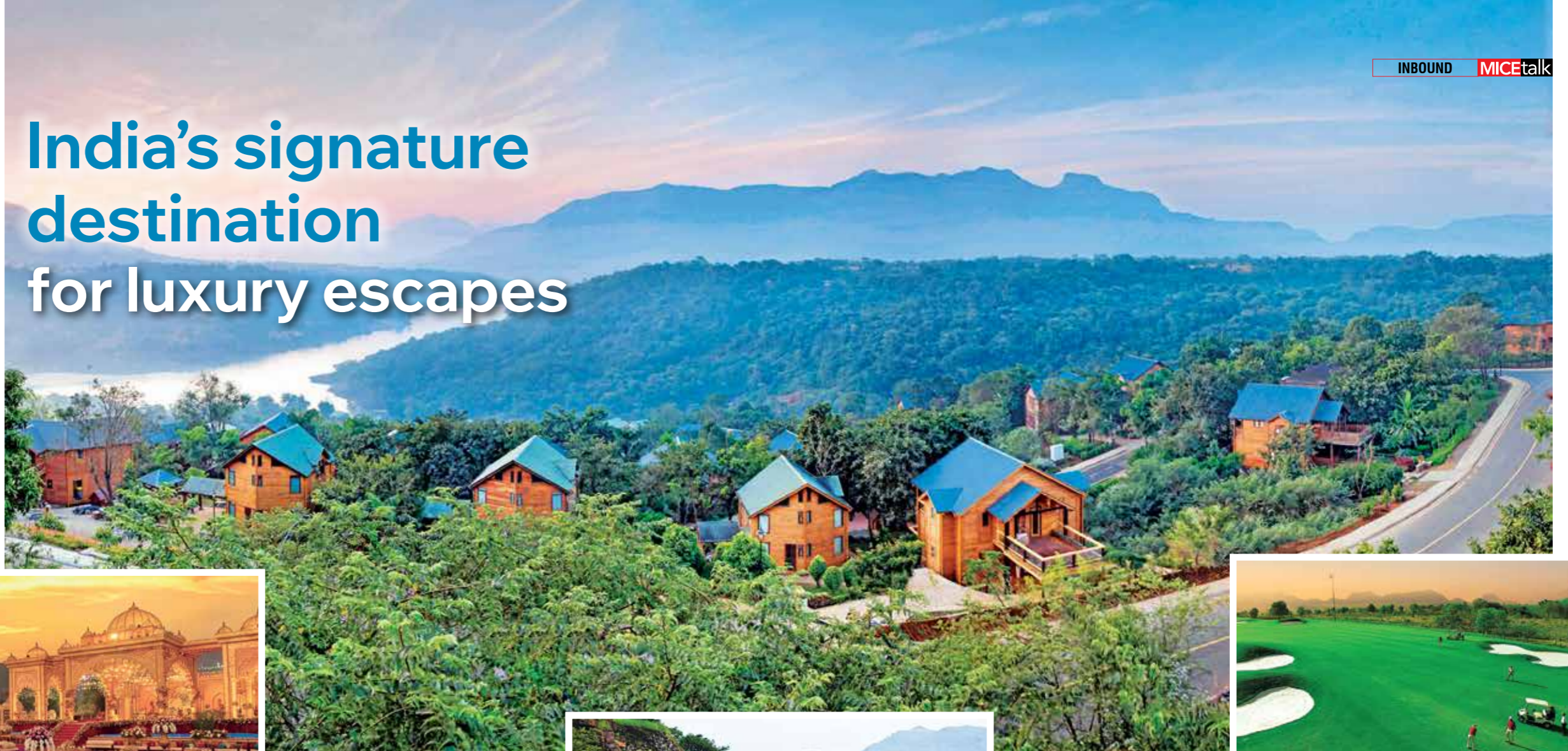


NIHALUDDIN
SR VICE PRESIDENT & BUSINESS HEAD –
MICE & OBT, TRAIL BLAZER TOURS INDIA

“
We witnessed a 33–35 per cent shift in proposals from the Middle East towards Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Singapore.
— Nihaluddin”

Sprawled across the Sahyadri mountains, Aamby Valley City is a 10,000-acre township that seamlessly blends destination weddings, high-octane adventure, and world-class championship golf into one immersive escape.

India's signature destination for luxury escapes



ROMIE DUTT
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, AAMBY VALLEY CITY & HOTEL SAHARA STAR

In an era where luxury is increasingly measured by time, space, and exclusivity, modern travellers and event planners are shifting away from conventional, single-use venues. The demand has evolved from mere locations to complete, self-contained ecosystems — dynamic spaces that can host multi-day, multi-generational experiences without a single moment of repetition.

Sprawled across more than 10,000 acres amidst the pristine Sahyadri mountains of Maharashtra, Aamby Valley City does not simply participate in this luxury landscape — it defines it. “Aamby Valley is designed to be more than a destination — it is an experience for every kind of traveller. From

celebrations to adventure and leisure to luxury, every guest finds their own reason to return,” adds **Romie Dutt**, Executive Director, Aamby Valley City and Hotel Sahara Star.

As a masterfully planned, independent township, it seamlessly blends breathtaking natural topography with world-class infrastructure. The result is a premier destination that serves as a spectacular stage for legendary weddings, high-octane corporate retreats, and refined leisure escapes. While many luxury properties boast a signature ballroom or a picturesque lawn, Aamby Valley City offers an entire layout of diverse venues. This allows hosts to weave intricate, multi-chapter stories for their celebrations, rather than hosting

a repetitive series of indoor functions. The scale here is unmatched. For grand-scale gatherings, the Town Square stands as one of Asia's largest event spaces — spanning an impressive 117,167 sq ft and effortlessly accommodating up to 3,000 guests.

For indoor spectacles, prestigious corporate conventions, or grand receptions, the 27,000 sq ft Aamby Auditorium offers a sophisticated, state-of-the-art setting for 1,500 attendees. Yet, the true magic of the township lies in its

outdoor diversity. Couples can orchestrate a breathtaking, traditional arrival via pontoon boat at the serene Banaras Ghat, host vibrant, sun-drenched mehndi ceremonies on the shores of Lagoon Beach, and exchange vows against the dramatic backdrop of the Golf Lawn, East Deck, or Lake Garden.

Here, milestones are not just hosted — they are truly lived. Weddings today are about storytelling, not just ceremonies. At Aamby Valley City, families are given the freedom to design every chapter of that story across spaces

that are as diverse as their imagination. Beyond its celebratory grandeur, the valley functions as a dynamic playground for all age groups — making it a perfect retreat for families, couples, and corporate groups alike. For the golf enthusiast, the city features a spectacular 18-hole, PGA-approved championship golf course.

Set against rolling hills, deep valleys, and mist-laden peaks, this world-class course combines sporting precision with unparalleled scenic luxury. For thrill-seekers, the dedicated adventure hub — 19 Degree North — transforms the rugged terrain into an adrenaline-fuelled escape. Guests can engage in a variety of activities:

- All-Terrain Vehicle (ATV) rides, trekking, and wilderness camping
- Ziplining, rappelling, and rock climbing
- Jungle safaris and paintball matches
- Signature Power Glider experience, which offers an unforgettable aerial adventure soaring 4,500 feet above the Sahyadris

Accommodation here is an architectural journey, featuring charming Aussie Rooms, rustic Spanish Cottages, elegant Burmese Chalets, and exclusive Cabanas equipped with private plunge pools. For ultimate privacy, the panoramic hilltop residences of Hermitage and Supreme Cottage offer sweeping views of the mountain ranges. This immersive stay is complemented by a sophisticated culinary portfolio. Guests can savour global fare at Woodpecker, experience Mediterranean elegance at Mabruk, enjoy casual, scenic dining at the Lake Front Café, or unwind at Legend – The Golf Café.

At its core, Aamby Valley City proves that true luxury is not measured merely by room inventory or square footage, but by the magnificence of the memories created within its gates. **MT**

To find out more, please visit www.aambyvalley.com or connect with the guest relations team via +91 75490 90700, +91 75490 91700, 022-39895000, or 020-22965111.

Future of incentives: Personalisation, adaptability, and impact

Companies are designing incentive programmes with clear business outcomes, using experiences to reinforce performance, build culture, and strengthen team connections



As the global MICE landscape evolves, corporate expectations are shifting from mere logistics to measurable impact. This conversation explores how personalisation, technology, and resilience are redefining regional event strategies.

By Deepa Sethi

Incentive travel is entering a more confident phase. According to **Manpreet Bindra**, Head, FCM Meetings & Events, Asia, shared travel experiences are no longer seen as discretionary rewards, but as deliberate business tools tied to engagement and retention. FCM's 2026 Trends Report reveals that nearly 92 per cent of respondents expect budgets to remain stable or increase, with over a third anticipating growth exceeding 10 per cent.

This shift is particularly pronounced across Asia. Markets, such as Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, China, and India are actively using these programmes to drive team performance. Bindra notes that around 45.2 per cent of Asian



MANPREET BINDRA
HEAD
FCM MEETINGS & EVENTS, ASIA

respondents plan to increase budgets specifically for employee incentives, while 67.3 per cent are increasing overall MICE spend. Globally, events driven by employee rewards have jumped from 28 per cent to 44 per cent year-on-year, with a noticeable tilt towards short- and mid-haul programmes that balance meaningful experiences with cost considerations.

TECH, A PLANNING ENABLER

Technology — particularly AI — is reshaping MICE design behind the scenes. Planners are now expected to create thoughtful, personalised experiences, while managing tighter budgets, risks, and greater internal scrutiny. Bindra explains that there is a clear move away from overpacked agendas, with more

emphasis on giving attendees the space to engage and connect.

AI is already embedded in the planning process, from drafting agendas and analysing feedback to managing approvals. Currently, 78 per cent of organisers use AI to reduce planning time and control costs. Tools that connect insights directly to action — linking recommendations with real-time venue availability and pricing — are shortening decision cycles significantly. FCM's Venue Finder tool, for instance, has cited a reduced booking time by up to 80 per cent time. However, gaps remain regarding data governance and integration, particularly as lead times have shrunk 18 per cent over the past two years, leaving little margin for error.

PERSONALISATION AT SCALE

As audiences become more diverse, the challenge lies in making large-scale events feel relevant to each individual. Bindra emphasises that human-led local

expertise is indispensable for navigating cultural nuances. Understanding ground-level expectations allows organisers to design programmes that feel intuitive and respectful of attendees' time.

Personalisation now extends into every touchpoint — including onboarding, agenda presentation, and pre-event communication. In Asia, this involves delivering specific content to the right audience while prioritising inclusion. Factors such as language, dietary requirements, accessibility, and mixed audience profiles directly influence venue choice and event design.

REDEFINING ROI

There is a decisive shift in how organisations are evaluating success. The question is no longer, "Was it a good event?" but rather, "Did it move the needle?" This evolution is pushing planners to focus on measurable business outcomes rather than traditional satisfaction scores.



Business leaders now demand greater visibility into their investments. Metrics have become outcome-driven, with 42 per cent of planners prioritising impact-per-attendee over sheer scale.

In Asia, Bindra points out that RoI is a top factor defining event success, alongside client acquisition, business growth, and expanded reach. Interestingly, safety and security have risen in importance, often outranking formal RoI considerations in the final decision-making process.

AGILITY IN SHORT CYCLES

One of the most pressing challenges is the reduction in lead times, which are 18 per cent shorter than two years ago. This compression leaves less room to manage complex visas and travel logistics.

Bindra highlights that the role of governments and industry stakeholders is critical in streamlining approvals, as visa considerations are now built into planning timelines and contract negotiations from the outset.

Simultaneously, there is growing interest in tier II and tier III destinations. Locations, such as Rajasthan, Goa, and Kerala are gaining prominence due to improved regional connectivity and the presence of globally recognised hotel brands. These destinations offer a distinctive alternative to traditional hubs while remaining capable of handling international MICE demand.

INDIA'S COMPETITIVE EDGE

India continues to hold its own against major competitor like Thailand, Singapore, the UAE, Turkey, and Indonesia. Both India and Singapore

Metrics have become outcome-driven, with 42 per cent of planners prioritising impact-per-attendee over sheer scale

remain highly active booking markets; venues such as The Westin Pune Koregaon Park and Shangri-La Singapore rank among the top booked in Asia.

Bindra observes a shift away from traditional destinations as planners prioritise value and ease of logistics over familiarity. India has significant potential to stand out by offering non-traditional venues and formats that provide uniqueness without adding operational complexity.

BUILDING EVENT RESILIENCE

Resilience is now the foundation of event planning. Planners operate under the assumption that conditions can change instantly, leading to more robust practices such as flexible contracts and built-in buffer timelines.

Bindra cites a case where a single global conference for 1,000 attendees was reworked into three regional events in Thailand, Nairobi, and Mexico City. This strategy reduced travel risks and eased visa pressures while improving attendee wellbeing and cost control.

BEYOND TEAM RETREATS

Incentive travel has undergone a significant transformation in recent years. Globally, the use of events for

rewarding top achievers has risen sharply, from 28 per cent to 44 per cent, while employee engagement as a core objective has grown even more substantially.

This shift is highly visible in Asia. Companies are designing incentive programmes with clear business outcomes, using experiences to reinforce performance, build culture, and strengthen team connections.

The conversation has moved decisively from, "Was it a good trip?" to "Did it deliver results?" — reshaping how incentive programmes are conceived and delivered.

SHIFTS SHAPING INDUSTRY

Looking ahead, Bindra notes a move towards programme-level planning, where organisations view their annual calendar holistically rather than as isolated events. Inclusion and sustainability are also moving from "nice-to-have" features to baseline requirements.

Within this evolving landscape, FCM Meetings & Events continues to position itself around flexibility, regional expertise, and integrated technology, supported by strong consulting capabilities — helping clients navigate complexity while delivering meaningful, high-impact event experiences. **MT**



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As global travel disruptions rise, Asego Bolt bridges the gap between financial reimbursement and real-time relief, providing instant baggage tracking and premium lounge access exactly when travellers need it most.



Real-time travel support beyond insurance

In today's fast-moving travel landscape, disruptions are no longer the exception — they are an expected part of the experience. According to a recent Global Airline Performance Report, over 25 million bags were reported mishandled globally, and more than 35 per cent of all flights faced delays exceeding 60 minutes. While travel demand has bounced back post-pandemic, the quality of the journey often does not keep pace. Travellers are facing longer wait times, more lost luggage, and higher levels of uncertainty at every step.

This is where the gap between travellers' actual needs and travel reality becomes clear. Insurance coverage may reimburse financial loss after an incident, but it does not show up when a bag goes missing, when a connection is missed, or when travellers are stranded at a foreign airport with no immediate assistance.

What travellers need today is not just reimbursement. They need real-time help. Recognising this shift, Asego has structured Asego Bolt, a powerful



DEV KARVAT
FOUNDER, ASEGO

new travel assistance bundle created by combining real-time baggage tracking and lounge access during flight delays. Together, they deliver rapid response and real protection, exactly when and where customers need it most.

It enables global, real-time baggage tracking across all airlines and routes, with guaranteed compensation of up to ₹66,000 per checked-in bag (up to two bags) if the luggage is not recovered within 96 hours. Similarly, it

automatically activates premium lounge access if a flight is delayed by more than 60 minutes — offering travellers comfort instead of frustration. Coverage extends across up to four flight segments in a single trip and includes access to over 1,300 lounges across more than 100 countries.

This is not just a service upgrade — it's a mindset shift. Travel assistance is no longer an add-on; it's becoming a baseline expectation. As a travel advisor or booking partner, offering Bolt is more than an upsell — it's about being proactive, customer-centric, and aligned with what modern travellers truly value: peace of mind and dependable support.

Asego Bolt empowers travel agents to move beyond selling destinations and start offering dependable journeys. It's time to think beyond insurance and give your customers a layer of protection that travels with them.

Whether it's a family vacation, a corporate itinerary, or a solo international trip, assistance like this transforms stress into trust. **MT**



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Crisis, conflict & continuity

Vikrant Gulani, Director – India, Pinkerton, gives his opinion on how geopolitical conflict is redefining MICE planning — elevating security, operational continuity, and leadership accountability — transforming travel risk management into a non-negotiable strategic pillar.

For those of us who travel frequently for work, it is clear that business travel today feels very different from what it once was. Airports are more crowded, routes change with little notice, visas take longer, and global headlines are no longer something we can ignore between flights. Conflicts that once felt far away now influence everyday travel decisions — often without warning.

Wars and geopolitical tensions are no longer abstract global issues. They show up in very real ways: sudden airspace closures, insurance exclusions, payment disruptions, supplier cancellations, and growing anxiety among travellers and their families.

For Indian companies, MICE travel is no longer only about engagement or reward. It has become a visible extension of leadership responsibility and employee

duty of care. When planning is not done well, the impact can be immediate and costly. Flights get cancelled with no alternatives ready. Delegates are stranded without clear instructions. Confusion



VIKRANT GULANI
DIRECTOR – INDIA
PINKERTON

spreads faster than facts, especially through social media and family WhatsApp groups. What was meant to be a positive corporate experience can quickly turn into reputational damage, internal dissatisfaction, and leadership discomfort. In these moments, the question is no longer who booked the best hotel, but who is accountable when things go wrong. This reality has

reshaped how events are planned. Cost, infrastructure, and entertainment still matter, but they are no longer enough.

Today, planners and decision-makers also assess political stability, diplomatic relations with India, medical preparedness, evacuation feasibility, and crisis response capability. Every international MICE event now carries an element of geopolitical judgment, whether openly discussed or not. Destination strategy has therefore become more deliberate. There is a visible shift toward politically neutral locations, India-friendly travel corridors, and shorter, more flexible formats. Reliability has become as important as appeal.

Security and continuity planning now sit at the core of design. Quiet preparation — risk assessments, vetted hotels, controlled transport, back-up routing, and clear escalation protocols — creates confidence. This is why companies increasingly choose partners who plan the “what-ifs” and, more importantly, remain present if an emergency arises.

Despite all this, MICE will never stop. Business still depends on human

MICE travel has become a visible extension of leadership responsibility and employee duty of care

connection, and incentives still motivate teams. What has changed is the depth of planning and the value of trusted partnerships.

In today’s world, safety is not the opposite of ambition. It is what allows ambition to move forward — confidently, responsibly, and sustainably. **MT**

(The views expressed in the article are those of the contributor in his personal capacity.)



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India tees off for global golf dominance

India's few golf moments have been too few and far between for it to emerge as a destination that could compete with other Asian destinations. The question is: Has the private sector done enough, or is it time for the Ministry of Tourism to grip it and rip it?

By Hazel Jain

The DP World India Championship recently brought top names—including Rory McIlroy and Tommy Fleetwood—to our fairways, proving India can host world-class golf. Bryson DeChambeau's appearance in the inaugural International Series further cemented this global presence.

With the Yuvraj Singh-backed IGPL securing US\$100 million for franchises and US\$250 million for infrastructure, India has an unparalleled opportunity to become a premier golf tourism destination. But will these events lead to something bigger?

Anirudha Seolekar, Chairman, Oxford Group, and President, Golf Industry Association (GIA), believes that India has its advantages. It pairs a competitive price point with a distinct cultural allure, making it an attractive alternative for golfers looking to explore new, world-class destinations.

"Golf is a game deeply connected to the land. Golf packages are inherently easy to create — curating them is



ANIRUDHA SEOLEKAR
CHAIRMAN, OXFORD GROUP, AND
PRESIDENT, GOLF INDUSTRY
ASSOCIATION



SHYAM VADOR
DIRECTOR
MY GOLF TOURS

primarily a matter of cost and logistics. When done well, packaging can enhance pricing because golfers are willing to spend on a quality experience. The key is how you present it," he says.

DRIVING DOMESTIC GROWTH

Beyond tourism, the game itself is set to grow exponentially. Many new real estate projects now combine residential complexes with golf courses.

India has all the pieces in place: high-quality courses, cost advantage, growing domestic interest, and a unique appeal for international travellers. With greater visibility in national tourism efforts, golf can become a significant pillar of Indian travel.

This begs the question: can the Ministry of Tourism do more to build on this momentum? If promoted correctly, golf tourism could be the spark that puts India on every golfer's bucket list.

With smart campaigns, global partnerships, and authentic storytelling, India won't just host great tournaments — it will become the destination golfers can't stop talking about.

Shyam Vador, Director, My Golf Tours, notes that international tournaments generate significant global

“
We have successfully facilitated multiple groups of 20–40 golfers on curated tours to cities like Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, and Kolkata.
”

— Shyam Vador

visibility. “Top golfers include these events in their calendars, garnering extensive coverage. This positions India not just as a host, but as a destination with infrastructure and professionalism matching global standards.”

He also adds that an interest can be observed among professionals and amateurs alike — especially the latter, as golf becomes a holiday highlight for those wanting to explore diverse courses across India.

ACCESSIBILITY CHALLENGES

Anitya Chand, Director, K&A Golf, teaches golf to Indian corporates and conducts tournaments for the automotive and luxury sectors.

These events often serve as team-building exercises or high-end client engagement sessions. “It is an experience the corporate wants to provide. Most occur within India, though some companies take clients abroad for short trips or offsites,” he explains, highlighting the bespoke nature of these activations.

However, the landscape remains restricted. “India has two types of courses — private courses and government-run ones. We don't have too many public courses — barely two or three that are pay-and-play. From a private course perspective, all of them are membership-based,” Chand notes.

He elaborates on the implications for corporate events: “The top 25 courses in

“
When done well, packaging can enhance pricing because golfers are willing to spend on a quality experience.
”

— Anirudha Seolekar



Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, Union Minister of Tourism, attends the official franchise launch of the Indian Golf Premier League in New Delhi

Indian Golf Premier League's commitment to bring US\$ 2 billion in investment for golf tourism infrastructure is not merely a sporting initiative, it is a strategic investment in Brand India. The initiative aims to promote India as a premium golf tourism destination by integrating sports and infrastructure development, while attracting also high-value international tourists and investments.

India are all private, serving as the primary hubs for corporate events. However, because they prioritise members over tourists, accessibility remains a challenge — unlike the international model, where private courses often embrace a pay-and-play approach.”

LESSONS BY GLOBAL RIVALS

According to Chand, Southeast Asia takes the lead in golf tourism. Thailand remains a premier choice — it offers the highest number of easily accessible courses and fully integrated packages, reflecting a truly professional approach. Vietnam is emerging strongly, and Macau remains a solid contender, making Southeast Asia a top-tier destination.

The UAE, specifically Dubai and Abu Dhabi, provides exceptional, well-organised courses at a higher price point. Lastly, the UK — particularly Scotland, the home of golf — offers a prestigious experience, though costs are higher and trips typically span seven to nine days.



ANITYA CHAND
DIRECTOR
K&A GOLF

Explaining why India lags behind Southeast Asia, he says that the biggest reason is that India does not have pay-and-play facilities.

“If you look at the top 20 golf courses in India, they're all membership-based. There is no space. That is primarily why nobody has been able to put together structured packages. Many retired cricketers now want to travel and play golf,” he adds.

GOLF+ EXPERIENCES WINS

Certain clubs host training programmes for their members, while entrepreneurs continue to open new coaching centres and academies across the country. Premium credit card holders can also book coaching sessions at these private clubs. As Vador points out, exclusive access to such clubs comes at a cost, and members naturally expect similar standards as part of that lifestyle.

Golf travel is a blend of sport, luxury, and lifestyle; therefore, it commands premium pricing and offers strong margins for well-positioned agents. The ability to offer ‘golf-plus’ experiences strengthens our positioning.

Domestic golf tourism is thriving; avid golfers regularly travel with friends and family to explore new courses. We have successfully facilitated multiple groups of 20–40 golfers on curated tours to cities like Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, and Kolkata, blending golf with local experiences.

Being an operator who actually plays the sport is a significant advantage. “It ensures a stronger grasp of what golfers truly value: the right course selection, efficient routing, flexibility for practice or warm-up, and the small touches that enhance the overall experience. Golf travel is primarily geared towards travellers who already play the sport, but it is still possible to design entry-level golf experiences for beginners, provided expectations are set correctly,” Vador explains. **MT**

With the right packaging and stronger visibility in national tourism efforts, golf can become a significant pillar of Indian travel



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Big fat weddings shift focus southwards



As the ₹5–10 lakh crore wedding industry evolves, planners are shifting their focus southwards, seeking a blend of high-capacity infrastructure, improved global connectivity, and authentic cultural experiences.

By MT Bureau

South India is steadily moving into focus as India's next big weddings and events frontier; however, unlocking its full potential will require sharper positioning, stronger government collaboration, and a decisive shift in mindset. Delivering the keynote at the Travel Wedding Show in Chennai, **Rajeev Jain**, Founder and Director, Rashi Entertainment, laid out both the scale of the opportunity and the gaps that continue to hold the region back.

"The destination map of India is changing very fast. For nearly 20 years, Jaipur and Goa have dominated the wedding business, but today clients are clearly looking for new pricing, new venues, new experiences, different cuisines, and better connectivity. This

is the moment for South India to take that opportunity and position itself as the next big destination," Jain said. He explained that the shift is being driven by evolving consumer behaviour, where weddings are becoming larger, more immersive, and significantly higher in value. "Today weddings are not just large, they are becoming extremely large and experience-driven. People are willing to spend on artists, production, and venues because they want to celebrate more meaningfully," he noted.

On the demand side, Jain emphasised the scale at which weddings are now being planned. Celebrity performances alone are commanding between ₹2–20 crore, while premium room rates of ₹50,000–1 lakh per night are increasingly being accepted for large-format celebrations. "People pay, negotiate, and move forward because the



RAJEEV JAIN
DIRECTOR & FOUNDER
RASHI ENTERTAINMENT

With the Indian wedding industry hitting the ₹10 lakh crore mark, South India is emerging as the next high-value frontier for grand celebrations

focus is now on experience and rather than just the cost," he said, underlining the shift towards high-value weddings. Indian wedding industry is currently estimated at ₹5–10 lakh crore, with projections indicating it could become one of the country's largest economic contributors by 2030. Despite these strong demand drivers, South India has yet to capture a proportional share of high-value weddings. Jain attributed this to a positioning gap. "South India is still seen as a traditional market and not an aspirational one. The challenge is not with the client. The challenge is that we are not selling the destination in the right way," he said.

Data from his presentation further reinforces the opportunity. South India attracts 43 per cent of international tourists



answer lies in how aggressively we market and position this region to domestic clients," Jain explained.

On the supply side, the region already has the capacity to host large-scale events, with weddings often accommodating up to 20,000 guests. However, what is missing is the experiential layering that defines high-end weddings in other parts of the country. "We have the scale, we have the venues, but we are not adding the level of experience that today's client is looking for," he observed.

Connectivity and infrastructure, once seen as barriers, have improved significantly. South India now has five international airports, up from two about seven years ago, offering direct links to the Middle East, Europe, and Southeast Asia. Road networks and inter-city connectivity have also strengthened, enabling smoother logistics for large events.

The infrastructure in South India is no longer a limitation. Airports, roads, and hotels are all developing rapidly. Every major city is well connected, which gives planners the ability to scale events efficiently. However, he stressed that infrastructure alone will not drive





Moving beyond traditional perceptions, South Indian destinations are now being repositioned as aspirational, experience-led hubs for the modern, high-spending couple

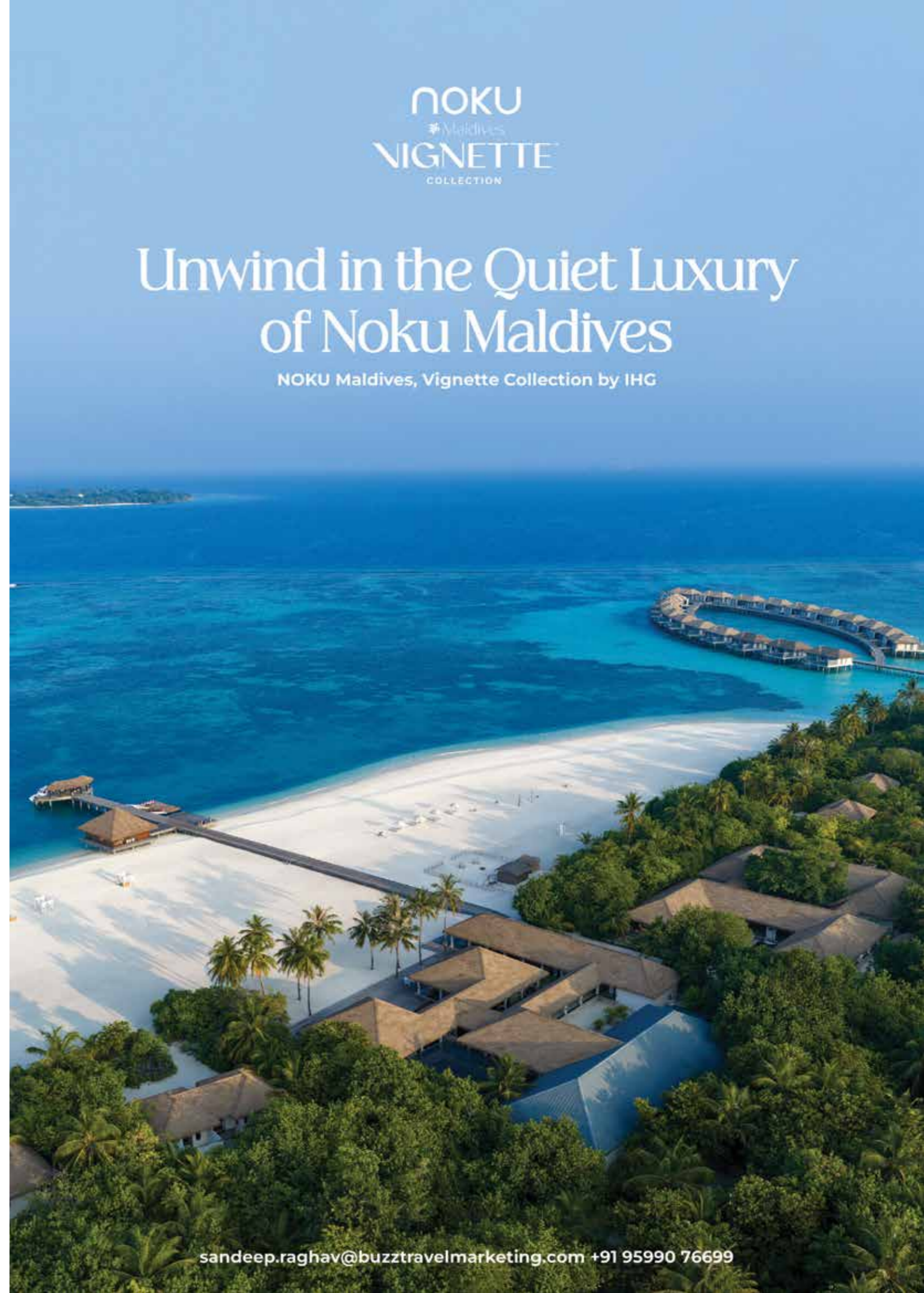
a more proactive role in driving this transformation. “The responsibility lies with all of us. We have to step out, learn from large-scale weddings happening in other markets, and bring that knowledge back. Once you start selling bigger ideas, the market will respond,” he said.

The message is clear: South India has the tourism strength, infrastructure and capacity to host large-format weddings. What it needs now is stronger storytelling, coordinated marketing, and deeper collaboration with government bodies to reposition. “South is not emerging; it is getting ready. With the right push, this region can become one of the biggest wedding markets in India,” Jain concluded. **MT**

growth on its own without institutional support. “Government backing is absolutely critical. If you want to build a large wedding and events market, you have to work closely with tourism departments, push for budgets, propose large-format events, and keep engaging consistently. It does not happen overnight, but once the support comes in, the results are visible,” he said.

Referring to successful models in other states, Jain cited examples of event-led investments ranging from ₹50 crore to over ₹100 crore, which have significantly boosted destination visibility.

He suggested that similar financial backing and policy support in South India could accelerate its positioning as a leading wedding destination. He also called on industry stakeholders to take



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Travel WEDDING SHOW



Travel WEDDING SHOW



RAJEEV JAIN
FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR
RASHI ENTERTAINMENT



“
Clients still default to Goa for beach weddings, showing lack of awareness about destinations in South India.
”

Awareness gap impacts wedding destination choices

Choices look diverse, but decisions remain limited. At the Travel Wedding Show, discussions revealed South India’s wedding growth is real, but perception gaps and low visibility still hold back bookings.

By **Janice Alysius**

For years, the Indian destination wedding conversation has followed a familiar pattern, with planners and clients circling back to the same set of locations despite a growing pool of alternatives. The comfort of known destinations continues to outweigh curiosity, even as new regions quietly build the infrastructure and experiences needed to compete at scale. That underlying hesitation — the gap between availability and actual consideration — set the context for a more pointed discussion that followed.

At the Travel Wedding Show, a sharp and refreshingly honest conversation unfolded around a question that has quietly shaped the Indian wedding and MICE landscape for years. Why do destinations like Jaipur and Goa continue to dominate conversations, while equally compelling regions in South India still struggle to enter the first shortlist for planners?

The panel titled ‘The Rise of New Destinations: Beyond Jaipur and Goa’ did not settle for surface-level optimism. Instead, it unpacked real market behaviour, perception gaps, structural challenges and emerging opportunities, offering a grounded view that is far



more relevant than the usual celebratory narrative around new destinations.

Moderated by **Rajeev Jain**, Founder and Director, Rashi Entertainment, the session quickly moved into uncomfortable but necessary territory. The conversation was not about whether South India has the potential. It was about why that potential is not converting into consistent business from northern and western India, where the bulk of high-value destination weddings still originate. Jain framed this gap in a way that resonated across the room, saying: “Even today, if my client says that I want to do a beach destination,



I say Goa. I will never say to go to Kochi. I will never say to go to Kerala. Why is that mindset not changing? Why don’t I have motivation as a wedding planning agency?” He pushed the point further, adding, “Why am I not excited about your part of the world?”

KERALA MARKET EVOLUTION

Raju Kannampuzha, Managing Director, Executive Events, began by placing Kerala’s journey in context. He acknowledged that the state’s entry into the destination wedding space is relatively recent and largely driven by external factors rather than a structured push. “Kerala was not really on the map or at the forefront of weddings, particularly destination weddings, until 2018–19,” he said, pointing to how late the region entered the competitive landscape.

He explained how the pandemic triggered this shift. “Most of the international boundaries were closed



RAJU KANNAMPUZHA
MANAGING DIRECTOR
EXECUTIVE EVENTS



“
Kerala government spent ₹8-10 crore on a wedding-focused Travel Mart, marking serious intent to grow the segment.
”

and people from the North had to travel to South India to find out more destinations. Goa became saturated. Then they searched for an alternative. That was Kerala,” he said. What worked in Kerala’s favour was readiness. “By that time we had more infrastructure, more properties. So we could accommodate most of the destination weddings,” he added.

The numbers reflected this sudden shift. “During that period, we were able to do 58 destination weddings in Kerala,” he said. That statistic, while modest compared to Rajasthan’s scale, marked a clear behavioural shift in planner choices. Yet, as the panel repeatedly pointed out, this momentum has not yet translated into a consistent pipeline of large-format weddings.

PERCEPTION VERSUS REALITY
Despite visible growth, perception continues to lag. Jain challenged this

directly, questioning why planners still instinctively default to Goa. Kannampuzha responded with notable honesty. “Half the problem is with the planners in Kerala. The second half is with the government,” he said, acknowledging shared responsibility.

He explained that earlier, destination weddings were not aligned with the state’s policy direction. “They felt these luxury events were not in line with their political thinking, so Kerala was not promoted as a wedding and MICE destination,” he said. That lack of promotion meant that even as infrastructure improved, awareness did not.

However, there are signs of change. Kannampuzha pointed to a shift in government thinking through targeted initiatives. “For the first time, there was an exclusive Kerala Travel Mart for weddings and MICE. The government spent nearly ₹8-10 crore for that event,” he said.



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DR SUDARSHAN SESHADRI
MANAGING DIRECTOR
MARK1 EVENTS & DECORS



“
Beach weddings can happen for as low as ₹10,000 in Tamil Nadu, yet no one knows about it.
”

Jain, who attended the event, hinted that funding alone is not enough unless it translates into long-term positioning and industry engagement.

AWARENESS GAP

The gap between policy and awareness was echoed strongly by **Dr Sudarshan Seshadri**, Managing Director, Mark1 Events & Decors. He highlighted how even progressive decisions are not reaching planners. “The government of Tamil Nadu has announced that beach weddings can happen for as

low as ₹10,000. But nobody knows about it. Nobody here knew,” he said, underscoring a critical disconnect.

Policies exist, but communication does not. “We need to engage the government in a very, very serious way to tell them the importance of this industry and give them the vision of what is happening,” he said. He also pointed to a deeper structural gap. “There has not been enough representation from our industry before the government to make them understand the scale. That is something we need to correct,” he added.

COST ADVANTAGE REALITY

Cost competitiveness emerged as one of the strongest arguments in favour of South India. **C Sri Sailam**, Director, Rise Advertising, stated clearly, “South India is a cost-effective market compared to North India. The variation may be around 15 to 20 per cent.”

In a market where budgets are tightening, this is a significant advantage. Jain contrasted this with the rising cost



C SRI SAILAM
DIRECTOR
RISE ADVERTISING

“
South India remains 15–20 per cent more cost-effective than North, yet struggles to attract consistent wedding demand.
”



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ALLA BALARAM BABU
PRESIDENT AND CO-FOUNDER
TCEI

structure in Rajasthan. “Rajasthan is becoming very, very expensive. One lakh rupees per room, plus everything else. South India is more flexible,” he said.

Yet, despite this clear pricing edge, South India is not the default choice. The panel agreed that cost alone does not drive decisions. Planners need familiarity, confidence and reassurance that execution will match expectations.

INFRA CAPACITY EXISTS

One of the biggest misconceptions addressed during the discussion was that South India lacks scale. **Alla Balaram Babu**, President and Co-founder, Telangana Chamber of Events Industry (TCEI), pushed back strongly. “Most of the weddings in South India are volume-driven. Guest counts typically start at 3,000 to 4,000. We transform three to four lakh square feet into massive setups, but nobody knows because we don’t showcase it,” he said. He also highlighted growing inventory across cities. “Hyderabad has more than 70 to 80 resorts, each offering 150 to 200 rooms. There are multiple properties coming up. Vishakhapatnam, Mahabalipuram, Pondicherry, Kerala — all these are strong destinations,” he said.

Martin Emmanuel, Founder and Managing Director, Razzmatazz Ventures, added further depth. “Kerala has 94 five-star hotels. That is the highest in India,” he said. He also pointed to

demand trends. “If you go to Grand Hyatt Kochi, you will struggle to find available dates. That is the level of demand now,” he added. He went on to name emerging destinations. “Bekal has more than 300 keys. Kumarakom, Kovalam, Poovar, Alleppey, are all growing wedding locations,” he said.

CONNECTIVITY AND CUISINE

Connectivity, once a concern, is no longer a barrier. Kannampuzha made this clear. “Kerala has four international airports within 700 kilometres. Most properties have helipads. It is well connected,” he said. Cuisine, often seen as a limitation, was also addressed directly. When Jain questioned the availability of North Indian food, Kannampuzha responded, “That is a preconceived notion. Kerala now has a metropolitan culture. North Indian chefs are available in most hotels,” he said.

“When South Indian cuisine became available in North India, weddings started moving there. Now if North Indian cuisine is available here, the reverse will happen,” added Balaram, offering a broader insight.

Labour remains a more serious concern. Seshadri highlighted this clearly. “At least 70 to 75 per cent of the workforce in Tamil Nadu comes from North India. We don’t have local labour.” He added that this dependency affects operations. “Just last week itself,

we had serious challenges because people went back for elections. We did not have manpower,” he said. At the same time, efforts are underway. “We have trained around 6,282 students in event management through diploma and postgraduate programmes,” he said, pointing to capacity building initiatives.

CHANGING MINDSET

The discussion also touched on how sharply consumer behaviour is evolving, particularly with younger audiences beginning to shape both format and spend. Seshadri shared a personal example that reflected this wider shift. “My son wants an intimate wedding with 150 to 200 people, but I want to call 6,000 to 8,000 people,” he said, highlighting the growing gap between traditional expectations and new-age preferences. “They want luxury, but they want it to be intimate. That is the mindset now,” he further added.

This shift is changing how weddings are being designed, with a stronger focus on curated experiences, personalised moments, and high-quality hospitality rather than scale alone. Multi-day celebrations are becoming more selective, guest experiences are more thoughtfully planned, and destinations are being chosen for uniqueness rather than familiarity. This evolving mindset is also influencing budgets. While the overall spend may not necessarily reduce, the allocation is shifting. Instead of large-scale

gatherings, there is greater investment in décor detailing, entertainment, bespoke experiences and premium venues that can deliver exclusivity. Srisailam noted that “40 to 50 per cent of the weddings are now driven by younger audiences,” indicating a clear generational shift in decision-making. This means planners and destinations are no longer just catering to families, but directly to individuals who are more experimental, digitally-influenced and open to newer locations.

UNIFIED INDUSTRY PUSH

As the session concluded, the conversation moved towards solutions. Kannampuzha called for collective action. “We should have a unified voice from South India. We need to invite North Indian planners and show them what we have,” he said.

Seshadri summed it up with a sharp observation. “Two mindsets have to change. One is the North Indian mindset that everything is not available in the South. The other is the South Indian mindset that everything is available, but we are not telling the world,” he said.

What emerged from the discussion was clear. South India does not lack infrastructure, scale, or diversity. It offers cost advantages, strong hotel inventory, improving connectivity, and varied landscapes. Yet, it continues to be underrepresented in actual booking decisions. The gap is not operational. It is perceptual. **MT**



MARTIN EMMANUEL
FOUNDER AND MANAGING DIRECTOR
RAZZMATAZZ VENTURES

“**South India can host up to 3,000 to 4,000 guest weddings across three lakh square feet venues but lacks visibility and promotion.**”

“**Kerala has 94 five-star hotels, the highest in India, offering unmatched inventory for large-scale destination weddings.**”

Travel Wedding Show

leaves lasting impressions



It was my second time attending the show and it had once again been a great experience. Last year in Jaipur and this year in Mahabalipuram, both experiences were amazing and we were already looking forward to the next edition. We gained potential clients through the show and it helped us showcase Della Resorts as an experiential destination, not just for weddings but also for corporate MICE and curated experiences. The meetings were very productive, and people were looking for destinations that offered something beyond the usual. The show also helped us connect with buyers from newer markets across the country and explore future opportunities.

PEARL SANGA, DIRECTOR, **DELLA GROUP**



Thank you very much for the Travel Wedding Show. It was a great experience, and the best part was the warmth in the room, the warmth among the people, and the eagerness to share and acknowledge destinations and experiences. It was a very meaningful show and a great platform to understand the potential of South India for weddings and social events. I had come there after almost four years and saw many changes. South India was now ready with venues, food, locations, and experiences for weddings and celebrations. The show definitely opened my mind and vision towards South India.

VIJAY ARORA, DIRECTOR, **TOUCHWOOD GROUP**

It had been a very interesting experience and a great forum with structured meetings, where we met nearly 50 potential event and wedding planners over two days in a relaxed frame of mind, which was very important. The timing of the event was also good because people were already thinking about the next wedding season and the destinations they could suggest. The calibre of people we met was definitely commendable, and the awareness of Sri Lanka and Colombo was already quite high. The show helped us understand the market better, connect with planners, and explore opportunities for Cinnamon Life and Sri Lanka in the Indian wedding segment.



TEKLA MAIRA, REP PARTNER, CINNAMON LIFE, **CITY OF DREAMS SRI LANKA**

The Travel Wedding Show was a very meticulously planned event, and the venue was absolutely apt. The hotel had come up beautifully post-renovation, and the overall experience there was wonderful. What really stood out for me was the quality of sellers and destination representatives present. I was able to meet exactly the kind of properties I was looking for, which made the event extremely relevant for the industry and current demand. The group of planners and participants was also very thoughtfully hand-picked, which added great value to the networking experience. It was my fourth edition, and I kept coming back because the team truly knew how to host a fruitful B2B conference.



VIKRAMJEET SHARMA, MANAGING DIRECTOR, **LE FLORENCE WEDDINGS**



The meetings at the Travel Wedding Show were very insightful, and the one-on-one format really helped us discuss everything in detail. We had around 60 meetings slotted in, which gave us a very good understanding of how the wedding segment was evolving in India, especially in Chennai. For us, India was a massive market for Sri Lanka, and the show gave us a great opportunity to promote our properties and understand client requirements better. It was also useful to discuss trends, budgets, and expectations directly with buyers. Overall, it was a very positive experience and a good platform to strengthen Sri Lanka's positioning in the Indian wedding segment.

ASHANE FERNANDO, CLUSTER ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, SALES, **MINOR HOTELS SRI LANKA**



I think one of the best things about the Travel Wedding Show was that it brought together conversations that were actually relevant to what clients were looking for. For us, comfort had become one of the biggest deciding factors while planning weddings. It was no longer just about a beautiful venue — it was about how easy and comfortable the entire experience was for guests. From travel time and accessibility to food and language, everything mattered. The show provided a great platform to discuss these changing preferences and connect with people who understood the industry from a practical point of view. It was beautiful, insightful, and very relevant for the wedding industry.

SNEH DALAL, MANAGING DIRECTOR, **GLOBALLY LOCAL WEDDINGS AND EVENTS**

We were very happy to participate in the Travel Wedding Show and looked forward to being part of it every year because of the new experiences and the format of the show, which we really loved. We had been getting successful results from this platform, and the experiences had been really great for us year after year. The show was scaling up very well and gave us a good opportunity to connect closely with the wedding and MICE segment. It also helped us understand customer requirements better and showcase our customised offerings. We were already looking forward to the next destination announcement and participating in future editions as well.



DHANASHREE NAGARKAR, MANAGER INDIA LEISURE MICE & GROUP, **OMAN AIR**

Thanks to the DDP team for hosting such an amazing 10th edition of the Travel Wedding Show. It was a fabulous experience for us; we met many airlines, hoteliers, and several planners. The hospitality was fantastic, and the entire experience was very smooth. As wedding planners, we were always open to exotic and offbeat destinations because clients today wanted a new look and feel for their once-in-a-lifetime celebrations. Mahabalipuram proved to be a pleasant destination with beautiful views, great food, and amazing hospitality. Overall, it was a wonderful and very meaningful experience for us.



ROHAN AGARWAL, FOUNDER, **ACROSS GLOBE PLANNERS**



The Travel Wedding Show was a lovely opportunity to connect with wedding planners from across the country and introduce them to destinations beyond the usual markets. For Rosetta Hospitality — which had largely seen Bengaluru as a key feeder market — the show helped create visibility among planners from other regions as well. It was encouraging to see growing interest in intimate destination weddings and experiential celebrations. The event also provided a great platform to meet stalwarts of the industry, exchange ideas, and showcase properties like Rosetta Sakleshpur and South Goa, which were designed for close-knit celebrations and meaningful guest experiences.

POONAM TIPNIS, HEAD, SALES – ROSETTA SAKLESHPUR, **ROSETTA HOSPITALITY**



The Travel Wedding Show was a very good platform for us to connect with hospitality partners and destination suppliers for the Gujarat market. Since we handled both large weddings in Ahmedabad and destination weddings within India and overseas, the show helped us understand which destinations were attracting greater interest from clients. We were seeing more inquiries for international destinations, especially from young couples who wanted to do something different. Overall, the event gave us a chance to meet the right people, discuss trends, and explore destinations that were becoming increasingly popular for weddings and celebrations.

TAMANNA SUTARIA, HEAD – DESTINATIONS & HOSPITALITY, **PRASANG EVENTS**



Gujarat's great wedding gambit

Gujarat Tourism is positioning itself as a strong contender for destination wedding by banking on infrastructure growth, hospitality expansion, and upcoming tourism policy support.

By MT Bureau

As India's destination wedding industry expands beyond Rajasthan and Goa, Gujarat Tourism is positioning itself as a primary contender. Serving as the Gold Partner for the Travel Wedding Show 2026 in Chennai, the state engaged with over 50 national wedding planners to showcase its infrastructure, connectivity, and diverse venues.

LUXURY TOURISM RISING

Chetan Misan, General Manager, Gujarat Tourism Corporation, highlighted the state's readiness to host large-scale celebrations. "Gujarat has world-class infrastructure and robust connectivity, including four international airports and domestic links to all major Indian cities," Misan stated. He noted that the hospitality ecosystem now features premium hotels across every major city, supported by an extensive road and rail network essential for handling large guest movements.

To fuel further growth, the government is revising its tourism incentive policy. Expected in the next financial year, the new framework aims



CHETAN MISAN
GENERAL MANAGER
GUJARAT TOURISM CORPORATION

to offer enhanced opportunities for hospitality investors and luxury hotel developers. "We are currently working on a revised policy to provide better incentives for new hotels," Misan revealed, emphasizing a shift towards experiential, high-end projects.

ADDRESSING CHALLENGES

While Gujarat's liquor policy is often cited as a hurdle, Misan noted increasing flexibility. "The government is working on it, and we have pockets — such as GIFT City — where liberty has been given," he explained. **RJ Jadeja**, Officer on Special Duty, Commissionerate of Tourism, Government of Gujarat, added that the state's geographical diversity — spanning mountains, beaches, and heritage sites — offers bespoke possibilities that few other regions can match. With targeted policy backing and expanding inventory, Gujarat is aggressively carving out its share of the luxury wedding market. **MT**



RJ JADEJA
OFFICER ON SPECIAL DUTY,
COMMISSIONERATE OF TOURISM,
GOVERNMENT OF GUJARAT

Rising demand for multi-purpose venues

As audiences grow beyond 20,000, venues are under pressure to deliver seamless experiences, offering insight into how operations, logistics, and planning are evolving.

By MT Bureau

Large-format events are no longer occasional showcases in India — they are becoming central to how destinations position themselves. From concerts and brand activations to conventions and exhibitions, demand for venues that can combine scale with experience is rising rapidly. For ExpoInn Suites & Convention, this transformation has been driven by hosting high-energy events that test both capacity and operational strength.



BARUN GUPTA
COO, INDEVA HOTELS AND RESORTS
(A DIVISION OF IEML)

Barun Gupta, Chief Operating Officer, Indeva Hotels & Resorts (a division of IEML), says activations such as Red Bull Jam 2026 and concerts featuring Arijit Singh and Satinder Sartaaj have significantly shaped the venue's identity. "These are not standalone showcases — they demonstrate our ability to manage footfall of up to 25,000 guests in a single day while ensuring seamless execution," he says.

Such events have positioned ExpoInn as a venue capable of moving effortlessly between entertainment and

MICE formats. India's MICE industry is projected to grow at an estimated 12–15 per cent CAGR, with the market expected to cross ₹30,000 crore in the near term. Gupta notes that organisers are increasingly seeking flexible spaces that can host conferences, exhibitions, concerts, and social gatherings within the same infrastructure.

Execution at this scale depends heavily on coordination. "Production, F&B, security, and guest services have to function as one unit," Gupta explains. ExpoInn also focuses strongly on crowd movement through zoning, multiple access points, and digital ticketing to ensure guest comfort and safety. Technology, too, plays a defining role. Advanced lighting, sound systems, and integrated event platforms are shaping both operational efficiency and audience engagement.

To support this momentum, Indeva Hotels & Resorts is expanding, with three hotels becoming operational within 15 months and plans to build a portfolio of 50 hotels across South Asia by 2030. The strategy reflects a commitment to hospitality, events, and travel demand. **MT**



Sri Lanka courts India's luxury wedding market

Beach resorts, private buyouts, and curated celebrations — Sri Lanka is crafting a fresh tourism playbook aimed directly at India's booming wedding and MICE market.



By Janice Alysius

Sri Lanka's tourism and hospitality industry is increasingly viewing India as more than just a volume market. From luxury resorts and destination wedding venues to MICE-focused properties, hotel groups believe Indian travellers are now



RAJINDRA DANIEL
AREA DIRECTOR – SALES
MINOR HOTELS SRI LANKA



CHRISTOPH DUEKER
CLUSTER GENERAL MANAGER
ANANTARA KALUTARA RESORT AND
AVANI KALUTARA RESORT



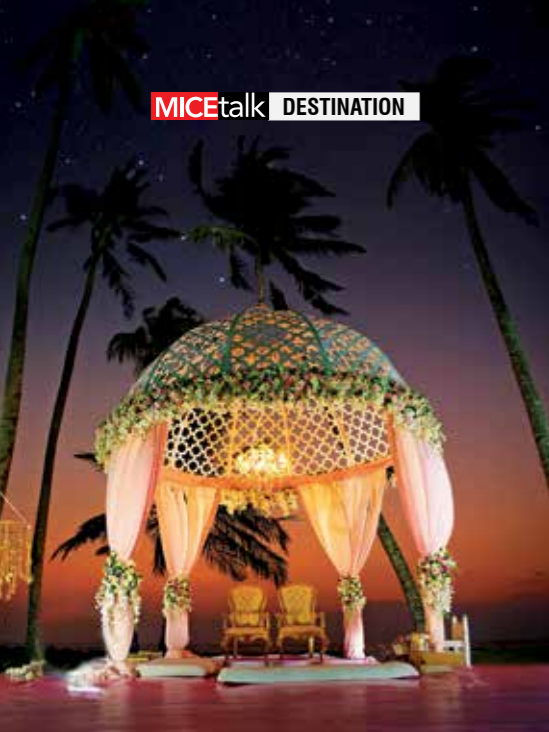
FREDERIK VAN DEN BORRE
GENERAL MANAGER
ANANTARA PEACE HAVEN TANGALLE

seeking deeper experiences, shorter-haul premium getaways, and personalised itineraries rather than conventional beach holidays alone.

Rajindra Daniel, Area Director – Sales, Minor Hotels Sri Lanka, said India continues to remain one of Sri Lanka's strongest source markets. "In 2025, Sri Lanka recorded close to 535,000 Indian

arrivals and the first quarter of 2026 crossed 120,000 arrivals. If not for the issues in the Middle East, the numbers would have been even higher," he said.

Sri Lanka is now positioning itself as a destination offering wellness, culture, and luxury alongside beaches. "It's not only about selling a room anymore. We want travellers to experience Sri Lanka



WIM NM FAGEL
GENERAL MANAGER, NH BENTOTA
CEYSANDS RESORT AND
NH COLLECTION COLOMBO



ASHANE FERNANDO
CLUSTER ASSISTANT DIRECTOR – SALES
MINOR HOTELS SRI LANKA

differently and stay longer. Luxury travel from India is growing steadily, and we see strong opportunity there,” he said.

Minor Hotels is also looking to expand its footprint across destinations such as Habarana, Nuwara Eliya, and Kandy while increasing engagement with Indian travel partners across Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, and Chennai. The group is simultaneously targeting India’s growing wedding market through participation in specialised wedding and travel shows.

Christoph Ducker, Cluster General Manager, Anantara Kalutara Resort and Avani Kalutara Resort, said Indian demand today spans FIT, weddings, and MICE equally. He highlighted the rise of multi-generational family travel among Indian guests. “Families want destinations where every generation can relax together. That is something we consciously cater to,” he said.

Ducker also acknowledged that geopolitical tensions have affected travel sentiment globally. “We have seen cancellations from Western Europe, but India has remained an important market for us. We believe demand will recover strongly once the situation stabilises,” he noted.

Frederik Van den Borre, General Manager, Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle, believes Sri Lanka’s proximity is working in its favour. “As conflicts arise elsewhere, safe and short-haul destinations become more relevant. The Indian market has substantially grown compared to last year,” he said.

He added that the resort is seeing increasing interest from luxury wedding



groups and travellers seeking quieter, experience-led stays. The property, spread across 20 acres, can host destination weddings of up to 200 guests and offers customised Indian hospitality experiences including Indian chefs and wellness specialists.

Wim NM Fagel, General Manager, NH Bentota Ceysands Resort and NH Collection Colombo, said Indian travellers contribute nearly 10 per cent

of the hotels’ business, with growing interest in combining Colombo’s urban experiences with Bentota’s beach offerings. “Indian travellers are no longer treating Colombo as just a transit city. We are seeing stronger demand for combined city-and-beach itineraries, where guests want to experience Colombo’s culinary and cultural side before heading to the coast,” he said.

Meanwhile, **Ashane Fernando**, Cluster Assistant Director – Sales, Minor Hotels Sri Lanka, said the Indian wedding segment is witnessing significantly shorter booking cycles. “Earlier, lead times used to be six to eight months. Now, inquiries are converting within two to three months, which is a very positive sign for Sri Lanka,” he said. Fernando added that the group is offering flexible buyout and partial-buyout wedding packages tailored to Indian requirements, including Indian culinary experiences and customised event setups. **MT**

Beachfront convention gives InterContinental edge



With new wedding infrastructure and larger event spaces, InterContinental Chennai is aiming for bigger destination weddings and corporate gatherings.

By MT Bureau

Fresh from a year-long renovation, InterContinental Chennai Mahabalipuram Resort is positioning itself as a stronger contender in South India’s destination-wedding and residential conference market. Hosting the Travel Wedding Show became the relaunch platform for the resort, which has upgraded its event infrastructure, redesigned interiors, and added new wedding-focused facilities.

Speaking at the event, **Anand G Nair**, General Manager, InterContinental Chennai Mahabalipuram Resort, said the renovation was aimed at addressing gaps that earlier prevented the property from becoming a preferred wedding destination.

The most significant addition is a new 7,500 sq ft banquet hall with two pre-function areas and a glass colonnade, which brings the total convention footprint to nearly 11,000 sq ft. Nair highlighted the location of the convention space as the property’s standout feature. “What truly differentiates us is that this is probably the only hotel where the convention centre directly faces the beach. Guests attending

conferences or weddings walk straight into the beachfront experience, which creates a completely different atmosphere compared to traditional venues,” he said.

The resort now offers multiple event venues including lawns and Kokomo, its tiki-style beachside restaurant set entirely on sand. This allows planners to host every ceremony in a different setting across multi-day weddings. To improve logistics, a dedicated driveway leading directly to the beachfront and lawns has been added, while a specialised lawn kitchen has been built for Marwadi and Jain weddings that prefer personalised catering setups. **MT**



ANAND G NAIR
GENERAL MANAGER
INTERCONTINENTAL CHENNAI
MAHABALIPURAM RESORT

Wedding venue USP snapshot

- 7,500 sq ft banquet hall
- 11,000 sq ft event space
- 2,300 sq ft junior ballroom
- Two dedicated pre-function areas
- Two 30,000 sq ft lawns
- Beach-facing convention centre
- Direct lawn access driveway
- Beachside Kokomo tiki venue
- Dedicated Jain wedding kitchen
- Multi-venue wedding flexibility



India's MICE resets from volume to value

The future of MICE lies not in scale alone, but in delivering value, relevance, and differentiation. As one of the fastest-growing outbound markets, India is no longer asking where to go — but what more can a destination offer.

By Nisha Verma

At the MICE-focused discussion at the Tourism Malaysia Sales Mission, there was a noticeable maturity in how corporates are travelling. The focus was not on chasing numbers, but on questioning the nature of growth. The Indian outbound traveller has evolved, and so has the expectation from destinations.

The session made one thing clear — India does not lack demand; however, it is seeking differentiation. The Indian traveller is ready to spend, ready to explore, and ready to upgrade. However, this is only possible if destinations move beyond the predictable. From better connectivity and flexible airline policies to stronger storytelling and experiential design, the path forward requires alignment across the ecosystem.

As we see the industry shifting from volume to value, the real opportunity lies not in attracting more travellers, but in giving them a reason to return — and to remember.

LUXURY & EXPERIENCE MIX

The Indian traveller today is no longer satisfied with traditional itineraries. The shift towards experiential and premium travel came through strongly across the

panel. “I think if we look at 1.4–1.5 billion people in India, every segment is there. However, now the traveller has evolved. They do not just want budget travel, they want experiential travel, and they also want luxury. Every package now has that in the overall itinerary that we all sell,” said **Guldeep Singh Sahni**, Managing Director, Weldon Tours & Travels.

This evolution is not limited to leisure, but extends deeply into MICE and group travel. **Monia Kapoor**, Joint Secretary, OTOAI and Director, Travel O Holidays, captured this shift briefly, saying, “Luxury has become more about experiential travel. Most of the clients would not want regular sightseeing. They don't want it. Travellers today seek exclusive experiences which are drafted for them.”

For destinations, this means moving beyond infrastructure to imagination. Kapoor noted that the demand is rising for “exclusive private villas, luxury retreats, spa properties, and eco lodges,” indicating a clear shift from traditional five-star dependencies.

PREMIUM IS PERCEPTION

The discussion kept revolving around what truly defines “premium”. **Romil Pant**, Executive Vice President & Business Head – Holidays, Thomas

Cook India, explained that while destinations may offer premium products, “premiumisation is a function of how you position it in the customer's mind.”

He made it clear that pricing alone does not define premium. “The perception is that the services in the product are truly world-class and befitting of the customer, not just taking the money out of the customer's pocket.” Pant further underlined a critical industry gap and said, “Malaysia is considered a part of this trio — Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia — rather than an independent destination. This bundling has diluted its premium positioning in the Indian market.”

Sahni reinforced this from a trade perspective and suggested, “We should not judge our destination's promotion from the rates that we see in the newspaper. Most of the customers automatically ask for an upgrade and go for a premium product.” Even Pant added a crucial distinction and shared, “A lot of us perceive upgrade and premium as hotel upgradation. It is the experience upgradation that agents should offer.”

CONNECTIVITY: MICE BASE

There is no doubt that demand is strong, and the panel acknowledged

that connectivity continues to shape destination success. “We are still lacking in terms of connectivity from the second-tier cities to Malaysia and to Malaysia's other cities,” admitted **Nuwal Fadhilah Ku Azmi**, Senior Director, Tourism Malaysia, even as she highlighted growing links from cities like Bangalore and Chennai.

From the airline perspective, the response is evolving alongside customer expectations. **Nikhil Dhar**, Vice President – Direct & Ancillary Sales, IndiGo, noted, “Indian customers are moving towards a higher premiumisation trend, and as an airline, we are also happy to support different groups, depending on what sort of group we are getting.” Emphasising flexibility over standardisation, he said, “We do not want a cookie-cutter approach, but want to create specific requirements based on the groups.”

However, operational challenges remain. Kalsi pointed out that group travel has become increasingly restrictive: “Today you pay upfront, it's non-refundable. You don't get enough people, you lose a lot of money.”

He stressed that airlines need to rethink their approach. Group fares should be better priced and have fewer strings attached.

Demand for exclusive private villas, luxury retreats, spa properties, and eco lodges is rising, indicating a clear shift from traditional five-star dependencies



ROMIL PANT
EXECUTIVE VP & BUSINESS HEAD – HOLIDAYS, THOMAS COOK INDIA



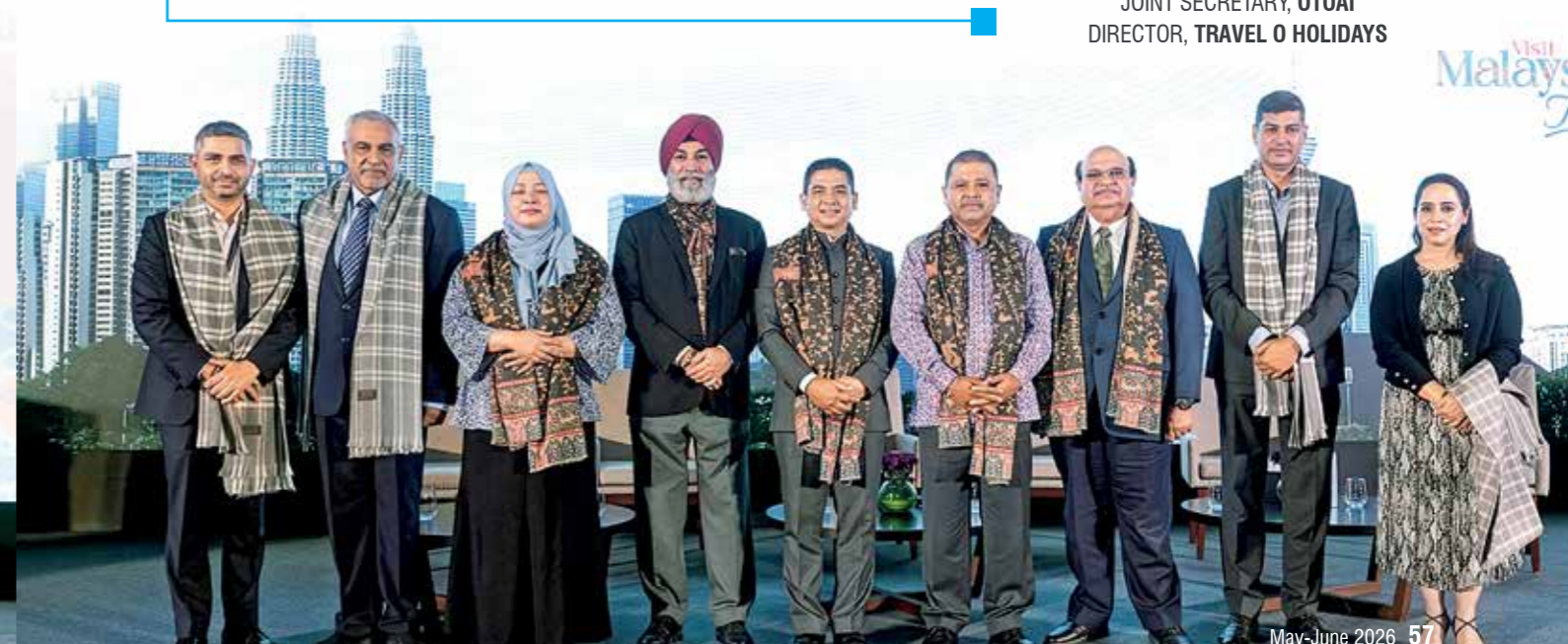
NIKHIL DHAR
VP – DIRECT & ANCILLARY SALES INDIGO



MONIA KAPOOR
JOINT SECRETARY, OTOAI
DIRECTOR, TRAVEL O HOLIDAYS



GULDEEP SINGH SAHNI
MANAGING DIRECTOR
WELDON TOURS & TRAVELS





NUWAL FADHILAH KU AZMI
SENIOR DIRECTOR
TOURISM MALAYSIA

That's broadly the product," he stated. He also stressed that destinations must actively reshape perception. From the trade side, Sahni offered a practical insight: "We sent a couple for a turtle snorkelling experience to Sabah and Sarawak. Most people had no clue about it. We need to tell people about such experiences."

EXPERIENTIAL MICE FOCUS

The conversation underlined that MICE is no longer about logistics. It is about storytelling. "Exclusivity is what counts," said Kapoor, citing examples like "exclusive dinner set-up post-closing hours at the Petronas Towers" or curated cultural performances. She added that travellers want something they can talk about, post on social media, and that no one else has experienced."

This aligns with Tourism Malaysia's strategy and Azmi noted, "We are casting our net wide-leisure travellers, multi-generational, MICE, as well as weddings. We are reaching directly to corporate clients, building trust to entice them to come in. We can offer luxury at a fraction of the cost, but they want to experience true luxury."



ANIL KALSI
VICE PRESIDENT, TAFI AND
MD, AMBE WORLD TRAVELS

COLLABORATION IS KEY

What stood out was the need for stronger collaboration. Pant described it as a two-way street, where destinations and operators must work together through training and product development.

From the airline part, Dhar reinforced saying, "We want to work with tour operators and tourism boards. When these destinations build up is when they move to a high yield. We must look at high yields for the sustainability of the travel and tourism trade." **MT**

BEYOND KUALA LUMPUR

A strong consensus emerged on the need to expand beyond the usual circuits. **Anil Kalsi**, Vice President, TAFI and Managing Director, Ambe World Travels, said "We must increase the stay to other destinations in Malaysia. Penang, Langkawi, Johor Bahru," said Kalsi, highlighting the opportunity to extend itineraries and drive higher yield.

Pant echoed this, highlighting that the challenge lies in product storytelling. "What are projecting beyond Petronas Tower?



WEEW 2026 backs Hyderabad's global rise



Bringing together MICE, weddings, and entertainment, WEEW 2026 aims to position Hyderabad as a global hub for the rapidly expanding events economy.

By **MT Bureau**

India's events and MICE ecosystem is preparing for a new large-scale convergence platform with the launch of World Events Economy Week (WEEW) 2026, scheduled from 12-15 June at HITEX Exhibition Centre, Hyderabad. Positioned as an integrated platform for the global events economy, WEEW aims to bring together business events, weddings, exhibitions, culture, entertainment, and the creative economy under one umbrella.

The concept is built around the growing economic influence of the global events industry, which the organisers estimate at over US\$2 trillion, with a projected CAGR of 15-17 per cent across experiential and

business events sectors. The presentation highlights that the industry supports one in ten jobs globally while generating a three-times multiplier effect on local economies through tourism, hospitality, and infrastructure.

A key focus for MICE stakeholders will be 'India for MICE', a dedicated one-day business events platform on 14 June. The segment is expected to bring together over 500 curated delegates, 75 exhibitors and destination partners, along with more than 100 industry leaders and decision-makers from across five countries. Organisers are positioning it as a space for corporate buyers, associations, tourism boards, convention centres, and hospitality leaders to collaborate and explore partnerships.

Alongside MICE, the event will also host the South Indian Wedding Planners Congress (SIWPC) and the Creative Economy Conclave, reflecting the increasing overlap between celebrations, culture, entertainment, and business events. The wedding segment alone references India's US\$ 130 billion wedding economy, while the creative economy platform focuses on content, design, media, and experiential industries.

Hyderabad has been chosen as the host city owing to its growing position as

WEEW 2026 in Hyderabad will unite MICE, weddings, and creative industries through networking and business collaborations

a global convention and technology hub. The dossier notes that the city has over 100,000 sq m of convention capacity, more than 25 international hotel brands and annual airport traffic exceeding 30 million passengers. Supported by organisations including ICCA, UFI, EEMA, and IEIA, WEEW 2026 reflects a broader shift towards creating interconnected event ecosystems rather than standalone trade shows. **MT**

Philippines strengthens MICE appeal through expanded incentives

The Philippines is accelerating its MICE strategy with expanded incentives, improved connectivity, and policy support — positioning itself as a stronger destination for global event planners.

By **MT Bureau**

As destinations compete harder for global business events, incentives are becoming a decisive factor in destination selection. The Tourism Promotions Board (TPB) Philippines is strengthening its positioning through the MICE Plus Programme, a structured incentive framework designed to support organisers across meetings, incentive travel, conventions, and exhibitions.

Rather than direct financial subsidies, the programme focuses on in-kind support that enhances event delivery, delegate experiences, and destination promotion — areas that planners increasingly prioritise when evaluating destinations.

WHO CAN BENEFIT

The programme is intentionally broad, covering the ecosystem that drives international events.

Eligible stakeholders include:

- Private corporations and event organisers

- Incentive travel planners and business events organisers
- Associations
- Government agencies and institutions
- Local government units
- NGOs

This inclusive framework supports both corporate incentives and association-led conferences — two segments seeing strong outbound demand from India.

EVENTS THAT QUALIFY

TPB incentives prioritise events that deliver international participation and destination impact.

Qualified events include:

- Bids for regional and international MICE events
- Attendance promotion campaigns
- Foreign incentive travel groups
- Regional and global conferences and conventions
- International exhibitions and trade shows
- Partnerships between local and international associations

The focus clearly aligns with attracting events that generate inbound



business travel rather than purely domestic gatherings.

WHAT IS NOT COVERED

To maintain strategic impact, certain event formats fall outside the incentive framework, including:

- Events without foreign participation
- Social celebrations such as weddings, galas, and reunions
- Cultural festivals and concerts (unless tied to a conference/exhibition component)
- Religious events
- Academic exchange programmes
- Leisure group tours not funded by corporates

This reinforces the programme's positioning as a business-events growth tool rather than a general tourism subsidy.

APPLICATION PROCESS

Organisers must apply at least 90 days prior to the event, submitting:

- A formal request letter
- A completed MICE support application form

Support is evaluated based on event scale, impact and alignment

TPB incentive offers	
Support area	How it helps organisers
Technical planning support	Guidance in event design, logistics, and coordination
Marketing & promotion	Digital promotion, brochures, and printed materials
Delegate experience	VIP tokens, participant giveaways, and welcome branding
Cultural integration	Cultural entertainment elements to showcase destination identity
Hospitality support	Food & beverage support during receptions
Destination exposure	City tours and welcome banners for groups

with national MICE priorities, with assistance provided in-kind and subject to government procedures.

WHY THIS MATTERS

For Indian corporates and agencies, destination support often influences shortlist decisions, especially for incentives and mid-size conventions.

The Philippines' model offers three clear advantages:

- Experience-led incentives that improve delegate satisfaction
- Operational support that reduces planning complexity for agencies
- Destination storytelling through culture, branding and curated experiences

As outbound incentives from India

continue to diversify beyond traditional Southeast Asian hubs, structured programmes like MICE Plus strengthen the Philippines' competitiveness.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Globally, destinations are redefining incentives as strategic event enablers rather than simple financial aid. The Philippines' approach reflects this evolution by focusing on partnership with organisers, stronger delegate experiences, and measurable event impact. For planners, this signals a destination that is actively investing in business events rather than simply promoting tourism. In today's competitive MICE landscape, that distinction matters. **MT**

Tailored event incentives	
Segment	Key incentive focus
Meetings & Conventions	Planning assistance, promotion, VIP tokens, cultural entertainment, F&B support, half-day city tours
Incentive Travel	Participant giveaways, cultural experiences, reception F&B, welcome banners, VIP tokens
Exhibitions	Event promotion, banners, planning support, delegate engagement tools, city tours



Spain pitches experiential edge to global planners



With culture, connectivity, and customisation at its core, Spain is sharpening its appeal for global MICE planners and Indian market demand.

By MT Bureau

From a planner's lens, what stands out in today's MICE landscape is not just infrastructure — but how memorably a destination can feel. In that sense, Spain is clearly leaning into experience-led storytelling. **Elena Orland**, Director, Tourism Office of Spain in India, outlines how the country is repositioning itself beyond postcard tourism, towards deeply immersive, culturally rooted, and highly customisable programmes for global corporates and Indian luxury travellers alike.

BLEISURE MEETS CULTURE

At the heart of Spain's pitch is a shift from passive sightseeing to participatory engagement. As Orland explains, "Spain offers a wide range of experiential activities that go beyond traditional sightseeing, including private flamenco workshops, exclusive visits to top art galleries, hands-on experiences such as 'make your own jewellery', culinary experiences such as cooking classes with renowned chefs, and vineyard visits with wine tastings."

She adds that even venues are becoming experiences: "Spain offers venues on board a wooden sailing ship inspired by 18th century schooners, as well as a unique auditorium inside a volcanic cave, where nature and culture intertwine to form an inimitable experience." Regions such as La Rioja and Ribera del Duero are central to this shift. Notably, football stadiums are also emerging as unconventional and high-energy venues for MICE events across the country.

This experiential layering also strengthens Spain's bleisure. Orland notes, "Spain is particularly well-suited for bleisure programmes thanks to its excellent infrastructure and lifestyle offering. Meetings can be hosted in world-class convention centres or



ELENA ORLAND
DIRECTOR
TOURISM OFFICE OF SPAIN – INDIA

unique venues such as historic palaces and monasteries, complemented with curated local experiences. High-speed rail and efficient connectivity allow for seamless transitions between business and leisure components."

FLAMENCO MEETS BUSINESS

Diversity is one of Spain's strongest assets, and planners are increasingly leveraging it within single itineraries. Orland suggests, "Planners can design multi-destination itineraries that showcase Spain's diversity by combining urban, cultural, and coastal experiences."

A typical flow could move from Madrid to Seville and end in Mallorca. "Spain's modern and top-class connectivity makes it easy to combine multiple regions efficiently." She also emphasises the importance of cultural immersion: "Local traditions and flamenco are key strategic elements that enhance the experience, reinforce the destination's identity, and add value to business tourism in Spain. Local traditions increase the perceived quality of an event and attendees' satisfaction due to their emotional component."



INDIA DRIVES DEMAND

Looking ahead, Spain's strategy for high-value markets like India is aligned with evolving traveller expectations. "Spain is increasingly focusing on sustainability, personalised luxury experiences, and promoting lesser-known destinations to offer exclusivity." Orland adds, "There is also a growing emphasis on wellness, slow travel, and curated high-end experiences, along with progressive adaptation in services, including tailored gastronomy and vegetarian menus."

This adaptability is especially evident in the wedding segment. Orland explains, "Spain is a year-round wedding destination for high-net-worth Indian families by blending

its historic grandeur with cultural adaptability." There is a growing trend for organically unfolding celebrations in open landscapes, vineyards, and historic spaces that provide cinematic, unstaged photography. Regions like Andalusia, Marbella, and Barcelona are leading this demand.

WEDDINGS SCALE UP

Spain is also strengthening its readiness for large Indian weddings. Orland shares, "Hotels and venues across Spain are increasingly experienced in hosting Indian weddings and are adapting to specific requirements such as multi-day celebrations, large guest capacities, and customised vegetarian catering, including Indian cuisine." She highlights Costa del Sol as a strong hub. Marbella is very popular for high-end Indian weddings, great for multi-day events and big guest lists, with a strong vendor ecosystem. Other destinations such as Seville, Ibiza, Mallorca, and Tenerife are also gaining traction.

The larger takeaway is clear: Spain is no longer just selling destinations. It is curating narratives. And in a market where experience is the differentiator, that narrative is becoming increasingly compelling. **MT**

“
The Indian market is a priority, and we are adapting with personalised services, including tailored gastronomy and culturally aligned experiences.
”

Maldivian Recalibration: Forget the crowd and find the island

Island resorts are merging high-end luxury with destination-led programmes, moving away from generic formats to serve boutique MICE groups seeking privacy, authenticity, and immersive cultural storytelling.

By **Rahul Bhadana**

Experiential travel and luxury, once touted as two opposite shores of the same sea, are now merging. Travellers across every demographic are leaning towards experience-led journeys. Driving the shift, NOKU Maldives, Vignette Collection is offering high-value travellers — including MICE segments — immersive, destination-led programmes over traditional formats. This evolution is reshaping how island resorts engage with group travel.

Following a recent refurbishment and operational reset, the 50-villa resort is recalibrating its approach to align with smaller, experience-driven movements. While leisure remains the foundation, evolving incentive travel patterns and boutique corporate groups are creating new avenues within the luxury segment.



HUSSAIN SHAHID
GENERAL MANAGER
NOKU MALDIVES

Hussain Shahid, General Manager, Noku Maldives, Vignette Collection, said the resort's scale supports this transition towards more personalised formats. "We have an intimate 50-villa scale that allows us to curate experiences in a very personalised way, supported by a strong team and high staff-to-guest ratio," he said.

RESHAPING GROUP JOURNEY

The growing preference for experiential luxury is influencing how group travel

“
Island destinations are recalibrating their approach, trading massive guest capacity for high-value, immersive cultural travel experiences.
”



is structured, particularly in island destinations like the Maldives. Smaller groups are increasingly prioritising exclusivity, privacy, and a deeper connection with the destination.

At Noku Maldives, this is reflected in programmes that integrate cultural and natural elements into the guest journey. Experiences such as cultural theme nights, interactions with local fishermen, and storytelling sessions are being incorporated into itineraries, offering alternatives to conventional

event formats. "Rather than delivering a generic luxury product, we are focused on authentic Maldivian storytelling through curated experiences that can be adapted for different guest profiles," Shahid said.

The resort's physical configuration — including villas starting at 175 square metres, beachfront settings, and access to a house reef and multiple dive sites — allows for flexibility when designing incentive programmes and boutique group movements.



PIVOT TO CURATED MICE

This approach mirrors a broader shift within the MICE segment, where planners are moving away from scale-driven formats towards curated, high-value experiences. Outdoor venues, adaptable dining formats, and informal settings are increasingly being used to create programmes that are less structured and more immersive. Food and beverage is also evolving within this framework; themed dining and curated menus are now integral parts of experience design rather than standalone elements.

TARGETING NEW MARKETS

Demand continues to be led by Russia and the CIS, followed by China and Europe, including the UK and the DACH countries. Meanwhile, markets such as India, Japan, and Korea are emerging as key contributors to incentive-led and experiential group travel.

To support this shift, the resort is strengthening engagement with partners through familiarisation trips and direct outreach. "Providing first-hand experience through familiarisation trips is crucial to build confidence and enable partners to position the resort effectively," Shahid said.

As experiential luxury continues to redefine travel behaviour, the lines between leisure and MICE are becoming increasingly fluid — with boutique resorts adapting to serve both through flexible, experience-led formats. **MT**



MOVEMENTS



SIMON PRESS
MD – International
Fairfest Media

Expanding its international leadership team, Fairfest Media has appointed Simon Press as Managing Director – International following the acquisition of WTE Miami. With over two decades of experience in international exhibitions and B2B media, Press will lead Fairfest’s global portfolio, drive WTE Miami’s growth, and support the introduction of high-potential international event IPs into India’s rapidly expanding exhibition and trade show market, while strengthening the company’s global expansion strategy.



DEEPAK BOTHRA
Corporate General Manager
Summit Hotels & Resorts

Summit Hotels & Resorts has appointed Deepak Bothra as Corporate General Manager. Bringing nearly three decades of experience, he has expertise in hotel ops, pre-opening projects, quality control, and revenue management. In his new role, he will oversee operational strategy, service standards, and performance optimisation across Summit’s portfolio, focusing on streamlining systems, improving operational efficiency, and ensuring consistency across properties in the Eastern Himalayan region and surrounding markets.



VEENU RASTOGI
Head – Sales & Marketing
Wyndham Hotels & Resorts

Veenu Rastogi has been named Head of Sales & Marketing – Eurasia, for Wyndham Hotels & Resorts. She will lead integrated commercial functions, spearheading data-driven initiatives across the corporate, leisure, and MICE segments. Her role focuses on aligning sales strategy with brand growth and unlocking sustainable revenue across the region. Rastogi’s appointment is part of a broader leadership reinforcement to support Wyndham’s 25 brands during their continued expansion throughout Eurasia.



RAMAN SOOD
Resident Manager
Shangri-La Bengaluru

Bringing extensive global hospitality experience, Raman Sood has joined Shangri-La Bengaluru as Resident Manager. Over the years, he has worked with luxury brands including The Ritz-Carlton, JW Marriott, and Burj Al Arab across India, the UAE, Canada, and the United States. In his new role, he will focus on enhancing operational performance, strengthening service standards, and elevating guest experiences across the hotel’s operations and departments.



MOHAMMED AKHIL
Operations Manager
Novotel Vijayawada Varun

Novotel Vijayawada Varun has promoted Mohammed Akhil to Operations Manager. Previously serving as Director – Sales & Marketing, he played a key role in driving revenue growth, strengthening partnerships, and supporting the hotel’s launch. With over 19 years of experience, Akhil will now oversee day-to-day operations, focusing on efficiency, compliance, cross-functional coordination, guest satisfaction, operational performance, and consistent service delivery across the hotel’s various departments.



RAJIB GHOSH
Loss Prevention Manager
ITC Windsor

Strengthening its focus on safety and operational excellence, ITC Windsor has appointed Rajib Ghosh as Loss Prevention Manager. Bringing over two decades of experience in security management and risk mitigation, he has worked with Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces and Wyndham Grand Agra. He will oversee loss prevention strategy, safety protocols, emergency response planning, compliance management, risk evaluation, and overall security operations, while strengthening operational coordination across the hotel.



AYUSH SARAF
Training Manager
JW Marriott Hotel Bengaluru

JW Marriott Hotel Bengaluru has appointed Ayush Saraf as Training Manager. Bringing over a decade of experience in hospitality L&D, he has previously worked with leading brands including Marriott International, The Tamara Coorg, and Evolve Back Resorts. At JW Marriott Hotel Bengaluru, he will lead learning and development initiatives, focusing on leadership capability, associate engagement, service culture, and refined guest experiences across departments while strengthening overall training standards.

Form IV

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I, SanJeet, hereby declare that the particulars given above are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.
Date : 01/03/2026

Sd/
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Signature of the Publisher



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