

HVS Monday Musings: Rebooting Inbound Tourism in India

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As the world gradually reopens for travel, there is a massive race between countries to attract international tourists to their shores. Several countries have already opened their borders to fully vaccinated international tourists, while others are gradually resuming inbound tourism in a phased manner.

The Indian government also recently announced its plans to provide free visas to the first 500,000 tourists once scheduled international commercial travel resumes in the country. This initiative is a first step in the right direction to encourage inbound tourism, but we have a long way to go before we can regain our share of international arrivals in the post-COVID era.

India, which has a minuscule share in global international arrivals and received significant negative publicity in the global press during the pandemic, will have to work much harder to regain its pre-COVID share and then grow beyond it. It will not be business as usual when international travel finally resumes in the country. Given the circumstances, it is very likely that we would have suffered a setback from being a preferred tourist destination for global travelers as safety and health are their top priorities now. The recent images of our leisure destinations and cities overcrowded with travelers flouting COVID-appropriate behavior are not helping our cause. Instead, they raise questions about our seriousness about the pandemic even after the devastating second wave that was witnessed in the country.



It is, therefore, critical that the entire tourism fraternity – government, public sector, private sector, and even the citizens – come together as one to rebuild traveler confidence and put India back on the global tourism map. A few measures have been mentioned below, which may seem like a bitter pill to swallow initially but will help the country regain its competitive advantage.

- Health, safety, and adherence to COVID-appropriate behavior should be non-negotiable. Ensuring that all stakeholders, including tourists, follow the COVID-safety guidelines to the tee is of primary importance to rebuilding international tourist confidence and trust. Hotel and restaurant managers need to strictly ensure social distancing and other COVID safety measures at their premises and even refuse entry to patrons who are not following the guidelines.

Summary

This article highlights some measures which can help India become a preferred tourist destination once again for global travelers in the post-COVID era.

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- The vaccination drive in the country has gained momentum and the government plans to vaccinate the majority of the population by the end of this year. However, the government and the private sector should collaborate to ensure that all tourism-sector employees – from hotel staff to tourist guides and cab drivers – are fully inoculated as a priority.
- Along with creating a reboot plan, the government should introduce effective marketing campaigns, showcasing India as a 'safe' destination. The campaigns should communicate the COVID safety measures being implemented at tourist destinations, including the fact that all travel employees are fully inoculated. These campaigns should also highlight that healthcare facilities, infrastructure, and amenities at airports & railway stations, etc. have been augmented due to the pandemic, which will enhance the perception of India as a safe and attractive destination. It is also perhaps time for India to extend the 24x7 multi-lingual tourist helpline to be a '911'-like service.
- Effective destination management can help reduce overcrowding. Tourists as well as the hospitality industry are eager to go back to normal, but we need to ensure that it is done in a phased manner so that we can avoid the third wave. This is perhaps the right time for the authorities to evaluate global best practices, establish models based on international guidelines, and implement strategies for effective destination management to strike the much-needed balance between tourism and sustainability.

About **Mandeep S Lamba**



Mandeep S. Lamba, President – South Asia, oversees the HVS global hospitality practice for South Asia. He has spent over 30 years in the hospitality industry of which the last 19 have been in CEO positions. Having worked with leading International and domestic Hotel Companies such as IHG, Radisson & ITC Hotels, he also set up joint venture companies with Dawngay Day Group UK and Onyx Hospitality, Thailand to own and operate hotels in India giving him a broader exposure to the hospitality business.

An established industry leader, Mandeep has won several awards and recognitions in India and abroad for his accomplishments and contribution to the hospitality industry. He is a Certified Hospitality Administrator from the American Hotels Association (CHA), a member of the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, UK (MRICS) and a member of the Tourism Council of CII (Northern India). His views are often solicited for television and print media as a spokesperson for the hospitality & tourism sector.

Prior to joining HVS in 2018, Mandeep was the Managing Director, Hotels & Hospitality Group for JLL.

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